Disputes of Offence:

Making sense of the discursive construction of Political Correctness

Clare Fearon

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School of Geography, Politics and Sociology at Newcastle University

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Abstract

This thesis explores how Political Correctness (PC) is discursively constructed and has emerged in contemporary society as a cultural signifier for a new politics of language and identity. The thesis begins by arguing that the literature has not adequately reconciled the various tensions which continue to underlie how PC is defined and understood. In doing so it examines how the celebration and prevalence of anti-PC rhetoric has emerged alongside our increasing intolerance of 'politically incorrect' forms of discourse (such as racist or homophobic language). It also considers why varying levels of PC might be present (and absent) within different levels of discourse.

The project uses data from popular cultural and media sources which draw upon the multifarious and increasingly participatory nature of our public domain. The data sources include newspaper articles and editorials; a parliamentary debate; the social media site *Twitter*; popular comedy and political cartoons. In order to conduct a socio-cultural analysis, the research incorporates the use of various discourse and visual analytical approaches including Bakhtinian dialogism; Bourdieu's capital theory; Barthesian semiology and Hall's representational analysis.

The thesis argues that our preoccupation with disputes of offence (or 'PC disputes') has acquired an increasingly individualised dimension. It suggests that our concern with group rights and identity politics may overshadow how the giving or taking of offence is also attached to the diverse ways in which individual identity is felt and experienced. In particular, it argues that the assertion of offence is increasingly grounded in the hurt offence is felt to cause to the beliefs which form our sense of self-hood or personal identity. The project maintains that disputes of offence relating to wider inequalities (like racism or sexism) are more usefully understood through exploration and recognition of both their broader and individualised contexts.

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I would also like to thank friends and family for their patience and support throughout the completion of this thesis including Tony and Audrey Fearon, Geoff and Stanley.

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[1] This quote from Paul Berman (1992:5-6) is taken from a lengthier description of the difficulties surrounding any attempt to conceptualise or account for PC.

[2] This quote is taken from a *Daily Telegraph* article written by Ruth Dudley Edwards in 2012 which is used in the project as a data source. [Online] Available at: http://www.ruthdudleyedwards.co.uk/journalism12/Dtelblog12_ (Accessed 15th April, 2015)

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[3] This quote is from the comedian Jimmy Carr and is taken from a 2009 interview with *The Guardian* newspaper.[Online] Available at: http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/nov/05/jimmy-carr-paralympics-joke (Accessed 10th April 2015)

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Chapter1. Introduction

Figure1. Tweet sent by Emily Thornberry, MP, on 20th November 2014

1.1 The Research Context: Framing the culture and language of offence

In November 2014 the MP, Emily Thornberry, resigned from the Labour party's front bench after having posted a tweet during the Rochester and Strood by-election. The tweet showed a terraced house with three England flags draped from the windows and a white van parked outside. The message simply said 'Image from Rochester'. In the media furore which followed, the tweet was decried as 'offensive', 'snobbish' and 'sneering'[4]. The Labour leader, Ed Miliband, also wrote in the *Daily Mirror* newspaper of his anger with the tweet which he argued 'conveyed a sense of disrespect about a family in Rochester'[5]. The offence generated by Thornberry's tweet dominated the discussion surrounding a high profile by-election in which contentious argument about immigration, the rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the decline of traditional party politics had hitherto set the media and political agenda. It also helps illustrate how a culture has emerged in which the giving and taking of offence has an important power to shape headlines or affect the conditions of debate. In this

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[4] Emily Thornberry subsequently apologised for having caused offence after her tweet was widely reported by the British media. *The Sun* newspaper was amongst those offended by the tweet and referred on its front page to 'Snob Labour MP's dig at White Van Man's England flags'. See [Online] Available at: http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/21/us-britain-politics-flag-idUSKCN0J514U20141121 (Accessed 01 February 2015)

[5] [Online] Available at: http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/ed-miliband-furious-emily-thornberry-4671545 (Accessed 01 February 2015)

instance the resignation of Emily Thornberry also demonstrates how giving offence may have significant consequences for those who offend.

This project arose from a desire to grapple with the sociological significance of our preoccupation with disputes of offence including the discursive alignment of the language of offence to the reification of political correctness (PC) in recent decades. In particular, the aims of the project were generated by some of the ways in which the emergence of the language of PC[6] has changed how we view disputes concerning racism, sexism or other forms of prejudice. Undoubtedly, the language of PC has emerged alongside important social, cultural and political change regarding attitudes towards racism or sexism. An important component of this has involved linguistic change which discourages the use of racist, sexist or homophobic language. This sort of linguistic reform - often attributed to PC - has been usefully described by Cameron (1995) as constituting a progressive 'verbal hygiene' movement which involves viewing language as something that shapes as well as reflects broader values. However, there has also been a significant backlash against what is regarded as the culture of censoriousness surrounding many 'PC disputes' and much of this is predicated on the view that open debate has become compromised or curtailed by people's willingness to take offence over utterances deemed as 'racist' or 'sexist'. The frequency with which disputes of offence (such as the controversy provoked by Emily Thornberry's tweet) pervades media discourse contributes to the sense that a culture has emerged in which the assertion of offence increasingly directs both the nature of the topic up for discussion[7] and what may or may not be legitimatised as appropriate or 'correct' discourse within that discussion. One of the motivations for this research project is the way in which arguments against racism or homophobia have become discursively realigned or reappraised within contemporary discourse as 'PC' arguments. A consequence of this is that arguments about what constitutes racism or homophobia have come to be viewed as sustained or produced by a 'new' politics or culture of offence. It is this juxtaposition of PC as something to disparage in spite of its non-discriminatory and progressive goals that this thesis explores.

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[6] By 'language of PC' I refer in this project both to the direct use of the term 'PC' and its derivatives (such as 'politically correct' or 'politically incorrect') *and* the discourse which surrounds the debate about PC (such as the argument it generates about the nature of offence or inequality). The language of PC, therefore, will incorporate a range of viewpoints about the nature of political correctness both positive and negative.

[7] For example, during the Rochester by-election the offence provoked by Thornberry's tweet propelled it into a major news story which eclipsed the discussion of policy issues associated with the campaign.

Sociological analysis has addressed the negative way in which PC is viewed by focusing primarily on how PC is purported to unduly prioritise the avoidance of offence and promote linguistic change as the principal way of advancing social and political equality (see e.g. Ehrenreich, 1992; Hall, 1994; Cameron, 1995; Lakoff, 2000; Fairclough, 2003). Studies have also considered the implications of various 'offensive' or 'non-PC' forms of social stereotyping using representations of gender, ethnicity, disability, class or sexuality (see e.g. Finding, 2008; Billig, 2010; Lockyer, 2010; Malik, 2010;Montgomerie, 2010). However, in order to make sense of how PC is discursively constructed around a 'new' politics of offence, sociological analysis has not produced a comprehensive study which encompasses different forms or levels of discourse. This thesis will, therefore, undertake an investigation of various discursive contexts which contain varying levels of 'offensive' or 'non-PC' discourse. It will also explore the unresolved tensions which continue to surround the debate about PC using a socio-cultural analysis which deploys a range of power centred approaches to examine different popular cultural and media sources. This emphasis upon the role of culture locates the research within the field of cultural sociology and the thesis therefore contributes to the deeper understanding of how culture and cultural processes can help interpret and explain the sociological significance of disputes of offence. In doing so the project draws attention to a question arising from reflection upon some of the available literature (including that referenced in this paragraph): PC has been approached and understood in the literature to be a phenomenon which discourages racist or otherwise 'incorrect' discourse and yet 'non-PC' representations within popular culture nevertheless retain a level of cultural acceptance and popular appeal.

The controversy arising from the tweet posted by Emily Thornberry is therefore located within a wider culture in which the giving and taking of offence forms a prominent and newsworthy component. This case also helps us begin to consider more carefully *why* this project is undertaken as it draws attention to some of the general features of the socio-cultural landscape it will examine. Firstly, the tweet does not contain the use of any 'obviously' derogatory language or imagery. However, the image, together with its short message 'Image from Rochester' was understood immediately by many people to be offensive. The offence it provoked illustrates how meaning depends upon access to a shared language which allows people within a discursive community to interpret and make sense of the world around them. The tweet also demonstrates that visual imagery (as well as the written or spoken word) is an important form of language which carries with it the power to offend. In this respect, any

comprehensive understanding of 'offensive' language must consider more than the use of 'offensive' words or spoken utterances and also recognise the power of imagery to communicate meaning which is offensive to some, whether this might be a photograph or a political cartoon. Furthermore, the tweet also markedly demonstrates the contextual nature of offence: for example, it is unlikely that the image or words alone would generally have caused offence independent of the context or circumstances in which they were understood to have been used.

Secondly, the controversy generated by this incident suggests that traditional ways of framing or discussing the culture of offence and political correctness may require re-examination. For example, amongst those offended by the tweet was *The Sun* newspaper which criticised at length the 'snobbishness' of Emily Thornberry. The popular tabloid is generally dismissive of the notion of political correctness, however, it was prominent amongst those demanding that Thornberry apologise for the offence she caused. We need, therefore, to develop a more nuanced understanding of the culture of offence and how disputes of offence may or may not become discursively attached to PC. Of further significance are the reasons why the tweet was considered to be offensive. The image used included cultural signifiers (namely the draped England flags and white van) which have acquired a semiotic attachment to the identity and values associated with parts of the English working class[8]. The controversy this case generated was therefore imbibed with discussion of class prejudice and the modern Labour party's disconnect from its traditional working class supporters. The emergence of the language of PC has developed alongside the strengthening of identity based politics which has tended to prioritise linguistic or cultural change rather than economic change based upon traditional class based politics. However, the Emily Thornberry tweet succeeded in discursively aligning class politics with the politics of offence. We need also, therefore, to develop an understanding of PC which addresses the appeal of the politics of offence in recent decades and how an increasing range of issues and subject matter are now debated within a discursive framework in which the language of offence is pre-eminent.

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[8] The phrase 'white man van' has emerged as a popular stereotype in the UK and is often used to denote an aggressive or inconsiderate driver and tabloid reader, usually assumed to be working class. The man whose home was 'sneered' at by Emily Thornberry was named 'White Van Dan' by the media and his own 'Danifesto' was published in *The Sun* newspaper setting out how he would run the country if in power. [Online] Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/11/22/white-van-dan-emily-thornberry_n_6203580.html (Accessed 11th February 2015)

1.2 Aims and Outcomes of Thesis: Making sense of 'PC disputes' and the culture of offence.

This thesis undertakes an examination of the different meanings, paradoxes and disputes which inform and also obfuscate how PC is understood. In doing so it recognises how PC has emerged in recent decades as a powerful cultural signifier for a 'new' politics of language and identity. The thesis has three overarching aims. Firstly, it will undertake an exploration of the various meaning(s) attached to PC and ask whether PC can be accurately described as responsible for installing an illiberal culture of censoriousness in which 'incorrect' viewpoints are routinely prohibited or discouraged in spite of PC's ostensibly progressive aims. In order to develop an answer it will revisit and engage with the popular critique of PC as an illiberal movement to be disparaged. An important purpose of this part of the research process will be to ascertain how, whether and to what extent a culture of censoriousness based upon excessive sensitivity towards the giving of offence *does* prevail across different levels of contemporary discourse.

The second core aim will address a further paradox at the heart of the debate surrounding PC. It investigates why anti-PC discourse and rhetoric retain a level of popularity despite society's increasing intolerance of racism or other forms of bigotry. Also implicit in this matter is the question of how the celebration of politically incorrect forms of expression can be reconciled with the sense that a form of PC orthodoxy has been imposed upon many aspects of modern social life. In order to investigate this, the project will consider how the notion of political incorrectness should be characterised and explore what strategies or practices might help to legitimise politically incorrect forms of discourse within some discursive spaces. It will also explore whether any principal meaning can account for the appeal of politically incorrect utterances despite the offence this simultaneously generates.

The third core aim will be to undertake an investigation that accounts for our preoccupation with 'disputes of offence' including the discussion the giving and taking of offence invariably generates throughout modern media. (This part of the research process also hopes to build upon some of the insights and analysis developed from having undertaken the first two research aims). The thesis will explore how and whether the emergence of new discursive spaces - particularly those generated by social media technologies – has contributed to the evolving nature or character of debate around disputes of offence. In attempting to account

for the importance attached to social contestation surrounding 'PC disputes' the thesis will also question whether a culture of competing rights has arisen in which different groups or individuals vie to assert their right to offend or be offended.

The thesis will refute the assertion that PC has imposed a culture of censoriousness which permeates across all levels of discourse explored in this study. However, it does argue that the conditions of debate have changed as a consequence of the emergence of the language of PC over recent decades and that this has created a less readable discursive environment. Within this environment discourse may utilise the language of PC in order to give credence to arguably 'non-PC' positions. However, the assumption that people share a disdain for racism or homophobia may also help legitimise politically incorrect utterances within other discursive contexts (such as the sharing of 'ironically offensive' jokes). Although the study does not suggest that particular viewpoints are prohibited throughout the different levels of discourse it examines, the thesis does maintain that what may be said (or what might be regarded as 'offensive') continues to be highly context dependent[9]. In this respect, it contends that progressive goals may also contribute to the propagation of illiberal practices within some discursive contexts. The thesis will account for this by identifying how power is sometimes understood to operate in such a way that structural inequalities are reinforced by forms of expression considered 'offensive' to historically disadvantaged groups.

The thesis contends that no single meaning or set of associations can account for the appeal of anti-PC rhetoric or the expression of politically incorrect utterances. It does, however, identify a range (or polyphony) of potentially incompatible voices which have been labelled 'politically incorrect'. These include those which deploy the use of irony to varying degrees as a way of deflecting critique of superficially 'incorrect' utterances. They also include voices which appear to explicitly celebrate forms of expression that reject the politics of language or identity associated with PC. The study contends that effective deployment of cultural capital skills is able to legitimise the use of some 'offensive' forms of expression despite the heightened sensitivity within society to the problems arising from racism or homophobia. Finally, it will argue that discourse which addresses or critiques (rather than celebrates) social problems like racism or sexism may also be potentially viewed as 'politically incorrect'. It describes the backlash against political correctness – particularly the sense that it has

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[9] By 'context dependent' I refer both to the specific location of a form of discourse (such as a parliamentary debate or exchange between users of social media) and who is engaged in that discourse.

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inculcated a culture of excessive censoriousness – as strengthened by the classification of different and disparate voices in this way. (In other words, the conflation of a potentially wide range of utterances as 'politically incorrect' contributes to the sense that many forms of expression are felt to be 'off limits').

Crucially, the thesis will recommend that disputes of offence should be understood as containing an individualised dimension which sits alongside a wider dimension encompassing the politics of group membership or group identity. It also suggests that the emergence of identity politics over recent decades has encouraged us to examine PC disputes primarily through analysis which focuses upon the importance of group identity rather than this individualised dimension. The thesis will draw this conclusion in light of its analysis of the highly subjective way in which offence is taken - a theme particularly highlighted in its exploration of discourse generated through new discursive spaces (such as online activity). It will argue that the user-led and relatively democratised nature of modern forms of media allow us to observe more directly the diversity of opinion which may exist within as well as between different groups regarding what is or is not felt to be 'offensive'. In claiming this, the thesis does not refute the significance of power differentials between different social groups or how these help produce 'PC disputes' arising from grounds such as racism, religious identity or sexuality. However, it does argue that such disputes are increasingly embedded in what people consider as offensive to their sense of self-hood, and that this individualised dimension cannot be reducible to, or subsumed within, some of the broader categories of identity explored within this project in any predictable or obvious way.

1.3 Thesis Outline

Chapter Two, *A Genealogy of PC*, will address two key themes. Firstly, it traces the emergence and reification of PC over recent decades in order to provide an accurate socio-cultural context from which the significance of disputes of offence can then be explored. In doing so, this chapter utilises the idea of the floating signifier which was originally developed by Levi-Strauss (1950) to demonstrate how the meaning of a concept or sign may not be stable. The chapter describes why and how this thesis will approach PC as a floating cultural signifier which is attached to a number of different meanings or signifieds. Secondly, the chapter also undertakes a Foucauldian genealogical analysis which considers the conditions through which the emergence of PC as a floating cultural signifier was made possible. It

draws upon the 1960s situation comedy *Till Death Us Do Part* in order to explore the contemporary discussion surrounding PC by conducting a 'history of the present' (Kendall and Whickham, 2000:4).

Chapter Three, *PC and The Academy*, provides an evaluation of how the literature has sought to account for the various meanings attached to PC, particularly the negative signification of PC as an authoritarian movement which has generated an excessive fear of causing offence within contemporary society. In doing so it reviews a body of work which encompasses three broad positions. The first of these will entail an exploration of studies which claim that a prevailing culture of censoriousness has emerged which is attributable to PC. The second will include a review of the available literature which has reasoned that although PC is underwritten by progressive and commendable aims, the narrative of excess surrounding it (including its prioritisation of the politics of language) has contributed to an anti-PC backlash. Thirdly, the chapter will examine studies advanced by those who reject the view that the term PC may be reasonably used to describe the emergence of a verifiable movement or phenomena, and instead prefer to view it as a concept co-opted and utilised by the political right in order to discredit the political left. Finally, this chapter will consider how the meanings attached to PC have been understood by relevant studies within each of the three core thematic fields used in the thesis to answer its research objectives. This part of the thesis will highlight the ways in which the literature has failed to fully reconcile some of the tensions which continue to encumber our understanding of PC.

Chapter Four, *'A Puzzle without a solution'?: Researching PC*, will outline the research aims and objectives which underpin the thesis along with the different methodologies used to answer the research questions. It therefore provides a detailed description of the research design which will include an explanation of why each question is asked, and how each question will be investigated, analysed and answered. In view of the synergistic nature of the methodological framework developed by this project, the methodology chapter also outlines why an eclectic range of power-centred discourse analytical models are chosen rather than any single methodology. Finally, the chapter will reflect upon the overall research context in which this project was undertaken, including the methodological issues and challenges this has produced.

Chapter Five, *Political Correctness and the production of news*, undertakes an exploration of the first core research question using three case studies which focus upon a different fragment of discourse involving the (re)production of news or political affairs. Each study will make use of both senses of 'discourse' as defined by Gee (1999; 2010) in order to answer this question: in other words, the use of the word 'PC' and its derivatives are investigated within each data source together with the wider discursive context in which each source is located. The first case study explores discourses of PC within two broadsheet newspapers (*The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*) and asks whether a liberal orthodoxy is identifiable within the source material or if particular arguments are discouraged or precluded in any way. The second case study undertakes a thematic analysis of the arguments made in the parliamentary debate in the House of Commons which led to the vote in favour of same sex marriage in 2013. It queries how the discursive context in which debate takes place might impact upon the conditions of debate, including what may or may not be said as well as how things are said. The third case study uses the Paris Brown 'Twitter Storm' of 2013 as source material[10]. It continues to explore the relationship between discursive context and how disputes of offence are enacted and understood. It also begins to consider how the emergence of new forms of media has contributed to our preoccupation with disputes of offence[11].

Chapter Six, *Comedy and Political Correctness*, will use contemporary British comedy as source material with which to answer the second core research question and its sub-questions. It does so using two overarching conceptual frameworks. Firstly, the chapter uses Bourdieu's capital theory to help it consider how and why politically incorrect utterances are able to acquire a cultural legitimacy and acceptability despite the offence this might also generate as a consequence of changing social attitudes towards forms of social stereotyping. This part of the chapter will include a comparative analysis of the cultural capital resources held by two successful stand-up comedians - Roy 'Chubby' Brown and Jimmy Carr - together with their audience(s). Chapter Six also uses Bakhtinian dialogism to investigate why politically incorrect forms of expression continue to be celebrated within some levels of discourse. In particular, it utilises the Bakhtinian concepts of the carnival and double-voiced discourse to explore whether contemporary forms of 'edgy' or 'non-PC' stand-up comedy can be usefully viewed as a carnivalesque subversion of 'official' PC cultural norms and values.

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[10] Paris stood down from her role as newly appointed Youth Police and Crime Commissioner for the Kent Police Force Area after having sent a number of tweets considered by many people to be offensive.
[11] The relationship between disputes of offence and the emergence of new media technologies is also considered in Chapter Seven.

Chapter Seven, *Political Cartoons and 'offensiveness'*, examines the third research question(s) using political cartooning on the theme of religion and religious identity as source material. It will also build upon the analysis developed in the previous data chapters as it continues to explore how we should account for our contemporary preoccupation with disputes of offence - particularly in light of the importance the modern media attaches to such disputes. The chapter will use a range of methodological tools to do so. Firstly, it undertakes an intertextual analysis of cartoons by Martin Rowson which depict social contention over religious themes *or* have generated controversy surrounding matters of religious identity. This part of the chapter observes the regulatory power of the assertion of offence and is particularly interested in querying whether a culture of competing rights has emerged based around the claiming of offence. Secondly, the chapter uses Hall's theory of representation to explore the signifying practices within British newspapers at the time of their coverage of the offence generated by the publication of cartoons of the prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2006. The signifying practices are examined as a method of understanding how our perception of the nature of offence is produced through these practices. Thirdly, the chapter undertakes an examination of the online comic strip *Jesus and Mo* using Barthesian semiology. The comic strip is selected so that the thesis can consider more closely the relevance of user-led forms of media which have encouraged a generally more participatory and less regulated discursive environment.

Chapter Eight, *Conclusion*, includes a summary of the knowledge acquired from the investigations undertaken in each of the three data analysis chapters which it uses to consider the contribution to knowledge this study has made. The chapter argues that although the thesis findings do not suggest that a form of 'PC' orthodoxy pervades throughout contemporary discourse, uncertainty over the nature of 'offensiveness' has been galvanised by the varying and disputable levels of PC within different levels of discourse. The chapter will also argue that the emphasis placed within academic and journalistic discourse on the relationship between disputes of offence, the politics of identity and group rights may deflect our focus from the ways in which PC disputes also contain an individualised component. Finally, the chapter will suggest how further research might build upon some of the findings and conclusions it discusses. It recommends that to make sense of the disparate ways in which offence is given and received by different people, research might undertake more direct analysis of the relationship between an audience and 'offensive' forms of expression.

Chapter 2. A Genealogy of PC

'Not all neologism is politically loaded. But the introduction of a new phrase or word into the popular lexicon is world-changing because it alters our presuppositions: it identifies the new concept as both real and worthy of mention, assigns it to a frame, and so enables us to talk and think about it.' (Lakoff, 2000:90)

'One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid the subject itself, that is to say, to arrive at analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. And this is what I would call genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history' (Foucault, cited in Gordon, 1980:117)

2.1 Introduction

In 2000, Lakoff claimed that no other neologism appearing in the later decades of the 20th century had 'achieved the celebrity of "political correctness" or "p.c."(p.90). Today, popular use of the concept (including its derivatives like 'politically incorrect' or 'non-PC') continues to pervade our everyday discourse. The term 'PC' is often used without explanation, thereby suggesting that its meaning is commonly understood and broadly accepted. However, attempts to define and account for PC (including its obverse, political incorrectness) are often contentious or disputatious. Two overarching reasons may help to account for this. Firstly, as PC is typically viewed as having emerged from the politics of the liberal-left, the attempts to account for it often reflect deep underlying philosophical or ideological differences[12]. Secondly, the language of PC[13] has permeated discussion of an ever wider range of arguments and disparate practices in the decades since use of the term entered mainstream discourse in the early 1990s[14]. As a way of making sense of both this broadening scope and the politically charged context in which the debate about PC takes place, attempts to define the concept have often involved the classification of particular types of thought, speech or

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[12] In 1994, Hall described 'the rise of political correctness' in both the US and UK in the 1980s and 1990s as 'intimately connected' to the battle over 'moral and cultural issues' between the liberal-left and the New Right governments of that era (pp. 168-169). The wider relationship between political affiliation and PC is outlined in greater depth in the Literature Review chapter, and more generally throughout this thesis.

[13] I mean the 'language of PC' in this chapter to include the use of the phrase itself and its various derivatives (such as 'political incorrectness' or 'non-PC').

[14] This expansion of the arguments and practices attached to PC will be explored in this chapter.

behaviour as manifestations of PC[15]. Nevertheless, the exercise of classifying particular tendencies or behaviour as either 'politically correct' or 'politically incorrect' remains problematic as a consequence of the discontinuous and disputative way in which PC is understood. This thesis, therefore, suggests that it may be more useful to approach PC as a floating signifier which is subject to redefinition by different people in different contexts, rather than as a descriptor of fixed or readily observable phenomenon[16]. The notion of the floating signifier has been adopted by researchers who are interested in how concepts are discursively constructed. For example, Hall (2006:20) describes the concept of race as a sliding or 'moving signifier' and argues that there is always a 'sliding of meaning' around the concept which to be understood must be explored and contextualised through analysis of discourse (including religious, popular, scientific or political discourse). This chapter will interrogate the 'sliding of meaning' around PC in order to account for the ways in which it has become discursively attached to a disparate range of debates and phenomena. This exercise will also help locate the analysis of discourse in the data chapters of this project within their broader discursive context.

This chapter investigates two broad themes. Firstly, in order to make sense of how PC has been defined, it explores PC as a floating cultural signifier which is tied to a number of different meanings. Secondly, it considers the discursive and non-discursive conditions which enabled PC to emerge as a reified phenomenon in the 1990s. Analysis, therefore, will focus both upon how PC is understood, *and* how this understanding has become possible. The first part of the chapter explores PC as a floating signifier which exists alongside a 'floating chain of signifieds' (Barthes, 1977:39). It is also informed by Said's concept of 'the travelling theory' which argues that an idea or theory may travel from its origins onto other locations where it evolves and is transformed 'by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place' (1983: 227). Using this conceptual framework, the chapter asks what PC might signify

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[15] For example, in his history of the origins, progress, and nature of political correctness, Hughes (2010:12) describes how within the 'the category of swearing only ethnic slurs qualify unambiguously… as politically incorrect', whilst religious or sexual swearing are categorised more variably.

[16] The notion of a floating signifier was initially developed by Levi-Strauss in 1950 in his book *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* and is defined by Chandler as 'a signifier with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent signified' (2001:229). Saussurean semiotics has highlighted the arbitrary nature of the relationship between signifier and signified (for example, there is no inevitability that the colour green used on traffic lights should signify the instruction to proceed). However, the idea of the floating signifier also questions the apparently predictable relationship between signifier and signified within a particular social context. This is because a floating signifier removes the stable link between the two, so that the signifier comes to mean different things to different people.

within different locations and at different moments in time. It, therefore, considers the temporal nature of the concept as it has evolved over recent decades, and also how PC may be simultaneously attached to different meanings within a particular location or discursive context. This first part of the chapter contends that, despite the fluidity of meaning surrounding PC, it has become reified as an overarching and hegemonic project around which disputes of offence and social contestation are enacted. It also describes how the sliding of meaning surrounding the concept has reconstituted PC as an orthodox rather than countercultural phenomenon. The second part of the chapter undertakes a Foucauldian genealogical analysis in order to consider the conditions of possibility through which PC was able to emerge as a signifier for a new form of politics. It draws upon the socio-political context surrounding the situation comedy *Till Death Us Do Part* (originally broadcast in the UK in 1964), in order to explore our contemporary understanding of PC through a 'history' or consideration of the past. This part of the chapter asserts that the way(s) in which PC is understood today is the consequence of a multiplicity of historical processes and contingencies rather than any overarching or easily identifiable cause.

2.2 PC as a floating signifier

2.2.1 The discursive origins of PC

Authors have speculated that the origins of the use of the term PC may derive from various forms and tones of communist doctrine (e.g. see Berman, 1992; Perry, 1992; Hughes, 2010)[17]. However, the 1971 essay by Toni Cade, 'The Black Woman', is usually cited in the literature as the earliest written example of the modern use of the term 'politically correct' (e.g. see Cameron, 1994:19; Stourton, 2008:16, Hughes, 2010:63). In the essay Cade asserts that 'a man cannot be politically correct and a chauvinist too'. In this context the term is used to argue in a straightforward manner against sexism, and its use resonates with how PC is defined today by the *Oxford English Dictionary*[18] as well as much contemporary discourse which locates PC in debates about the harm caused by group based inequalities, such as racism or sexism. PC, therefore, can be viewed as a signifier for a particular political or

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[17] Berman (1992:5) describes PC as 'originally an approving phrase on the Leninist left to denote someone who steadfastly toed the party line'. Meanwhile, Perry (1992) and Hughes (2010:63) suggest that the origins of PC may lie within the countercultural left's enthusiasm for Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book* (1964). Hughes argues that the notion of 'correctness' was elevated to mean 'adherence to Maoist doctrine', and 'was concerned not just with "doing the right thing" but "thinking the right thoughts"' (p.62).

[18] Political Correctness is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'the careful avoidance of forms of expression or action that are perceived to exclude or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against' (2011:1110).

ethical position which emerged in response to material and social conditions of inequality, based around factors such as ethnicity or gender. However, although this position informed Cade's use of the term in her 1971 essay, this was not the only way in which PC was understood. Cameron has described the dominant method of discussing PC in the 1970s and 1980s as 'ironic' (1994:19). She describes the term in this period as used largely by US leftists in a self-mocking way in order to 'satirise the ever-present tendency of 'politicos' to become over-earnest, humourless and rigidly prescriptive, poking fun at the notion that anyone could be (or would want to be) wholly 'correct'' (Cameron,1994:19)[19]. The language of PC, therefore, permeated in-group discourse and was 'understood by insiders as a joke at their own expense' (ibid.).

2.2.2 The resignification of PC

The 'discursive drift' (Cameron, 1995:129), which saw the language of PC move from its original in-group context into popular discourse, has been contextualised by various authors as having surfaced during a series of controversies surrounding the apparent politicisation of the culture and curriculum of US universities in the 1980s and early 1990s (e.g. see Hentoff, 1992; Annette, 1994; Baker-Jones, 1994; Cameron, 1994 and 1995; Hollander, 1994; Morris, 1995; Wilson 1995 and 1996). These controversies centred upon a number of interrelated claims which were initially voiced in critiques concerning the US education system raised in various polemical books and academic articles (see e.g. Bloom, 1987; Kimball, 1990 and 1992; D'Souza, 1991 and 1992; Paglia, 1994). Firstly, these authors claimed that educational standards were being compromised, particularly across Arts and Humanities courses, as traditional texts were side-lined in order to make way for literature selected to reflect a wider range of non-European and female voices. Secondly, it was argued that the use of affirmative action in student admissions policies was undermining educational standards and the principle of equality of opportunity. Thirdly, it was asserted that free speech itself was under attack as student activists and lecturers imposed formal and informal speech codes on campuses which censored language and thought deemed to be racist or sexist. The use of the term PC appeared periodically (although not consistently) as these assertions were initially made. For example, although PC is explicitly identified by Kimball and D'Souza in 1992 as the ideology responsible for the purported changes to US universities, their earlier work

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[19] As this project focuses primarily on the UK, it is worth clarifying how during this period use of the term PC was largely confined within the US left, although the UK left used broadly equivalent terms such as 'politically sound' or 'ideologically sound'.

espouses similar arguments without directly referencing PC. Instead, blame is directed towards targets including the 'proponents of deconstruction, feminist studies, and other politically motivated challenges to the traditional tenets of humanistic study' (Kimball, 1990: xi). More broadly, the language of PC in the early 1990s was emerging as a marketable theme across the popular media. The increase in articles and news features in the US which referred to PC in this period has been documented by Wilson (1995) and Lakoff (2000); and Suhr and Johnson (2003) describe a similar sequence of events as they occurred in the UK[20].

This 'discursive drift' (Cameron, 1995:129) produced a resignification of PC as usage of the term moved from its countercultural origins and into mainstream discourse. Crucially, the ironic meaning of the term was usurped and discursively reconstituted as a straightforward reflection of the form of politics the left had once parodied as 'over-earnest… and rigidly prescriptive' (Cameron, 1994:19). PC became reified through this resignification as a coherent movement or project in possession of its own underlying structures, ideologies, practices, and followers. In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault (1976) had contended that sexual identity was a modern invention, asserting that, 'the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species' (p.43). In the early 1990s, the 'politically correct' emerged as a 'species' and political correctness as a new phenomenon which was tied to a set of signifieds reflecting 'its new position in a new time and place' (Said, 1983:227).

2.2.3 PC as a mobile cultural signifier

PC emerged in the early 1990s as a new cultural signifier for a politics of language which encouraged the avoidance of words or utterances deemed to be offensive, particularly towards groups who have been historically disadvantaged in some way. This form of politics is described by Cameron as interested in the power of language wherein language is viewed as 'not just a medium for ideas but a shaper of ideas; [which]… is always and inevitably political' (1995:122). It also involves a degree of linguistic intervention whereby, rather than

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[20] Using analysis of various news databases, Lakoff reports that usage of the term PC 'picks up steam around 1990, peaks between 1991 and 1995, and appears to subside after that' (2000:95). Suhr and Johnson (2003:33) note how the debate developed slightly later in the UK (with the level of interest in PC within popular newspapers peaking in 1994 rather than 1991) and that PC was often initially depicted as an idea or movement imported from the US.

simply avoiding certain words, ways of speaking may be challenged or replaced by politically correct alternatives (For example, chairman becomes chair or chairperson).

Secondly, the importance attached to the use of 'correct' language and the avoidance of offence, has sat alongside a critique of PC which views it to be a prescriptive and censorious project. Various authors have drawn attention to how media discourse which has favoured stories that report upon the excesses of politically correct linguistic interventions has helped to underwrite and sustain much of this critique (see e.g. Wilson, 1995; Lakoff, 2000; Mills, 2003; Suhr and Johnson, 2003; Allan and Burridge, 2006)[21]. In this respect, PC has also emerged as a signifier for an authoritarian movement to be mocked or disparaged. In 1994, Dunant declared that 'PC is a dirty word in nineties Britain. To call someone PC is less a description than an insult…' (xi). Today, PC remains a label people seldom self-identify with; rather, it is typically imposed upon them by their ideological opponents[22]. In addition, as PC signified a movement to be disparaged, political incorrectness also became a signifier in the 1990s for the non-censorious and authentic alternative voice, thereby enabling political incorrectness to acquire a positive signification.

Thirdly, PC's 'discursive drift' (Cameron, 1995:129) attached the label not only to a politics of language but also to a broader range of political activism, initiatives and practices aimed at combatting various social inequalities. This might include action taken to curb discrimination in the workplace, or efforts by activists to ensure full legal equality on grounds such as sexuality or disability. It also suggests that PC may be tied to ideas about appropriate forms of behaviour rather than simply resting upon the appropriate use of language. In this respect, PC has also become a signifier for various manifestations of identity based politics and activism.

These signifieds allowed PC to emerge reified as a new political phenomenon (along with the new 'species' of the politically correct). However, it is also significant that the signifieds pre-date the presence of the language of PC within popular discourse. Firstly, the politics of language had already formed a significant part of the campaigns against racism or sexism

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[21] For instance, Allan and Burridge describe how in the 1990s 'hostility to political correctness grew, fuelled by endless reporting and re-reporting of stories of over-the-top speech codes, and banning of books and visual images…Real or invented, the most absurd and extreme positions were depicted as mainstream political correctness' (2006:92-93).

[22] The success with which PC became discursively repositioned in this way in the 1990s has been described as evidence in itself of a form of right-wing cultural politics which is hostile to attempts to rescue language from some of its detrimental or discriminatory features (e.g. Wilson, 1995; Fairclough, 2003).

prior to the reification of PC in the 1990s[23]. Secondly, this focus upon language had also been subject to resistance and critique prior to the emergence of PC as a signifier of a movement to be mocked. Thirdly, as it permeated mainstream discourse PC became attached to a variety of established political concepts and forms of activism (such as feminism or anti-racism). In this sense, as PC became resignified (as a new politics of language or an authoritarian movement to be mocked), it also became grouped with a number of other pre-existing signifiers (like feminism or multiculturalism). The significance of PC as a cultural signifier was that it was able to emerge as an overarching label or category under which other signifiers could now be placed. These signifiers (such as multiculturalism or feminism) could then be emptied of their own specific meaning(s) and histories, and taken as examples of the broader hegemonic project of political correctness.

Said's notion of the travelling theory contends that ideas take on different implications depending on where, when and how they are deployed. The process of resignification (in particular the emergence of PC as an authoritarian movement to be disparaged) allowed PC to come to denote and discredit 'the threatening menace of the left' including 'a wide array of discursive practices generally thought of as lefty' (Lakoff, 2000:91). However, since the mid-1990s, the remit covered by the term has expanded so that PC is also increasingly used to refer to 'behaviour… rather than a political position. Moreover, the emphasis has now moved to civil gentility…' (Allan and Burridge, 2006:94)[24]. More broadly, PC has come to be associated with the regulation and management of the self in ways which may not possess any obvious political origin. This might include notions surrounding the 'correct' management of the body, such as whether we smoke or how we exercise (e.g. Allan and Burridge, 2006:175-202)[25].

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[23] For instance, many feminist theorists had explored the nature of sexism in language during the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. see Kramarae and Treichler, 1985; Miller and Swift, 1976; Spender, 1980 and 1981).

[24] For example, Allan and Burridge draw attention to an on-line discussion over social etiquette in which a participant asserted that, 'it is not politically correct to let your guests wash all the dishes themselves' (2006:.95).

[25] Allan and Burridge argue that our dietary habits are deeply entwined with issues of morality and self-regulation, which are overseen by medical, political and media discourse. One example of this could be our attitudes towards smoking in public places. A ban in 2014 in the UK on smoking in cars while children are present has been informed by medical and political discourse concerning the health and welfare of children. However, the move has also been condemned as 'authoritarian' and 'politically correct' (e.g Forsyth, J 2014 ' What will the family police do next?', *The Daily Mail,* 9th February)
http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2554960/What-family-police-force-read-children-night.html
(Accessed: 27 March 2014)

What unifies many disparate practices which have come to be viewed as evidence of political correctness is a perception that they contribute to an increase in the oversight and regulation of people's lives. Furthermore, this regulation is also often understood as possessing an ethical dimension so that 'correct' behaviour is deemed to improve the essence and character of the individual, or of wider society. (Browne has referred to the ethical dimension of political correctness as 'the dictatorship of virtue' (2006:3)). In this respect, popular phrases like 'PC gone mad' and 'PC brigade' form part of a narrative of excess surrounding the discussion of what might constitute 'correct' or 'incorrect' behaviour. This narrative implies that an acceptable (yet unspecifiable) level of PC has been overstepped in some way and that PC is zealously and rigorously enforced by an organised and disciplined movement, or 'PC brigade'. The discursive repositioning of PC in the 1990s (as a hegemonic and authoritarian movement) has been strengthened through the assembling together of many issues under the overarching category of PC since this period. As these issues may involve challenging or questioning various aspects of people's attitudes or behaviour they are felt to be a part of the broader PC project. This further connects PC to another set of signifiers denoting both liberal *and* authoritarian aspects. These signifiers include: 'illiberal liberalism' (Phillips, 1994:35), 'authoritarian liberalism' (Rankin 2002:xi), 'liberal fascism' (Goldberg 2009) and 'liberal orthodoxy' (Hughes, 2010:4). Political correctness, therefore, has come to be understood as a project which may be underpinned by liberal aims but which is also authoritarian or illiberal in method or practice.

2.2.4 The contextual nature of PC

The examination of the origins and evolution of PC as a floating signifier demonstrates the temporal nature of the concept, and helps us contextualise how the debates and controversies surrounding PC are able to emerge. However, the notion of the travelling theory (Said:1983) is also of use when exploring the fluidity of meaning surrounding PC *within* a specific location or level of discourse. For instance, the signification of PC as an authoritarian movement has attached the concept to the practice of making judgements about people's attitudes, thought and behaviour. These judgements might include questioning people's use of language, their political viewpoints or their lifestyle choices if these are deemed to be politically incorrect. Hughes (2010:204-210) has examined how political correctness is now perceived to inform medical and popular discourse surrounding what we eat and consume, including the various efforts to regulate and improve our dietary habits. However, he also

explores how assumptions about our dietary habits and patterns of consumption inform discourses surrounding body image. Words including 'fattism', 'lookism' and 'body fascism' have politicised this discussion, and point to an increasing awareness of the social influences and pressures which are detrimental to body image. This also suggests why a flexibility of meaning has arisen around PC within this discursive context. PC may simultaneously signify the practice of making judgements (in order to improve and regulate what and how we consume), *or* the absence of making judgements in order to avoid causing offence and perpetuating prejudice.

This sliding of meaning may suggest that it is also possible to view PC as an empty signifier which means whatever its interpreters wish it to. However, in order to make sense of the sliding of meaning in this context, it is important to re-examine PC as a signifier of a politics of language and the politics of identity. PC is understood to be especially concerned with the avoidance of offence towards less powerful groups in society[26]. ('PC' judgements about dietary habits, therefore, may be withheld in order to avoid reinforcing the politically incorrect doctrine of 'body fascism'). The practice of avoiding offence also contributes to a further uncertainty, or confusion of meaning, surrounding PC. Various authors have argued that the fear of offending less powerful groups may contribute to an unwillingness to confront illiberal attitudes or practices *within* these groups (see e.g. Okin, 1999; Pollit, 1999; Cohen, 2007; Malik, 2009; Phillips, 2009)[27]. One consequence of this is that political correctness is accused of silencing discussion concerning the rights of the some of the least powerful members of minority communities (such as women or LBGT people). Ironically, therefore, the failure to address social inequalities, such as sexism, becomes attributed to PC.

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[26] This understanding resonates with the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of PC as 'the careful avoidance of forms of expression or action that are perceived to exclude or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against'.

[27] For example, in *Is Mulitculturalism bad for women?*, Okin (1999) asserts that demands for multiculturalism and group rights can endanger the rights of women. For example, she argues that 'during the 1980s, the French government quietly permitted immigrant men to bring multiple wives into the country, to the point where an estimated 200,000 families in Paris are polygamous' (p.9). Malik (2009) has argued that the progressive recognition of group inequalities has given way to a regressive development within the politics of identity whereby concern for cultural sensitivity has engendered a form of liberal self-censorship. Cohen (2007) reiterates this view, arguing that the consequence of political correctness and self-censorship is that liberals within minority groups often lack the support of their liberal-left 'comrades' (p.12).

2.2.5 Summary and implications of analysis

The fluidity of meaning attached to PC lends weight to the assertion that the closer the arguments surrounding PC are examined, the more 'everything is a puzzle without a solution' (Berman, 1992:6). However, approaching PC as a floating signifier enables this project to first identify the various meanings attached to the concept before exploring their significance. This chapter has identified three key ways in which PC has emerged as a signifier: (i) as a politics of language; (ii) as an authoritarian movement to be mocked; and (iii) as a politics of identity and activism. Crucially, it contends that the significance of PC as a floating signifier is that it has become an overarching label under which a number of practices, concepts and issues of social contestation are placed. Furthermore, as the language of PC has travelled from its countercultural origins into mainstream discourse, it has also acquired an orthodox rather than countercultural signification[28]. In 1971, Kirby described how 'a counter-culture [unlike a sub-culture] arises in distinct opposition to the major culture. It examines and challenges many of the taken for granted features of the larger society' (p.204). The radical politics which emerged from the 1960/70s counterculture, (including movements such as feminism, gay liberation and anti-racist groups) possessed 'a subversive appeal' (Berman,1992:9) which was retained as many movements made inroads and progress more broadly across society. Although these movements may have been subject to mockery or disapproval, they were also often viewed as anti-establishment; or as challenging the existing order, including its prevailing norms and conventions.

Berman's description of how the term 'PC' was adopted in the early 1990s 'by people who had no fidelity to radicalism at all, but who relished the nasty syllables,'(1992:5) suggests how 'new' words or neologisms can contribute to the way in which debates shift and are reconstituted within a discursive community. It also concurs with Lakoff that 'the introduction of a new phrase or word into the popular lexicon is world-changing' and capable of altering 'our presuppositions' (2000:90)[29]. As PC became useful shorthand for critique of a form of 'liberal orthodoxy' (Hughes, 2010:4), to be politically correct came to suggest 'someone who steadfastly toe[s] the party line' (Berman, 1992:5). This understanding of PC has found support beyond traditional political conservatism and is bolstered by the language

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[28] This is particularly bound with the notion that PC symbolises an authoritarian project which is enforced by liberal elites or a 'liberal orthodoxy' (Hughes, 2010:4).
[29] The full quote from Lakoff is used at the start of this chapter.

surrounding the concept, including the prescriptive notion of 'correctness' which suggests an inflexible conformity to an approved body of thought or opinion. For instance, in a critique of the excesses of 'PC culture' the left leaning social critic, Ehrenreich, argues that 'rules don't work' (1992:335) and she asks 'why would you want to join a group just to be criticised and "corrected"? (p.336).

2.3 A Foucauldian genealogical analysis of the emergence of PC

2.3.1 The Genealogical Method

Although the contention that PC should be approached as a floating or sliding signifier eschews the possibility of any fixed or indubitable definition of PC, this chapter has nevertheless asked what meanings have become attached to the concept. However, this part of the chapter is interested primarily in how these meanings were able to emerge. It conducts a Foucauldian genealogical analysis which focuses upon the conditions of possibility which have enabled the reification of PC to take place (rather than inquiry into the essence of the concept).

In order to understand how contemporary ways of conceptualising PC were able to emerge, it is worth considering Foucault's explanation of Genealogy in his 1971 essay 'Nietzsche Genealogy History'

> Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things…Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion: it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; (Foucault, [1971] cited in Rabinow, 1984:81)

Genealogy, therefore, 'opposes itself to the search for "origins"' (Ibid:77) and regards traditional or linear historical accounts which have attempted to uncover the causes of phenomenon as misconceived. Kendall and Wickham (2000:5) assert that genealogical analysis is underpinned by two considerations; firstly, the search for 'contingencies instead of causes', and secondly, scepticism 'in regard to all political arguments'. This theoretical understanding would suggest that there was nothing inevitable about the emergence of PC as a neologism in the early 1990s. Instead, it points analysis towards 'the complex course of

descent' (Foucault, 1971 cited in Rabinow, 1984:81) to reveal the multiplicity of events and occurrences which underpinned the historical beginnings and evolution of the concept.

Hitherto, much of the literature has sought to attribute the reification of PC to clear and identifiable causes. These causes often reflect the political standpoint or ideological differences of those involved in the discussion. Therefore, right leaning authors have tended to assert that a form of liberal politics led to PC (Kimball, 1990; D'Souza, 1991; Hughes, 1993); whilst left leaning authors have often explained anti-PC sentiment in terms of a right wing backlash against liberal politics (Epstein, 1992; Wilson, 1995; Fairclough, 2003). In this respect, the debate has risked remaining locked within the adversarial positions through which it is often conducted. A genealogical methodology may provide an alternative way of approaching this topic and move beyond the ideological deadlock which has the potential to direct the arguments and conclusions taken from analysis.

However, despite its emphasis upon contingencies rather than causes, a genealogical approach does not preclude the existence of specific factors that contribute to the production of institutions, processes, concepts and ideas. Indeed, the uncovering of these factors is crucial to this method of inquiry. Kendall and Whickham (1999:45-46) have described how material and discursive conditions enable particular types of knowledge to operate and be produced. These types of knowledge will also have consequences for the conditions from which they arise and from which they are inseparable. This part of the chapter applies this understanding to an examination of the conditions through which PC was able to emerge as a floating cultural signifier, using the situation comedy *Till Death Us Do Part* to conduct a 'history of the present' (Kendall and Whickham, 2000:4).

2.3.2 Till Death Us Do Part, and the conditions of emergence of PC

In 1966 the BBC began to broadcast one of the first TV comedies to deal directly with racism and bigotry, and through the programme's main character it gave voice to the expression of language and opinions which would be considered politically incorrect today. *Till Death Us Do Part* ran from 1966 to 1974 and centred upon Alf Garnett, a white working class man with racist and politically reactionary views who lived with his family in a council house in the east end of London. Ross (1996) and Malik (2002) have explored how the programme was initially regarded as a radical departure from the anodyne nature of the situation comedies of the time, and Garnett is described by Malik as 'stirring it up in people's living

rooms, speaking the unspeakable…and thus working against the grain of expected liberal (television) caution' (2002:92).

The series immediately provoked controversy and can be viewed as having contributed to an emerging wave of popular discussion on substantive topics such as race, immigration and sexual liberation; as well as questions regarding the very nature and conditions of debate. For instance, can some words or opinions be deemed so offensive to the sensibilities of others that they should be excluded pre-emptively from debate? This question was asked in view of the fact that many viewers agreed with Alf's view of the world and felt vindicated by its expression. Medhurst (1989:18) asserts that 'a whole repertoire of anxieties and prejudices was being expressed for the first time and with such bravado and forcefulness that the response was instant and massive'. And yet the intention of the programme had been to expose and ridicule, rather than advocate, the sorts of viewpoints expressed by Alf Garnett. Writer Johnny Speight claimed to be highlighting Alf's ignorance (which was often challenged and mocked in the series by Alf's family), and he maintained that his writing was informed by liberal, anti-racist principles.

The controversies surrounding *Till Death Us Do Part* demonstrate how contemporary disputes over the nature of offence and free expression, which are conceptualised as PC, share a history and lineage with debates which pre-date the popular use of the term. Political Correctness is defined by *The Oxford Dictionary* as 'the avoidance of forms of expression or action that are perceived to exclude, marginalise or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against'(2013:725). Many of the objections to Alf Garnett that arose in the 1960s and 1970s can be firmly located within this understanding of the concept [30]. Furthermore, Malik's description of Garnett as 'speaking the unspeakable' in contrast to the 'expected liberal (television) caution'(2002:92) of the 1960s resonates with more contemporary perceptions of political incorrectness as favouring open debate in place of an assumed cautiousness or conformity of politically correct orthodoxy. In view of this, how has the notion of PC as an idea come to be thinkable and to be seen as self-evident in a sense which was absent from the period when *Till Death Us Do Part* was originally broadcast?

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[30] However, it is also worth noting that some critics of Alf (including most famously the campaigner Mary Whitehouse) expressed more concern over his regular use of swear words and perceived blasphemy than his use of racist language and expression of racist views (see Thompson, 2013:159-160).

To account for this, it is worth viewing the reification of PC as the product of a number of historical conditions of emergence, rather than approaching PC as something which was discovered or identified during the controversies surrounding US universities in the 1980s and early 1990s. McNay (1994:88-89) describes 'traditional history as falsely celebrating great moments' and contends that 'genealogy is the method of analysis which traces the uneven and haphazard processes of dispersion, accumulation and over-lapping that are constitutive of the event'. A traditional semantic history would locate the UK of the 1960s as preceding the advent of political correctness (in line with the absence of the language of PC from the mainstream lexicon of that era). However, the material and discursive conditions of this era, in which *Till Death Us Do Part* was embedded, form a significant part of the historical contingencies through which the idea of PC was able to emerge.

These broader material conditions included post-war immigration to the UK from former Commonwealth countries which resulted in a more multicultural Britain; together with the advent of post-imperialism and decolonisation. Malik (2002) argues that the dominant narrative surrounding 'race' at this time (which continued to be reflected across TV dramas and documentaries in the 1960s) had concerned the extent to which black and Asian immigrants were assimilated into British culture and society, without fundamentally addressing what might be preventing assimilation. She asserts that media depictions increasingly created a 'gap between television's unifying project and the social, economic and cultural interests of an increasingly differentiated British nation' (2002:44). This nation included a popular level of opposition to immigration which was most notoriously articulated by Enoch Powell MP in his infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech delivered in 1968, shortly before the introduction of the Race Relations Bill[31]. A burgeoning awareness of the problem of racism, including legislative steps to combat it, therefore co-existed with a level of popular support for the views expressed by figures such as Powell. It was within this discordant social and political context that Alf Garnett appeared and became 'a cultural phenomenon, attracting seismic media coverage, largely because of the series' controversial and open focus upon race, sex, religion and politics' (Malik, 2002:93).

Till Death Do Us Part disrupted the dominant televisual narrative on race and assimilation (Malik: 2002), and allowed the discussion of racism to occupy a prominent space within the public arena. Tulloch (1990) suggests that the discourse generated by the programme

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[31] This bill made it unlawful to refuse housing, employment or public services on grounds of someone's colour or ethnicity.

'...made it a *social event,* providing a nexus through which ideologies could be actively reorganised' (p.252). Although some viewers took Alf's bigotry as a straight-forward vindication of their own prejudices, the programme also contributed to the shifting discursive terrain surrounding the significant social change of the period in which the series was originally broadcast. In addition to the emergence of a more diverse and multicultural Britain, the programme also reflected how traditional ideas surrounding gender roles, individual freedom and deference to authority were being increasingly challenged. This was discursively aligned with the rise of identity politics which was drawing attention to and challenging various forms of prejudice and discrimination. The movements and campaigns associated with identity politics sought to uncover and critique inequalities based on the shared experiences of particular groups including those based upon ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or religious affiliation. The literature has generally identified this as the key factor which led towards the reification of PC as a new political project or movement (see e.g. Berman, 1992; Hall, 1994; Loury, 1994; Gitlin, 1997; Browne, 2006; Green 2006). In 1992, Berman claimed that the emergence of identity politics 'sparked the PC debate of today' (p.13) and he argued that this usurped the traditional leftist prioritising of economic and material inequalities in favour of the 'idea that in cultural affairs, the single most important way to classify people is by race, ethnicity and gender' (p.13). Berman (1992), Loury (1994) and Gitlin (1997) also argue that identity politics provided the pretext for the controversies surrounding political correctness within US universities in the 1980s and 1990s[32].

This analysis concurs that identity politics has been a crucial factor which has enabled PC to be produced and sustained as a cultural signifier for a new politics of language and identity. However, it also maintains that identity politics constitutes an important contingency rather than causal explanation of the presence of the language of PC within contemporary popular discourse. This is because there was no inevitability about the 'discursive drift' (Cameron, 1994:20) which saw use of the concept move from US countercultural politics into everyday discourse. The role the media has played in this 'discursive drift' (ibid) has been discussed at length in the literature (see e.g. Cameron, 1994; Wilson, 1995; Gitlin, 1997; Lakoff, 2000; Fairclough, 2003; Suhr and Johnson, 2003; Allan and Burridge, 2006). Allan and Burridge describe the 'PC scare' during the 1990s as 'largely media fed' (p. 92) and discuss how

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[32] Berman (1992), Loury (1994) and Gitlin (1997) have explored identity politics from a broadly left of centre political perspective, although their central claim concerning the link between identity politics and the controversies in US universities is largely also echoed by right leaning authors (see e.g. Phillips, 1994; Rankin, 2002; Green, 2006).

debate was 'fuelled by endless reporting and re-reporting of stories of over-the-top speech codes, and banning of books and visual images' (p. 92-93). The media was a significant factor which enabled the idea of PC to be recognised more broadly beyond those directly involved in leftist political activism. However, there was no necessity in how PC emerged as 'a marketable theme' (Suhr and Johnson, 2003:50) in the 1990s *or* in how successfully the concept would be co-opted in order to conflate a number of disparate issues and concerns.

This genealogical analysis does not preclude, however, that the discourse surrounding PC is often grounded in concrete disputes and anxieties surrounding notions of offence and free expression, or how the backdrop to reification has involved important shifts in attitudes towards racism and other forms of prejudice. The sequel to *Till Death Us Do Part* was broadcast in the UK from 1985 until 1992, and was called *In Sickness and in Health.* Although the language of PC had yet to be absorbed fully across British popular discourse, the BBC was increasingly appearing to be responsive to changing notions of what was deemed as offensive or socially unacceptable. Writer Johnny Speight complained that the BBC wanted to censor his series due to Alf's racist and sexist views, and in a 1994 interview with *Channel Four* he claimed that 'politically correct people' couldn't see that the joke was on Alf ('Without Walls', *Channel Four*, 25.10.94 cited in Malik, 2002:93). Although the character of Alf Garnett had always been controversial, the dispersion of PC discourse in the 1990s provided a new language with which to articulate the disputes he had already provoked in the 1960s and 1970s. That such disputes had preceded the everyday presence of the language of PC conveys how PC was discursively constructed as a new phenomenon in the decades following the original broadcasts of *Till Death Us Do Part*. However, this discursive process has sat alongside the eventual disappearance of Alf from the TV schedules, (along with other prime time television programmes which would be viewed as politically incorrect in a contemporary context). This suggests that the reification of PC took place during a period of meaningful social and political change in the way racism or sexism is perceived; and that the process of reification was aligned to the broader shifting discursive conditions concerning how we respond to racism or sexism.

2.3.3 Political Correctness and the shifting nature of offence

The use of racist language in *Till Death Do Us Part* had been controversial from the outset, although the conditions of debate clearly shifted during the 1980s and 1990s. Firstly, there was a sense that the crude and overt racism expressed by Garnett represented an outdated view of a multicultural Britain which was increasingly at ease with diversity and the reality of a more pluralistic society (Malik, 2002:94). Secondly, the expression of Alf's racism was regarded as increasingly problematic in view of the assertion that language acts as a 'shaper of ideas' (Cameron, 1995:122). Thirdly, this was linked more broadly to changing perceptions of offensiveness which focused upon challenging the negative depiction and representation of various social groups. The language of PC, therefore, became a useful way of articulating these debates, and of making sense of the shifting discursive landscape and changing social attitudes of the later decades of the 20th century.

Speight's accusation that 'the politically correct' didn't get the joke is also illustrative of how PC has become associated with disputes over the censorship of 'offensive' words or utterances. Speight's assertion suggests that 'the politically correct' lack an awareness of intent or context with regard to the use of language they proscribe as off limits. This inability to understand why 'offensive' language can sometimes be used to make a meaningful point about a particular issue or problem, such as racism, helps suggest why PC has become a signifier for a movement to be mocked or disparaged. In this particular instance, PC is also implied to possess a degree of humourlessness and a lack of understanding of the use of satire and irony. However, the wider question concerning the relationship between offence, intent and context remains unresolved and will be revisited in the Comedy chapter of this thesis. According to Speight 'the joke was on Alf': however, regardless of his intentions this was not the experience for many 'politically incorrect' viewers who saw Alf's bigotry as a vindication rather than condemnation of his various prejudices.

2.4 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has explored how PC has become attached to a range of meanings, and how the concept became reified through the alignment of a number of historical processes and contingencies, rather than any single or primary event. The first part of the chapter considered PC as a floating cultural signifier which has emerged as an overarching label under which a range of disparate practices have been re-grouped and gathered in spite of their specific

histories or traditions. This process of re-grouping has also surfaced alongside the discursive construction of PC as a newly coherent political movement, or broader cultural and socio-political phenomenon.

The second part of the chapter demonstrates how the process of reification has helped to mask how many issues which we now discuss using the language of PC (such as disputes over the use of language deemed as racist or sexist) are not entirely new concerns. However, it also argues that reification has provided us with a shared language, or way of conceptualising and making sense of real political and socio-cultural change regarding our attitudes and response to forms of prejudice like racism or sexism.

The chapter has approached PC as a floating signifier in order to enable this project to identify and explore the significance of the various meanings attached to the term. Why, therefore, does much of the discussion of PC[33] continue to echo Berman's assertion that 'everything is a puzzle without a solution' (1992:6)? To begin to address this, it is worth briefly re-considering the role PC plays as a floating cultural signifier. As a signifier for a politics of language and of identity, PC is tied to a set of tangible political ideas and practices[34]. This way of viewing PC draws our attention to arguments about particular issues and topics which divide political opinion. Questions about issues such as the merits of positive discrimination, or the use of non-sexist language, provoke disagreement and debate which reflect the different values and judgements people use in order to interpret and analyse the world around them. However, this context is nevertheless linked to disagreement over matters which are substantive. However, the notion of PC as a cultural signifier for an authoritarian, or censorious, movement moves the discussion more directly towards the conditions of debate and introduces questions about the very rules and norms of behaviour that govern discussion in the public domain. For example, should 'offensive' arguments be pre-emptively excluded from discussion? Or, who can speak about what topics, and when, without violating (un)spoken PC rules and codes of etiquette? Some of the most contentious arguments explored in this chapter are grounded in these sorts of questions. For instance, the genealogical study of *Till Death Us Do Part* shows us that as racism came to be viewed as socially and politically unacceptable, so did Alf Garnett's expression of it, regardless of the

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[33] By 'the discussion of PC' I mean to refer here to how PC continues to be understood within academic *and* popular discourse.
[34] For example, PC has become attached to concepts such as multiculturalism, or practices like anti-discrimination legislation.

anti-racist intentions of Johnny Speight or the mockery of Alf's opinions in *Till Death Us Do Part* by his own family.

Although the meanings attached to PC are fluid, it has become a clear point of reference for contemporary disputes surrounding the giving and taking of offence and how the rules or conditions of debate should be set. Across popular discourse PC also continues to possess an overwhelmingly negative signification as authoritarian, censorious and detrimental to the principles of open and honest discussion. The following chapter will consider how the literature has made sense of this signification, and of how varying levels of 'offensiveness' or 'political incorrectness' may be present (and absent) within particular discursive contexts.

Chapter 3. PC and the Academy

'The whole PC strategy depends on a conception of politics as the unmasking of false ideas and meanings and replacing them by true ones. It is erected in the image of 'politics of truth' – a substitution of the false racist or sexist or homophobic consciousness by a 'true consciousness'. It refuses to take on board the profound observation (for example, by Michel Foucault and others) that the 'truth' of knowledge is always contextual, always constructed within discourse, always connected with the relations of power which make it true…The view that we need to struggle over language because discourse has effects for both how we perceive the world and our practice in it, which is right, is negated by the attempt to short-circuit the process of change by legislating some Absolute Truth into being. What's more, what is being legislated is another single, homogenous truth – our truth to replace theirs…' (Hall, 1994:181)

3.1 Introduction

Since the notion of PC became part of our mainstream lexicon in the early 1990s the literature has sought to account for the various controversies it has provoked. In particular, it has addressed the largely negative signification of PC as having contributed to an authoritarian culture of increasing censoriousness and excessive sensitivity towards the giving of offence. This chapter explores three broad positions which have sought to account for this negative signification before the thesis begins to address how the controversies surrounding PC will be explored by this project. The chapter also considers how studies have approached the relationship between PC and the thematic fields explored within the data analysis component of the thesis. It does so in order to provide a context and rationale for the research process it proposes and develops in the forthcoming chapters.

The first position outlined in this chapter largely agrees that we share an increasing preoccupation with the giving and taking of offence which is detrimental to the free and open exchange of ideas, and is attributable to the emergence of PC. The second position argues that PC is fundamentally informed by creditable and progressive goals, but that the narrative of excess associated with it, together with its prioritisation of the politics of language, has contributed to the backlash against political correctness. The third position views PC primarily as a concept co-opted by the political right in order to condemn and discredit their leftist opponents. As PC is typically ascribed to a politics of language rooted in the ideas of

the liberal-left and/or identity politics, these three broad positions tend to correspond with different political affiliations. However, this review of the literature also reflects upon areas of discussion which are not straightforwardly situated in the differences between right or left-wing politics (including the liberal-left critique of PC). Furthermore, the three broad groupings, or positions, examined here are not intended to represent homogenised bodies of thought as the level of agreement within and between each grouping will vary dependent upon the author and the specific argument under discussion.

However, this chapter does present an orientating examination of the main theories and studies which have sought to make sense of the meaning(s) attached to PC. It will also recognise how sociology has addressed some of the questions raised by the arguments outlined here primarily through studies within the field of sociolinguistics. It argues that these studies have generated a deeper understanding of how linguistic change has become increasingly attached to wider social and political change, however, it also contends that the literature has not reconciled some of the tensions and inconsistencies underlying our perception of PC. In particular, it argues that space in the literature remains for exploration of how PC is felt to have installed a hegemonic form of censoriousness, whilst politically incorrect forms of expression are simultaneously celebrated and accepted across many discursive spaces. It therefore concludes by outlining why the exploration of a range of discursive spaces within various media and popular cultural locations is at the heart of this research project.

3.2 The case against PC

The 'discursive drift' (Cameron, 1994:20) which saw PC discourse move in the early 1990s from its original self-parodying context in the US political left and into the US mainstream, included the publication of a number of polemical books and journal articles by conservative authors. Kimball (1990; 1992; 1995), Bahls, (1991); D'Souza (1991; 1992), Dickman (1993); Hughes (1993) and Bernstein (1995) focused primarily on what they saw as the politicisation of US universities in line with liberal or leftist doctrines.[35]. Viewed collectively, the work of these authors advances two key assertions regarding the impact and significance of PC.

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[35] The Genealogy chapter of this thesis has examined how the use of the term PC appears periodically (although not consistently) within the work of many authors. For example, in 1992 Kimball and D'Souza explicitly identify PC as the ideology responsible for the 'politicisation' of US universities whilst their earlier work develops similar arguments without directly referencing PC.

Firstly, they object to the apparent side-lining in academic courses of texts by 'Dead White European Males' in favour of a more socially diverse university curriculum. In 1992, D'Souza argued there was 'a movement of change, of transition, in which the Western classics are increasingly diminished and the non-Western works, very often polemical, ideological, anti-Western in tone, are being emphasized' (p.32). Kimball also describes PC as having 'invaded' the study of literature:

> …The effect is not to make one more politically sensitive but to transform a concern with literature into an obsession with one's race, one's sex, one's sexual preferences, one's ethnic origin. What one gains is a political cause; what one loses is the freedom of disinterested appreciation. (Kimball, 1992:74)

Secondly, these authors condemn the imposition of formal and informal campus speech codes. D'Souza (1992:30) described PC as having replaced the principles of a 'liberal education' (based upon 'free and open debate') with that of an 'illiberal education' (based upon 'censorship regulations outlawing racially and sexually offensive speech'). Hughes (1993:30-31) accuses academics at US universities of imposing formal speech codes upon students which punish 'verbal offences' and 'may impede…student's progress from protected childhood to capable adulthood'. More generally, the arguments outlined here concerning campus speech codes precipitate wider contemporary debates about self-censorship and the exclusion of 'incorrect' viewpoints from public discourse.

Initially, the academic discussion surrounding PC was largely concentrated in the US, although books such as *The War of the Words: The Political Correctness Debate* (Dunant: 1994) also addressed the meanings attached to PC within the socio-political context of the UK[36]. However, as the language of PC has acquired a presence and longevity within everyday discourse, its impact upon the UK has come to be examined more widely. Green (2006) and Furedi (2011) have criticised what they regard as the excessive encroachment of PC upon our formal lives and personal conduct, such as the introduction of workplace quotas for historically disadvantaged groups, or the enactment of codes of conduct in the workplace or within educational institutions. However, much of the critique of PC purports to be largely accepting of legal efforts to outlaw discrimination against particular groups (see e.g. Loury, 1994; Gitlin, 1997; Rankin, 2002; Browne, 2006; Bullough, 2008; Hughes, 2010; Saunders,

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[36] The initial concentration of academic discussion within the US is, in part, a reflection of how PC was discursively constructed here, and of how the term had first emerged from its 'in-group' location in the US liberal-left.

2011). PC, therefore, has been understood in the literature as manifest within different levels. Firstly, it is understood as involving the principles of non-discrimination and formal equality, which are broadly accepted (particularly those governing institutions such as the workplace); and secondly, PC is felt to contain a broader cultural context which is regarded as more problematic. This cultural context has been described by Loury as involving an implicit 'social convention of restraint on public expression' (1994:430) which has developed alongside the stigmatising of 'incorrect' types of thought, words or behaviour.

The case against PC is built overwhelmingly around the contention that PC promotes a 'right' to be offended which is sustained by a wider fear of causing offence and a culture of excessive censoriousness. PC is also accused of having distorted the traditional liberal principles of free speech and tolerance to become a form of 'illiberal liberalism' (Phillips, 1994:35), 'authoritarian liberalism' (Rankin 2002:xi), 'a heresy of liberalism' (Browne, 2006:2), or even 'liberal fascism' (Goldberg 2009)[37]. Browne (2006), Green (2006) and Saunders (2011) describe PC as a product of the success of group rights and identity politics which they view as having elevated 'victimhood' into 'a political status' (Green, 2006:1). In their view, this status enables some groups to receive preferential treatment, a crucial element of which is the 'right' to not be offended. Browne (2006) also argues that PC operates through the misapplication of words such as *sexism, racism* and *homophobia*; and that this becomes a method of silencing discussion and dissenting viewpoints through instilling the fear of being labelled sexist, racist or homophobic. He, therefore, argues that these words are no longer used purely to denote the iniquities of discrimination based upon gender, ethnicity or sexuality. Instead, he claims they are asserted rather than demonstrated to exist for political advantage and to suppress viewpoints which stray from PC orthodoxy. In a similar vein, Green (2006) argues that the language denoting 'victim status' (p.45) has expanded in recent decades to include new words such as *Islamophobia* and *transphobia,* and therefore new ways of suppressing dissenting viewpoints.

As PC is typically assumed to have emerged from a form of liberal-left identity politics, it is unsurprising that these claims about its censorious nature are echoed in the work of many right-leaning authors (see e.g D'Souza, 1992; Rankin, 2002; Goldberg, 2009). However, the

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[37] Phillips (1994), Rankin (2002), Browne (2006), and Goldberg (2009) are right leaning authors who are generally critical of the modern liberal-left. An interesting feature of the conservative critique of PC is its propensity to imply that 'true' liberal values (such as tolerance or free expression) are now the preserve of the right.

case against PC has also been made by those who broadly align themselves to the liberal-left (see e.g. Loury 1994; Gitlin 1997; Cohen, 2007; Malik, 2009; Hasan 2010; Lester, 2010). Whilst Gitlin maintains that 'PC Panic' (1997:177) has been exaggerated by a level of media frenzy that itself requires analysis, he also describes some parts of the left as 'having struggled to overcome silences…developed their own methods of silencing' (p.147). He argues that PC involves a form of self-censorship whereby the fear of offence or ideological transgression silences potential speakers from entering debate or expressing 'politically incorrect' viewpoints. Loury (1994) asserts that the self-reinforcing nature of this type of censorship is especially problematic within sections of the left where people may deny their behaviour, making it potentially difficult to either identify or directly challenge. Malik (2009) and Hasan (2010) have described self-censorship as an aspect of contemporary leftist cultural politics which is rooted in a fear of giving offence towards groups considered as less powerful or marginalized in some way. Hasan (2010) argues 'supporters of multiculturalism fear that to argue against or critique oppressive beliefs would lead to 'misrecognition' of minority cultures and leave them open to the charge of being disrespectful of their very being' (p.23). From this perspective, the 'mainstreaming' of PC moves this aversion towards the giving of offence beyond the cultural politics of the left and into wider social and political discourse.

The liberal and conservative cases against PC reach similar conclusions using different ideological paths. Both assert that PC inhibits open debate and is predicated on an excessive fear of causing offence. However, Green (2006), Browne (2006) and Saunders (2011) regard PC as based largely upon erroneous and outdated notions of victimhood that 'classify certain groups of people as victims in need of protection from criticism' (Browne, 2006:4). These authors also tend to downplay the presence of racism and other forms of prejudice and discrimination within modern society. Meanwhile, Malik (2009) and Hasan (2010) describe the desire to avoid offence as grounded in the recognition of real inequalities and power differentials. From this perspective, the liberal fear of offence arises from a desire not to offend those less powerful, or unwittingly reinforce prejudice directed at less powerful groups.

Much of the case against PC in the 1990s initially developed as a polemic against what Kimball described as the 'radical curriculum' (1990:xiv) within US universities. This polemical element is retained within the contemporary critique of PC which is often

grounded in the political or partisan position of the writer[38]. Furthermore, although a core assertion of the case against PC is that it inculcates a culture of self-censorship predicated on the fear of causing offence, this claim may be more difficult to demonstrate than it is to assert in view of the self-regulatory nature of what it purports to describe i.e. PC is regarded as effacing the evidence of its effects. The challenge this poses to academic research is recognised by Loury (1994) in his study of self-censorship in public discourse. In order to demonstrate how the fear of causing offence might close down open debate, Loury identifies specific examples of censored public discourse[39]. Secondly, he uses Goffman's dramaturgical model to describe how each interaction between a 'sender' (someone who expresses him/herself in a particular way) and a 'receiver' (who listens and reacts to that expression) is played as a 'game' or 'performance' (p. 422). Within this performance, the sender, or speaker, will want to make a desired impression on their audience, or receiver.

> …a skilful speaker will structure his message mindful of the inferences that listeners are inclined to make. He will try to use the patterns of inference established within a given community of discourse to his advantage. He will avoid some expressions known to elicit negative judgements or association and he will deploy others known to win favour with his audience or cast him in a positive light. (Loury, 1994:433)

According to Loury, PC ensures that 'conventions of self-censorship are sustained by the utilitarian acquiescence of each community member [so that] by calculating that the losses from deviation outweigh the gains, individuals are led to conform' (p.455). Loury's use of Goffman, therefore, helps us make sense of how open discussion may be compromised when the risks of offending an audience (or part of an audience) are felt to be too great.

However, whilst Loury's analysis may lend weight to the assertion that PC maintains conventions of self-censorship, it also sits alongside the enduring popularity of forms of expression across various discursive spaces which display direct and open hostility towards PC. Indeed, many levels of popular discourse (for example, comic discourse) pride themselves upon their anti-PC rhetoric and/or aversion to PC principles. This review of the

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[38] For example, the books cited in this section of the chapter by Sanders (2001), Browne (2006) and Green (2006) are all published by the right of centre think tank *Civitas.*

[39] One of the cases Loury examines is the case of 'An Incorrect Discussion of The Holocaust' (1994). He examines how Philip Jenninger (once the president of the parliament in the former West German Republic), was forced to resign in 1988 following a speech he made in which many in his audience interpreted his 'brutally frank account of prevailing attitudes among Germans in the 1930s as a disguised defence of National Socialism' (p.438).

literature suggests there is room for further exploration of the paradox whereby people are deemed to self-censor to avoid appearing non-PC for fear of being stigmatized by a wider community; however, PC simultaneously remains an unpopular notion within that wider community. The concurrence of these apparently conflicting trends is, therefore, worth further academic examination, including what this suggests about the contested meaning(s) of PC, and the varying levels of PC within different discursive spaces.

3.3 PC as a flawed progressive project

Although PC is a concept which has been defended by Min Choi and Murphy (1992) and Butterbaugh (1994) as representing the progressive values of social equality and non-discrimination, the literature contains few who are willing to self-identify as PC or rescue the term entirely from its negative connotations. (This reflects, at least partially, how successfully the term has been demonised and used as a way of stigmatising its purported proponents). That the literature tends to mirror a broader cultural unease with PC also highlights the need for further exploration of the enduring unpopularity of the term, despite its purportedly progressive and non-discriminatory goals. However, whilst refraining from unreserved identification with the label, the position examined in this section of the chapter develops a more equivocal understanding of the concept, including the controversies it provokes surrounding free expression and the politics of offence.

This position largely includes those who view PC as fundamentally informed by progressive goals and ideals which recognise the harm caused by social inequalities, and the power of language to affirm broader cultural values (see e.g. Alibhai-Brown, 1994; Ayim, 1998; Berman, 1992; Perry and Williams, 1992; Ehrenreich, 1992; Cameron, 1994 and 1995; Hall, 1994; Kelly and Rubal-Lopez, 1996; Said, 1992; Frunza, 2006). In her analysis of the use and regulation of language Cameron asserts that PC assumes 'language is not just a medium for ideas but a shaper of ideas; that it is always and inevitably political; and that the 'truth' someone speaks may be relative to the power they hold' (1995:122). Various writers have suggested that the emergence of PC is an example of the tradition of campaigns for linguistic reform which emerge when cultures contest or renegotiate the use of certain words according to particular aesthetic, moral, practical, or political considerations (see e.g. Cameron, 1994 and 1995; Hall, 1994; Lakoff, 2000; Fairclough, 2003; Allan and Burridge, 2006). Cameron (1994) calls PC a 'verbal hygiene' movement which emerged from a moral and political

belief in, 'rationality, progress and the perfectibility of humankind and human institutions' (p.18). In this respect, PC can be viewed as having extended our notion of what is considered culturally taboo to include the use of language which is deemed offensive towards particular groups, or is suggestive of prejudicial attitudes. However, despite the intent to replace 'offensiveness' with public norms of respect and fairness, PC continues to provoke a level of hostility less visible when we consider other campaigns for linguistic reform. (For instance, Fairclough (2003:21) contrasts the backlash against PC with the relative acceptance of what he describes as the 'neo-liberal project to change identities' through the extension of market based terminology such as 'customer', 'consumer' or 'individual responsibility' into everyday discourse).

Three broad arguments have been advanced by those who regard PC as a flawed progressive project in order to account for the level of hostility directed towards it. Firstly, Ehrenreich (1992) and Hall (1994) argue that the prioritisation of the politics of language has sometimes left the liberal-left open to accusations of triviality and oversensitivity regarding the policing of words. This position is partly grounded in the view that objections to PC arise from the emphasis PC places upon the 'correct' use of language at the expense of matters concerning actual discrimination, or the unequal treatment of people. Although the move to create a discursive environment free from discourse deemed offensive or oppressive towards particular groups is recognised as largely positive and well intentioned, Ehrenreich also argues that 'verbal uplift is not the revolution' (1992:336) and that the changing use of words does not automatically engender changing attitudes, or the wider acceptance of a politics based upon progressive values. However, this assertion requires further reflection. If the sensitivities surrounding the use of particular words are deemed to be 'trivial', how can we explain the vehemence with which the critique of such sensitivities is often voiced? Cameron (1995:140) describes the 'anti-PC' position in its crudest form to be 'self-contradictory' in view of the 'vitriolic terms' in which it presents the renegotiation of language as an attack on fundamental liberties and values. As PC has become discursively attached to disputes over the taking of offence, the academic and popular focus of this has been primarily upon the people and practices who oppose the use of racist or sexist discourse, rather than those who object to efforts to install linguistic or cultural change. Those who object to 'PC', however, also constitute an important component of those 'offended'. Might further analysis, therefore, consider more closely the nature of the response towards efforts to introduce 'verbal uplift',

including what the varying levels of acceptance and resistance it provokes suggests about how we negotiate and comprehend the giving and taking of offence?

Secondly, PC is described by Hall (1994:168) as possessing 'a strong strain of moral self-righteousness'. (This argument appears similar to the summation of PC as the 'dictatorship of virtue' (2006:7) by Browne)[40]. Consequently, Hall views the backlash against PC as partially grounded in a reaction to its often overly zealous, sanctimonious and censorious tone. Again, the disdain for PC is felt to be less troubled by its non-discriminatory goals, and more concerned by the authoritarian manner in which these goals are sometimes pursued[41]. However, the tone of the critique of PC could also be open to the same sorts of accusations levelled against PC itself. Whilst PC is accused of closing down debate, the vituperative nature of some of the critique of PC has also become an effective method of stigmatising and silencing those who risk being labelled PC. Dunant (1994:viii) describes the discourse surrounding PC as often misleading, prone to 'hysteria' and 'apocalyptic' in tone; a notion given credence by the titles of books like *Liberal Fascism* (2009) by Jonah Goldberg, or *Thought Prison* (2011) by Bruce Charlton. The debate has sometimes been clouded by the polemical way in which it is conducted, and the strongly held political or ideological viewpoints in which argument becomes embedded. However, space remains in the literature to re-examine PC - both as an ideology or socio-political project, *and* the various narratives which arise and continue to circulate around this ideology.

Thirdly, the pervasiveness of PC disputes (especially within media discourse) has contributed to a narrative of excess surrounding PC which draws upon a sense that our lives are subject to unprecedented and inescapable levels of PC- driven judgement and surveillance: (this sense is also reflected in the ubiquity of popular discourse denouncing 'PC gone mad' or the ever assiduous 'PC Brigade'). Various authors have implied, or suggested, that the discomfort surrounding PC may stem from an aversion to its excesses (see e.g. Berman, 1992; Dunant, 1994; Johnson and Suhr, 2003; Allan and Burridge, 2006). However, there is no overarching agreement in the literature regarding where the point of excess begins or even what produces and sustains the narrative of excess surrounding PC. Berman (1992), Dunant (1994), Johnson

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[40] Hall firmly identified with the politics of the left throughout his life and academic career. However, in this instance, his questioning of the 'tone' of PC echoes some of the arguments made by right leaning authors like Browne.

[41] Hall articulates his disquiet with the 'whole PC strategy' in the paragraph included at the start of this chapter. In it he worries that PC may 'short-circuit the process of change by legislating some Absolute Truth into being' (1994:181).

and Suhr (2003), and Allan and Burridge (2006) concur that PC has contributed to an increase in oversight over aspects of human activity, whilst also agreeing that the label has been used to conflate too many disparate issues and impose a distorted identity upon many of the ideas, actions and people labelled PC. Furthermore, Fairclough (2003:21) sees this conflation of 'a diverse range of actions and interventions on the part of diverse groups of people…within the category of 'PC'' as itself a form of 'cultural politics'[42]. From his perspective, the narrative of excess could equally be viewed as kept alive by a regressive or conservative form of cultural politics which itself requires explanation and analysis.

The position explored in this section of the chapter draws upon a range of arguments which appear to suggest that 'the problem is less with the aims of PC than with its methods' (Dunant, 1994:ix). In summary, the 'problem' with PC might be: (i) its prioritisation of the politics of language; (ii) the authoritarian way in which it tries to achieve its aims; and (iii) the narrative of excess which surrounds PC. The literature examined here also maintains that PC is fundamentally underpinned by progressive goals, although authors differ regarding the extent to which they wish to rescue PC from its negative connotations[43].

One contention this section of the chapter shares with the previous section is that the politics of language has taken on a new significance over recent decades. Consequently, socio-linguistic analysis has approached PC as a political battleground over which the struggle for meaning over words, sentences or utterances is fought (see e.g. Cameron, 1994 and 1995; Lakoff, 2000; Fairclough; 2003; Allan and Burridge, 2006). Cameron argues that 'language is a highly variable and radically context-dependent phenomenon which may have effects on perception' (1994:25). As such, she suggests 'there is nothing trivial about trying to institutionalise a public norm of respect, and one of the most important ways in which respect is made manifest publicly is through linguistic choices' (p.26). However, Cameron also agrees that 'words are constantly being inflected…with new meanings as they are used in different contexts' (ibid.). In this respect, whilst our linguistic choices carry meaning, this meaning remains unfixed, and dependent upon many different factors (including *how*

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[42] Fairclough (2003:21) names 'teachers, academics, feminist activists etc.' as examples of some of the 'diverse groups of people' who may be labelled 'PC' for their beliefs and/or actions.
[43] For example, in Dunant's 1994 collection of essays on political correctness, *The War of the Words*, Hall refers to his own ambivalence regarding PC: 'The last thing we need is the model of one authority substituting one set of identities or truths with another set of 'more correct' ones'(1994:181-182). Meanwhile, Cameron argues that 'so-called 'politically correct' language does not threaten our freedom to speak as we choose…It threatens only our freedom to imagine that our linguistic choices are inconsequential…' (1994:33).

something is said or *who* says it within *what* context). What, therefore, might the different meanings attached to language (and representation more generally) suggest about how we should understand disputes of offence; and in particular, how might this help us to develop an analysis of the contested nature of 'offensiveness' as it appears within different discursive contexts? The significance of language also needs to be explored within the wider social context in which it is used and the definition of language broadened to include other ways in which values or meaning are transmitted between people (such as our reliance upon shared visual signifiers).

3.4 PC as a myth

Although PC is understood in different ways by the core arguments examined in the previous sections of this chapter, these arguments approach PC as a tangible phenomenon, and one which has made a real impact upon our everyday lives in recent decades. However, the position outlined in this part of the chapter asserts that PC is largely an idea which has been co-opted and utilised by the political right in order to discredit their liberal-left opponents. This assertion is made most forcibly by Wilson (1995) who wrote *The myth of Political Correctness* in response to the initial critique of PC espoused by writers such as D'Souza (1991;1992) and Kimball (1990;1992). Wilson rejected claims that PC had taken over US universities and argued that PC as defined by conservatives like D'Souza or Kimball barely existed. Instead, he regards hostility directed towards 'political correctness' as part of 'the resentment against the many changes – institutional and intellectual – in American universities since the 1960s' (1995:158). His central contention is that PC is a 'myth':

> …the myth of political correctness is a powerful conspiracy theory created by conservatives and the media who have manipulated resentment against leftist radicals into a backlash against the fictional monster of political correctness. (Wilson, 1995:xv).

When describing PC this way, Wilson does not claim it to be a 'pure invention with no basis in reality' or that 'there are some leftists who would not hesitate, if given the power to oppress conservatives' (p.2). However, he does argue that few leftists have the power or inclination to suppress the speech of their opponents, and that greater power is held by a conservative establishment which attracts a fraction of the attention or criticism directed at PC. Meanwhile, the 'myth of political correctness' is sustained through the invention,

repetition and distortion of incidents that support the notion of a PC orthodoxy; a process which Wilson describes as 'myth making by anecdote' (p.20).

Feldstein (1997) describes the emergence of the PC debate in the 1990s as largely the consequence of the need for US neo-conservatism to have an enemy upon which to project its fears in the wake of the collapse of the Cold War and Soviet style communism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He also claims that the PC debate was as much about the 'discursive strategies' used to establish the ideological battle-lines in the US Culture Wars, as it was about the 'diverse cultural movements related to them' (p.2). In other words, although the Culture Wars were grounded in real differences over substantive issues (such as attitudes towards abortion or affirmative action), the discourse surrounding PC was able to create a new 'internal enemy' of 'the politically correct' who included 'the radical intelligentsia who work in the universities today' (p.67).

Wilson (1995) and Feldstein (1997) developed their arguments primarily in response to the original controversies surrounding the relationship between PC and US universities in the 1980s and 1990s. Since this period, the language of PC has acquired a longevity and wider presence which is now entrenched within our everyday discourse. In view of this, Suhr and Johnson describe political correctness as a 'plastic word' (2003:50) which is adaptable and applicable to new circumstances and debates. Many authors examined in this survey of the literature agree that the influence of PC has been exaggerated, and distorted by its conservative opponents and the complicity of some sections of the media (see e.g. Berman, 1992; Gitlin, 1997; Fairclough, 2003; Banning, 2004; Allan and Burridge, 2006). However, these authors also resist describing PC as a 'myth'. This may, in part, reflect how the very durability of PC discourse has forced us to also consider PC as a tangible social phenomenon, rather than simply a projection of conservative disdain for the politics of language and/or the liberal-left. However, liberal authors like Gitlin also maintain that 'one reason why the campaign against PC has legs…is that identity politics and attendant censoriousness [is] real' (1997:175). The view that PC is largely a 'fictional monster' (Wilson, 1995:iv), therefore, remains a minority position and much of the literature continues to focus upon the purported negative aspects of PC including whether, how, and to what extent, it is responsible for closing down debate and prohibiting the free exchange of ideas. Nevertheless, the discussion in this section of the chapter of how 'myth making' (Wilson, 1995:20) and 'rhetorical strategies' are 'used to establish ideological agendas' (Feldstein, 1997:1-2) may also help us

to isolate the projection of identities upon people (as either 'PC' or 'non-PC') from the tangible conflicts over free speech in which the debate about PC is embedded.

3.5 The sociological view of PC and its implications for further research

This chapter has examined the core arguments which have sought to account for the overwhelmingly negative signification of PC. This part of the chapter briefly summarises these arguments before it considers the different fields of enquiry this project will use in order to explore the unanswered questions surrounding PC. The survey of the literature has demonstrated how much of the analysis of PC emerged primarily as a debate about the curriculum and culture of US universities. Although the scope of the debate within popular and journalistic discourse has widened immensely since this period, much of the literature surrounding PC was written during (and therefore continues to reflect) this initial context. PC has, however, also subsequently been considered more broadly by the academic community as a cultural signifier for a new politics of language. Underpinning the critique of this politics of language is the core contention that PC closes down debate through its disavowal of 'incorrect' or 'offensive' words or viewpoints. This contention is expressed most forcibly by those who argue that accusations of bigotry, racism or sexism may be used as a method of suppressing dissenting viewpoints (see e.g. Browne, 2006; Green, 2006; Schwartz, 2010; Lukianoff, 2014). Meanwhile, those who take a more equivocal view claim to support the progressive or anti-discriminatory aims of PC whilst questioning some of its methods, including its propensity to prioritise the politics of language (see e.g. Ehrenreich, 1992; Hall, 1994).

Sociological research has considered some of the matters raised by the positions explored in this chapter through analysis of the ways in which society and our position within it influences our linguistic choices. Much of this research has taken place within the field of sociolinguistics and has understood language as something which shapes as well as reflects our ideas about the social world (see e.g. Cameron, 1995; Lakoff, 2000; Fairclough, 2003; Allan and Burridge, 2006). In particular, sociolinguistics has helped us make sense of the increasing importance attached to linguistic change as a way of encouraging political change. For instance, Cameron argues that drawing attention to racist or sexist language may be an effective way of making a wider point about racist or sexist attitudes or behaviour (1994:25-

26). Significantly, Fairclough has also highlighted how PC has become isolated from the more general process of linguistic or discursive intervention:

> It is worth considering why critics of 'PC' readily say that it is 'PC' to suggest that adult females should be referred to as 'women' and not 'girls', but do not see it as 'PC' when 'bank accounts' are re-labelled as 'financial products'. This re-labelling is certainly prescriptive for bank employees, and imposed on customers, and in that sense has to do with what is 'correct'. But I imagine it is not generally seen as 'political' (Fairclough, 2003:21)

This identification of PC with the politicisation of language suggests why PC might be viewed pejoratively as a proscriptive or proselytising project. However, further research might also ask *why* PC is separated from other attempts to change our attitudes and perceptions through linguistic reform. Furthermore, why are discursive interventions attributed to PC met with greater resistance than the other sorts of interventions Fairclough describes in the above paragraph as 'imposed on customers'?

Although much of the focus within the academic community has been upon the changing use of language, the questions raised by contemporary disputes of offence force us to also consider the importance of social and cultural change more generally; including how disputes of offence are produced and enacted across different cultural locations and levels of discourse (for example, how might 'offensiveness' be viewed differently within comedic or parliamentary discourse?). In particular, our social intolerance of 'offensive' and negative forms of social stereotyping sometimes sits awkwardly alongside a popular resistance against PC within some cultural spaces in which political incorrectness is often felt to embody an authentic or plain speaking alternative to PC orthodoxy. In order to examine this more closely this project moves beyond the predominantly linguistic orientated analysis which has dominated the discussion of PC in much of the contemporary literature to draw upon a range of power-centred discourse analytical approaches. It also directs its focus towards some of the cultural spaces in which disputes over the giving and taking of offence arise.

Chapter 4 of this thesis contains a detailed examination of its research questions and methodologies. However, this chapter considers briefly how the literature has approached the three core thematic fields explored by this project in order to support and contextualise the research aims and methodology it proceeds to develop. The first thematic field involves

analysis of different instances of news discourse. Various studies have examined discourses of PC within the news media and considered the enduring capacity of PC to act as a 'discursive frame' (Suhr and Johnson, 2003:6) for a wide range of topics (see e.g. Lakoff (2000); Suhr and Johnson (2003); Culpeper, Suhr and Johnson (2003); Toolen (2003)). Taken together, these studies highlight how the language of PC[44] can be drawn upon as a means of simplifying and/or suppressing complex arguments about an increasingly disparate range of subjects. For example, in their exploration of discourses of political correctness in British newspapers (taking the period between 1994 and 1999) Culpeper, Suhr and Jonhson (2003) discuss how PC related terms were regularly used in national newspapers as a means of critiquing the Labour party. However, this critique incorporated a range of different criticisms of the policies and people associated with New Labour under the leadership of Tony Blair, as well as the politics of the 'Old' Labour party. Lakoff (2000) also points to the conflation and denunciation in newspapers, magazines and televisual broadcasts of 'a wide array of discursive practices' regarded as 'PC'. These studies, therefore, have contributed to our knowledge and understanding of the discursive strategies in which the negative signification of PC is embedded. However, in view of the protean and discontinuous nature of PC, this project re-considers the discursive processes at work within different forms of news discourse within a contemporary context. Furthermore, although various studies have considered some of the ways in which PC has acquired a negative signification, further analysis might also consider whether, or the extent to which, the critique of PC is defensible in light of the different processes at work in the production and circulation of news. In other words, are particular arguments really proscribed or stigmatised in the reporting or discussion of topical events? Of further significance is the impact of new media technologies (including the increasing importance of social media in the last decade). This has expanded the potential pool of data from which any analysis of PC is drawn and also encourages research to consider the impact of the changing conditions of debate upon the character and nature of debate.

The second thematic field this project explores is popular comedy, an artistic form renowned for its propensity to transgress social taboos and to offend. In view of this propensity, the literature has focused upon the meaning(s) produced and circulated by 'offensive' comedy, particularly humour which might be viewed as racist or bigoted in some way. Much analysis has explored the relationship between comic utterances and the (re)production of prejudice.

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[44] By 'language of PC' I refer here both to the use of the term 'PC' and its various derivatives (like 'politically incorrect'), and the various arguments or assertions which are made with regard to political correctness.

For example, Weaver (2011) examined racist jokes as an active part of the process of 'Othering' and Billig (2009 and 2010) argues that the telling of racist jokes reinforces racial hatred through the creation of 'insider' and 'outsider' groups. In 1998, Littlewood and Pickering argued that political correctness (which they align to the emergence of 1980s alternative comedy) had largely marginalised 'old style' racist or sexist humour from mainstream comedy. They also describe such humour as having become far 'less common' without 'the need to resort to official compulsion' (p.297). However, more contemporary analysis has suggested that irony (or the assertion of irony) is increasingly invoked as a way of deflecting criticism of 'politically incorrect' humour (see e.g. Finding 2008 and 2010; Gill, 2008; Hunt 2010 and 2013). Furthermore, humour that relies (ironically or otherwise) upon stereotyping on grounds such a gender, class or disability continues to retain a popular appeal (see e.g. Finding, 2010; Lockyer, 2010; Montgomerie, 2010; Kramer, 2011). However, what does the enduring popularity of such humour suggest about PC as a mode of expression or what might constitute the discursive limits of free speech today? Although 'offensive' humour has emerged as a topic which is increasingly debated within popular and journalistic discourse[45], there is relatively little academic analysis of the significance of the tangible trend towards 'offensive' or 'politically incorrect' comedy within recent years. In particular, the literature has not reconciled our perception of PC as having created a more censorious discursive environment with our continued acceptance (and celebration) of 'politically incorrect' or 'non-PC' forms of expression within some cultural spaces, including the field of popular comedy. Finally, can we confidently claim that the enduring appeal of 'politically incorrect' humour is truly 'ironic'?

The third data analysis chapter included in this thesis will examine political cartooning. The literature has explored how political cartoons have often relied upon the use of 'offensive' and/or negative stereotyping in order to make a particular point or satirical comment (see e.g. Buell and Maus, 1988; Gilmartin and Brunn, 1998; Goodwin, 2001; Keane, 2008; Hughes, 2010; Collins and Douglas, 2013). In particular, representation analysis has documented how cartoons have been used to promote racial stereotyping (for example, Thibodeau (1989) has examined the negative representation of African-Americans in US political cartoons, and

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[45] For example, in 'The new offenders of stand-up comedy' the *Guardian* comedy critic, Brian Logan identified a 'new offensiveness' within some forms of modern comedy and argued that 'all the bigotries and the misogyny you thought had been banished forever from mainstream entertainment have made a startling comeback'. [Online] Available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/jul/comedy-standup-new-offenders (Accessed: 21 December2014).

Goodwin (2001) has undertaken a history of European anti-Semitic cartoons). In 2008, Taras asserted that 'what is not permitted of the spoken word because of the hegemonic regime of political correctness can be indulged in with graphic representations' (p.163). In their analysis of the representation of women in political cartoons of the 1995 world conference on women[46], Gilmartin and Brunn (1998:536) also assert that the medium of the cartoon enables publications like newspapers to express themselves in ways which would otherwise be considered too 'politically incorrect'. However, despite this body of research there has been little direct examination in the literature of the relationship between the emergence of the language of PC and political cartooning. Whilst cartooning is generally assumed to be a 'politically incorrect' form of communication, studies have typically focused upon two overarching concerns: firstly, how cartoons are able to rely upon the use of 'offensive' imagery or text which might otherwise be deemed impermissible if expressed using another medium and secondly, the specific ways in which cartoons might be offensive (through, for example, the examination of how representations within cartoons reinforce forms of racial stereotyping). However, in light of contemporary controversies over 'offensive' imagery, can we claim confidently that political cartoons continue to be granted leeway to be 'politically incorrect'? Contemporary controversies over political cartoons suggest rather that they are ' assuming an increasingly important role in international political communication' in which 'the potential for conflict is spiralling in a context where images are circulated globally, but are received in very different local contexts' (Attwood and Lockyer, 2009:4). .Furthermore, how might the changing conditions of debate (including the increasingly participatory nature of discourse generated by online activity and/or social media) impact upon our understanding of the offence generated by some political cartoons? Although the literature had addressed the range of (largely negative) meanings attached to PC, this chapter contends that it has not adequately reconciled some of the tensions underlying these meanings. Our increasing intolerance of 'politically incorrect' words or behaviour continues to sit awkwardly alongside our celebration of 'political incorrectness' as constituting an authentic alternative to PC. Despite its purportedly progressive aims, the literature also highlights how PC provokes a level of disdain which is far less visible when we observe other attempts to change values and attitudes through linguistic intervention[47]. This project, therefore, will explore these tensions through examination of the social practices and cultural context in which linguistic or discursive intervention takes place.

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[46] The fourth World Conference on Women took place in Beijing, China.
[47] This point has been made most forcibly by Fairclough (2003:21).

Chapter 4. 'A puzzle without a solution'?[48]: Researching PC

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapters outline how PC has emerged in recent decades as a signifier for an entire set of focuses. Some of these focuses are related to tangible phenomena (such as the emergence of a new politics of language and of identity) whilst others involve more contestable questions about these phenomena (such as, whether, how and why people self-censor within everyday discourse). Crucially, these chapters have also highlighted how the literature has not reconciled various tensions which underlie how PC is perceived or understood. In particular, our increasing intolerance of 'incorrect' language or behaviour (such as racist or homophobic slurs) has developed alongside an emboldened critique of PC which has enabled political 'incorrectness' to acquire a positive signification. This chapter describes how this project investigates this paradox at the heart of the debate about PC. It therefore outlines the research questions which underpin the thesis, and sets out the rationale for the epistemological approach and methodologies embraced by this project in order to answer them.

The chapter begins by outlining the core research questions. Secondly, it discusses why a range of power-centred discourse analytical approaches have been chosen as methodological tools given the aims and nature of the research. Thirdly, it outlines the research design for each of the data analysis chapters included in the thesis. This includes the rationale for how data is gathered and how the research questions are investigated and analysed within each chapter. Finally, the chapter reflects upon the overall research context in which this project is undertaken, including the methodological issues and challenges this has produced.

4.2 Research Questions

The principal aim of this thesis is to make sense of the meaning(s) and tensions which continue to underlie how PC is understood in popular discourse. For this reason the project undertakes data analysis of popular cultural and media sources which allow it to examine these tensions. Although PC has been theorised as a new politics of language, this project has

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[48] This quote is taken from Paul Berman's description of the lack of consensus within both academic and non-academic circles surrounding the meaning of PC. (1992:5-6)

developed from a wider concern about the significance of change within language, representation and culture as a way of generating social or political progress. It, therefore, engages meaningfully with the critique of PC explored in the previous chapter, particularly the view that the pressure for linguistic or cultural change is felt to have engendered a censorious culture driven by a fear of causing offence. In other words, the progressive goal of social change has become discursively aligned through the critique of PC with disputes about the nature of 'offensiveness' and the limits of free speech. The first research question draws directly upon this discursive alignment:

1. How are we to make sense of the various meaning(s) attached to PC, particularly the assertion that it is responsible for the imposition of a 'liberal orthodoxy' (Hughes, 2010:4) rooted in a fear of causing offence and conformity of opinion?

In order to answer this core research question there are various related issues that need to be considered. Further sub-questions are thus:

1.1 How might a PC or 'liberal orthodoxy' be identified within a particular level of discourse?

1.2 Do the conditions of debate which surround contentious topics suggest that particular viewpoints are stigmatised or precluded in any way?

1.3 What is the relationship between the nature of debate and the discursive context in which it is held: crucially, how might the discursive context impact upon the way in which the giving or taking of offence is enacted or more broadly understood?

This thesis has observed that the assertion that a PC orthodoxy prevails across contemporary discourse has developed alongside a popular backlash against PC in which 'political incorrectness' and/or anti-PC rhetoric has acquired a positive signification (see e.g. Dunant, 1994; Cameron, 1995; Hughes, 2010). As PC emerged as a cultural signifier for a censorious movement to be mocked, political incorrectness has also emerged as its plain-speaking and free-thinking obverse or alternative. Despite the offence undoubtedly generated by 'incorrect' utterances, hostility towards PC therefore retains a level of popular kudos or appeal. The second research question directly addresses this paradox:

2. How do we account for the enduring popularity of political incorrectness within some levels of discourse; and how should disputes of offence which arise from politically incorrect forms of expression be viewed?

The sub-questions which help to address this core question are as follows:

2.1 How should we define or characterise political incorrectness?

2.2 What are the social practices or discursive strategies at work which might legitimise and reproduce the use of politically incorrect language and rhetoric within some levels of discourse?

2.3 Can any singular or overarching meaning account for the appeal of politically incorrect forms of expression despite the offence this also generates?

Since the debate surrounding PC emerged in the later decades of the 20th century it has taken place within an increasingly participatory and democratised public domain. As the language of PC has become part of our everyday lexicon, disputes of offence have also acquired an increasingly high profile within our mainstream media and wider culture[49]. In other words, as a diverse range of people and practices have become categorised or labelled as 'PC'[50] so have the opportunities grown for people to engage in discussion of the various controversies the debate about PC continues to provoke (especially the controversies concerning the nature of 'offensiveness'). The third research question will draw upon both the significance of our preoccupation with 'offensiveness' and the ways in which the conditions of debate have changed over recent decades:

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[49] In 2003 Suhr and Johnson claimed that media interest in matters concerning PC had peaked in the UK in the mid-1990s. However, disputes of offence (particularly those concerning prejudice like racism or sexism in public life) form a regular part of the reporting and discussion of news and current affairs in the 21st century. Much of the broader discussion about the significance of this, however, has been contained within journalistic or media discourse and commentary rather than academic analysis.

[50] The expansion of the range of practices categorised as 'PC' has been examined extensively in the literature; including how the language of PC is used as a way of stigmatising those labelled 'PC' and of discursively simplifying a number of complex arguments about the politics of language and the nature of offence (see e.g. Cameron, 1995; Lakoff, 2000; Fairclough, 2000; Culpepper, Suhr and Johnson, 2003; Allan and Burridge, 2006). However, there has been little direct discussion of the relationship between the changing conditions of debate and how PC disputes are enacted or understood.

3. How should we make sense of our preoccupation with the giving and taking of offence, including the discussion this generates across various discursive spaces within our media?

In order to answer this, two further sub-questions are also investigated:

3.1 What is the relationship between the changing conditions of debate (particularly the expansion of discursive spaces generated by new technologies such as social media) and the nature of debate surrounding disputes of offence?

3.2 Has the increasingly democratised and participatory character of many discursive spaces facilitated a culture of 'competing rights' surrounding the giving and taking of offence?

These research questions are used to explore social contestation over the use of language and representation more generally within different levels of discourse (this encompasses 'formal' types of discourse like parliamentary discourse as well as the arguably 'informal' nature of comedic discourse). This is the focus embraced by this project as it investigates its core research questions. However, before doing so, the following part of this chapter discusses the overarching epistemological approach the thesis adopts in view of its research aims and objectives.

4.3 Methodological Overview

This thesis uses a range of discourse analytical approaches which have been adopted by researchers who are interested in the relationship between power, language and society and wish to describe, interpret and explain this relationship. Discourse analytical approaches also enable the data analysis component of this project to engage with the many genres of discourse in which disputes of offence are embedded (such as political discourse or comic discourse). The rationale for each choice of method is described in the forthcoming sections of this chapter. However, the overall research framework advanced here enables this project to develop a methodology which will encompass research embracing image, textual and cultural data from a range of media sources. As an eclectic range of data sources are drawn upon, the methodological tools are selected in view of the specific nature of each source and

the specific questions which are explored. For example, Bakhtinian dialogism is chosen as a conceptual framework which is especially suited to the analysis of offence and transgression in the field of comedy. Although this project makes use of a range of methodological tools and concepts, the methods and techniques of research it deploys share three core ontological assumptions. Firstly, power relations are viewed as discursive, and the various methods probe the relationship between our discursive behaviour and wider socio-political factors. Secondly, language is conceptualised broadly as encompassing anything which might function as a sign, or carry meaning[51]. For example, this project explores the various signifying practices at work within the language of both imagery and written texts in order to answer its core research questions. Finally, language is also approached as a site of struggle over meaning which is always contextual, temporal and embedded in wider processes of power.

Crucially, the use of a variety of research approaches allows the thesis to benefit from the advantages associated with triangulation whereby different research techniques are used to investigate the questions posed by a particular study. Bryman (1992) has suggested that the idea of triangulation has drawn upon 'multiple operationism' in which different data sources are subject to different forms of data collection and analysis in order to check the findings produced by various research strategies against one another (p.63). In this respect, a multi-method research project is strengthened through its ability draw conclusions from results unimpeded by the limitations imposed through reliance upon a single research strategy or methodology. Denzin (1970) therefore suggests that triangulation helps a researcher to maximise the credibility or accuracy of their research, and he has broadened the concept to include some techniques adopted by this thesis. Firstly, data triangulation is described by Denzin (1970) as research involving a variety of data sources. The research process described in this chapter outlines how data will be gathered in the thesis using different sampling strategies so that slices of data are gathered from a range of discursive contexts. Secondly, Denzin uses theoretical triangulation to refer to the use of more than one theoretical position in interpreting data. This chapter outlines how different theoretical traditions are incorporated into the research process in order to examine its sources: for example, Bakhtinian dialogism and Bourdieu's capital theory are both deployed in order to investigate the nature and appeal of 'politically incorrect' forms of comic discourse. Finally, Denzin (1970) refers to

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[51] The conceptualisation of language adopted by this project is informed by the work of Hall (1997). Hall describes 'any sound, word, image, or object which functions as a sign…[and] which is capable of carrying and expressing meaning [as]…'a language'' (p.19).

methodological triangulation as the use of more than one method for gathering data: the following chapter sections outline a range of methodologies used to gather the data examined in this thesis.

The project, therefore, applies different theoretical and methodological concepts to investigate different types of cultural data within a wider methodological framework in which the relationship between power and language enables us to explore the myriad of ways in which PC is understood. Crucially, PC is approached throughout the research process as a discursive construct whose meaning is relational and subject to redefinition by different people and in different contexts. This does not preclude the tangible significance of the socio-cultural, political and linguistic change which has generally been attributed to the emergence of PC[52]. Rather, it is to foreground the 'freeplay' (Derrida 1966, cited by Chandler, 2001:79) of PC as a floating signifier[53] which cannot be grounded to any 'fixed' or singular meaning. How, therefore, should the discursive construction of PC and the various controversies this provokes be explored?

4.4 Political Correctness and forms of news discourse

Chapter Five of this thesis uses three case studies to investigate the research questions. It focuses primarily upon the first research question although it also begins to consider matters raised by the third as it observes the ways in which the changing conditions of debate have contributed to our preoccupation with the giving and taking of offence. The studies make use of both senses of 'discourse' as defined by Gee (1999; 2010): firstly; data is examined in which the use of PC related terminology (such as 'PC' or 'politically incorrect') is directly gathered from the data source. Secondly, discourse is also viewed as involving the wider discursive context and social processes in which the data source is embedded and is a part of. For example, one case study examines a parliamentary debate in which the term 'PC' is used only once. However, the data analysis also looks at the discursive practices which are used to construct and exchange argument throughout the debate. One of the methodological challenges arising from this approach is that by labelling discourse (such as the parliamentary

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[52] Although the meaning of PC remains contested in the literature the previous chapter observes how it is broadly accepted by authors across the political spectrum as a signifier for a politics of language and identity (see e.g. Loury, 1994; Gitlin, 1997; Rankin, 2002; Browne, 2006; Green, 2006, Bullough, 2008; Taras, 2008; Hughes, 2010; Furedi, 2011).

[53] The notion of PC as a floating signifier is examined in depth in the Genealogy chapter of this thesis.

debate) as 'PC discourse' the project becomes part of the broader discursive process - including the discursive construction of PC - which it seeks to deconstruct and unpick. However, in this instance, the decision to approach the case studies in this way is a reflection of how PC has already emerged as a cultural signifier which is attached to many of the issues and themes the studies raise[54]. In choosing to begin the data analysis chapters by focusing upon some of the ways in which news is produced and circulated, the thesis observes the relatively 'formal' nature of parliamentary discourse and the reporting of news by the BBC before it engages with less formal levels of discourse in the chapters which follow. However, the news discourse component of this project also engages with the less regulated nature of social media which begins to encourage the thesis to consider more closely the complex relationship between what is said and its discursive context.

4.4.1 Reading British newspapers

The first case study begins to explore the first research question using two British newspapers as source material. In order to capture a snapshot of how PC is understood by each newspaper, data collection was limited to a two week time-frame between 10th and 23rd September 2012. Two broadsheet papers were selected for their broadly opposing political affiliations: (i) the liberal-left leaning *Guardian* and (ii) the right leaning *Daily Telegraph*. This project was particularly keen to examine *The Guardian* because it is often identified within media or journalistic discourse as a 'politically correct' publication[55]. The online Lexis Library was used to access the data sources and a search for articles containing the expressions 'PC', 'political correctness', 'political incorrectness', 'politically correct' and 'politically incorrect' was conducted. Once instances of 'PC' which referred to the abbreviation of 'personal computer' and 'police constable' were removed from the data, the search produced eleven articles and news items in *The Telegraph* and eight in *The Guardian* which made use of PC related terms. Of these, analysis was narrowed to two articles in *The Telegraph* and two in *The Guardian* which were all taken from opinion-based, or 'Comment' sections. These sections were selected for data analysis as opinion based articles typically possess greater licence to freely discuss and dispute ideas and arguments than the purportedly

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[54] These themes (which are directly identified in Chapter Five) include conflicting notions of equality, rights, free speech and the giving of offence.

[55] Indeed, one of the articles from *The Telegraph* which is used as a data source in this particular case study refers disparagingly to 'Guardianistas' as part of its critique of political correctness. [Online] Available at: http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/petermullen/100180868/islamist-terrorism-is-beginning-to-demolish-political-correctness/ (Accessed 18 November 2014).

'objective' or factual nature of news reporting[56]. The case study considers how PC is understood within each article and how we might identify a 'PC' or 'liberal orthodoxy' by exploring the different ways in which political correctness is discursively constructed within the right leaning *Telegraph* and left leaning *Guardian*. It revisits the conceptualisation of PC developed by Loury[57] (1994) - in which PC is viewed as involving both disagreements over substantive issues as well as questions about whether certain viewpoints are excluded from debate - and uses this to help ascertain whether a 'PC' orthodoxy can be identified within the various articles used as data sources. Finally, it will identify whether particular arguments are stigmatised during the discursive process and consider the practices at work which are used to (de)legitimise the expression of different arguments or viewpoints[58].

4.4.2 Listening to parliamentary debate

The second case study uses the second reading of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill in the House of Commons on 5th February 2013 as source material with which to further explore the first research question using analysis of a different form of political discourse to do so. As parliamentary discourse involves politicians at work in a formal or official capacity it allows the thesis to begin to address more directly how the rules and practices governing discourse are informed by its discursive context and/or institutional setting. This part of the chapter is also particularly interested in utilising the second sense of 'discourse' advanced by Gee (1999) as it investigates the various practices and strategies used within the Commons debate in order to advance or defend different positions (either opposed to or supportive of the bill).

The parliamentary debate on the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill is available on the UK Parliament website[59] both through the Hansard transcript and a video recording of the full debate. The case study uses both sources in order to conduct a thematic analysis of the arguments made during the second reading of the bill and focuses on the use of rhetoric, language and discursive strategies to produce the arguments advanced by the various MPs

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[56] The News Discourse chapter will, however, recognise the significance of the different ways in which news and topical events are reported. For instance, the discursive practices surrounding the factual reporting of news on the BBC is examined in the third case study included in the chapter.

[57] The conceptualisation of PC by Loury (1994) is introduced by this thesis in the Genealogy chapter.

[58] The analysis developed in each of the data chapters will invariably address matters which are not specific to any single research question or sub question. In this instance, although the analysis of broadsheet newspapers primarily addresses the first research question the examination of discursive practices also begins to consider how 'political incorrectness' acquires a positive signification (a matter which is considered in more depth in the Comedy chapter).

[59] [Online] Available at http://www.parliament.uk/ (Accessed 20 July 2014)

debating the issue in Parliament. References to 'Political Correctness' (or derivatives of the term such as 'politically correct' or 'political incorrectness') were recorded in the initial stage of the data gathering process. Examination of the Hansard transcript and video recording revealed a single reference to 'Political Correctness' by Maria Miller, the Member of Parliament responsible for introducing the bill to the House. The search was then broadened to identify the key conceptual arguments made throughout the parliamentary debate - both for and against the legalisation of same sex marriage. The data collection process revealed that both those supporting and opposing the bill relied predominantly upon of notions of equality, rights and discrimination to support their arguments[60]. These themes were also often presented as interrelated. Opponents of the bill also strongly asserted the importance of tradition, although this was often used to buttress arguments in support of religious rights and freedoms (including the opinion that the bill constituted a form of discrimination against religious groups). This quantitative exercise then provided the data for the qualitative and wider thematic examination of how political discourse is regulated and produced within the institutional setting of Parliament. Although this thematic study is used primarily to answer the first research question, the analysis of the strategies used to oppose the bill also begin to explore the notion of 'competing rights' which is raised by sub-question 3.2.

4.4.3 Following Twitter and the reporting of 'Twitter Storms'

The final case study continues to address the first research question generally and also begins to explore some of the issues raised by the third research question. In particular, it considers the relationship between new social media technologies and how the debate concerning 'offensiveness' is conducted[61]. The analysis explores discourses of offensiveness using the 'Twitter Storm' arising from the appointment in 2013 of England and Wales's first Youth Police and Crime Commissioner, Paris Brown. It uses tweets posted by Paris and the BBC coverage of the controversy they led to as data. It only uses the tweets Paris posted which were republished by the media, as the original source (Paris Brown's Twitter account) has been deleted. The data analysis considers how discourses of offensiveness are produced through the reporting of current affairs. This enables it to consider our contemporary

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[60] 32 MPs involved in the debate used notions of equality to support their viewpoint(s). 26 referred to rights; and 22 to discrimination.

[61] This matter is raised directly by question 3.1.

preoccupation with 'offensiveness' including how contentious viewpoints become stigmatised within media discourse[62].

In order to conduct the study, a search of the BBC News Archive was undertaken using the name 'Paris Brown'. Of the 20 articles found, 6 contained video clips which were also included as part of the source material. The BBC News Archive was selected as a sampling frame as the BBC aspires to be politically objective and unbiased in a way that is not claimed by other media sources, such as print journalism[63]. The analysis, therefore, explores the generation and circulation of news using two sources: (i) the Paris Brown tweets, and (ii) the BBC news archive. It also uses Goffman's (1959) distinction between our 'front stage' and 'back stage' selves (where we are viewed as possessing an observable 'front stage' and hidden 'backstage' self) as a conceptual tool with which to make sense of the changing conditions of debate generated by social media. The analysis conducted in this part of the research project also acts as a foundation for the study of our multifarious and democratised media domain which is explored in greater depth within the cartoon chapter (Chapter Seven).

4.5 Political Correctness and Popular Comedy

Chapter Six focuses primarily on the second research question using contemporary British comedy as source material. It begins with a mapping exercise in which the historical relationship between PC and British comedy is outlined in order to situate the research process within an accurate broader socio-cultural context. Although the chapter will discuss different genres of comedy (including sketch shows and situation comedies) it uses contemporary British stand-up comedy as a sampling frame from which its main data sources are drawn. It does so for two key reasons: firstly, the controversies surrounding politically incorrect discourse have often centred upon the routines of popular stand-up comedians and secondly, stand-up comedy may arguably be felt to be a comedic genre particularly suited to the expression of contentious opinions, observations or 'saying the unsayable'[64]. Because

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[62] The data analysis will therefore help to answer the issues directly raised by questions 1.2 and 3 and 3.1.

[63] The BBC describes its values as 'independent, impartial and honest', although of course it is not immune to accusations of political bias. Research conducted by the Glasgow Media Group (1995) has accused the BBC of favouring a conservative viewpoint, although it is more frequently accused of having a liberal-left bias, which some conservative commentators (e.g. Browne,2006; Green, 2006) have conflated with its alleged culture of 'political correctness' which Browne argues has become 'institutionalised'(2006:34).

[64] Of course, various other comedy genres might also be viewed in this way and our general perception of comedy remains highly subjective and contextual. However, a situation comedy or sketch show may more easily be read as involving the portrayal of particular characters rather than constituting a true reflection of a

this project is interested in the various meanings attached to PC, all of the stand-up comedians whose material is used as data are renowned for giving offence and fostering a reputation as 'politically incorrect'. Despite the offence their comedy might generate, they are also selected because they are highly successful performers who have maintained their success at a period in history in which 'politically incorrect' utterances have generally become less socially acceptable[65]. Much of the source material is selected from the comedy generated by three popular comics: Roy 'Chubby' Brown, Jimmy Carr and Frankie Boyle. The data analysis component is divided into two main parts of the chapter, both of which address the second research question generally, although each part will focus more directly upon particular sub-questions.

4.5.1 Using capital theory to explore why Jimmy Carr is 'edgy' and Chubby Brown 'offensive'

The first major piece of data analysis uses Bourdieu's capital theory in order to examine the processes at work when we form our comedic tastes, including the distinctions we make between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' forms of 'offensive' comedy. It also looks at the enduring popularity of politically incorrect comic discourse whilst focusing especially upon the second sub-question which asks what discursive strategies might help legitimise politically incorrect utterances.

Capital theory broadens the notion of economic capital developed by Marx to also include cultural, social and symbolic capital. For Bourdieu (1986; 2005) economic capital remains primary as it can be used to purchase these other forms of capital. Bourdieu describes cultural capital as the forms of knowledge, tastes and dispositions which endow people with wider advantages in society. For example, parents provide their children with cultural capital when they transmit knowledge and values to them which are necessary to succeed at school. Social capital refers to the advantages accumulated from social connections or networking between individuals and groups; and symbolic capital involves the advantages gained through status or reputation. In *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991) Bourdieu also identifies linguistic

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performer's thoughts or opinions. Whilst a stand-up comedian might also adopt a comic persona which is distinct from their non-comic identity, stand-up lends itself less easily to this type of reading than the character based nature of a situation comedy or sketch show.

[65] By 'politically incorrect' utterances I refer here particularly to language deemed to display or suggest bigotry towards certain groups (such as racist or sexist language).

capital as a form of cultural capital. He argues that an individual acquires linguistic capital if their use of language (such as speaking with a particular accent or dialect) is seen more broadly as legitimate. In *Distinction* (1984) Bourdieu explores how those with high levels of cultural capital are able to determine what constitutes taste within society. In particular, he considers how middle class tastes and dispositions are used by people as cultural signifiers in order to distinguish themselves from those who lack high levels of cultural capital. Bourdieu argued that one of the main ways in which privileged social groups cultivate their cultural capital resources is by converting them into tastes for 'high' culture (such as an appreciation of 'high' art like opera). These tastes, or dispositions, can also be converted into broader material rewards[66]. However, various authors point out that the differences between 'high' and 'low' culture have become an increasingly less reliable means of distinguishing between those with different cultural capital resources (see e.g. DiMaggio, 2004; Friedman, 2011). Friedman argues that 'the pursuit of distinction is not just a matter of *what* objects are consumed, but the *way* they are consumed and the *aims* pursued in doing so' (2011:351). In this respect, forms of popular culture like comedy are also open to analysis of how those with higher cultural capital resources are able to consume comedy in ways less accessible to those who lack these resources.

Cultural capital is utilised as a conceptual framework with which to answer the second core research question. The sampling process selects ten minute segments from each of the DVD recordings of live performances by Roy 'Chubby' Brown and Jimmy Carr which are chosen as data sources[67]. The live recordings are used for both practical and theoretical reasons. Firstly, the use of the DVD recordings enables the research process to 'capture' or record the telling of jokes with relative ease. Secondly, as Chubby Brown is seldom broadcast within the mainstream broadcast media his live recordings grant us access to view his material. Finally, any analysis of 'offensive' humour may be particularly suited to the observation of live comedy where comedians are generally less constrained by what they can and cannot say[68]. The chapter takes each of the different forms of capital defined here by Bourdieu and uses them to examine several key factors: (i) the jokes told by Brown and Carr in the selected DVD recordings; (ii) the comic personas adopted by both comedians; and (iii) how both

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[66] For example, Bourdieu described how knowledge of 'high' culture can help secure educational success which is then transmutable into economic capital (1984; 1993).

[67] The DVDs used in this part of the chapter are: *Clitoris Allsorts* (1995, 2001); *Too Fat To Be Gay* (2009) and *Making People Laugh* (2010).

[68] For example, the jokes told by Jimmy Carr when performing live to an audience of fans will be more 'offensive' or explicit than those he tells as a popular host of pre-watershed TV panel shows.

comedians are more broadly perceived (including their critical reception and how they are viewed by the media and public). In other words, the chapter will explore how possession (or lack of possession) of the various forms of capital becomes attached to the way(s) in which we view jokes and comedians who rely on politically incorrect humour. Capital theory, therefore, is applied to the source material and used to explore the discursive processes and social practices which help (de)legitimise politically incorrect utterances.

4.5.2 Is there a 'new offensiveness'?[69] Using Bakhtinian dialogism to make sense of the appeal of politically incorrect discourse

The comedy chapter continues to look generally at the second research questions whilst focusing particularly on the third sub-question which asks whether any overarching meaning can explain the enduring popularity of politically incorrect discourse. 'Offensive' and/or 'politically incorrect' jokes taken from mainstream contemporary British comedy are used as data. In selecting the jokes the project recognises that these labels are somewhat imprecise ways of classifying an eclectic range of jokes, comedians and forms of humour. It therefore selects jokes which target historically disadvantaged groups, or incorporate social stereotyping and the use of taboo: in other words, it selects jokes conceptualised as politically incorrect within contemporary popular discourse. In particular, it draws upon material which it deems would once have been viewed as problematic within mainstream British comedy in the post-alternative comedy era, despite the absence of any 'official compulsion' (Littlewood and Pickering, 1998:297) to proscribe such 'offensive' content. This part of the chapter also draws upon Littlewood and Pickering's useful distinction between humour which 'kicks up' at the powerful and that which 'kicks down' in order to help identify particular jokes or forms of humour as 'politically incorrect' (ibid.). The source material includes a segment from the BBC situation comedy *The Office* as well as jokes told in comic routines by Frankie Boyle and Jimmy Carr. Particular focus is placed upon jokes about disability told by able-bodied comedians[70]. This is because jokes about disability have emerged as a notable ingredient in the repertoire of many of the 'offensive' comedians featured in this project, and their telling

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[69] The 'new offensiveness' is a reference to the emergence and popularity of post-alternative comedians who appear to delight in the use of politically incorrect language and rhetoric. The term was coined in an article by *Guardian* comedy critic, Brian Logan and is explored in greater depth in the comedy chapter. [Online] Available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/jul/comedy-standup-new-offenders

[70] All of the jokes used in this chapter are also told by white, heterosexual men. This was not a deliberate part of the sampling process although it is illustrative of how comedy continues to be dominated by this profile of comedian.

also arguably unsettles prior established notions of who is entitled to say what within the post-alternative comic world.

This part of the chapter uses Bakhtinian dialogism as a conceptual framework with which to explore the source material. According to Bakhtin words or utterances acquire meaning from the dialogic relationship between two or more speakers:

> The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes one's "own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language…but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions; it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own' (Bakhtin, 1935 cited in Emerson and Holquist, 1981:293-294)

Everything we say and mean, therefore, is mediated and revised through our communication with others so that 'any utterance is a link in the chain of communication' (Bakhtin, 1952 cited in Emerson and Holquist, 1986:68). Bakhtin suggests that the meaning of words is always negotiable and therefore, can never be entirely fixed or owned by one voice or group. In his 1935 essay *Discourse and the Novel* Bakhtin also explores the impossibility of neutrality in language and considers how one set of associations can replace another in the struggle over meaning[71].This understanding of language as fundamentally dialogic enables the comedy chapter to explore the complex struggles over meaning and language in which PC disputes are invariably embedded.

Of particular use are the Bakhtinian concepts of 'double-voiced discourse' together with the notion of 'the word with a sideways glance' (Vice, 1997: 22-23). These concepts describe how different voices may simultaneously occupy authorial intention in a dialogical relationship. They are, therefore, useful conceptual tools with which to investigate the interplay between conflicting PC and non-PC voices within contemporary comedy. These concepts are applied to each of the data sources in order to explore the enduring popularity of 'non-PC' voices within contemporary comic discourse. Bakhtin also invites us to consider

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[71] For instance, the quote previously cited in Emerson and Holquist (1981:293-294) describes how the speaker 'appropriates' the word to make it 'one's own'. Disputes of offence, including contestation over 'offensive' words or the 'reclaiming' of derogatory labels by less powerful groups might also usefully be explored using this dialogical approach.

how speech is characterised by heteroglossia, or 'multi-languaged-ness' (Vice, 1997:113). Heteroglossia has been called 'Bakhtin's key term for describing the complex stratification of language into genre, register, sociolect, dialect, and the mutual inter-animation of these forms' (White, 1993:136 cited in Vice, 1997:18)[72]. The stratified nature of language is also drawn upon throughout the research process in order to examine why some forms of 'non-PC' discourse retain a popular presence and appeal.

Finally, Bakhtin's concept of the carnival is also used as a conceptual tool with which to answer the second research question(s). Bakhtin identified the carnival as a space granted in the medieval period by religious and civil authority in which the public celebration of the profane and transgressive was temporarily given free expression. At carnival time people were free to feast and revel in grotesque comic celebration in which

> the body copulates, defecates, overeats, and men's speech is flooded with genitals, bellies, defecations, urine, disease, noses, mouths and dismembered parts (Bakhtin, 1968:319)

Comedy has been described as embracing a carnivalesque celebration of contempt and disrespect for the usual restraints and icons of polite life (see e.g. Medhurst, 2007; Sturges, 2009:282). In a contemporary context, polite life arguably incorporates politically correct codes of speech, thought and behaviour, sometimes perceived as imposed on the majority by a more powerful liberal orthodoxy or authority[73]. The idea of the carnivalesque as a comedic and socially transgressive mode is taken up by this thesis and used to consider whether politically incorrect forms of comic discourse can be usefully understood as ritualised displays of what are ordinarily suppressed and 'incorrect' viewpoints. Crucially, the comedy chapter considers whether or not the jokes it examines constitute a carnivalesque subversion of 'PC officialdom' and authority.

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[72] Vice notes how this definition of heteroglossia makes use of concepts from contemporary sociolinguistics, such as " 'sociolect' (discourse determined by different social groups according to 'age, gender, economic kinship' and so on) and 'register' (discourse belonging to 'the lawyer, the doctor…the politician)" (1997:18)

[73] In his analysis of 'Chubby' Brown, Medhurst (2007) reflects upon this way of viewing modern life and defends the popularity of Brown on the grounds of his politically incorrect credentials and carnivalesque celebration of 'offensiveness' in which both comedian and his (predominantly working class) audience participate in a public rejection of PC 'officialdom' and social inhibition.

4.6 Political Correctness and Political Cartooning

Chapter 7 uses political cartoons in order to explore the giving and taking of offence on grounds of religious belief or identity. The chapter continues to explore many of the issues provoked by the first two research questions although it also considers the third research question in greater depth. The rationale for its thematic focus centres upon the notion that we now live in a 'post-secular' society.[74] Undoubtedly, the decision to make religion and cartooning the focus of this chapter was informed by the high media profile of cases involving contestation over visual (and non-visual) representations of religion, religious figures or religious groups. The data gathering process uses political cartooning as a sampling frame from which to select cartoons which have either generated disputes of offence *or* encourage discussion relating to offence taken on grounds of religious belief or identity. The data analysis process is located within the context of debate about religion in the UK in the 21st century[75]. An effort is made to include different religions (including Christianity, Islam and Judaism), however, in choosing cases which have generated most discussion in the 21st century a significant portion of this part of the thesis will focus upon the controversies surrounding the visual depiction of the prophet Muhammad. The research process utilises the insights of semiotics, intertextual analysis and representation theory in order to create a methodological path and framework through which the research questions are explored.

4.6.1 Using intertextual analysis to explore discourses of offence

This part of the chapter begins to examine the third core research question and explores the notion of 'competing rights' which is raised in its second sub-question. The chapter includes an intertextual reading of discourses of offence using the cartoons of Martin Rowson as source material. Rowson is a British editorial cartoonist who describes his work as 'visual journalism'[76]. His cartoons are used as data as he has explored religion and religious themes in his work. The cartoons used have appeared in *New Humanist* magazine and *The Guardian*

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[74] Habermas (2008) argues that the endurance of religious belief and reassertion of religious identity within Western societies in the 21st century means that traditional sociological theories of secularization have been largely discredited. The idea of the 'post-secular' society is examined in greater depth prior to the core data analysis in the cartoon chapter.

[75] This will include consideration of the infamous Muhammad cartoons which were published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005. However, the research process will focus primarily upon the response of the British press to the publication of the cartoons.

[76] Rowson made these remarks during an appearance on Radio 3's Essential Classic Programme on 30/07/2013 [Online] Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0375wx8 (Access 03/12/2014)

newspaper. *New Humanist* describes itself as standing for 'reason, secularism and free enquiry'[77] and, therefore, might be expected to adopt a critical view of religion. *The Guardian* has already been used as a data source in the News Discourse chapter of this thesis. However, the liberal-left broadsheet is also included here for practical and theoretical reasons: firstly, it is the main employer of the cartoonist Rowson and secondly, as *The Guardian* is often perceived as a 'PC' publication[78] it is worth revisiting in order to build upon our understanding of how PC is discursively constructed.

Intertextual analysis encourages us to recognise how the meanings of a discursive image or text depend not only on that one text or image, but also on the meanings carried by other images and texts[79] (Rose, 2007:142). According to Kristeva (1992) texts are always in a state of production and cannot present clear or stable meanings as they always embody an on-going negotiation and contestation over the meaning of words. In this sense, any meaning of a text can only be understood as a temporary re-arrangement of elements of pre-existent meaning(s) (p.52). This understanding of the discursive image as a site of contestation is used in this chapter to analyse three political cartoons: (i) a cartoon which appeared in *New Humanist* magazine in 2010 which depicts the prominent atheist Richard Dawkins and God directing 'offensive' hand gestures at each other;[80] (ii) a cartoon from *The Guardian* in 2010 showing the offence taken by Church of England clergy in view of the decision by the ruling synod that women bishops should be permitted[81]; and (iii) a cartoon taken from *The Guardian* in 2006 which features prominently the stars of David covering a fist which is used to punch a Lebanese boy[82]. Rather than focus primarily on the internal structure of each image, the readings also explore the intertextual relationship between each cartoon and other discursive events, images and texts. It will also ask what this relationship tells us about our contemporary preoccupation with 'offensiveness'. The first two cartoons are chosen because they depict the giving and taking of offence on grounds of religious belief (or lack of belief).

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[77] This statement is taken from the magazine website. [Online] Available at: https://newhumanist.org.uk/about (Accessed 02/12/2014)

[78] For instance, one of the data sources used in the News Discourse chapter disparagingly refers to 'Guardianistas' [Online] Available at: http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/petermullen/100180868/islamist-terrorism-is-beginning-to-demolish-political-correctness/ (Accessed 18 August 2014)

[79] For example, Figure 4 at the beginning of the cartoon chapter shows 'New Atheists' Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens 'coming out' as atheists. The cartoon makes use of recognisable tropes (including the 'out and proud' placard held by Hitchens) in order to convey a particular viewpoint. In other words, it relies upon our intertextual knowledge of the symbols and methods used by the gay rights movement in order to comment upon New Atheism.

[80] See figure 6 in chapter 7.

[81] Figure 7 (ibid.)

[82] Figure 8 (ibid.)

However, the third cartoon uses intertextual analysis to explore the relationship between critique of Israel and anti-Semitism. Unlike the first two cartoons, it is included in this part of the chapter because its publication in *The Guardian* in 2006 caused offence and provoked accusations of anti-Semitism. The cartoon is also selected because it allows this project to explore the complex relationship between racial and religious prejudice – an issue which has become embedded in the discussion of religious identity in the 21st century.

4.6.2 The reporting of a 'cartoon crisis': Using representation theory to explore the British media response to the Danish Muhammad cartoons

Although the publication of the aforementioned cartoon using the stars of David generated a wider discussion about the nature of anti-Semitism, the cartoons used in the intertextual readings can be viewed primarily a form of commentary upon events as they occur in the real world. However, representation theory is used in this project to explore the significance of cartoons which have contributed more directly to the creation, rather than simply reflection of broader political events. The third research question is examined in light of the controversy generated by the publication in 2005 of images of the prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten.* There has been much academic and journalistic discussion regarding use and nature of the imagery depicted in these cartoons (see e.g. Hakam, 2009; Levey and Modood, 2009; Cohen, 2012; Norton, 2013). However, this thesis looks primarily at the response the cartoons provoked amongst British national newspapers. The research process is informed by the conceptual framework developed by Hall (1997) to explore the process of representation within the media. Hall's analytical approach is used in this thesis to examine written text within newspaper editorials, (although his approach has also been used to explore imagery and spoken language).

Hall's interest in representation is located both within an understanding of the complexity of meaning(s) surrounding images or texts; and in an analysis of how power operates in society in order to shape and circulate these meanings. The methodological approach advanced by this project agrees with the view that culture is constructed through the ideas that people have about it, and the practices that flow from those ideas (Rose, 2007:1). According to Hall,

> Culture…is not so much a set of things – novels and paintings or TV programmes or comics –
> as a process, a set of practices. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and

exchange of meanings – the 'giving and taking of meaning' – between members of a society or group… (Hall, 1997:2)

Hall's framework moves beyond the traditional view of representation which has attempted to capture the level of distortion involved in media images and depictions of particular groups, events or ideas. This view is dependent upon the assumption that it is possible to identify a fixed or 'true' meaning (independent of representations of an event or idea) against which the level of distortion within representations can be measured. (For example, the scale of the offence generated by the Danish cartoons was, in part, a reflection of how the cartoons were felt to depict a distorted view of Muhammad and/or Muslims more generally). However, Hall maintains that there is never one agreed or fixed meaning of an event as this is always dependent upon how it is interpreted. Furthermore, interpretation is also dependent upon how the media represents something. Hall, therefore, views representation not simply as a process which occurs after the event, but as an important component of the event, and as constitutive of it. In this sense, the focus of sociological enquiry is drawn towards how meanings are able to enter into texts or images, and how particular forms of knowledge are (re)produced through them.

Hall argues that we need access to a shared language in order to exchange and externalise the meanings we are making of the world. He also defines language broadly:

Any sound, word, image or object which functions as a sign[83], and is organised with other signs into a system which is capable of carrying and expressing meaning is, from this point of view, 'a language'. (Hall, 1997:19)

A political cartoon or newspaper editorial, therefore, can be studied as a type of language which will carry meaning through their use of signifying processes or practices:

Meaning is produced within language, in and through various representational systems which, for convenience, we call 'languages'. Meaning is produced by the practice, the 'work', of representation. It is constructed through signifying – i.e. meaning-producing – practices. (Hall, 1997:28)

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[83] Hall defines signs as 'the general term we use for words, sounds or images which carry meaning' (1997:18)

Signifying practices might, for example, involve the use of stereotyping which works through the 'construction of 'otherness' and exclusion' (Hall, 1997:257). According to Hall, stereotyping tends to occur where there are inequalities of power so that 'power is usually directed against the subordinate or excluded group' (1998:258). Crucially, our understanding of representation cannot be divorced from the issue of power. Hall argues that although images or texts do not have a fixed meaning, the use of power and ideology can attempt to 'fix' or naturalize the meaning of an image or text. In this context, power is understood not only in terms of economic power, but also in broader cultural or symbolic terms; including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way – within a certain 'regime of representation' (Hall, 1997:259). Hall describes this process as 'the exercise of symbolic power through representational practices' (ibid.).

This project examines briefly the use of signifying practices within the most controversial of the Danish cartoons – an image by cartoonist Kurt Westergaard which shows Muhammad with a bomb in his turban. However, the use of stereotyping in the Danish cartoons has been debated at length by the academic community (see e.g. Klausen, 2009; Tamaz, 2010; Poole, 2009). The project, therefore, conducts a detailed analysis of the representational practices at work within British newspapers in order to consider the *response* to the publication of the cartoons and the offence they provoked. The analysis uses editorials from the following national newspapers as data: *The Times*, *The Sun, The Daily Mail* and *The Guardian*[84]. All of the editorials discuss the decision by British newspapers not to republish the cartoons and debate their 'offensive' nature. The newspapers were chosen to reflect a cross section of political opinion (ranging from the right of centre *Daily Mail* to the liberal-left *Guardian*). They also include broadsheets and tabloid publications (including the 'red-top' *Sun* newspaper and 'middle-market' *Daily Mail*). The representational strategies at work within the paper editorials are critically examined. In particular, the analysis considers how the representation of 'difference' is produced and maintained through the signifying practices used in each of the editorials. In summary, the data analysis is used to answer the third research question, particularly in light of how 'offence' continues to provoke discussion within our media.

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[84] The editorial from the *Guardian* was published on 4th February 2006. All other editorials were published on 3rd February 2006.

4.6.3 Using Barthesian semiology to 'demystify' Jesus and Mo

Sub-question 3.2 asks whether the increasingly democratised nature of many discursive spaces has facilitated a culture of 'competing rights' surrounding the giving and taking of offence. The cartoon chapter, therefore, incorporates data sources which enables it to demonstrate the shift towards forms of media which encourage a more participatory, or user generated approach to both the creation and circulation of media. This includes an examination of the online comic strip *Jesus and Mo*. As an online venture, the *Jesus and Mo* cartoons have acquired a platform without which the cartoon creator would need to rely upon more traditional ways of reaching an audience (such as publication in a printed newspaper or magazine)[85]. In view of this, the research process also considers the relationship between the discursive opportunities created by Facebook and Twitter (both of which have circulated the *Jesus and Mo* cartoons) and how disputes of offence emerge and are enacted.

The thesis utilises Barthesian semiology in order to explore the source material it uses to answer the research questions. Barthes was interested in the analysis of sign systems in order to critique and 'demystify' wider society (Chandler, 2007:218). Drawing upon the relationship between denotative and connotative readings of cultural phenomena, he examined how dominant cultural or ideological values come to be regarded as 'natural' or self-evident. A denotative reading describes something on a basic or literal level although it nevertheless relies upon an audience being able to interpret signifiers in a particular culturally ascribed way. For example, *The Daily Mail* published a cartoon by Stan McMurty on 26th January 2012 of a Church of England bishop and his employees which relied upon the reader recognising certain items of clothes or dress as signifiers for particular occupations in order to go on to decode and make sense of the whole cartoon[86]. The signifiers include the religious attire of the bishop, and the uniforms worn by the chauffeur, maid, waiter and cook; as well as the presence of objects, such as the cleaning lady's mop and bucket. The use of text also provides what Barthes called anchorage as it allows the reader to choose between various possible denotative meanings of the visual image. The cartoon denotes a bishop living in his

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[85] It is also worth pointing out here that the *Jesus and Mo* website is subject to regular online attacks and efforts to close it down. The offence caused by the cartoons might, therefore, be a factor which any printed publication would consider before deciding to publish the cartoons.

[86] The cartoon image is available using the following link:
http://www.dailymail.co.uk/coffeebreak/cartoons/mac.html?index=10&monthYear=2012-01 (Accessed 07th August 2015)

comfortably furnished residence. Despite having opposed benefit cuts he addresses a row of his employees who may be about to lose their jobs due to orders from the synod to cut housing costs.

A connotative reading links this descriptive or 'literal' explanation to 'the wider realms of social ideology – the general beliefs, conceptual frameworks and value systems of society (Hall, 1997:38-39). Analysis, therefore, can be described as moving from a 'first order' (denotative) level to a broader 'second order' (connotative) level (Allen, 2003:50). In order to conduct connotative analysis, Barthesian semiology is interested in how the signs identified in the denotative reading are attached to a further set of signifieds. For example, the small group of domestic servants depicted in the cartoon are fairly socially representative; including a mixture of males and females and one non-white employee. They can be viewed as a synecdochal sign for the wider working population and the cartoon linked with broader socio-political discourse surrounding welfare reform. This includes the popular belief that ordinary working people are unfairly burdened by the cost of welfare and that the 'undeserving' are disproportionately rewarded by the current welfare system[87]. Meanwhile, the bishop is a synecdochal sign for those opposed to benefit cuts, and is represented as ill-judged, hypocritical and cushioned from the harsh economic realities faced by his employees. Related to connotation is the concept of myth, which is described by Lakoff and Johnson as comparable to how extended metaphors help us share and conceptualise our surrounding world (1980:185-186). For Barthes, the relationship between signs and culture is deeply ideological. Myths perform the ideological function of naturalization (Barthes, 1977:45-46) by making dominant cultural values and beliefs appear as natural, timeless, or simply a reflection of the how the world is:

> [myth]…transforms history into nature (p.129)…it gives [things] a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact… it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organises a world which is without contradictions…Things appear to mean something by themselves… (Barthes [1957] 2009:143)

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[87] Garthwaite (2011) has examined how 'the language of shirkers and scroungers' within media and political discourse increasingly perpetuates distinctions between claimants and non-claimants. Meanwhile, Briant, Philo, and Watson (2013) assert that there has been a significant change in how welfare benefits are reported in the UK media since the welfare reforms following the election in 2010 of the UK's Coalition government. For instance, they describe newspaper coverage in 2010/11 as increasingly 'less sympathetic' to claimants with 'an increase in articles that focused on disability benefit and fraud' (p.874).

The signs used in *The Daily Mail* cartoon naturalise particular ideas about welfare provision which can be demystified through consideration of the socio-political context and circumstances in which the cartoon has appeared. This might include exploring how myth has been influenced by the changing nature of political discourse following the financial crisis of 2008 and the consequent reform and restructuring of the welfare state.

The cartoon chapter in this thesis undertakes denotative and connotative readings of three *Jesus and Mo* cartoons which are chosen for analysis because of the offence they have generated[88]. The cartoons are also selected because the offence they have provoked was expedited by the use of discursive opportunities created by new media technologies. For example, one of the cartoons provoked controversy after it was used on a university Facebook page to promote a social event and another as a consequence of having been re-tweeted. The analysis also uses Barthesian semiology to explore whether the source material can usefully be described as circulating myths about the world which reinforce dominant cultural values. The research findings are then used to answer the matters raised by the third research question(s).

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[88] Chapter Seven provides a detailed description of the offence caused by these cartoons (see Section 7.4.4) which are shown in figures 10, 11 and 12 in the chapter. The description notes that despite the denunciation of the cartoons, they have not generated the violent response associated with the publication of the Danish cartoons. Similarly, unlike the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo,* the *Jesus and Mo* comic strip has not been subject either to the murder of cartoonists or a violent attack on its premises. Several factors may contribute to why *Jesus and Mo* is a less 'obvious' target than either the Danish cartoons or *Charlie Hebdo*. Firstly, the comic strip is a small online venture rather than a national newspaper or weekly publication. Secondly, the cartoons rely less upon crude or arguably 'offensive' depictions and caricatures than that which publications such as *Charlie Hebdo* are renowned for. Thirdly, the cartoonist responsible for *Jesus and Mo* uses a pseudonym to protect his identity for reasons of personal safety. This particular measure demonstrates how real the risk of giving offence as a consequence of depicting the prophet Muhammad is felt to be, regardless of the nature of the imagery used by a cartoonist. This thesis has reflected seriously on the ethical considerations regarding its inclusion of *Jesus and Mo* as a source of data for visual research. In doing so it has also examined the 'Integrated Framework' (2010:545) developed by Pauwels with the purpose of bringing clarity to aspects of undertaking visual methods of research. His framework includes a discussion of some of the potential challenges and ethical considerations which may arise from visual research. Pauwels recommends that 'Complex consideration of all contextual issues relevant to the particular research is required, including…the acceptability of possible negative consequences,...and so on'(p.565). The International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA) has also developed a Code of Research Ethics and Guidelines which it describes as composed in order to help 'guide visual researchers in varied disciplines, using varied visual research methods' (2009:250). The Introduction to the code highlights the requirement of researchers to 'minimise possible harms' (p.251) and the general principles of the code advise that researchers 'do not knowingly act in ways that jeopardize either their own or others' professional welfare' (p.252). There has been little direct focus in the literature regarding the publication of visual imagery for academic purposes which has the potential to cause harm as a consequence of the offence it may generate. (This thesis has also noted in its examination of the available literature on the controversies surrounding the Danish cartoons that the academic community has opted not to republish the offending images: (see e.g. Klausen, 2009; Meer and Mouritsen, 2009; Levey and Modood, 2009)) In view of the ethical considerations surrounding the desire to 'minimise possible harms' this project will therefore provide a link to the cartoons in the post-viva version of the thesis.

4.7 Reflections on the research process

The methodological framework outlined in this chapter is underpinned by the desire to strengthen analysis through the contributions made by each method of investigation it describes. In developing this framework the project recognises that the different methodological tools it utilises might be used to investigate a number of data sources. (For example, the data sources in the comedy chapter might also benefit from an intertextual reading, as the legitimisation of politically incorrect jokes often relies upon our intertextual knowledge - through, for example, the re-telling of 'old' jokes, or the 'ironic' revisiting of familiar routines and stereotypes based around race or gender). However, this thesis investigates each research question after careful consideration of the choice of method it uses to answer it. In doing so it does not claim that any single method is the only method appropriate for analysis of the source material. However, it does aim to create and develop a synergistic research project in which the strengths of different methodological tools are pooled and utilised throughout the research process.

As this research project explores the meanings attached to PC - including the discursive alignment between PC and disputes of offence - the research questions consider matters including whether or not 'offensive' arguments are precluded from debate, or why politically incorrect utterances within some levels of discourse retain a degree of popular appeal. These questions, therefore, also force us to consider how people might *feel* about political correctness and its relationship with the nature and conditions of social discourse. However, in focusing on the process of representation and the discursive practices at work within various forms of popular cultural and media sources, this thesis has chosen not to pursue an approach which uses interviews or other methods of directly observing how an audience might interpret disputes of offence or respond to some of the source material examined here (such as the telling of 'offensive' jokes or sending of 'offensive' tweets). It does so for both theoretical and practical reasons: firstly, the project uses cultural data as it wishes to understand how PC is discursively constructed within our wider culture; and secondly, the matters raised by the research questions might indeed 'offend' potential respondents or inhibit the reliability of response(s) from interviewees or participants. (For example, most respondents are unlikely to suggest that the appeal of politically incorrect utterances – such as racist or sexist humour - might emanate in any way from their own acceptance of racist or

sexist attitudes). The methodology developed here, therefore, hopes to examine the difference (or indeed similarities) between how PC is typically understood[89] and how the rules and conditions of debate actually function and are produced within different levels of discourse. For example, a key reason why the news discourse chapter undertakes an analysis of broadsheet newspapers is to examine whether particular viewpoints *are* in fact stigmatised or precluded from debate.

The rationale for the choice of source material within each of the data analysis chapters has been outlined in the previous sections of this chapter. However, in view of the preponderance of contemporary disputes of offence, one of the challenges arising from the research process has been devising the criteria for the selection of each overarching field of enquiry to be explored in the thesis. The decision to move between the relatively 'formal' nature of some levels of discourse (such as parliamentary discourse) and the more 'informal' nature of other levels (such as comic discourse) is intended to give this project room to manoeuver between the different rules of debate which surround different institutional settings or discursive contexts. Furthermore, this thesis has arisen in part from an interest in the role humour plays with regard to the rules and conventions governing what may or may not be said. Each of the three data chapters occupies a distinct position in view of this interest. Firstly, the 'formal' nature of news reporting and political discourse examined within the news discourse chapter will largely consider what is said within 'official' or 'serious' discursive realms. (However, within this 'official' field of enquiry, the case study which examines the Paris Brown 'Twitter Storm' will also consider how the 'serious' world of news reporting responds to the ostensibly 'humorous' nature of Paris's politically incorrect tweets). Secondly, the cartoon chapter straddles more recognisably between 'serious' and 'humorous' discursive territory. Political cartoons typically rely upon the use of humour and satire although humour is not an essential ingredient of a political cartoon[90]. Furthermore, whatever the humorous intention of a cartoon might be, the data examined in the cartoon chapter will demonstrate how cartoons are also aligned to the 'serious' world involving the production and making of news. Thirdly, the comedy chapter engages most directly with the role and significance of humour. Analysis of British comedy will constitute a core component within this thesis in light of the changing nature of comic discourse and the reification of political correctness in the UK in the 1990s.

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[89] By 'how PC is typically understood' I refer here to the various ways in which PC has emerged as a cultural signifier which are explored in the previous chapters.

[90] For example, figure 7 in the cartoon chapter uses an image of a boy being punched which might be satirical but it is more difficult to describe as humorous.

The British alternative comedy 'movement' preceded the reification of PC although it arguably pre-empted some of the arguments surrounding the nature of free speech and 'offensiveness' to which PC is discursively aligned today. Comedy is therefore, explored as a way of understanding how the discursive construction of PC emerged or was made possible in the later decades of the 20th century. Furthermore, the acceptance (and arguable rehabilitation) of forms of 'offensive' humour within 21st century comedy suggests that it may also be worth exploring as a contemporary counterpoint to the 'official' or 'serious' world of political correctness.

The decision to focus upon British comedy also reflects the broader decision to develop a research project which examines PC primarily through analysis of the socio-cultural context of the UK. In doing so, the project recognises that a comparative analysis of some of the issues it wishes to explore might strengthen any understanding of the relationship between 'offensiveness' and the discursive context within which 'offence' takes place. (For example, it might be useful to compare the response of the British media to that of countries which did choose to republish the infamous Danish Muhammad cartoons in 2006). However, the direct focus on data from British cultural and media sources gives this thesis room to explore in greater depth how disputes of offence are circulated and produced within a specific cultural context. This also leaves more opportunity to consider how the controversies surrounding PC highlight the temporal nature of offence within a culture (for example, this project is able to explore how the use of language within political discourse has changed over recent decades in the UK, and how this might reflect upon the emergence of the language of PC and changing attitudes towards the giving and taking of offence).

4.8 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the research questions which are explored in the forthcoming data analysis chapters. It has also outlined the rationale for the epistemological approach and choice of methods which guide and underpin how the research is undertaken. In outlining the research design - including how data will be gathered, investigated and analysed within each core stage of the research process – it has, therefore, identified how this project will seek to explain the various meanings and controversies attached to the debate surrounding PC. In doing so, it does not claim that each method chosen is the only possible way of exploring the various source materials it draws upon. However, it does intend to pool the strengths of the

different methods used in order to create an overarching methodological framework through which a varied range of cultural data will be examined. The research design outlined here, therefore, enables the following three chapters to investigate the issues and questions from which the general arguments and conclusions of this project will be drawn.

Chapter 5. Political Correctness and the production of news

Yet so natural to mankind is intolerance in whatever they really care about… (John Stuart Mill, 1998 [1859] p.16)

If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind. (John Stuart Mill, 1998 [1859] p.28)

5.1 Introduction

The aforementioned quotes taken from the 19th century philosopher John Stuart Mill's famous essay *On Liberty* were written over a century and a half ago. However, their attention to the dangers of intolerance and censorship, together with the emphasis they place upon the importance of the free exchange of ideas, appear remarkably familiar in view of today's preoccupation with the controversies surrounding political correctness and the giving and taking of offence within public life. A contemporary reading of *On Liberty* suggests that the fear of closing down debate is a recurrent theme throughout history, although in the 21st century this fear has become attached to concerns surrounding a new politics of language, or what Hughes has described as a new 'liberal orthodoxy' (2010:4). This new 'orthodoxy', including whether and the extent to which it is responsible for the closing down of debate will be at the heart of the research process undertaken in this part of the thesis.

All three case studies contained in this chapter focus upon the (re)production of news. They reflect the varying levels of PC[91] present (and absent) within different forms of news discourse, and demonstrate how the language of PC now permeates the way in which news is circulated and produced. The first part of the chapter examines articles from broadsheet newspapers *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* in order to make sense of the different meanings attached to PC. This case study also focuses particularly upon whether anti-PC discourse is a response to a stifling of open dialogue within the public arena. The chapter argues that although opportunities for debate over difficult and contested social matters continue to be upheld in the 21st century, trends towards self-censorship in the public domain

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[91] By PC, I refer here to the efforts taken generally by people to avoid language deemed to be discriminatory or offensive towards different social groups.

(together with the subjective nature of offence) also contribute to greater uncertainty over where the discursive limits of free speech might reside. The second part of the chapter explores the parliamentary debate in the House of Commons on 05/02/2013 which led to the overwhelming vote in favour of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill. It, therefore, observes politicians in a professional capacity where what they say must be carefully considered, and arguably 'PC' in comparison with other discursive environments responsible for the (re)production of news (such as journalistic commentary or discussion on social media forums). The chapter locates the parliamentary debate within the context of wider social and legal change regarding issues of equal rights and sexual orientation. It argues that, within the institutional setting of Parliament, the language of PC has influenced both the formulation of positions on substantive topics like gay marriage, as well as the way in which debate is discursively performed. The third part of the chapter examines the Paris Brown 'Twitter Storm' of 2013 and begins to explore the relationship between the giving and taking of offence and the emergence of new media technologies. This case study asserts that the new discursive spaces created by sites such as Twitter has elevated our opportunities for, and therefore our preoccupation with, both the giving and taking of offence.

5.2 'I'm not touchy. However I do take offence at being accused of being politically correct'[92]: Discourses of PC within British broadsheet newspapers

In 1994, Loury identified two levels through which the debates surrounding PC had emerged and were typically understood. Firstly, he refers to 'partisan arguments' (p. 429) which involve the adoption of different political and philosophical judgements on a range of substantive issues (such as the underlying causes of crime, or the dangers and significance of climate change). Secondly, he points to the debate 'taking place over the very nature of primary discussion' (p. 429). This directly concerns the conditions and parameters within which debate takes place, including whether dissenting views are felt to be silenced or stigmatised by a prevailing 'PC orthodoxy' or uniformity of opinion. The coexistence of these two levels of the 'PC debate' is observable in the analysis of newspaper articles selected as sources for this case study. The data suggests that some of the hostility directed towards 'PC' is actually about disagreements over viewpoints on substantive topics, rather

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[92] This quote is taken from one the data sources used in this case study. [Online] Available at: http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/ruthdudleyedwards/100180109/i-take-offence-when-accused-of-being-politically-correct/ (Accessed 09 December 2014)

than the curtailment or silencing of these viewpoints. Under the headline 'I take offence when accused of being politically correct' (*The Telegraph* 10/09/2012), Ruth Dudley Edwards responds to readers online criticisms of a previous article she has written by claiming 'I'm not PC when I say that what Julian Assange is alleged to have done to a brace of Swedish women could reasonably be thought to constitute rape'[93]. In this instance, the arguments about what constitutes rape are presented as either 'PC' or 'non-PC'. Those in the academic community who have reflected upon the direction of liberal-left politics following the 1968 generation[94] have documented how particular movements or ideas (such as feminism or multiculturalism) have come to be associated in everyday discourse with 'political correctness' (see e.g. Berman 1992; Spencer, 1994; Drury, 1996; Hall 1994; Kelly and Rubal-Lopez, 1996; Chong, 2006). However, in a contemporary context, the use and application of the term PC has widened to the extent that it is progressively less clear which arguments are now classifiable as PC, by whom and why. In this instance, the accusation of 'PC' is levelled against a journalist for holding an opinion which differs from that of some of her readers. However, the frank exchange of views between the journalist and her respondents takes place within an environment in which candid and open argument remains possible. If PC is understood as contributing to an implicit restraint upon public expression then this meaning does not sit well within the context of this article.

However, the concerns which arise over the rules of debate as a consequence of political correctness are more directly addressed in the second *Telegraph* article, 'Islamist terrorism is beginning to demolish Political Correctness' (13/09/2012). This piece was written during a period of global demonstrations and violent protest against the appearance on YouTube of a trailer for an anti-Islamic film, 'The Innocence of Muslims'[95]. The journalist, Peter Mullen, quotes from the editorial of the *Daily Telegraph* on 13/09/2012 which states that 'the simple

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[93] The previous article Edwards refers to had been published by the Daily Telegraph on 06/09/2012 and concerned her opinion of the politician George Galloway. Galloway had recently protested the innocence of Wikileaks founder, Julian Assange, against accusations of sexual offences. [Online] Available at telegraph.co.uk/news/ruthdudleyedwards/100179758/the-bullying-george-galloway-has-become-a-creepy-joke/ (Accessed 23 July 2014).

[94] By 'the 1968 generation', I mean to refer broadly to the counter-cultural politics of the 1960s New Left. In *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968*, Berman (1997:1) describes the countercultural politics of this generation: 'A utopian exhilaration swept across the student universe. . ... Partly it was a belief, hard to remember today, that a superior new society was already coming into existence. And it was the belief that we ourselves--the teenage revolutionaries, freaks, hippies and students--stood at the heart of a new society.'

[95] The trailer for 'The Innocence of Muslims' was uploaded on YouTube in July 2012. It was reported to have been written by Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, under the pseudonym of Sam Bacile. Nakoula had claimed that the trailer was to be for a two hour film, however, the film has never been located. See e.g [Online] Available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-19572912 (Accessed 26 July 2014)

fact is that Islamic fundamentalists are irreconcilable. To them the US will remain the Great Satan'. Praising the editorial he continues:

> I wonder if, in the midst of all this horror, we might begin to see signs of hope? I mean, might we at last be beginning to escape the mealy-mouthed world of all that for long remained unsayable. Perhaps there are, after all, limits to political correctness. I dare to breathe the hope that maybe Western societies will not die the death of a thousand euphemisms.

Mullen accuses PC of contributing to an inability to speak truthfully and openly about the nature of Islamist violence, and he argues that since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, our media has succumbed to a culture of 'euphemistic orthodoxy':

> The Ministry of Truth operated by the Guardianistas and the BBC have delighted in what they call 'The Arab Spring', as if this heralded the advent of 'democracy' all across North Africa and the Middle East. As we now learn from events in Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and the Sinai – and most recently in Libya – this was always a delusion, a perversion of reality flying in the face of the facts. The fact is that a resurgent, militant anti-Western Islamic fundamentalism is the gravest threat to civilisation. This is bad news of course. But the good news – as evinced in today's editorial column – is that finally we are being allowed to name this peril for what it is.

This linking of PC to debates surrounding Islam and /or Islamism in the post 9/11 world illustrates the longevity and flexibility of PC as a 'plastic word' (Johnson, Suhr 2003:50) which is able to mould itself around the discussion of various social phenomena, including the unfolding of major political events. Wider investigation of British newspapers suggests that some of the concerns held by Mullen may be shared more broadly, and felt more virulently. In their quantitative and qualitative study of online broadsheet and tabloid newspapers, Richardson and Stanyer reported that 'racial and religious difference, and immigration' were 'hot button' issues (2011, p. 993). For instance, in February 2008, 'most comments by online tabloid readers were on religion' (ibid). Whilst the classification of topics in their study is broad, and does not denote the level of debate specifically concerning Islam, the authors point to the preponderance of 'vituperative comments' online concerning Multiculturalism and Islam; and referring to one case study, they describe the 'venom in the thread, with readers all but united in a chorus of knee-jerk rejection of British Muslims' (p. 996).

Mullen appears to echo Huntingdon's (1993) 'clash of civilisations' thesis whereby conflict in the post-Cold War world is taken as underpinned primarily by cultural factors. In his article, 'Islam' and 'the West' are presented as two diametrically opposed and monolithic blocks possessing radically different values. Whilst the headline of his article refers directly to 'Islamist terrorism', the article itself links the events of 9/11 directly to 'Islam' and repeatedly uses the term 'Islamic terrorism'. The use of the word 'Islamism' is often employed to clarify the distinction between Islam as a religion and Islamism as a fundamentalist political ideology. Mullen's conflation of the two terms could be viewed as reinforcing the polarisation of 'Islam' and 'the West' whilst refusing to distinguish between what Bilgrami describes as 'the diversity of many Islams' (2012, p. 478) (and by implication the diversity of many 'Wests'). However, Mullen's criticism of 'media propaganda' for 'telling us that 9/11 had nothing to do with Islam' suggests how this more careful use of language might be understood as yet another example of what he describes as the 'euphemistic orthodoxy' of political correctness.

Mullen's belief that political correctness has prohibited open critique of Islamism and/or Islam is held within the context of an age in which major geo-political events have prompted an unprecedented expansion in media discourse surrounding Islam. Media discourse has given voice to a variety of socio-political positions, some of which have expressed concerns over what is described as the 'Islamification' or 'Islamicisation of Europe' (see e.g. Carr: 2010, p. 81). Citing journalistic authors including Mark Steyn, Bruce Bawer and Melanie Phillips; Carr claims that since 2001, 'the Islamic threat to Europe has become something of a minor publishing phenomenon' (p.81). In their analysis of reader online comments, Richardson and Stanyer refer to the high frequency of opinions regarding immigration and difference which adopt the following argument: 'this [*particular event*] is characteristic of everything that is wrong with multicultural Britain…' (2011, p. 996). They claim that 'this argument was used so frequently on *Daily Telegraph* threads discussing Islam and immigration that it assumed an idiomatic status' (p. 996). Online discussions are notorious for their 'political incorrectness' and lack of nuance although they do provide a forum for the frank exchange of arguments (albeit subject to the moderation policy of the online publication). Media discourse that is critical of Islamism, and more broadly of Islam, is therefore visible within both tabloid and broadsheet forums and is expressed by both journalists and readers. This suggests that despite a perception that individuals are fearful to

exercise their freedom of expression, PC does not exercise a stranglehold over all discussion of contentious social matters.

However, as PC is charged with installing a 'liberal orthodoxy' which is typically ascribed to the culture and politics of the contemporary liberal-left, it is also worth considering how the left-leaning *Guardian* newspaper approaches matters surrounding free expression, and the articulation of contentious viewpoints. The first of the articles found in the data search from *The Guardian* focuses upon the decision by the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* to publish a series of satirical cartoons of Mohammed in the wake of the global protests against 'The Innocence of Muslims'. In the article, 'Charlie Hebdo – more anti-Islamic than anti-clerical' (19/09/2012) Philippe Marliere briefly describes the irreverent and anti-establishment tradition of the magazine whilst also pointing out how its 'sexism' and 'bawdy inclination' during the 1970s would be judged as out of step with 'the advent of political correctness'. Marliere describes the editorial stance of Charlie Hebdo, since its re-launch in 1992 as 'muddled' and criticises its editor as 'anti-Islamic' for supporting the 2004 law banning headscarves in French state schools. Referring to the broader political climate in which the cartoons were published, he argues, 'Of course people should be entitled to mock Islam and any other religion. However, in the current climate of racial and religious prejudice in Europe, how can these cartoons be helpful? Charlie Hebdo is waging a rear-guard battle'.

The Genealogy chapter of this thesis has explored how PC emerged as a cultural signifier for a censorious or authoritarian movement to be mocked or disparaged. Underlying this censoriousness is felt to be an excessive fear of causing offence, and a silencing of unpalatable viewpoints. In this instance, the aforementioned article upholds the right to mock religion, although it also cautions against unfettered freedom of expression in view of the wider socio-political context within which such mockery takes place. The backdrop of 'racial and religious prejudice' persuades Marliere to adopt a less robust defence of forms of expression which he deems as potentially 'unhelpful'.

The *Guardian* article may also help us make sense of some of the terminology highlighted in the review of the literature which has been used to describe the politics of the modern liberal-left. This terminology includes the following oxymoronic labels: 'illiberal liberalism' (Phillips, 1994); 'liberal orthodoxy' (Hughes, 2010); and 'authoritarian liberalism' (Rankin, 2002). Such labels are used to describe the censoriousness (including self-censorship) which is assumed to prevail as a consequence of political correctness. The position adopted by

Marliere in the *Guardian* is informed by the recognition of existing inequalities between different groups in society. The process of giving offence towards groups considered to be already marginalised or discriminated against is, from this perspective, regarded as potentially discriminatory itself. The distinction, therefore, between discourse and behaviour becomes more fluid and less clear, as 'offensive' words or imagery are felt to be increasingly comparable to discriminatory action or behaviour. However, Malik has argued that the progressive recognition of group inequalities has facilitated a regressive trend within identity politics in which 'free speech has become more restricted without the need for overt censorship' (2009, p.197). He refers to attitudes towards free speech in the decades following the publication in 1989 of Salman Rushdie's 'The Satanic Verses' as having inculcated a cultural 'internalization of the fatwa' based upon the fear of giving offence (p.197). Marliere's article can be viewed as illustrating this shift towards self-censorship whereby the liberal - or 'PC' - concern with cultural sensitivity spills over into an illiberal attitude towards the free exchange of ideas, including the right to say what others may find unpalatable or offensive. Arguably, this position may also unwittingly contribute to the view that conservative or illiberal opinions are the 'authentic' voice of a designated community whilst denying the multiplicity of experience and opinion within communities (as well as between them)[96].

The final article used in this case study addresses a separate topic. 'Golliwogs are a vile reminder of a racist past – even Tory MPs must see this'(*The Guardian* 21/09/2012) criticises the selling of 'golliwog' dolls in UK shops and is particularly concerned that the dolls can be won as prizes at a seaside arcade in Whitby. The journalist, Richard Seymour, has written to the constituency MP for this area who has responded by letter stating that it is 'important that we don't become over-sensitive to situations such as this, where no evidence has been brought to me other than your letter that anyone has been offended or annoyed'. Seymour anticipates that those opposed to his position are likely to label him a 'hysterical PC troublemaker' because of his wish that the dolls be removed from sale.

This article illustrates how anti-PC rhetoric has successfully isolated 'PC' from what Fairclough describes as other 'cultural and discursive interventions' which have been 'directed at changing representations, values and identities' (2003, pp.20-21). Seymour

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[96] The homogenisation and simplification of positions taken by different social groups is considered in more depth in the cartoon chapter of this thesis.

recognises that hostility to his campaign would be likely to involve accusations of political correctness. However, Fairclough has questioned how, for instance, the 'neo-liberal project to change ideas, values and representations' (p.20) has escaped similar accusations of interference or 'trouble-making'. For example, the extension of market-based terminology like 'customer' and 'consumer' into discourse surrounding public service provision is not commonly recognised to be 'directed at changing representations, values and identities' (ibid.). Fairclough asserts that the isolation of PC from the more general process of cultural intervention is 'in itself a form of cultural politics' through which PC comes to be an identification usually 'imposed upon people by their political opponents' which 'has relied primarily on the complicity of sections of the media' (2003, p.21). This is particularly important because the use of the term PC as a slur has arisen in an era where overt displays of racism have become increasingly socially unacceptable. Therefore, the accusation of PC emerges as an effective strategy for opponents of the points raised by Seymour who wish to avoid having to engage directly with his arguments concerning racism.

The Seymour article also invites us to consider how historical items produced within the context of a 'pre-PC' era should be viewed or managed today. Kushner has linked the golliwog's cultural presence in the late 20th century to 'the heritage permeated society' which had taken hold towards the end of the millennium within 'popular culture through retro-pubs, television, cinema and even interior furnishing' (1999, p.68). For example, he notes that until 1994 the UK shop *Past Times* (which specialised in retro-memorabilia) sold golliwog fridge-magnets and plates. However, the gradual disappearance of the golliwog from most major retailers could also be viewed in the 21st century as an example of the sort of socio-cultural change often attributed to the emergence of political correctness. Meanwhile, Seymour's position on this issue combines both levels of the 'PC debate' outlined earlier in this section of the chapter by Loury (1994). Firstly, Seymour's objections to the dolls are based upon a particular ideological viewpoint involving his opposition to racism, including the use of racist imagery. Secondly, his wish for the dolls to be removed from sale reinforces an understanding of PC as an overarching project or 'liberal orthodoxy' which sets the rules of conduct or 'correct' behaviour. In this instance, the racist nature of the dolls is deemed as 'incorrect' therefore disqualifying them from sale.

5.3 Parliamentary Discourse: the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill

5.3.1 Parliamentary Discourse and the role of MPs

As the dominant branch of the UK legislature, the House of Commons forms a central part of the British political establishment. The debates that take place within it are, therefore, subject to various forms of oversight including the publication of Hansard[97], journalistic commentary and since 1989, the televisual broadcast of its proceedings. More broadly, the behaviour of Members of Parliament (MPs) attracts a significant level of scrutiny often justified by the public and media alike on the grounds of their unique role as elected representatives and law makers. This scrutiny may focus upon both the positions politicians take on substantive issues, as well as their personal conduct in their public and private lives. Such scrutiny may also involve whether a politician is deemed to engage in politically incorrect discourse, or behaviour[98]. The role of MPs as they engage in debating and making new laws is, therefore, worth observing as part of any broader exploration of PC and the regulation of public life and public expression.

5.3.2 Brief contextual background to the bill

The topic of same sex marriage has become embedded across popular and journalistic discourse within arguments surrounding PC, group rights and social equality[99]. The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill is a high profile example of a topic which has come to be identified with the more general advancement of political correctness as a broader cultural phenomenon or project. It is especially significant that this bill was proposed by a Conservative led government as this party has historically been renowned more for its social conservatism than its commitment to gay rights[100]. However, on the 5th October 2011 David Cameron was

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[97] This is the daily edited report of parliamentary debates.

[98] For example, David Cameron was subject to criticism after he told a female shadow minister to 'calm down dear' during a debate in the House of Commons in 2011. The shadow minister, Angela Eagle, later claimed that 'a modern man would not have expressed himself in that way'. The incident also sparked considerable media debate about whether the PM was sexist. [Online] Available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-13211577 (Accessed 29 July 2014)

[99] For example, in an article critical of same sex marriage written for the *Daily Mail* in 2011 journalist Melanie Phillips accuses the Prime Minister of 'signing up…to the wilder extremes of political correctness'. [Online] Available at: http://www.melaniephillips.com/797 (Accessed 10th December 2014)

[100] Most infamously, in 1988, the then Conservative government introduced Section 28 of the Local Government Act, which prohibited Local Authorities from 'promoting homosexuality'. Section 28 was eventually repealed in Scotland in 2000 and throughout the rest of the UK in 2003.

confident enough at the annual Conservative party conference to pronounce, 'I don't support gay marriage despite being a Conservative. I support gay marriage *because* I am a Conservative'[101]. Although many MPs, most of whom were members of Cameron's own party, vehemently opposed the bill, its success is a reflection of a lengthy process of social and legal change regarding issues of rights and sexual orientation. In particular, it is noteworthy that Cameron's decision to support this issue so publicly has been widely interpreted as an attempt to 'detoxify the Tory brand'.[102] What, therefore, can the parliamentary debate about this issue tell us about the relationship between political correctness, and contemporary political discourse?

5.3.3 Debating same sex marriage in the House of Commons

Discourse surrounding same sex marriage involves a discursive link with PC which reflects the wider association between gay rights and PC 'characteristic of the rise of identity politics, where shared social identity (as woman, Black, gay or lesbian), not material interest…is the mobilising factor' (Hall, 1994:167). However, the second reading of the Marriage bill uses the term 'political correctness' only once and does so in an attempt to distance the bill from it (thereby reinforcing the generally pejorative way in which PC is usually invoked). The Minister for Women and Equalities, Maria Miller, who was responsible for proposing the bill to the House asserted that:

> **The introduction of equal marriage will not marginalise those who believe that marriage should be between a man and a woman**…but neither will it continue to marginalise those who believe that marriage can, and should, also be between a man and a man or a woman and a woman. We will not allow one belief to exist at the expense of the other. **No misguided sense of political correctness will be allowed to impinge on that**. It would be deeply divisive if, in righting a wrong for some, we created a wrong for others… **No religious minister will have to conduct same-sex weddings. (Hansard, 05/02/2013, Column 132)**

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[101] This speech was widely reported across the Western media. For example, the Washington Post quoted Cameron's words suggesting that, 'Americans watching the latest push for social change in Britain might feel as if they had stepped into an alternative universe: Here, the Conservatives are leading the change for same-sex marriage'. [Online] Available at http://www.bostonglobe.com/news/world/2012/03/31/britain-conservatives-push-for-same-sex-marriage/CywN88sXjHaun2tWxzAizL/story.html (Accessed 24 July 2014)

[102] For instance, a piece written for the *Guardian* newspaper concerning the Conservative party conference refers to gay marriage as a 'surviving signifier of the party's detoxification'. [Online] Available at http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/oct/10/conservative-conference-return-nasty-party (Accessed 26 July 2014)

However, the desire not to 'marginalise' different beliefs, including those held by religious groups, can be viewed as adopting an inclusive approach towards group rights; and one which in a contemporary context is also arguably PC. In this respect, despite the overwhelming absence of the term from the debate, themes integral to how PC is discussed and understood (including questions about the nature of discrimination, or equality), inform the substance and direction of parliamentary discussion.

Section 5.2 of this chapter describes how Loury (1994) argues that in order to make sense of the concept, PC needs to be viewed as operating on two levels: firstly, differences of opinion on various partisan arguments; and secondly, the very conditions through which debate takes place. The Commons debate on gay marriage raises important issues with respect to both levels, as it provides insight into conflicting viewpoints, *and* how the rules surrounding discourse are produced within the formal or institutional setting of Parliament.

Despite the adversarial nature of the UK Parliament, the Same Sex Marriage bill was introduced as a free vote and was not intended to reflect partisan differences. However, there are clear disparities between the major parties regarding the level of support received for the bill: 45% of Conservative MPs opposed it, compared with 9% of Labour MPs and 7% of Liberal Democrats. Whilst MPs in favour of same sex marriage overwhelmingly emphasised the importance of equality based upon sexual orientation, those opposed focused upon religious rights and the traditional status of marriage as a uniquely heterosexual institution. If PC is understood as an idea or broader project which is opposed to discrimination on grounds such as sexual orientation, gender or ethnicity then the success of the vote could reasonably be interpreted as a 'PC victory'. (Of course, this excludes the remaining anomaly whereby heterosexual couples are prohibited from civil partnerships). However, in addition to the result of the vote, the discursive context within which the debate took place - and in particular the form taken by arguments opposing the bill - signifies further how Parliamentary politics has absorbed and responded to the language of PC.

Firstly, the data shows that many MPs who opposed the bill were simultaneously eager to declare their opposition to homophobia:

Mr Matthew Offord (Con): Will the Minister take this early opportunity to confirm that the opponents of the Bill, including many hundreds of my constituents, are **not homophobic, not bigots and not barking**? **(Hansard, 05/02/2013, Column 126)**

Mr Michael McCann (Lab): I want to ensure that my views are recorded, because **I do not agree with the comments from people who are clearly steeped in bigotry and hatred**. I know that many hon. Members are worried that European courts will force religious organisations to conduct same-sex marriages.**(Hansard, 05/02/2013,Column 179)**

Mr John Glen (Con): I am very disappointed to have to rise to oppose the Bill. I never imagined that I would be put in a position where **I have, by virtue of standing up for marriage, been characterised variously as a "homophobic bigot", a "religious nutter", a product of the dark ages**, or, as I see in this weekend's press, on the brink of making "a tragic mistake" that I will have many years to regret. This was not in our main manifesto…My concern this afternoon is to uphold marriage. I speak not just from personal religious interest; although sadly I feel it necessary to have to state it, **I do not speak either from any sentiments of a homophobic nature. I hope that my friends who are gay would stand to that comment**.(Hansard, 05/02/2013,Column 190)

Mr David Burrowes (Con): I do not have a monopoly on victimhood. **The homosexual community has been subject to abuse which, sadly, has characterised debates about sexuality. It is intolerable, however, that as soon as Members of Parliament put their heads above the parapet and speak to the media, they are called "a homophobe", "a Nazi"—I have been called that—"a bigot**", and many other expletives that I would not dare to read out. I have been told to be ashamed of myself, and to die: I have received specific death threats relating to my travel plans. **I have been told that I am a disgrace, and that I have no right to express my opinion on this subject**. **My children have been told that their dad is a bigot and a homophobe…**I am not angry, but I am very sad that my Government have so hastily introduced legislation to redefine marriage. **I am resolved to join other Members in proudly standing up for marriage—standing up for the equal value of people, whatever their sexuality,** but also standing up for a commitment to the value of marriage as a distinctive institution for a man and a woman. **(Hansard, 05/02/2013, Column 197-198)**

The frequency of disclaimers against homophobia suggests a general acceptance that this is something to be condemned, and a desire not to be associated with any form of bigotry towards gay people as a historically disadvantaged group. That the terms of debate take place

within these parameters signifies a shift in political discourse whereby unabashed expressions of homophobia by mainstream politicians are no longer regarded as acceptable or 'PC'. In 1992, Rayside had asserted that in the 1970s and 1980s Britain's largest political parties had contributed to the maintenance of 'a repressive climate for gays and lesbians, the Conservatives through their selective adoption of a morally conservative outlook…, and the Labourites through a timidity on matters of sexuality born of a concern for the puritanism of an important element of their working-class constituency' (p.122). Whilst gay rights *was* an issue which mobilised a minority of politicians and activists within the major parties (mainly within the Labour party), it was also regularly ridiculed by other politicians and the conservative media more generally as the preserve of the 'loony left'[103]. During the 1987 UK general election, Conservative campaign literature described books on homosexuality as part of 'Labour's idea of a comprehensive education' and a party political broadcast highlighted 'a "gay seminar" as an example of local council misspending'(1992:126). In the 1983 Bermondsey by-election, campaign leaflets for the Liberal party described their candidate, Simon Hughes, as the 'straight choice' compared with the Labour candidate, Peter Tatchell (one of the few openly gay political candidates at that time). However, politicians from the main political parties are now less willing or able to make political capital this way, and the discursive ground has shifted so that opposition to gay marriage is invariably prefaced by the sorts of clarifications and disclaimers highlighted here in the data[104].

Secondly, the data also demonstrates that many MPs opposed to the bill were keen not only to condemn homophobia but also any suggestion that they themselves might be homophobic. The desire not to be labelled this way may be a real reflection of changing social attitudes, although it also highlights an anxiety surrounding the stigma of being labelled a homophobe or bigot. A recurrent criticism of political correctness is that opinions deemed to be

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[103] Curran, Gaber and Petley (2005) have examined how the tabloid media of the 1980s was particularly guilty of presenting gay rights as a form of 'extreme' or fringe politics which was unrepresentative of majority opinion.

[104] An interesting development with regard to the expression of politically incorrect language or viewpoints within modern British politics has been the rise in recent years of the UK Independence Party (UKIP). UKIP has acquired a significant media profile in response to its growing popularity. The party has also gained a reputation for political incorrectness; some (though not all) of which it appears to relish. One example of this 'incorrectness' occurred in January 2014 when a UKIP councillor wrote to his local newspaper blaming the heavy flooding across Britain at that time upon Parliament's decision to legalise same sex marriage. However, what is significant about instances like this is how they are generally reported and received. The Conservative MP for the constituency in which the councillor lives told the BBC that the letter was 'not the sort of thing he should have written in today's age', whilst a UKIP spokeswoman claimed 'it is quite evident that this is not the party's belief but the councillor's own…'. [Online] Available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire (Accessed 29 July 2014). Overt expressions of homophobia, therefore, are increasingly less marketable and more damaging for mainstream political parties than may once have been the case.

'incorrect' come to be placed off limits and various authors (encompassing those aligned with both liberal and conservative politics) maintain that the use, and sometimes misuse, of accusations of 'homophobia', 'racism' or 'sexism' *does* indeed serve to close down debate (see e.g. Abel and Horvath, 2004; Gitlin, 1997; Rankin, 2002; Browne, 2006; Hasan, 2010)[105]. As these words have emerged as powerful signifiers of bigotry or prejudice, people increasingly object to being labelled this way. Therefore, MP David Burrowes objects to being described as a 'homophobe' and claims to be 'standing up for the equal value of people, whatever their sexuality' (Hansard, Column 197-198) whilst he simultaneously opposes same-sex marriage. However, we have no way of knowing whether overt denials of homophobia, racism or sexism necessarily indicate an absence of bigotry. The language of PC, therefore, can be viewed as creating a more inscrutable discursive environment, and even one in which politically correct language may be deployed in order to convey arguably non-PC viewpoints.

The concept of 'homophobia' used and accepted by both sides of the Commons debate, is a relatively new one although Hughes (2010:180) cites the word as having been used in the 1920s to refer instead to a fear of men. The change in meaning can be traced to the 1970s when it became a word popularised by an emergent gay rights movement. George Weinberg is widely credited as responsible for influencing the change of meaning through his 1972 book, *Society and the Healthy Homosexual* (cited in Hughes, 2010:180; Willis, 2012:1594). Weinberg defined homophobia as a psychological disorder located in an irrational or 'phobic' response to homosexuality, although the definitional boundaries of the term have since expanded to include the broader institutional and social dimensions responsible for promoting homophobia. The word helped to 'name the problem' of prejudice based upon sexual orientation in a similar way to racism or sexism with regard to ethnicity or gender.

However, the Commons debate also suggests that within a contemporary context, use of the word 'homophobia' has become attached to an alternative narrative whereby those labelled as 'homophobes' believe they are targeted unfairly for possessing views which - according to Loury's conceptualisation of PC - are 'pre-emptively excluded from public debate'(1994:429). MPs opposed to the Same Sex Marriage Bill draw attention in the debate

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[105] Van Dijk (1992; 1993), however, argues instead that those who challenge or 'speak up' against racism risk accusations of 'seeing racism where there is none'… Moreover, such accusations are seen to impose taboos, prevent free speech and a 'true' or 'honest' assessment of the ethnic situation. In other words, denials of racism often turn into counter-accusations of intolerant and intolerable anti-racism'(1992:90).

to the ways in which they have been described: 'religious nutter'; 'homophobic bigot'; 'Nazi'; 'barking' (Hansard, Column 197-198). They cite this as evidence of the intolerance displayed towards those who deviate from received wisdom, or opinion. Within this narrative, those opposed to same sex marriage become 'the new marginalised' who are victims of a PC orthodoxy despite the absence of any genuine hatred or bigotry on their part. This is an interesting reversal of the positions or identities typically ascribed to groups in the 'pre-PC' world: those supporting rights based upon sexual orientation are now perceived to contain an oppressive and intolerant element, whilst those opposed to same sex marriage perceive themselves to be vilified and excluded by mainstream opinion.

Finally, the perception that those opposed to gay marriage constitute a stigmatised group, forces us to consider more closely how the notion of competing rights may underpin some of the arguments around the debate, so that religious rights often appear to be pitted against gay rights. It is worth recalling that MPs have used their religious beliefs as justification for *supporting* the bill.

> **Toby Perkins (Lab): As a Christian, I see Christianity as a tremendously generous religion. As I have said previously, I think that Jesus Christ led the way on promoting equalities**. There are any number of stories in the Bible that make it absolutely clear that Jesus stuck up for groups that had been oppressed over the years. **As a Christian, I feel entirely comfortable voting in favour of this Bill.** As someone who got married at the famous Crooked Spire church in Chesterfield, I do not think that my marriage will be besmirched or undermined in any way by the fact that gay people in the future might also be able to say that they are married**. (Hansard, 05/02/2013, Column 149)**

However, more typically, religious rights and freedoms are understood and discussed as threatened by same sex marriage, despite reassurances from Maria Miller that no same sex marriages could legally take place in religious institutions as a consequence of the bill.

> **Robert Flello (Lab): The Government say that the Bill protects religious organisations, but there are conflicting legal opinions that robustly challenge that view**. **Moreover, there is absolutely nothing to stop a future Government legislating to allow, or indeed require, Churches to celebrate same-sex marriages…**Marriage is the union of a man and a woman that is open to the creation and care of children—not in all cases, but fundamentally that is its intrinsic value. This Bill will fundamentally change that. **(Hansard, 05/02/2013, Column 147)**

Ian Paisley (DUP): … comments have been made that fall into what I can only describe as the not-so-new phenomenon—which will now develop—of **Christophobia. Anyone who expresses a Christian view is now going to face the allegation that they are by nature homophobic. (Hansard, 05/02/2013, Column 206)**

Ian Paisley's coining of the term 'Christophobia' draws upon a wider trend towards the classification of particular attitudes or ideas as symptomatic of a deeper irrational fear or disorder. Since 'homophobia' acquired its contemporary meaning in the 1970s, concepts including 'Islamophobia' and 'transphobia' have also become increasingly commonplace in public debate. These neologisms are often applied to substantiated forms of bigotry (such as hostility towards transgendered people, or anti-Muslim prejudice), although increasingly there is a sense that they may also be used to label particular opinions as bigoted or 'phobic' in some way. The question of whether some opinions *are* necessarily underwritten by bigotry has contributed to the endurance and fractious nature of contemporary disputes regarding what might constitute bigoted or 'offensive' viewpoints. In this instance, Paisley suggests that the allegations of homophobia levelled against opponents of same sex marriage, is really evidence of a creeping Christophobia whereby anyone expressing a Christian viewpoint risks some form of vilification. 'Christophobia' is not a term which has become part of our mainstream lexicon, although it is interesting that Paisley chooses to use it to make his point within the context of a parliamentary debate. Conservative writers (see e.g. Green, 2006; Browne, 2006) have argued that the notion of victimhood has acquired a political status which can be used to gain preferential treatment or political advantage. One way in which this status is sustained is through the currency attached to labels like 'homophobia' which encourages others to avoid causing offence to groups designated as oppressed or disadvantaged in some way. Green (2006) views the increase in 'phobias' in recent decades as a means of castigating or silencing opponents through the promotion of group interests or identity politics. This interpretation may ignore (or chose to downplay) how terms like 'homophobia' have emerged in response to real rather than imagined grievances. However, it also invites us to consider whether the way we define bigotry may be increasingly flexible; or stretch beyond a specific hostility and antipathy towards particular groups to also include that which undermines or insults our core beliefs, feelings, or sense of identity. In this instance, Ian Paisley side-steps charges of homophobia by claiming that his own core beliefs and identity as a Christian are subject to another type of phobia. That the expression of ideas, or the enactment of particular policies which may offend people, constitutes a type of 'phobia'

exacerbates the sense that the language of PC has contributed to a culture of 'competitive victimhood' and heightened sensitivity. (Furthermore, Paisley's conception of 'Christophobia' is also complicated in this context by the presence of MPs who cite their Christianity as grounds for supporting same sex marriage).

Although the use of the concept 'PC' is largely absent from the Commons debate, the conditions of the debate evoke Loury's (1994) conceptualisation of PC as informing the very nature of primary discussion. The House of Commons vote, which was overwhelmingly in favour of same sex marriage[106], is itself indicative of shifting social attitudes. However, the language of PC also informs *how* the various arguments are debated and articulated so that politicians are generally keen to avoid overt or undisguised expressions of homophobia within the context of parliamentary business. What is also significant is how many opponents of same sex marriage are also keen to adopt the language of victimhood to describe their own status as that of a marginalised or stigmatised group. Arguably, the conditions of debate have inculcated a culture of competing rights, whereby political clout or credibility is sought through the appropriation of the language of victimhood.

5.4 The Paris Brown 'Twitter Storm'

5.4.1 The emergence of Twitter and social media

This case study begins to consider the significance of social media as the thesis explores the relationship between PC and the changing conditions of debate. Twitter was created in 2006 and claims to have upwards of 100 million users with over a billion tweets sent from Twitter accounts each week (Mussell, 2012:347). Twitter works by enabling users to broadcast public messages (or 'tweets') of up to 140 characters at a time, which may or may not be directed towards other specific user(s). Users can choose who they wish to receive messages from, but not necessarily who can receive their own messages, (although they may decide to 'block' particular users from 'following' them or sending them tweets). The popularity of Twitter is one example of how our use of the Internet is increasingly experienced through social media and social networking forums. Social media is often conflated with social networking technologies, such as Facebook, as the later typically facilitates a 'public or semi-public profile within a bounded system' (Murthy, 2012:1061) which enables users to share

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[106] The House of Commons voted in favour of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill by 400 to 175, a majority of 225. [Online] Available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21346220 (Accessed 22 July 2014)

information with other users with whom they have a connection. Both social media and social networking sites can be viewed as overlapping technologies which are 'designed to facilitate social interaction, the sharing of digital media, and collaboration.' (Murthy, 2012:1061). However, social media sites are concerned more broadly with reaching an audience beyond those with whom users have identified as having a personal connection. 'Twitter culture encourages interaction between tweeters who do not yet know each other' (Thorton, 2013:42), thereby creating a deliberately less bounded discursive environment, and one which further fuses the traditional distinction between private and public spheres. Murthy (2012:1061) also describes Twitter as a form of media 'wherein 'ordinary' people in ordinary social networks (as opposed to professional journalists) can create user-generated 'news' (in a broadly defined sense)'.

Twitter, therefore, empowers people to generate their own news discourse. It is also a useful site for exploration of how people negotiate the generation and exchange of politically incorrect forms of expression within a comparatively un-moderated and democratised social forum. This is particularly pertinent in view of the advent of the 'Twitter Storm' - a term used to describe a sudden increase in activity on Twitter, usually as a result of something controversial or newsworthy taking place. Twitter Storms also demonstrate how social media sites may simultaneously regulate as well as generate public expression (through, for example, the outrage expressed on Twitter in response to someone airing a controversial opinion). Twitter, therefore, can be approached as a forum which both enables and disables various forms of expression. This analysis will consider the complex relationship between 'offensive' forms of self-expression, and new media technologies, through exploration of the Paris Brown Twitter Storm.

5.4.2 Brief background to the Paris Brown case

In April 2013, 17 year old Paris Brown was appointed as England and Wales's first Youth Police and Crime Commissioner. However, shortly following her appointment complaints were received by Kent police from members of the public regarding comments she had made on Twitter, posted when Paris was between the ages of 14 and 16. These tweets had initially been brought to wider attention by *The Mail on Sunday* on 7th April 2013 (see Figure 3) and were subsequently reproduced throughout the media turning the tweets briefly into a national news item. The tweets were selected from Paris's personal Twitter account where the *Mail*

claims 'she has posted or circulated more than 4000 messages and images, many of them offensive' (07/04/2013). The media furore surrounding Paris focused upon her suitability for the post she was appointed to in light of the tweets printed by the paper.

Following the complaints to the police, Paris was interviewed under caution, and her phone was confiscated for three days whilst police decided whether any criminal offences had been committed. On 21st April, Kent police announced that no further action would be taken on the grounds that, although some of the language used in the tweets was 'offensive' towards particular social groups, it was not 'grossly offensive on a reasonable objective assessment considering intent'[107] In the meantime, Paris had apologised for causing offence and stood down from her appointment as youth police and crime commissioner on 9th April 2013.

5.4.3 The reporting of a Twitter Storm

The emergence of social media sites, including Twitter, provides opportunities for research to observe some previously undocumented forms of social discourse, including the sharing online of people's everyday rituals, thoughts, practices and interactions. Of crucial significance here, is how Twitter exposes that which was previously kept within the private sphere and which has now become public and permanent. Although tweets may be deleted, once they have been viewed they acquire a public presence which is difficult to erase, (as with the tweets posted by Paris Brown years prior to her appointment as youth police and crime commissioner).

Twitter has also helped intensify our preoccupation with 'offensiveness' as the democratised and (relatively) unregulated space of the 'Twitter-sphere' provides a powerful platform for users to engage in both the giving and taking of offence. However, rather than viewing Twitter simply as a generator of new forms of discourse, it may also make sense to reflect upon how Twitter has made some forms of discourse more visible. For instance, the controversy provoked by Paris Brown forces us to recognise the presence and prevalence of politically incorrect language within everyday conversation or social interaction.

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[107] [Online] Available at http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/apr/21/paris-brown-no-action-twitter-comments (Accessed 20 July 2014)

Figure 2. Extract from 'Is this foul-mouthed, self-obsessed Twitter teen really the future of British policing?' by Russell Myers in *The Mail on Sunday* on 7th April 2013

The BBC reporting of the Paris Brown tweets draws particular attention to how some of the tweets could be regarded as racist and homophobic.

Paris Brown, 17, posted what could have been considered racist and anti-gay tweets from the ages of 14 to 16.

(8 April 2013, 'Kent youth PCC Paris Brown investigated over tweets')

The UK's first youth police and crime commissioner, Paris Brown, has resigned from her post following criticism of messages she posted on Twitter…Police are investigating her over tweets she posted between the ages of 14 and 16 which could be considered racist and anti-gay.

(9 April 2013, 'Paris Brown: Kent youth PCC resigns after Twitter row')

In her formal apology, which was delivered on camera to an expectant media, Paris was also especially keen to distance herself from allegations of racism and homophobia.

I accept that I have made comments on social networking sites which have offended many people and I am really, truly sorry for any offence that has been caused. I strongly reiterate that I'm not a racist and I'm not a homophobic [sic]

(9 April 2013, 'Paris Brown: Kent youth PCC resigns after Twitter row')

This emphasis (both on the part of Paris and the BBC news coverage) suggests a 'hierarchy of offensiveness' whereby racism and homophobia are singled out for particular attention and denunciation, above the references Paris had made in her tweets to violence, drug taking, and underage drinking[108]. This is significant, especially as the BBC articles used here as data are not opinion based pieces (unlike the newspaper articles previous examined in this chapter). Instead, the BBC articles are presented to us as objective news reporting. The data, therefore, assumes a broader social acceptance that racism and homophobia constitute the most serious transgressions in the case of the Paris Brown tweets.

The response to the tweets also reflects a wider and enduring confusion regarding how public expressions of politically incorrect language or viewpoints should be managed. The BBC

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[108] Although Paris did express her opposition to drug taking in her formal apologies, this was given less coverage or priority by both Paris and the BBC reporting of the case.

reprinted three of the offending tweets originally published by the *Mail on Sunday*. In the tweets, Paris refers to herself as being 'racist' and 'sexist' whilst drunk, and makes use of homophobic slurs and derogatory language towards the Travelling Community. However, it is the presence of these utterances on a social media site which led to a police investigation exploring the possibility of criminal offences having been committed. This draws into question the relative significance of the content of the messages, and the location in which they appeared. In this instance, no further action was taken and the BBC reports Paris's lawyers as describing the police investigation as 'disproportionate' (21 April, 2013). However, this case suggests that the opportunities for self-expression facilitated by Twitter have developed alongside an additional potential for greater censure and regulation of self-expression. It also suggests that we are still struggling with how to respond (both legally and socially) to disputes of offence which arise from use of new media technologies.

The reporting of the tweets also contextualises what is said in view of Paris's age when she posted the messages.

> *Paris Brown*: If I'm guilty of anything it's showing off and wildly exaggerating on Twitter and I am very ashamed of myself, but I can't imagine that I'm the only teenager to have done this.
>
> (8 April 2013, 'Police chief backs teen crime commissioner after tweets')
>
> *Anne Barnes (Police Crime Commissioner):* The only excuse I will make is that she wrote them on social networking sites between the ages of 14-16 and, you know, young people make mistakes.
>
> (8 April 2013, 'Police chief backs teen crime commissioner after tweets')

Many young people have opportunities for self-expression through social media which were unavailable to previous generations, and as a consequence teenage life has been made more public or observable. However, there is also a disconnection between this exposure of our public selves through social media and the way some users manage and reflect upon their online identities. Davis (2012) has examined how young people explore their identities online and argues that many do not look beyond their relationship with their own friends (or any specific on-line rules) when considering the consequences of 'offensive' language and speech. Observing reactions to the use of racist language in online forums, Davis found that only a minority of her participants (2 out of 24) looked beyond the impact upon the user's

friends or towards 'broader social community-level effects' (2012:642). Meanwhile, this way of separating our online selves from the broader world which we inhabit is not unique to the young, as people continue to grapple with the consequences of online activity deemed to be 'offensive', 'threatening' or potentially libellous - much of which is generated by adults[109].

Goffman (1959) referred to social life as containing a 'backstage' within which individuals are given space to explore and engage in behaviour which might otherwise undermine the integrity of their observable or 'front stage' selves. His assertion that the 'backstage' includes 'places where the camera is not focussed at the moment' (1959:119) is useful when considering the emergence of social media technologies like Twitter. The space contained within the 'backstage' can be viewed as narrowing, as more people participate in social media forums which allow another tier of surveillance to be placed upon their interactions with others. This facilitates greater potential both for the exposure of politically incorrect discourse (which might otherwise be hidden from our 'front-stage' selves) *and* an increase in popular focus upon the issues generated by such discourse (such as where the limits of free speech should lie). For example, prior to the emergence of social media it is improbable that the comments made by Paris Brown between the ages of 14 and 16 would have ever become a popular discussion point or a national news item.

The fusion of our 'front-stage' and 'back-stage' selves through the emergence of social media sites like Twitter, has undoubtedly contributed to an intensification of our preoccupation with disputes of offence. However, this fusion of our private and public selves is further complicated by the very nature of social media. Firstly, users of social media sites are made aware that this medium enables their comments and interactions to be placed in the public domain. It may, therefore, make more sense to view Twitter as providing a view of the backstage which people are prepared to let others see, rather than a straightforward or unmediated insight into the thoughts and utterances of individuals which previously remained hidden or privatised[110]. Secondly, despite the obviously 'social' aspect of social media, it appears that some users approach Twitter as if it really were a largely backstage activity.

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[109] In 2012, the BBC claimed that '653 people faced criminal charges in England and Wales last year in connection with comments on Twitter and Facebook'. [Online] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20782257 (Accessed 29 July 2014) More broadly, the media reporting of Twitter-storms involving high profile public figures also suggests that it is not only younger people who experience a disconnect between their online selves and public selves.

[110] This understanding of social media may lend some credibility to Paris's claim that she was guilty of 'showing off' on Twitter, rather than expressing her genuinely held beliefs or thoughts.

Therefore, any exploration of anti-PC discourse within social media forums should remain alert to the particular discursive context(s) from which online discourse emerges.

5.5 Summary and conclusions

This chapter has explored how PC discourse is produced through the reporting and circulation of unfolding news stories and events. It demonstrates how the language of PC informs the way in which topical events are discursively performed and understood more broadly. Using broadsheet newspapers as data, the first part of the chapter described how the meanings attached to PC are informed by political differences or affiliation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in the data sample used, the right leaning *Telegraph* draws upon anti-PC discourse and rhetoric, unlike the left leaning *Guardian*. The sample includes a small number of articles, and a larger sample (incorporating additional journalists and a broader range of topics) might be expected to produce a greater variety of positions within as well as between each newspaper. However, in the data obtained, *The Guardian's* cautious approach towards free speech in some circumstances is suggestive of a trend whereby liberal-left politics has emerged as less assertive in its commitment to free expression than its ideological opponents. In both of the *Guardian* articles examined this reticence arises from a broader concern with social inequalities and with forms of speech or representation which appear to reinforce these inequalities. The cartoons appearing in *Charlie Hebdo*, therefore, are accused of reinforcing anti-Muslim prejudice whilst the sale of golliwogs is viewed as reinforcing racism. Both cases are also embedded in contemporary fears about the giving of offence and highlight how discourse deemed as 'offensive' towards particular groups is also increasingly felt to constitute discriminatory *behaviour* towards that group. However, whilst the *Guardian* articles reveal a liberal-left aversion towards offence giving, this case study does not claim that a 'liberal orthodoxy' has taken hold across the broadsheet media. The data obtained from *The Telegraph* demonstrates how the expression of anti-PC rhetoric may also be accompanied by a perception that individuals are fearful or unable to express particular viewpoints. For example, in his discussion of Islamist terrorism, Mullen refers to how his views have 'long remained unsayable' and he criticises the 'euphemisms' of the *BBC* and 'Guardianistas'. However, in this instance, the presence of PC censure is asserted rather than demonstrated, as both *Telegraph* articles include frank discussion of contentious arguments

and ideas[111]. In the small sample of articles used in the case study the *Telegraph* does not, therefore, adhere to the rules or diktats of a 'liberal orthodoxy'. Finally, if PC is viewed as an idea or movement which has inculcated a propensity for the excessive taking of offence, it is also worth considering how both of the *Telegraph* articles used as data take offence in strongly voiced terms against what they regard as 'political correctness'. For example, Mullen describes the 'politically correct' media coverage of the 9/11 terrorist attacks as 'propaganda' involving 'euphemistic orthodoxy and the fatal disease of appeasement'. The taking of offence, therefore, is not confined to any single political perspective or position and instead forms a part of the wider discursive environment in which political commentary and the exchange of opinion takes place.

The second part of the chapter recalls the parliamentary debate in the House of Commons in February 2013 which led to the legalisation of same sex marriage. It therefore addresses a key milestone in the struggle for equality based upon sexual orientation. The data analysis demonstrates that those MPs opposed to equal marriage rights were simultaneously careful to distance themselves from accusations of bigotry or homophobia. In this sense, the linguistic, political and cultural change which is typically attributed to PC[112] can be described as having entered the rules governing discourse within the institutional setting of Parliament. Undoubtedly, the very discussion of the bill in the House, together with the efforts on the part of those opposing it to distance themselves from accusations of homophobia, illustrate that a real cultural shift has taken place over recent years. However, rather than having inculcated a 'liberal orthodoxy' in which dissenting views are stigmatised, this chapter asserts that the language of PC has contributed to a less readable discursive environment. Today, mainstream politicians are less willing or able to engage in overtly homophobic, racist or sexist statements. However, this also means that the expression of arguably non-PC viewpoints (such as opposition to equal marriage rights) may be articulated, ironically, through 'PC' language or rhetoric. (For example, the Labour MP, Michael McCann opposes same sex marriage whilst simultaneously claiming to 'not agree with the comments from people who are clearly steeped in bigotry or hatred' (Hansard, 05/02/2013, Column 179)). Significantly, those MPs opposed to the same sex marriage bill also adopt a language of victimhood to support their position. This is suggestive of a culture of competing rights in which different

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[111] In her article, Edwards also discusses at length the feedback she has received from *Telegraph* readers regarding her ideas.

[112] Of course, the changes described here are more directly a consequence of LGBT activism although gay liberation has become one of the many forms of activism which is subsumed or categorised under the PC label.

groups, identities or positions appear as pitched against one another within a broader arena of political or social activism. It also encourages us to begin to explore some of the matters raised by the third research question, including whether our preoccupation with the taking of offence has facilitated a culture of 'competing rights'[113]. This is important because it also forces us to consider how we should respond to the demands or sensibilities of different groups, particularly where these may be in conflict with one another. For example, as the bill was introduced in Parliament, Maria Miller MP sought to accommodate religious rights and beliefs with equality for same sex couples. Secondly, it forces us to also recognise the lack of homogeneity *within* particular groups (or those sharing common identities) as well as between different groups. (For instance, during the House of Commons debate different MPs cite their Christian beliefs as grounds for both opposing and supporting same sex marriage). The data, therefore, points to an increasingly individualised dimension within the politics of identity in which the beliefs or feelings of the individual are elevated and prioritised. The evocation of group rights, therefore, may be used to foreground the feelings of the individual rather than the entire group. (For example, in the parliamentary debate Toby Perkins MP gives his support to the bill whilst Ian Paisley MP opposes it whilst claiming to be a victim of 'Christophobia'. However, both politicians use their identity as Christians as justification for their personal views).

The third case study follows the Paris Brown Twitter Storm of 2013 and explores the relationship between our preoccupation with the giving and taking of offence and the emergence of new media technologies. The BBC coverage of Paris's tweets lends weight to the assertion that particular viewpoints are precluded or stigmatised within some forms of contemporary discourse. In this instance, the precluded viewpoints include tweets deemed to be racist, sexist and homophobic. That her 'offending' tweets were initially published and denounced in *The Mail on Sunday* - the sister paper of *The Daily Mail,* a paper also known for also decrying 'political correctness'- suggests that sensitivity towards the giving of offence on grounds such as racism or sexism has become entrenched broadly across society. Using Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model of social interaction the case study illustrates that it has become increasingly difficult to disentangle our 'backstage' selves from our 'front-stage' selves, and that what may once have been confined largely to the 'backstage' (such as one-to-one interactions or people's everyday thoughts and rituals) has now acquired a

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[113] The idea of 'competing rights' is raised by research question 3.2 and explored in greater depth in the cartoon chapter.

presence and permanence within a wider public domain as a consequence of the emergence and use of social media. One consequence of this has been our broader exposure to the prevalence of politically incorrect discourse within everyday social interaction[114]. This exposure has also contributed to an intensification of our preoccupation with disputes concerning the giving and taking of offence in recent years.

The analysis of the source material largely echoes the claim by Fairclough (2003:21) that "Political Correctness' or being 'Politically Correct' are, in the main, identifications imposed upon people by their political opponents'. *The Telegraph* accuses 'Guardianistas and the BBC' of 'euphemistic orthodoxy' whilst the Minister responsible for introducing the same sex couples marriage bill to Parliament warns against its supporters adopting a 'misguided sense of political correctness' (Hansard, 05/02/2013, Column 132). This chapter also rejects the idea that a PC or 'liberal orthodoxy' pervades our media and uses source material from the *Telegraph* newspaper to support its position. However, the source material examined here also demonstrates that there is a general unwillingness on the part of people to be labelled as bigoted or prejudiced in any way. This is particularly observable when following the substance of parliamentary discourse within the formal setting of Parliament. It is also evident in the apologies of Paris Brown, and in her decision to step down as youth police and crime commissioner. Furthermore, although both articles used as data from the right-leaning *Telegraph* lambast 'political correctness', the paper also points out the 'obnoxious' nature of the anti-Islamic trailer for 'The Innocence of Muslims' in its editorial of 13/09/2012.

In summary, despite the largely negative signification of PC, the discursive environment which is examined by this news discourse is one in which individuals are generally reluctant to be viewed as endorsing racist, sexist or otherwise bigoted attitudes or behaviour. The chapter also observes how our understanding of what might constitute 'homophobic' or 'offensive' attitudes remains contestable and is increasingly dependent upon personal or individual proclivities or beliefs. The subjective and contestable nature of offence, therefore, contributes both to our ongoing preoccupation with 'offensiveness' and our uncertainty as to where the parameters of acceptable discourse lie. Finally, as this chapter focuses upon the (re)production of news it generally observes how our 'formal' selves are encouraged to

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[114] Instances where individuals have been subject to scrutiny or censure over their use of politically incorrect language have become a staple feature of news reporting in recent years. Often, these instances involve comments made using 'new' media technologies such as Twitter, Facebook, email or texting. Prior to the emergence of such technologies many 'incorrect' utterances (such as the Paris Brown tweets) are likely to have remained free from wider public scrutiny and within the domain of our 'backstage' selves.

adhere to certain codes of behaviour (such as non-racism or non-sexism)[115]. However, the third case study also begins to consider how this sits alongside our 'informal' selves and how we form and negotiate codes of behaviour in a world in which the distinction between 'informal' and 'formal' spheres is becoming less clear. In view of this, the following chapter will consider the less formal field of comic discourse as it begins to examine how the enduring appeal of 'political incorrectness' within some forms of discourse should be viewed.

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[115] For instance, Paris Brown steps away from public office because of the controversial and 'politically incorrect' nature of her tweets.

Chapter 6. Comedy and Political Correctness

A joke that feeds on ignorance starves its audience. We have the choice. We can say something or we can say nothing. Not everything true is funny, and not everything funny is true. Most comics feed prejudice and fear and blinkered vision, but the best ones, the best ones…illuminate them, make them clearer to see, easier to deal with. We've got to make people laugh till they cry. Till they find their pain and their beauty. Comedy is medicine. Not coloured sweeties to rot their teeth with. (*Comedians,* Trevor Griffiths, 1976:23)

The jokes on this DVD I have told to 300,000 people on tour, so I know they're not offensive. My audience aren't offended and people who buy this DVD won't be. The thing about my DVD is that there is no message, there is nothing to be learnt from it and there is no agenda. I am purely trying to make you laugh your ass off for two hours. That's my job. I am trying to release endorphins here. I am not preaching to you - I am trying to make you laugh. (Jimmy Carr, 2011)[116]

6.1 Introduction

Comic discourse is renowned for delighting in 'saying the unsayable', or in unsettling and confronting our deeper anxieties and social taboos. It therefore, provides a potentially rich source of data for analysis of the controversies surrounding political correctness and the nature of offence. This chapter uses jokes told by popular comedians as data in order to explore and account for the enduring appetite for politically incorrect forms of expression. It will also make sense of some of the discursive strategies which help to (de)legitimise the expression of 'incorrect' utterances. In doing so it recognises that comic discourse may be understood as constituting a distinct level of discourse from that which governs our formal or 'official' selves[117]. In this sense, professional comedians are also understood as granted greater leeway to transgress and tweak at the codes of political correctness through humour, than the more 'formal' discourse governing, for example, the conduct of politicians in Parliament which has been explored in the previous chapter. However, comic discourse does not occupy an entirely separate realm without connection to the world which we routinely

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[116] In this quote Jimmy Carr is discussing his DVD, *Being Funny,* with the *Daily Mirror* newspaper. [Online] Available at: http://www.mirror.co.uk/3am/celebrity-news/jimmy-carr-interview-motormouth-reflects-92406 (Accessed 09 July 2014)

[117] The idea that humour provides a temporary release from the regulation and oversight of our formal selves is explored in depth in section 6.4.2 of this chapter.

inhabit[118]. For instance, the comic will enter our conversations with friends and colleagues within the 'formal' domain of the workplace. The comedic, therefore, cannot be hermetically sealed from our broader society and culture, or from meaningful analysis of our understanding of the nature of offence.

This chapter begins with an historical overview of the relationship between PC and British comedy in order to locate present-day debates within their broader socio-cultural emergence and context. The second part of the chapter addresses how notions of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' forms of 'offensive' discourse have become attached to the ownership of cultural capital resources. The data analysis draws particularly upon the humour of Roy 'Chubby' Brown and Jimmy Carr, and argues that access to higher levels of cultural capital can help legitimise the expression of politically incorrect viewpoints or utterances. The third part of the chapter uses Bakhtinian dialogism and the notion of the carnival to consider the rise of 'edgy' comedy and the enduring appetite for 'offensive' or 'politically incorrect' jokes and comedians. It seeks to demonstrate how the popularity of such humour cannot be reducible to any singular meaning. However, it also asserts that the evocation of political correctness has contributed to the rehabilitation within mainstream comedy of humour which relies upon the targeting of those less powerful as 'edgy'. The chapter argues that the rehabilitation of such humour as 'edgy', 'subversive' or 'challenging' has become possible as a consequence of the negative signification of political correctness.

6.2   An historical overview of PC and British comedy

6.2.1 Mapping PC and British comedy

This section of the chapter provides a brief overview of the relationship between PC and British comedy in order to place contemporary debates within an accurate cultural context. It identifies three broad historical shifts which it classifies as pre-PC, PC and post-PC eras. These are loose categories which correspond with an emergence and diversity of many types of comedy; however, this overview focuses specifically on comedy which has contributed to the arguments surrounding political correctness and the nature of offence. In attaching a time

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[118]   The interconnectedness between the comic and 'non-comic' was one of the factors underpinning the discursive repositioning of comedy in the 1980s. Alternative comedy understood the racism and sexism of many comics as reflecting and shaping broader inequalities beyond the locus of a particular comic routine or performance.

frame to each era, it does not seek to homogenise the comedy described as specific or unique to any particular period. However, it does identify visible and overarching cultural shifts which help us locate and recognise the relationship between PC and the discursive repositioning of comic discourse.

This mapping exercise takes the 1970s as its starting point. It then outlines the relocation of comic discourse in the 1980s, and explores how this was attached to the emergence of alternative comedy in this decade. The 1980s is identified as corresponding with the PC era, despite popular usage of the term PC having entered the mainstream lexicon in the UK in the early 1990s. This is because this thesis will argue that from a present-day perspective, many of the precepts and principles of 1980s alternative comedy can be viewed as constituting a broadly PC sensibility. The 1990s, and early decades of the 21st century, are described by this chapter as post-PC. The 'post' prefix suggests a complex renegotiation of the relationship between comedy and political correctness within this period which incorporates elements of both continuation and rejection of prior eras.

6.2.2 The Pre-PC era

The popular culture of the1970s has been recalled as often fervently and unconsciously politically incorrect, when viewed from a contemporary standpoint (see e.g. Littlewood and Pickering, 1998; Lewisohn, 2003; Turner, 2008; Beckett, 2009; Viner, 2010). Viner (2010) describes the 'casually sexist and racist dialogue' of the 1970s police drama *The Sweeney* as providing 'as strong an evocation as any television programme of a world gone forever' (p.136). He also describes the 'political incorrectness of those times' as 'effectively mined' in the 2007 BBC drama *Life on Mars* in which a modern-day detective travels back to 1973 to work with the 'gloriously unreconstructed DCI Gene Hunt' (ibid.). During the 1970s racism, sexism, and homophobia were also common elements within TV-friendly comedy[119], as well as the less regulated world of live stand-up comedy. Littlewood and Pickering have described the ubiquity of humour within this decade which relied upon stereotypical material, such as mother-in-law or 'paki' jokes as

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[119] For a flavour of the decade it is worth viewing the *Joint Industry Committee for Television Advertising Research* (JICTAR) yearly top ten rated programmes for ITV. [Online] Available at: http://www.users.zetnet.co.uk/itw/features/Ratings.html] (Accessed: 15 June 2014) For example, in 1975, the top three most viewed programmes were: (1) *The Royal Variety Performance*; (2) *The Benny Hill Show*; and (3) *Love Thy Neighbour*.

…typical of the style of comedy which had hardened in the working men's clubs of the 1950s and 1960s…What has characterised pub and club comedy most of all…are the almost exclusively white male performances and the aggressively masculinist jokes where women, 'queers' and ethnic minorities are the staple butts. (Littlewood and Pickering, 1998:294)

The influence of working men's clubs on light entertainment and mainstream comedy in the 1970s is described by Littlewood and Pickering as 'pervasive' (p.295). Significantly, although the swearing and aggressive delivery of the club comic may have been toned down for TV or 'family' viewing, the racism or sexism was often retained[120]. However, there was also a burgeoning unease surrounding the pervasiveness of such content. This unease was articulated in the 1976 play *Comedians* (written by Trevor Griffiths) which centres upon a group of aspiring comics and critiques their preference for jokes that feed on 'ignorance' (p.23) at the expense of those which reveal 'a sort of truth… to liberate…to change the situation' (p.20). Political activism in the 1970s had shone a light upon various forms of inequality, and legislation was consequently introduced in this decade to curb racial and sexual discrimination[121]. Racism and sexism within broader popular culture also eventually came under greater scrutiny, which (along with a sense that the content and delivery of many comics had become clichéd and tired) contributed to a questioning of the pervasive use of negative social stereotyping within popular comedy.

6.2.3 The PC era

The rejection of casual racism, sexism and homophobia in British comedy is associated most directly with the rise of alternative comedy in the 1980s. In 1979, the Comedy Store club opened in London and provided an important platform for an array of comics who explicitly rejected the types of jokes associated with 'old school' comics like Bernard Manning or Jim Davidson. In his book on the experience of being a stand-up comedian, Double describes the 'new breed of comics' (1997:164):

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[120] This neatly illustrates the temporal nature of offence. Today, racist jokes are far more likely to be considered unacceptable than the use of swearing within much TV comedy (although, of course, the nature of offence remains subjective).

[121] For example, the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 outlawed discrimination in employment, training and education on the grounds of sex or marital status. Similarly, the Race Relations Act of 1976 was passed in order to prevent discrimination on the grounds of race.

They shouted and swore, they delivered weird routines with quiet menace, they turned seditious politics into jokes. They threw aside stolen Pakistani jokes of their predecessors and instead lashed out at the mood of the times, attacking wine bars and Sony Walkmans ('deaf aids for trendies' – Alexei Sayle) with as much venom as they did the newly elected Thatcher government. (Double, 1997:164-165)

Although the emergence of alternative comedy has been described by Double as sparking a 'comic revolution' (p.164) that 'completely redefined what it meant to be a stand-up comic' (p.167), it is worth reiterating that the shift from 'old school' to alternative comedy - and thereby the shift from pre-PC to PC eras - was not as stark or linear as it may appear in this mapping exercise. Firstly, prior to the advent of alternative comedy, not all popular comedy relied primarily upon crude social stereotyping[122]. Secondly, although racist or sexist content became less acceptable during the 1980s, 'old school' comedy retained a level of popular appeal and therefore presence (albeit one which was increasingly questioned) within the mainstream media of this decade. Thirdly, not all comics associated with the emergence of alternative comedy were as explicitly political, or fervent in the expression of their anti-sexist or anti-racist credentials, as comics like Alexei Sayle or Ben Elton. Littlewood and Pickering describe performers including Rik Mayall and Ade Edmondson as not possessing the same 'definite political motivations' as Sayle or Elton, or as tending to see themselves 'simply as comics' (1998:296). In this sense, the significance of alternative comedy lies more in its implicit rejection of the use of racist or sexist material, rather than any explicit or vocal declaration of a radical political or anti-racist agenda.

However, there are some notable hallmarks of alternative comedy which illustrate the discursive shift from pre-PC to PC era. Most significant is the aforementioned disavowal of humour that generally targets those less powerful. Finding observes that, 'where the target was outside the comedian's immediate experience, it tended to be a person (or an institution) of power, rather than one belonging to a marginalised group' (2008:5). Secondly, the style of delivery favoured by 'old school' comedians had tended to involve 'quick fire gags, many of them second hand and taken from general circulation' (Littlewood and Pickering, 1998:294). This had complemented the reliance upon well-trodden stereotypes and repetitive one-liners which had been the stock-in-trade of comedians like Frank Carson or Bernard Manning. The packaged gag was rejected by many alternative comedians, or otherwise subverted in order to

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[122] For example, comedians such as Jasper Carrott and Billy Connolly had achieved popularity largely through a more observational or story-telling style of comedy.

appear in new and unexpected ways. Alternative comedy generally relied more upon 'observational humour, personal narratives, and a need for the audience to be intellectually and emotionally involved in the comedian's train of thought in order to laugh' (Finding, 2008:5). Thirdly, these developments nurtured a sensibility within comedy which can be viewed from a contemporary perspective as broadly PC. At the core of this sensibility was a commitment to non-racism or non-sexism. However, alternative comedy also encouraged a broader engagement with the political and social questions of the 1980s, (such as the politics of identity, or the policies of the Thatcher governments)[123].

The discursive repositioning of comic discourse during the 1980s meant that many household names came to be regarded as either problematic or simply outdated, and were therefore increasingly side-lined by a media which had previously helped to build their careers[124]. Meanwhile, alternative comedy came to take its place within the mainstream, and comedians such as Ben Elton and Alexei Sayle acquired regular shows on the BBC in the late 1980s and early 1990s[125]. Double (1997:175) neatly describes how 'the non-sexist, non-racist comedy code gradually moved further into the mainstream':

> By 1990, the holiday firm *Thompsons* was banning 'blue' comedians and racist gags from its resorts, and it was not unusual for television comics as anodyne as Les Dennis to declare their respect for Alexei Sayle and Ben Elton and openly reject bigoted comedy, saying, 'I must admit it has worried me, when I've been watching an act with racist humour in it, to see the whole audience laughing'. (Double, 1997:175)

This description is particularly illuminating in view of what has followed the mainstreaming of alternative comedy. It highlights a general consensus of disdain for bigoted content, and yet also refers to the 'banning' of gags. Alternative comedy has been described as having taken an 'anarchic approach' (Double, 1997:167) towards the creation of humour, and as

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[123] This thesis views alternative comedy as discursively aligned with the politicisation of other elements within popular culture during the 1980s which drew upon their dissatisfaction with the incumbent Thatcher led governments. These elements included newly politicised musicians like Billy Bragg, or dramas like *Boys from the Blackstuff* (which was broadcast on the BBC in 1982, and dealt with the impact of mass unemployment). In 2006, Phil Wickham from the British Film Institute described the drama as 'TV's most complete dramatic response to the Thatcher era'. As the UK shifted rightwards politically during the 1980s, a cultural opposition to Thatcherism also emerged through various forms of artistic expression including comedy, music and drama.

[124] For example, in 1989, Thames Television's Head of Light Entertainment, John Davies, cancelled the once highly popular *Benny Hill show*. His reasons were, '…the audiences were going down, the programme was costing a vast amount of money, and he (Hill) was looking a little tired.' [Online] Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Benny_Hill_Show (Accessed 24 June 2014)

[125] In a symbolic departure from his anti-establishment roots in alternative comedy and the Comedy Store, Ben Elton stood in as guest host for Terry Wogan on his flagship BBC chat show in 1989.

having generated 'a punk sensibility of shock and offence' (Hunt, 2013a:7). However, the offence was directed towards a set of clearly defined targets: the old guard racist or sexist comedians, the Thatcher led governments, or powerful institutions and groups more generally. But alternative comedy was also predicated on the *avoidance* of offence with regard to historically disadvantaged groups, or those lacking power. Comics, such as Ben Elton, were often scrupulous in their efforts not to appear sexist or racist. Arguably, this contributed to the creation of a new set of taboos, rules or 'comedy code(s)' (Double, 1997:175) which were now attached to a new comedy establishment. How, therefore, does the mainstreaming of alternative comedy sit alongside the reification of PC in the 1990s as a hegemonic and censorious movement to be mocked; and what impact did this have upon the nature and direction of comic discourse?

6.2.4 The Post-PC era

It is less easy to identify any clear 'movement' within British comedy since the advent of 1980s alternative comedy. In his analysis of post-alternative comedy, Hunt (2013a) identifies a number of trends which he describes as characterising the nature of British comedy since the 1990s[126]. However, he is keen to point out that these trends are neither self-contained or unified, nor lacking in tension with one another (p.10). In other words, comedy has become less uniform and more diverse; and the underlying precepts of popular comedy less consistent or readable. What, therefore, might this suggest about the relationship between comic discourse and PC in the post-PC era?

At the end of the 1990s, Littlewood and Pickering argued that the legacy of alternative comedy's refusal to 'kick down'[127] or to make less powerful groups the target of comic abuse remained broadly intact (1998:293):

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[126] Hunt (2013a:10-15) identifies eight overarching trends in post-alternative British comedy which he argues are 'especially significant', including 'Northern comedy' and 'Dark' or 'Cringe' comedy. For a detailed description of these trends see pp.10-15 of his book on this topic: *Cult British TV Comedy*.

[127] Littlewood and Pickering (1998) coined the distinction between jokes which 'kick up' or 'kick down' in a discussion of joke structures which depend upon a target of ridicule. They argue that 'all comedians are faced with the choice of whether they direct their comic aggression at those who are in positions of power and authority, or at those who are relatively powerless and subordinated.' (p.293) This chapter uses this helpful distinction in its exploration of the comedic strategies deployed by popular comics today.

One of the beneficial effects of this refusal has been that its influence has been considerable without the need to resort to official compulsion. Such humour on stage is now less common, and even comedians who have in the past relied heavily on such derogatory jokes, Jim Davidson being an example, have now toned down their acts… (Littlewood and Pickering, 1998:297)

This thesis largely agrees with this summation of comedy in the 1990s. Arguably, a progressive form of self-censorship had been implanted which recognised that power differentials within wider society had been reinforced and reflected in some of the comedy pervasive in the pre-PC era[128].

However, this chapter also argues that two significant developments contributed to a discursive realignment of comic discourse surrounding matters of political correctness in the 1990s. Firstly, the politicised humour and social commentary of comics like Ben Elton, Alexei Sayle or Jeremy Hardy became less fashionable and less visible. Hunt quotes the comedian and promoter, Malcom Hardy claiming in 1994 that 'the right-on political stuff has more or less gone…now it's veering towards silly stuff, rather than clever wordy stuff' (Cook, 1994:280-281, cited in Hunt:2013a:6). The shift away from political comedy could be viewed partially as a reaction against the tenets of the new alternative comedy 'establishment'. In 1989, Wilmut and Rosengard had described how alternative comedy involved 'a rejection of preceding fashions in comedy' (xiii). In this sense, the apolitical nature of much 1990s comedy suggests a similar process was taking place whereby the 'new' generation of comics symbolically dissociated themselves from the 'old'. The wider socio-political context of the 1990s may also have contributed to a climate less conducive to the emergence of politically inspired comedy. The downfall of Margaret Thatcher from office in 1990 removed an important target for many alternative comedians who had been politicised by the social and political divisiveness of the 1980s. Furthermore, the (short-lived) optimism surrounding the emergence of New Labour in the 1990s dampened some of the anger and fervour of politically edged comedy[129]. Crucially, the retreat of political comedy is also

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[128] Of course, this is a general summation of trends within comic discourse. Not every comedian or comic performance has (or ever did) consistently abide by these principles. The comedian Jerry Sadowitz, for instance, first appeared at the Comedy Store when alternative comedy was at its height in the 1980s. However, he reacted against alternative comedy and continues to deal aggressively in his act with issues like race or gender. In a description of his performances in the 1980s and 1990s, Double claims 'there's something there to offend everybody…he got a lot of mileage out of deliberately winding up the liberals' (1997:210).
[129] Some comedians did continue to successfully use political material in the 1990s (such as Mark Thomas). However, this thesis locates this within a broader shift away from political comedy in this decade.

aligned with the 'discursive drift' (Cameron, 1994:20) of PC from its countercultural origins into mainstream discourse in the early 1990s. The reification of PC as an authoritarian and censorious movement, with its roots firmly ascribed to the politics of the liberal-left, undermined the sense that the politically motivated alternative comedian really was an 'anarchic' (Double, 1997:167) or anti-establishment presence. To use politically inspired material, or to strive for a politically engaged authenticity within a performance, risked accusations of self-righteous 'political correctness' in an era which increasingly favoured irony and political disinterest.

The reification of PC in the 1990s, therefore, developed alongside the shift away from politicised humour, or comedy which commented critically upon social problems like racism or sexism. This disavowal of the political as potentially 'politically correct' also sat alongside the emergence of 1990s Lad Culture, which would also contribute to a repositioning of comic discourse (particularly with regard to how matters surrounding gender or sexual politics were discussed). Hunt (2013a:10-11) identifies 'Laddishness and 'political incorrectness'' as one of the significant trends in his classification of post-alternative comedy, and a trend which still pervades various panel shows such as the 'testosterone-drenched' *Mock the Week* (BBC 2 2005-). The commercial success of Lad Culture in the 1990s awarded it a powerful presence across the popular culture of the time (including its music, film and popular literature). The original 'lad magazine' *Loaded* (established in 1994) declared on its strapline that it was 'for men who should know better'. This knowingness informed the 'ironic incorrectness' (Hunt, 2013a:1) of much of the laddish humour popular in the post-PC 1990s including, most famously, the situation comedy *Men Behaving Badly* (BBC1 1994-1998)[130]. The use of irony as a device for deflecting critique of questionable content is explored in depth in section 6.4.2 of this chapter. However, it is worth considering briefly here how 'ironic incorrectness' (ibid.) was manifest in some of the humour of the 1990s. *Men Behaving Badly* centred upon the laddish lifestyle of two friends in their thirties, and often drew upon the sexist language and behaviour of its main protagonist, Gary Strang. However, the series was careful never to reward Gary for his behaviour, and his attitude towards women was regularly mocked and ridiculed. In a similar vein, characters which emerged from other

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[130] The BBC comedy website describes *Men Behaving Badly* as 'the defining sitcom of the 1990s. Seemingly a reaction against the onset of the caring, sharing 'new man', it appeared to revel in a politically incorrect world of booze, burps and boobs'. [Online] Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/menbehavingbadly/ (Accessed: 19 June 2014)

comedies during the 1990s, such as *Alan Partridge* (created and performed by Steve Coogan) engaged in xenophobic, sexist and homophobic discourse; however, the comedy was written and performed so that the target was always Alan himself. Politically incorrect views, therefore, were simultaneously expressed *and* ridiculed, whilst the underlying principles of the PC era remained in place.

This discursive repositioning in the 1990s shifted comic discourse away from some of the rules and diktats of 'political correctness', whilst generally remaining careful to avoid the pitfalls of appearing to endorse derogatory forms of stereotyping[131]. However, in the 21st century, the popularity of some forms of comedy has provoked suggestions of a 'backwards slide' (Finding, 2008:7) or retraction of alternative comedy's refusal to 'kick down'. Gill describes a 'new cruelty' (2008:47) within the popular culture of the 21st century which she views as manifest in the pervasiveness of celebrity culture, reality TV and Make Over shows which revel in harsh critique of the physical and personal attributes of their participants. Finding (2008; 2010) also identifies a 'new cruelty' within some of the popular comedy of the 21st century. For example, she describes the character based sketch-show *Little Britain* (BBC 2003-2005) as relying 'primarily on the stereotypical Other, and their grotesqueness, for the humour of the show' (2008:8). She also describes most of these stereotypes as 'produced through disgust at class, sexuality, race or gender' (p.3).

> It seems that when alternative comedy became mainstream, a return to the old traditional comedy became the knowing, naughty, ironic alternative. If, as seemed to be assumed, the battles over racism and sexism had been won, then there could be nothing new or interesting about them or challenging them. The discourse of 'political correctness' and the tabloids' insistence that 'you can't say anything nowadays' meant that making racist or sexist comments became the new (old) alternative. (Finding, 2008:8)

How should we view this assertion, in light of the claim made a decade earlier by Littlewood and Pickering (1998:293) that alternative comedy had implanted a lasting legacy in its refusal to pander to comic abuse or regressive values? Some of the fears expressed by Finding appear to be confirmed in light of the popular appetite for forms of modern comedy which rely upon crude stereotyping or stock-in-trade one-liners not dissimilar from those told by the club comics of the pre-PC era. Does this suggest a straightforward return to the comic

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[131] Of course, the 'ironic incorrectness' of the 1990s remains open to different readings. The wider question of whether 'ironic incorrectness' (un)intentionally reinforces social stereotyping is explored in greater depth in section 6.4 of this chapter.

discourse of that era; and how should we make sense of the enduring appeal of politically incorrect humour in the world of post-alternative comedy?

6.3 A cultural analysis of 'offensive' humour

6.3.1 Comedy and the new 'liberal orthodoxy'

The marginalisation of 'trad' comics from mainstream entertainment formed part of a general cultural shift within society which encouraged a greater sensitivity towards language or behaviour which could be deemed to be politically incorrect. Arguably, this sensitivity also contributed to a sense that a new form of 'liberal orthodoxy' (Hughes, 2010:4) now prevailed over social discourse whereby unpalatable, or 'politically incorrect', viewpoints were stigmatised or silenced. This is worth exploring with regard to comic discourse, particularly in view of its reputation for 'saying the unsayable' and its complex relationship (via the birth of alternative comedy and post-alternative comedy) with the emergence and reification of PC.

The historical overview of PC and British comedy (outlined in the previous part of this chapter) concludes with Finding's suggestion that 'old traditional comedy' has emerged in recent years to become the 'new (old) alternative' (2008:8). Indeed, many of the jokes contained in the DVDs viewed for this section of the chapter are striking in view of how similar some of the politically incorrect themes and utterances are within the live shows of both 'trad' and post-alternative stand-up comics performing today. How, therefore, does this sit alongside the aforementioned marginalisation of 'old school' comics, together with the common assertion that a 'liberal orthodoxy' now pervades over contemporary discourse?

The remainder of this chapter will grapple with these questions. However, before doing so it is worth reflecting in more depth upon what is meant by offensive and politically incorrect humour, as these are terms which have helped frame the discussion surrounding the questions asked by this chapter.

6.3.2 Defining offensive humour and politically incorrect humour

The notion of what constitutes offensive humour is subjective; as is whether, and the extent to which, offensive humour can be separable from politically incorrect humour. Littlewood and Pickering (1998) suggest a distinction can be made between 'offensive', 'sick' or 'gallows humour' and humour which is understood in a contemporary context to be politically

incorrect. They describe 'sick' jokes as 'flaunting their bad taste' and their 'callous insensitivity to human tragedy and suffering' (p.290). According to Littlewood and Pickering such jokes, therefore, depend upon an awareness of their inappropriateness; however, politically incorrect jokes depend upon pandering to harmful and well-trodden stereotypes (p.290).

Whilst this chapter agrees that offensive and politically incorrect humour cannot be viewed as interchangeable ways of categorising or conceptualising types of comedy, it also asserts that any fixed or clear distinction between the two is increasingly difficult to sustain. Firstly, jokes may simultaneously incorporate insensitivity to human suffering with various forms of stereotyping or targeting of particular groups. For example, in October 2009, Jimmy Carr told the following joke to an audience at the Manchester Apollo: 'Say what you like about these servicemen amputees from Iraq and Afghanistan, but we are going to have a fucking good Paralympic team in 2012'. This joke provoked accusations that it was offensive towards wounded soldiers, in bad taste and disabilist; suggesting that it can be viewed as both offensive *and* politically incorrect using the method of classification described by Littlewood and Pickering[132]. Furthermore, many contemporary jokes which involve social stereotyping are also dependent upon an awareness of their inappropriateness or 'incorrectness'. This somewhat unsettles Littlewood and Pickering's earlier description of the role jokes play in reinforcing stereotypes, and is a use of humour which can be observed in another segment of a live performance from Jimmy Carr:

> I was asked this evening not to be patronising or sexist. I thought, fair enough, birds can't take it (*audience laughs, cheers and claps*)…don't worry that's post-modern misogyny, the joke was in fact steeped in irony (*addressing a woman in the audience)* don't you worry your pretty little head about it love. (*audience laughs*) (*Live at the Apollo*, BBC 2012)

In this example, the joke rests upon an awareness of the 'incorrectness' of sexism, and can be viewed as consistent with the way in which a 'sick' joke rests upon an awareness of the inappropriateness of laughing at suffering or human tragedy. Of course, not all jokes which

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[132] The joke was widely reported in the media as having been condemned by injured soldiers, disability rights groups, military leaders and politicians. See, for example, [Online] Available at http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1222791/Jimmy-Carr-The-comedian-criticised-making-disgraceful-joke-war-hero-amputees.html]. (Accessed 17/05/2014) The media storm provoked by the joke firmly locates it within the broader discussion and discursive formation of the 'new offensiveness' explored in Section 6.4 of the chapter.

involve sexual or racial stereotypes will incorporate an acknowledgement of the 'inappropriateness' of sexism or racism on the part of either the comedian or audience. Furthermore, jokes that do suggest a level of knowingness in their use of stereotypes cannot be dismissed as automatically non-racist or non-sexist as a consequence.

The contextual nature of comedy (together with the discontinuous way in which PC continues to be understood) complicates any attempt to conclusively define or describe what politically incorrect humour is. Of further significance is what Green (2006:4) describes as the 'expansion of victimhood' whereby more and more groups are perceived to be the targets of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination. In view of this, a greater number of jokes are potentially classifiable as politically incorrect. (For example, following Green's conceptualisation of 'victim' groups, it makes sense that class-based jokes which target 'chavs' are considered to be politically incorrect in the same way that racist or homophobic jokes are).

However, despite the ambiguities of meaning surrounding offensive and politically incorrect humour, this chapter uses jokes as data for analysis which target historically disadvantaged groups, or incorporate social stereotyping and the use of taboo: in other words, it selects jokes conceptualised as politically incorrect within contemporary comic discourse. In particular, it selects jokes and material which it deems would once have remained impermissible within mainstream British comedy, despite the absence of any 'official compulsion' (Littlewood and Pickering, 1998:297) to proscribe content in the post-alternative comedy era.

6.3.3 Data analysis

Despite the 'comic revolution' described by Double (1997:164) as having been triggered by the birth of alternative comedy, politically incorrect humour retained a popular appeal for some audiences. The relegation of many 'old school' comics by the mainstream broadcast media partly reflected changing public tastes, as well as wider concerns about how comedy had represented less powerful groups. Nevertheless, 'pre-PC' comics were still able to find audiences willing to watch their videos or live performances[133].

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[133] For example, Bernard Manning became famous on British television in the 1970s, appearing on shows like *The Comedians*. The racist content of his material contributed to his fall from grace from TV comedy in the following decades. However, Manning never toned down his racist jokes and continued to perform in theatres and clubs until his death in 2007. In a poll conducted by Channel Four in 2010, he was voted number 51 by the

One such figure is the highly successful Roy 'Chubby' Brown who began his career in comedy in the 1970s. After several unsuccessful auditions and appearances on television talent shows he rebranded himself as a 'blue' comedian and his popularity soared. He has released many lucrative recordings of his live shows[134], 'while his tours are guaranteed sell-outs and he holds box-office records at many theatres' (Medhurst, 2005:188). Despite his popularity, Medhurst observes 'there are many who have only heard of him, if at all, by reputation' (p.187). He also suggests that Brown is not shown on mainstream broadcast media because of this reputation: 'his stand-up comedy cannot be shown…because of its two chief characteristics, the relentless use of swearwords and the unvarnished expression of strong and contentious views' (ibid). These contentious views are expressed in jokes about 'sex…topical events, ethnic and sexual minorities, and assorted reference points drawn from the everyday life of white, working class England – or more specifically, white, working class, non-Southern England…' (pp. 188-189). Here are three Chubby Brown jokes selected from a ten minute segment of one of his live performances in 1995:

My first wife died. I didn't notice for a week. The fucks were the same but the dishes piled up. *(audience laughs)*

Do you know what I read in the paper today? This is true. You can now get AIDS off a mosquito. *(pause)* Well anyone sick enough to shag a mosquito up the arse deserves to fucking die. *(audience laughs)*

Cyril Smith (*then a famously overweight Liberal Democrat politician*) has that skin disease that eats you away *(pause)* doctors have given him 22 years to live.*(audience laughs)*

(*Clitoris Allsorts*, 1995)

Many Chubby Brown jokes echo similar 'politically incorrect' sentiments which have contributed to his status as an offensive figure, or reactionary throwback to a pre-PC era. The suggestion that his heavy reliance upon strong swear words - together with his expression of 'ideologically irredeemable' (Medhurst, 2005:191) viewpoints - has denied Brown greater media exposure contains some weight. However, this alone does not account for his near

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public in, *The 100 Greatest Stand-Ups*. [Online] Available at:
http://www.comedy.co.uk/guide/tv/100_greatest_stand_ups/episodes/1/2/ (Accessed 22 June 2014)
[134] His live recordings typically have crude titles, including the two used as sources for data in this chapter: *Clitoris Allsorts* (1995), and *Too Fat to Be Gay* (2007).

pariah status across much of the popular media[135]. Firstly, swearwords are increasingly tolerated by media broadcasting as an integral part of comic discourse (particularly within post-watershed transmissions); and comic performers (including those labelled controversial or 'edgy') are usually willing to temper their use of language to comply with the (un)spoken boundaries such broadcasts set in place. Secondly, the sorts of 'ideologically irredeemable' (ibid.) sentiments expressed in the Chubby Brown jokes above are also articulated by TV friendly performers.

For example, Jimmy Carr has acquired a ubiquitous media presence in the 21st century. His achievements include being host of the popular quiz show *8 out of 10 cats* (Channel Four 2005 - present), and co-presenter of the satirical current affairs show *10 O'Clock Live* (Channel Four 2011 – present). He is also a highly successful stand-up comedian and a regular guest on various BBC and Channel Four comedy panel shows. The following jokes are from a short segment of a live performance of his in Glasgow (which was also recorded for DVD, and broadcast on Channel Four in 2011):

I had a fat girl come up to me recently after a gig. Well, I say a fat girl, she was either fat or eighteen months pregnant (*audience laughs*) she was big. Bubbly you might say. Not with an effervescent personality that filled the room, no shaped like a bubble. (*audience laughs*) She was a comfort eater, I don't mean she was eating for emotional comfort, she was eating till she was comfortable to sit on. (*audience laughs*) She wasn't a size zero, she was a shape zero (*audience laughs*) She came up to me after - well, she pretty much surrounded me (*audience laughs*) and she said you're not meant to use the term 'fat'. I said you're not meant to eat cake for breakfast (*audience laughs*)

We all know that no means no, but what does it mean when they shout 'help'? It means the gag's come loose. (*audience laughs*)

I don't know how to describe it to people who didn't see the Paralympics. It's sort of like (*pause*) The Paralympics, it's like a children's book where all the broken toys have a picnic. (*audience laughs*)

(*Jimmy Carr Making People Laugh*, 2010)

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[135] Although Brown's shows are not shown on television, a documentary about him was broadcast on Channel Four in 2007, called *Roy Chubby Brown: Britain's Rudest Comedian*. He has also made several cameo appearances as the foul mouthed mayor of a fictional town in the comedy *The League of Gentlemen* (BBC TWO 1999-2002). Brown's real name, Royston Vasey, was also used in the comedy as the name for the town.

In common with other live performances from Jimmy Carr *Making People Laugh* draws heavily upon sex, misogyny, homophobia, disability, paedophilia, national or regional stereotyping and obesity in order to create its humour. (Significantly, although Carr's jokes are less explicit during his appearances on prime-time panel shows, Channel Four were confident to broadcast *Making People Laugh* in its entirety in the post-watershed time slot). Brown and Carr are both extremely popular comics whose reliance upon 'offensive' content forms a core component of their appeal[136]. Why, therefore, despite his obvious popularity, is Brown disdained by much of the media, whilst Carr has emerged to become one of the UK's most TV friendly comedians? Crucially, why are the jokes told by Brown viewed as regressive or pandering to bigotry, where similar jokes told by Carr are regarded as 'taboo-breaking' or 'edgy'?

Part of the answer to this question involves the use (or assertion) of the comic device of irony. Section 6.4.2 of this chapter will explore in depth how irony (or the assumption of irony) has helped to re-accommodate some forms of 'politically incorrect' humour. It also considers how Jimmy Carr builds irony very carefully into some - but significantly not all - of his joke-telling. His ironic persona, therefore, rests at-least partly upon the assumptions we make about him and the intentions which underlie his 'offensive' brand of humour. Offence, therefore, becomes attached not only to what or how something is said; but also *who* is saying it.

The assumption of irony is seldom granted to Brown, whose reliance upon sexism, racism or homophobia is typically viewed as a straightforward reflection of his own irredeemable prejudices. However, Medhurst describes this view of Brown as 'shockingly reductive' (2005:195):

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[136] The official websites for Jimmy Carr and Chubby Brown are keen to promote their offensive credentials. The front page of Brown's website declares him to be 'the most outrageous comedian in the world', and warns that 'offensive material may be used throughout this site. If easily offended please stay away'. [Online] Available at http://www.chubbybrown.biz/ (Accessed 27/06/2014). The Jimmy Carr website promotes his 2014 *Funny Business* tour by declaring it will be 'rude and offensive' and that 'If you are easily offended, don't be a dick about it'. [Online] Available at http://www.jimmycarr.com/live/ (Accessed 27/06/2014) Hunt (2013b:201-202) points out that such warnings 'seem designed to flatter the 'inside' audience even as they punish the prudish and 'politically correct'. Who, after all, wants to be regarded as 'easily offended'?'.

He relishes telling jokes which position him as a sexual adventurer, dispensing advice on how to stage successful conquests…yet these are always rendered ludicrous by his palpable failure to measure up to norms of male attractiveness, and they are in any case counterbalanced by jokes which catalogue both his failures to seduce and the feistiness of the women who turn him down. In these narratives, his own body is crucial, with the costume accentuating his fatness and a running theme centred on the gap between the delusions of desirability that he seems to suffer from and the actual spectacle evident on stage. (*Brown typically appears on stage wearing a helmet and a brightly coloured patchwork suit with too-short trouser legs*) (Medhurst, 2005:189)

In his 2006 autobiography, Brown also claims that, 'the same joke from a slim, good-looking comedian wouldn't have been half as funny as from a fat, balding lump' (p.262). This suggests a level of knowingness on the part of Brown, whose derogatory comments about women are juxtaposed with his own shortcomings, and the comic persona he creates to tell stories of how women respond to these shortcomings. Medhurst also identifies how

…one of Brown's favourite tropes is the provocation of outrage. He and his audience are engaged in a game of dare – will he dare to say these outrageous things and will they dare to laugh at them? He rampages through taboo areas, unleashing jokes about paedophilia, making fun of disabilities, treating famines in Africa and earthquakes in India as source material for jibes… and after especially on-the-edge remarks he takes satisfaction in confirming his status as the man who will go further than any other – 'Only me that can get away with that one'. (Medhurst, 2005:190)

This is not dissimilar to the 'game of dare' Carr engages with within his live shows[137]. He finishes the encore of his Glasgow gig with what he describes as his 'favourite pub joke':

What's the difference between football and rape? Girls don't like football. (*audience laughter and groans*)

(*Jimmy Carr, Making People Laugh*, 2010)

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[137] Section 6.4.2 of this chapter describes a comic performance in which Jimmy Carr directly invites his audience to find out what his most 'offensive' joke might be. In the routine from his *Telling Jokes* (2009) DVD he tells his audience 'we could start gentle and work our way up and see at what stage as an audience you go – oh for fuck's sake!'.

Carr had begun the encore by telling his audience (who respond by cheering) that he'd 'like to torpedo this gig with some very unpleasant jokes that will offend and upset you all'. After telling the aforementioned joke he describes the audience reaction to it as 'a text-book response…it's a laugh followed by an 'oohh''[138]. However, if this joke were told by Brown it is difficult to imagine it would be understood as defensible within the context of a broader or intentionally provocative comic persona[139]. In other words, Brown claiming 'only me that can get away with that one' is not understood as comparable to Jimmy Carr claiming he wants to 'torpedo this gig with…jokes that will offend and upset you'. Despite Medhurst's assertion that Brown engages in a knowing 'provocation of outrage' he remains a largely ostracised figure (or arguable casualty of our 'liberal orthodoxy') whose expressions of homophobia or misogyny are taken at face value, whilst other 'politically incorrect' comics are celebrated as 'dark' or 'edgy'. Allowing for the subjective nature of what might constitute comedy which is credible, amusing or offensive; why might comedians who engage with broadly similar themes or material be perceived so differently?

In order to account for this it is worth engaging with Bourdieu's theory of capital which can help us explore how individuals and groups use their resources to navigate their position in the world around them. This may also help us understand how possession of cultural capital resources is attached to the distinctions we make between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' forms of 'incorrectness'. In The Forms of Capital (1986) Bourdieu expands upon the Marxian notion of capital to move beyond a narrow economic conception of the term which regards capital primarily as control over material or economic resources. Although Bourdieu regards economic capital as the governing form of capital he argues that it is transmutable into other, non-material, forms. Economic resources enable the accumulation of cultural capital; or the forms of knowledge, tastes, skills and personal dispositions which bestow people with advantages within society. What, therefore, are the forms of capital at work within popular contemporary comedy?

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[138] Carr has previously claimed that 'my favourite noise in comedy is the laugh followed by the sharp intake of breath'. [Online] Available at http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/nov/05/jimmy-carr-paralympics-joke (Accessed 30 June 2014)

[139] This is not to claim that Carr (along with other post-alternative comics like Frankie Boyle) has been immune from criticism of his 'offensive' material but that he nevertheless continues to retain his position as a critically acclaimed and media-friendly comedian in spite of this. Undoubtedly, 'Daily Mail–style outrage' (Hunt, 2013:181) has sat alongside liberal-left disquiet with many comedians who rely upon 'non-PC' or seemingly derogatory material for laughs.

Brown lacks the cultural capital necessary for the acquisition of 'edginess'. Firstly, his emergence from the northern working men's clubs of the 1970s locates him firmly within the history, tastes and traditions of the unreconstructed, and pre-PC comedy past. Secondly, despite Medhurst's assertion that Brown's sexist jokes are typically knowing and self-deprecating (rather than unabashedly misogynistic) Brown is not generally attributed with the self-awareness, or sophistication of 'edgy' comics who also engage in misogynistic - or otherwise 'politically incorrect' - material. In his analysis of patterns of consumption of British comedy, Friedman describes how comedy fans possessing High Cultural Capital (HCC) were generally keen to describe the comedy they liked in terms of sophistication: 'Favourite comedians were 'intelligent', 'complex', 'intellectual' and most of all 'clever' (2011:359). These respondents also distanced themselves from what they regarded as the unsophisticated 'bullying' of 'trad' comics like Brown (p.362).

Bourdieu maintains that language must be understood not only as a means of communication but as a form of cultural capital whereby an individual acquires particular resources, or advantages, by virtue of their use of culturally privileged or legitimised speech patterns, sociolects, or dialects. His concept of linguistic capital may help us make sense of the distinctions made (by consumers and critics of comedy alike) between 'offensive' comedy that is 'dark', 'challenging' or 'edgy' and that which is unremittingly regressive. Unlike Brown, Jimmy Carr is a middle class Oxbridge graduate from the Home Counties: (he will begin a misogynistic one-liner with a reference to 'my girlfriend' rather than to 'the wife'). In a segment from the Glasgow gig used as data for this section of the chapter, Carr invites his audience to ask him any questions. The questions asked are crude and sexually explicit, as are Carr's responses. However, they also include the following exchange:

> *Member of audience*: What would you rather do, suck off your Dad or lick out your Mum? (*audience laughs loudly, cheers and claps*)
>
> *Jimmy Carr*: Yes, I think if I'm not mistaken that's one of Wittgenstein's theorems. (*audience laughs*)
>
> > (*Jimmy Carr, Making People Laugh*, 2010)

That Carr's humour is often described by comedy fans and critics as 'acerbic', 'dark' and 'taboo-busting' is partly a reflection of the power of his linguistic capital to confer upon him

and his comedy assumptions of irony, intelligence and erudition[140]. Brown, however, lacks the linguistic capital to convince us that he too is a 'risk-taker' who is carefully playing with what can and cannot be said within the parameters of comic discourse.

The role of the pre-alternative 'blue' comedian, or club comic, was typically a working class one; however, this is less true of the modern 'edgy' post-alternative comic. That said, neither are today's comics necessarily wholly dependent upon possession of a middle class status to be accepted as 'edgy' rather than regressive. Of paramount importance are the cultural capital resources of a comic's audience. The audience for Chubby Brown typically possess lower levels of cultural capital than the audiences of 'edgy' comics like Jimmy Carr or Frankie Boyle. (Hunt (2013b:225) has described 'alternative and post-alternative comedy' as 'strongly middle class in their appeal'). Brown's act is peppered with references to the tastes, values and experiences of his predominantly white, working-class audience: (he refers to holidays in the Spanish Costas, or points out what he has just read in *The Sun* newspaper).

> His comedy offers its white working-class English audiences a welcome, a place of refuge, a sense of belonging, a space that is simultaneously warmly familiar to those whose faces fit and ferociously unforgiving to those whose faces do not (Medhurst, 2007: 194)

Medhurst argues that Brown's success is particularly grounded in his articulation of the fears and experiences of a working class culture increasingly less certain of its status and future. He also argues that Brown's reliance upon ethnic slurs and homophobia can be explained (though not excused) through an understanding of Giddens' concept of ontological security. For Giddens, ontological security refers to 'the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity and constancy of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments' (2007: 195). This concept has been used to help illuminate how understandings of 'foreignness' enable citizens to acquire 'security about their own identity, their rightful position in the world and who (or what) poses a danger to them'

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[140] An interview with Jimmy Carr in *The Independent* neatly touches upon how he perceives his comedy. Carr claims 'I'm quite an edgy comic. I like dark things. So it's lovely that I've found that many people who share my sense of humour'. Referring to a series of jokes he has made about wife-beating, the interviewer asks how he thinks these jokes would be perceived if Bernard Manning or Jim Davidson told them. Carr replies, 'I don't want to get into the conversation where I defend myself against comics that a) I don't rate, and b) I don't want to be compared to. I think the vast majority of my audience recognise a liberal, slightly over-educated man telling jokes and playing with what you can and can't say'. [Online] Available at http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/comedy/features/taboobuster-the-dark-side-of-jimmy-carr-1022921.html (Accessed 03 July 2014)

(Grayson, 2013:390). Medhurst argues that Brown dispenses ontological security to an audience whose identities have become less secure due to the pace and fluidity of post-industrial change. He maintains that Brown's core audience are 'that segment of the white English working class whose identities were rooted in traditional heavy industries' (2007: 195), and who now experience an increasing rootlessness characterised by greater economic uncertainty and weakened social, familial and political ties.

However, the contention that Brown offers a 'sense of belonging…ferociously unforgiving to those whose faces do not fit' (p.194) makes it more difficult to sustain the view that the 'provocation of outrage' (p.190) he engages in with his audience represents an entirely ironic persona. For example, his 2009 DVD *Too Fat To Be Gay* includes a routine about asylum seekers in which Brown engages in crude racial stereotyping before inviting his audience to clap and sing along to a song about asylum seekers. This is an extract from the song which his audience enthusiastically clap along to:

<div align="center">

Came across on dustbin lids,

by the way this is my fifteen kids.

No security, no need to hide,

floated in over the tide.

You advertised on our TV,

you said everything in Britain was fucking free.

Sorry for taking the piss,

you fought two World Wars for this…

I am asylum seeker,

we love all of your benefits.

I am asylum seeker,

you give us a house, car, money, NHS, and a glimpse of Jordan's tits.

</div>

<div align="right">

(*Roy 'Chubby' Brown, Too Fat To Be Gay*, 2009)

</div>

The audience participation in the routine is suggestive of an 'anthemic'[141] response whereby approval is expressed for the views expressed by the comic onstage. The routine also

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[141] Mintz (1985) used the term 'anthemic' in his analysis of audience reactions to a Redd Foxx routine about oral sex. Mintz notes that whilst '… the older people in the audience gasped, flinched, physically backed away while laughing at the punch-lines, and frequently looked at each other nervously' (p.76) the younger members

highlights a notable difference between 'old school' Chubby Brown and the 'new offenders'[142] of stand-up comedy. The following section of this chapter notices that white post-alternative comedians generally remain more guarded in their treatment of race than other 'taboo' topics, as they do not wish to risk provoking the sort of 'anthemic' response given here to Brown[143]. 'Edginess', therefore, requires the ability to know which 'politically incorrect' viewpoints remain truly unacceptable, and which can be discursively rehabilitated and celebrated as outré or transgressive. This ability to know (on the part of both comedian *and* audience) depends upon possession of sufficient levels of cultural capital in order to successfully navigate and interpret the rules of the game governing comic discourse[144].

The acquisition of social and symbolic capital can also allow a comedian to manoeuvre confidently between their different personas or identities (including those which involve the expression of politically incorrect voices). Social capital (which is accumulated through the forming of networks and social connections) allows a comic to utilise their friendships and alliances across the media and comedy industries. This might involve networking with industry colleagues to secure regular appearances on popular shows, or receiving support from colleagues over the use of contentious material.[145] In general, post-alternative comedians appear reluctant to criticise another comic's material. This may reflect a general

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of the audience responded in an 'anthemic' manner. 'They leaned *toward* Foxx, often applauded, and raised their hands or fists as though cheering a political speaker with whom they were in agreement…' (ibid.).

[142] The 'new offenders' is a reference to the title of a controversial article by the *Guardian* comedy critic, Brian Logan which identifies a 'new offensiveness' in modern comedy. The arguments raised by the article are explored in the following section of this chapter. [Online] Available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/jul/comedy-standup-new-offenders (Accessed: 21 July 2014).

[143] For example, a 2009 *Guardian* interview with Jimmy Carr describes a member of his audience in Margate asking him a 'dubious question about immigration'. The article points out that Carr 'avoids making a joke and says he thinks immigration is a good thing'. [Online] Available at http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/nov/05/jimmy-carr-paralympics-joke (Accessed 04 July 2014)

[144] Of course, there are occasions where 'edgy' post-alternative comics may also misjudge these rules. Although Frankie Boyle was defended by Channel Four over his now infamous Harvey Price joke (examined in detail in part 6.4.2 of this chapter) he did face a considerable public backlash over the joke. In 2011, the media regulator, Ofcom, upheld complaints against the joke which it ruled had appeared to 'target and mock mental and physical disabilities'. The joke has also been removed from the DVD version of the *Tramadol Nights* series where it originally appeared.

[145] For example, in 2011 Ricky Gervais provoked criticism for repeatedly using the word 'mong' on his Twitter feed. When challenged, he spoke out against the 'humourless PC brigade' and argued that the term is now used to refer to someone who is 'ignorant', rather than as a slur against people with Down's syndrome. [Online] Available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/15365744 (Accessed 05 July 2014) In an interview with *Metro* newspaper, Jimmy Carr defended Gervais stating that, 'he's always been edgy so I don't understand what the fuss is about. It's always someone's turn. I am never offended by anything. As long as it's a joke it's fine'. [Online] Available at http://metro.co.uk/2011/11/25/jimmy-carr-ricky-gervais-saying-mong-is-just-him-being-edgy-as-usual-233546/ (Accessed 05 July 2014)

wariness of censoriousness, although it is also suggestive of the clubbable nature of the comedy world[146].

Bourdieu referred to symbolic capital as 'the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability' (1984:291). He saw symbolic capital as dispensed to individuals through their ownership of symbolic markers; such as the acquisition of a respected qualification, or prestigious job title. An 'old school' comic like Chubby Brown attracts low levels of symbolic capital. Meanwhile, Jimmy Carr has acquired numerous comedy awards which have bolstered his reputation as both an entertaining and a critically respected comic[147]. More generally, Carr's high media profile as a popular stand-up and TV host lends his comedy a degree of social approval and credibility. (In other words, his ironic persona is buttressed by his possession of symbolic capital: if he truly meant some of the politically incorrect things he says it is assumed he would not be so critically acclaimed, or appear so frequently on TV). Furthermore, Carr's self-identification as a 'liberal' (with respect to his non-comedic identity) also constitutes a valuable form of symbolic capital[148]. This thesis will address in depth the assertion that irony has emerged as 'the get out of jail free card' (Finding, 2010:113) for content which might otherwise be subject to ethical scrutiny. However, this section of the chapter also suggests that the assertion of a liberal-left[149] identity may act in a similar way to dismiss the notion that a comedian could possibly mean the politically incorrect things that they say (unlike, for example, the Conservative voting Jim Davidson). The assertion of a liberal identity, therefore, becomes a symbolic

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[146] However, it is also worth recognising that some comics *do* break rank, and have criticised particular content or trends within comedy. For instance, comedian Richard Herring wrote a blog in which he criticised Gervais for his repeated use of the word 'mong', and argued that disabilist language should be viewed as akin to racist language. [Online] Available at http://metro.co.uk/2011/11/28/richard-herring-ricky-gervais-mong-comments-just-werent-funny-235189/ (Accessed 05 July 2014). Some veteran comedians from the alternative comedy era have also expressed their discomfort with particular trends within comedy. For instance in a 2009 interview in the *Guardian,* Jo Brand refers to the 'new wave of misogyny going on in comedy'. [Online] Available at http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/apr/09/question-time-jo-brand (Accessed 14 July 2014)

[147] In 2002 Jimmy Carr was nominated for the comedy Perrier award. He was also named best stand-up at the Time Out Awards in 2003 and at the Laftas in 2004. After winning the Royal Television Society Award for best on-screen newcomer in 2003 he soon became one of the main faces of Channel 4 and BBC comedy.

[148] A 2009 *Guardian* interview describes how 'despite his non-PC stage persona, he calls himself an "uber-liberal"'. [Online] Available at http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/nov/05/jimmy-carr-paralympics-joke (Accessed 15 July 2014)

[149] By 'liberal-left' I mean to refer very broadly to having an identification with left leaning political principles (such as support for greater economic or social equality). In practice, this thesis recognises that this may incorporate a fairly vague or loose set of identifications. For example, someone who confesses a 'left-wing' or 'liberal' identity might possess a strong commitment to racial equality, yet hold less concern for debates surrounding gender or sexuality.

marker which carries with it the assumption that enlightened attitudes lie behind the 'ironically' homophobic or sexist jokes.

This suggests that the modern edgy comic has greater capital at their disposal with which to shift between their nominally 'PC' and 'non-PC' identities than the 'obviously unenlightened' and 'pre-PC' Jim Davidson or Chubby Brown. This is also further complicated whereby post-alternative comics (such as Frankie Boyle) engage in humour which incorporates both broader political or satirical concerns (involving jokes that target powerful figures or institutions which invariably 'kick up'); together with jokes that rest upon soft targets which 'kick down'. The audience of a Frankie Boyle gig is generally credited with the cultural capital to navigate and distinguish between his 'ironic' jokes and those which dare to 'speak plainly' and non-ironically, about political corruption or injustice. However:

> Audiences can't always be expected to know (or even be interested in) the intentions behind a contentious joke, and in the 'ironic' climate comedy now resides in, it's easy enough for comedians to make mistaken claims regarding their intentions. (Hunt, 2013b:229)

Crucially, the Chubby Brown audience are assumed to be 'anthemic' or approving when they clap or cheer a racist or homophobic joke; whilst the audience of an 'edgy' comic who ridicules 'chavs' or the disabled are assumed to be discerning enough to appreciate that these are 'just jokes' and that the comedian has 'no agenda'[150]. In practice, however, it is difficult to draw conclusive or generalised judgements about the relationship between jokes and the values or beliefs of a comic's core audience. However, class and possession of cultural capital underpin our assumptions about 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' politically incorrect utterances. Hunt argues that it seems as if 'middle-class offence is 'challenging'' whilst 'working-class offensive comedy is equated with ignorance' (2013b:226). In a similar vein, it appears that the cultural capital accrued by the modern edgy comic permits him/her to engage in illiberal utterances which might otherwise be subject to popular censure or greater critical scrutiny.

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[150] The view that comedy is 'just jokes' with 'no agenda' is a reference to the quote from Jimmy Carr included at the start of this chapter.

6.4 Making sense of 'edgy' comedy and the 'new offensiveness'

6.4.1 Identifying the 'new offensiveness' in British comedy

This section of the chapter seeks to account for the popularity of some of the humour explored by this part of the thesis. In particular, it examines what has been described as a 'new offensiveness' (Logan: 2009) within some forms of contemporary comedy. This term was coined in an article by the *Guardian* comedy critic, Brian Logan, and generated some controversy including a reproach from one of the 'offending' comedians named in the article[151]. Regardless of the disputatious nature of the arguments made, the Logan article nevertheless highlighted a tangible trend (observed in the previous sections of this chapter) towards what is variously described as 'offensive', 'edgy' or 'politically incorrect' comedy; labels which are applied in popular and journalistic discourse to a number of successful comics including Ricky Gervais, Frankie Boyle and Jimmy Carr[152]. These are somewhat ambiguous and imprecise labels which have been used as a way of classifying an eclectic range of comedians and types of comedy. However, what these types of comedy typically share is; firstly, a proclivity for the provocation of offence as a consequence of discussion of the 'taboo', and secondly, a repositioning of comedic discourse surrounding matters of race, gender, sexuality and disability. More generally, Hunt (2010a:181-182) has identified the relationship between offensiveness and British comedy as having become eminently newsworthy in recent years following the 'new sensitivity' created by 'Sachsgate'[153] in 2008.

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[151] In 'The New offenders of Stand-up Comedy' Logan argues that 'a world where all the bigotries and the misogyny you thought had been banished forever from mainstream entertainment have made a startling comeback'. [Online] Available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/jul/comedy-standup-new-offenders (Accessed: 21 April 2014). Comedian Richard Herring replied to the article in a piece also published by the *Guardian*. In 'There isn't a "New Offensiveness"' Herring argued Logan had used a quote from his live show out of context. The quote that 'racists have a point' was, he argued, in fact a prelude to a critique of racism. [Online]. Available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/jul/31/richard-herring-standup-comedian-brian-logan. (Accessed: 16 May 2014)

[152] Edgy comedy is often particularly associated with stand-up comedy, possibly because fewer restrictions are placed upon the content of live stand-up performances. However, both Frankie Boyle and Jimmy Carr have also achieved considerable success on panel shows broadcast on the BBC and Channel 4, and Ricky Gervais achieved mainstream popularity through his co-authorship, co-production and appearance in the BBC sitcom *The Office*.

[153] In 2008, during an episode of Radio 2's *Russell Brand,* Russell Brand and Jonathan Ross were broadcast leaving a number of answer-phone messages for the actor Andrew Sachs. The messages made explicit references to Brand having had sex with Sachs's granddaughter. The episode generated huge controversy (including 42000 complaints to the BBC). In the wake of 'Sachsgate' Brand and Radio 2 controller, Lesley Douglas, resigned and Ross was suspended by the BBC for three months. Hunt argues that 'Sachsgate' contributed to a heightened public and media sensitivity towards 'offensive' jokes and 'edgy' comedians (2010:183-184).

Much of the discussion surrounding the ascendancy of edgy comedy in the post-Sachsgate era has taken place within journalistic or media discourse (which increasingly also includes social media forums such as *Twitter* or the blogosphere). However, the academic community has examined the backlash against PC more broadly in the post-alternative comedy era, primarily through analysis of the use of irony or the assumption of 'knowingness' as a 'get out of jail free card' (Finding, 2010:133) or means of deflecting critique of arguably questionable content (e.g. see Gill, 2008; Lockyer and Pickering, 2009; Finding, 2010; Perez, 2013). This chapter concurs with the view that irony acts as a tool to create a 'safe place' (Finding, 2010:133) between the comedian and what is being said. However, it will also suggest that comics have become increasingly oblique in their use of irony, or confident to eschew reliance upon it altogether as a core defence of politically incorrect content.

6.4.2 Is 'the joking rebel'[154] subversive or conservative?: Data analysis of 'edgy' humour

The nature of irony (including the claims and counter-claims made over its use) is a crucial component of any data analysis of the discursive repositioning of comic discourse surrounding questions of offence, and/or social stereotyping. The relationship between irony, offence and social stereotyping shares a long history[155]. However, this part of the chapter will consider the ways in which modern forms of comedy have become less careful to separate humour which 'kicks up' from that which 'kicks down' and how this has contributed to a wider uncertainty around notions of what does and does not constitute offensive content.

The use of irony as a comedic device cannot be divorced from the context in which a joke is told. This context will incorporate a multiplicity of factors including the authorial intention of the joke-teller, the heteroglossia of comedic forms used to tell the joke (such as story-telling, mimicry or the use of sketches), and the various ways in which an audience experiences and interprets the joke. The contextual nature of meaning also complicates any analysis of the nature of offensiveness within comedy, including the assertion that irony has become a way of deflecting critique of questionable content. Bakhtin's model of language addresses how the meaning of words or utterances arises from the dialogical relationship between two or more speakers so that all we say and mean is mediated and revised through our communication

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[154] The 'joking rebel' is a term used by Billig (2010:209) and is explored in this part of the chapter.

[155] For example, irony was used as a comedic tool in the 1960s sitcom *Till Death Us Do Part* to draw attention to the racism of the main character, Alf Garnett. The Genealogy chapter of this thesis examines how some of the arguments raised in contemporary disputes of offence predate the presence of the language of PC within everyday discourse.

with others. Meaning is therefore always negotiable and can never be fixed or owned by one voice or group. Does the impossibility of neutrality in language, therefore, undermine any attempt to make sense of the use of irony and the popularity of edgy forms of comedy?

This part of the chapter argues that Bakthinian dialogism can help us explore the struggles over meaning that take place within comedic discourse; including the ways in which one set of associations may conflict with or replace another in the struggle over how a joke or comedic performance is understood. It maintains that analysis of these struggles is essential if we are to engage meaningfully with the assertion that irony has provided a new voice for forms of humour once vilified as problematic; or that this voice has rehabilitated and repackaged such humour as 'edgy' or 'transgressive'.

The Bakhtinian concept of 'double-voiced discourse' (Bakhtin, 1935:40 cited in Vice, 1997:22-23) suggests that different voices may simultaneously occupy a joke or comedic routine through the use of irony. In this respect, the comedian is granted licence to engage mischievously with politically incorrect utterances through interplay between conflicting PC and non-PC voices. For example, the following extract is taken from the BBC situation comedy *The Office*. In it, the character (Gareth) acknowledges the importance of sensitivity with regard to the use of offensive words only to fail to notice his own insensitivity.

> That's it, see. A lot of people can't keep up with what words are acceptable these days and what words aren't. It's like my Dad, for example, he's not as cosmopolitan or as educated as me, and it can be embarrassing, you know? He doesn't understand all the new trendy words, like, he'll say "poofs" instead of "gays", "birds" instead of "women", "darkies" instead of "coloureds". (*The Office*, Series 2, BBC, 2002)

Whilst the use of double-voiced discourse in this context relies upon politically incorrect language, the irony arises from Gareth's own ignorance about his use of offensive language despite his attempts to be PC. In this respect, the humour does not 'kick down' or suggest a rejection of principles like anti-racism or anti-sexism. Indeed, irony continues to be used as a device within comedy in order to draw attention to racism or sexism, often through the ridicule of racist or sexist voices within a particular joke or routine.

The myriad of ways in which double-voiced discourse is deployed (together with the different readings this exposes comedy to), can cloud or obfuscate the distinction between

humour which critiques and draws attention to bigotry, and that which condones it. Logan (2009) described the new offensiveness as directing today's comedians away from the principle implanted by alternative comedy which held that particular groups should not be denigrated, or that comedians should avoid negative social stereotyping. He gave various examples in 'The New Offenders of Stand-Up Comedy' to his to illustrate his point, although not all of these suggest that the discursive shift he describes represents a return to the pre-alternative comedy era of humour which 'kicks down'[156]. Humour which is evoked within popular discourse as 'edgy' or 'politically incorrect' may not, therefore, necessarily indicate a rejection of principles like anti-racism or anti-sexism, and irony continues to be a tool through which racism or sexism can be exposed or ridiculed rather than excused and rehabilitated.

Does this, therefore, undermine the assertion that the 'old' offensiveness has re-grouped or re-emerged in the 21st century as 'edgy' or 'ironic'? The jokes used as data in this section of the chapter suggest that edgy comedy has, in actuality, emerged as a signifier for a polyphony of comic voices. Some of these voices may share a preoccupation with purportedly 'taboo' topics, or a willingness to engage with contentious arguments surrounding matters like race or sexuality. However, their propensity to 'direct their comic aggression at those who are in positions of power and authority, or at those who are relatively powerless and subordinated' (Littlewood and Pickering, 1998:293) varies considerably.

For example, the following segment is taken from a live performance by Jimmy Carr in which Carr begins by explicitly drawing attention to the offensive nature of his jokes. He appears to delight in 'the word with the sideways glance' (Bakhtin, 1984a:249) in which his politically incorrect voice interacts with another voice that displays a candid awareness of this incorrectness:

> The most common question after a show is what's the most offensive joke…. now I don't
> think I can tell you the most offensive joke because I think offence is taken not given….
> Different people take offence at different things. So I can't tell you what the most offensive
> joke is….but we could see (*audience laughs*) We could start gentle and work our way up and
> see at what stage as an audience you go – oh for fuck's sake! (*audience laughs*) Do you want

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[156] Most notably, Logan's article quotes a line out of context from Richard Herring's *Hitler Moustache* show (2009-2010). The quote that 'racists have a point' is actually used in the show as a starting point for a lengthy critique of racism.

to give it a go? (*audience claps and cheers*).......people say that dolphins are really intelligent…I think yeah but only compared to the retarded kids we've gone swimming with (*audience laughs, and Carr continues*)…..The next joke is just a simple piece of wordplay, it's a turn on a very common phrase. The joke isn't about what the joke is about if you follow me – you know it's going to be offensive if it comes with a warning before-hand….They say there's safety in numbers – yeah? tell that to six million Jews…(*audience laughs and claps*)…Really London? Really? A round of applause? (*Carr uses the tone of his voice to suggest incongruity at the audience response*)….   (*Jimmy Carr: Telling Jokes*, 2009)

This example is less obviously interested in using irony as a way of critiquing or exposing social stereotypes, and is more demonstrative of what comedian Stewart Lee has described as the rise of the 'professionally offensive comedian' (O'Hagan, 2009:3 cited in Hunt, 2010b:201). The extract also sits neatly with Finding's description of irony as the reliable 'get out of jail free card' (2010:133). Many of the jokes used by Carr throughout this live performance suggest how content once thought of as regressive or problematic (or merely old-fashioned) retains the potential to be reawakened and discursively repositioned as 'edgy' through use of 'the word with the sideways glance'(Bakthin,1984a:249)[157]. However, in the aforementioned extract Carr frames his incorrectness very carefully. Despite his use of politically incorrect language, Carr pointedly makes clear that he (and by implication his audience) are fully aware of the offensive nature of what is being said. For instance, he responds to his audience with emphatic incredulity when they clap a joke about the Holocaust.

The contemporary edgy comic is protected by their 'sideways glance' which reassures us that fundamentally s/he 'knows better' than the 'old' offensiveness of the past. However, should edgy humour necessarily be understood in this way? In December 2010, Channel Four broadcast an episode of *Tramadol Nights,* a show containing a mixture of sketches and stand-up comedy, created by and starring Frankie Boyle. The show included the following joke:

Apparently Jordan and Peter Andre (*Katie Price's ex-husband*) are still fighting each other over custody of Harvey. Well eventually one of them will have to lose and have to keep him (*audience laughs*) I have a theory that Jordan married a cage fighter (*Alex Reid, Katie Price's second husband*) because she needed someone strong enough to stop Harvey from fucking her (*audience laughs*).   (*Tramadol Nights,* Channel Four 2010)

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[157] *Telling Jokes* includes jokes on topics such as disability, rape, paedophilia and wife-beating.

The joke attracted considerable controversy and media attention (its high profile partly sustained by the offence experienced and expressed by Harvey's parents)[158]. It is also an example of edgy comedy as both a taboo-breaker and vehicle for repositioning comic discourse surrounding matters such as disability. This repositioning also includes some unsettling of conventions around the use of insider and outsider humour[159]. Although outsider humour has withstood the post-alternative comedy era, comic discourse has generally incorporated a willingness to tread carefully so as to avoid denigration of 'the Other'. This joke, however, appears to disregard this willingness[160].

The joke is also harder to immediately recognise as the word of the author 'with the sideways glance'. This is because any use of irony as a means of distancing comedian or audience from what is being said must be assumed to take place *outside* of the joke itself. In other words, because 'we all know' targeting a disabled child is reprehensible, the joke acquires its ironic edge. Irony, therefore, becomes less of a comic device built around the actual telling of a joke and more of an assumed state of mind. Crucially, this understanding of the use of irony rests entirely upon this assumption without which the joke becomes indistinguishable from the 'old offensiveness' of jokes which unambiguously kicked downwards. The obvious question this provokes is can we really be certain everyone shares the preferred 'ironic' reading of the joke?

Unlike the extract taken from *Telling Jokes*, the Harvey Price joke is confident enough to by-pass any ironic framing as a part of the joke-telling process. This thesis, therefore, describes

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[158] Harvey Price has a condition known as septo-optic dysplasia, which makes him blind. He is also autistic, gains weight easily and finds walking difficult. After Channel 4 repeated the episode of *Tramadol Nights* Katie Price stated that, 'Channel 4 are embracing and exploiting discrimination. They are saying it is ok to ridicule people – even children – for disability in a way they would not dare over race or sexual orientation'. [see http://www.standard.co.uk/showbiz/katie-price-slams-repeat-of-frankie-boyle-show-with-joke-about-son-6546250.html]
(Accessed 01/06/2014)

[159] In Humour Studies, insider humour is used to refer to jokes told by members of a particular group which draw upon the shared experiences of that group, and may incorporate some use of social stereotyping as a consequence. Meanwhile, outsider humour includes jokes told by those external to the group being targeted. (Billig, 2010a:194)

[160] Boyle has been reported as defending the joke on the grounds that it intended to highlight Katie Price's use of her son for publicity. However, he also added (in a reference to Harvey's blindness) 'there's no way Harvey was watching the joke'. [Online] Available at
http://www.chortle.co.uk/news/2011/03/22/13005/frankie_boyle_stands_firm_over_harvey_gag (Accessed 03 June 2014)

the joke as an example of anti-political correctness in that it celebrates politically incorrect utterances simply by virtue of their expression. Confusingly, a comedian may switch between anti-political correctness and more carefully constructed ironic joke-telling so that the struggle over meaning within a comedic routine or repertoire becomes more abstruse and contestable. For instance, Hunt argues that "Bigot' would be an inappropriate word for Boyle' as 'like a lot of comedians he challenges some dominant political positions and reinforces others' (2010b:219-220). However, using the distinction between humour which 'kicks up' and that which 'kicks down', the following jokes from Carr and Boyle opt to kick down, demonstrating how the old offensiveness morphs into the new:

> Why are they called Sunshine Variety Coaches when all the kids on them look the fucking same? (*Laughter Therapy Tour,* Jimmy Carr, 2011)

> My Grandad's one of those people who can make you laugh just by reading a telephone directory. He's a spastic. (*Tramadol Nights,* Channel Four, 2010)

Edgy comics are increasingly willing to detach irony from the joke-telling process or to rely upon other ways of justifying controversial content (such as the defence of material on the grounds of free speech or 'the right to offend').[161] Furthermore, there appears to be a rejection of the interconnectedness between the comic and non-comic world which this chapter observes as having contributed to the desire to move away from racist or sexist humour in the 1980s. Alternative comedy had emerged from a position which viewed the language of comedy as an important shaper and reflector of wider beliefs and attitudes. However, today's post-alternative comic may appear to reject this interconnectedness, or view humour as occupying a distinct space from our 'non-comic' or 'formal' selves[162]. These features of the 'post-PC' comedy world - together with the appetite for anti-PC rhetoric within popular discourses - have contributed to a new uncertainty over how racist or sexist humour should be viewed.

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[161] For example, Jimmy Carr describes his comedy as 'just jokes'. He also argues that any subject should be 'up for grabs' in comedy and that 'some people just like being offended'.   [Online] Available at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/celebritynews/8916298/Jimmy-Carr-defends-joke-about-handicapped-children.html]   (Accessed 06 June 2014)

[162] This view of comedy has been endorsed by Jimmy Carr in various interviews. His defence of Ricky Gervais's repeated use of the word 'mong' argues 'I am never offended by anything. As long as it's a joke it's fine'. [Online] Available at http://metro.co.uk/2011/11/25/jimmy-carr-ricky-gervais-saying-mong-is-just-him-being-edgy-as-usual-233546/ (Accessed 15 July 2014).   The quote from Carr used at the start of this chapter also claims that his comedy has 'no message…I am not preaching to you – I am trying to make you laugh'.

We are uncertain about how to register the offence without seeming to lack a sense of humour, or without inviting the accusation of being moralistic, intolerant or – in what is now an uninspected term of condemnation – politically correct. No one wants to be judged in this way. (Lockyer and Pickering, 2009:5)

One explanation for the popularity of comics such as Jimmy Carr or Frankie Boyle is attributed, ironically, to the success of political correctness. Undoubtedly, the racist or homophobic jokes of the 1970s were told in a different socio-political context than the politically incorrect jokes of today. Shifting social attitudes, together with the gains accrued by formal or legislative change has contributed to the view that some of the most important battles against social inequalities have now been won. (Therefore, if we know that sexism is wrong then sexist jokes become 'just jokes' and lose their power to be problematic). This view has developed alongside a popular backlash against PC in which our lives are felt to be increasingly governed by an overarching and hegemonic PC culture. This culture is viewed as driven by an excessive fear of causing offence and underwritten by a new politics or policing of language. This is also an understanding of PC which enables the new offensiveness within comedy to position itself as a playful alternative to 'PC officialdom' and a potentially subversive voice that dares to 'say the unsayable'.

Humour ...challenges our closely held values and beliefs, subverts existing moral proprieties and bares its backside to prim decency and serious demeanours…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…(Lockyer and Pickering, 2001:648)

Bakhtin's notion of the carnival provides a useful metonym for the exploration of today's edgy comedy as a subversive and transgressive form of expression. In *Rabelais and his World* (1984a) Bakhtin identifies the carnival as a space temporarily granted in the medieval period by religious and civil authority in which public laughter and irreverent celebration of the profane was given free license. Central to the comic state described by Bakhtin was a separation between official culture, which was underpinned by the power of the church and civil society, and the unofficial culture of the carnival which was based around the collective

underbelly of the people. Bakhtin describes official 'medieval ideology' as determined by a 'tone of icy petrified seriousness' which he states was assumed to be 'the only tone to express the true, the good, and all that was essential and meaningful' (1984a:73). Meanwhile, the carnival provided 'a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man and of human relations' (1984a:6). Above all, it offered an alternative to (or temporary release from) the seriousness and constrictions imposed by the official culture of the day.

Rather than reflecting a return to the 'old offensiveness' of the past, can the jokes used here as data be viewed as providing a carnivalesque release from the seriousness and authority imposed by our 'official culture'? If PC is regarded as determining this official culture (including how we regulate our social selves through our everyday discourse and behaviour) then politically incorrect utterances act as a counterweight to this; forming part of a 'second world and a second life outside officialdom'(1984a:6) which is 'organised on the basis of laughter'(p.8). Central to the Bakhtinian view of the second world is the democratised and participatory nature of the carnival in which social hierarchies are suspended, including 'all the forms of terror, reverence, piety and etiquette connected with it - that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people'(Bakhtin, 1984b:123). The Bakhtinian view of our 'second life outside officialdom' also complements the perception of PC as a phenomenon largely imposed upon people by a ruling authoritarian minority who remain detached from the majority; a view reinforced by the use and ubiquity of popular phrases such as 'liberal elite', 'metropolitan elite' or 'PC brigade'. The carnival, therefore, permits people to temporarily dispense with the rules imposed upon them by governing officialdom (or in discourses of PC, the 'liberal elite') and offers an alternative construction of social relations driven by the collective will of the people.

In 1911 Bergson suggested that 'it seems that laughter needs an echo. Our laughter is always the laughter of a group'(p.5). Comedy is often enjoyed through the shared experience of a live performance which reinforces a view of laughter as a collective or unifying experience. (All of the Jimmy Carr jokes used in this chapter are taken from live shows and the series *Tramadol Nights* was recorded in front of a studio audience who are included in the stand-up segments of the series). In the carnival, laughter is typically shared in the location of the

marketplace: a site of free and uncensored communication where there is no separation between participants and spectators.

> The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organised in their own way, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organisation, which is suspended for the time of the festivity (Bakhtin, 1984:255)

The shared laughter of a comedy performance, therefore, echoes the experience of the crowd in the marketplace, and allows the comedian and audience to occupy a space that playfully flouts the rules and speech codes of our PC world. However, such an understanding rests upon an acceptance of politically incorrect humour as necessarily anti-authoritarian or subversive, and of edgy jokes as fundamentally inclusionary rather than exclusionary.

Whilst Bakhtin argues that 'laughter only unites' (1986:135) he nevertheless distinguished between the 'joyful, open festive laugh' and the 'closed, purely negative satirical laugh'(ibid). Laughter for Bakthin was joyful if it mocked authority and officialdom but negative when it served these interests. The data sources used in this chapter which target disability do not choose to mock authority. Furthermore, the evocation of political correctness enables humour which 'kicks down' to acquire an edgy or subversive veneer despite this. Such humour tends to reflect or reinforce, rather than challenge prevailing power structures whilst simultaneously positioning itself as rebellious or anti-authoritarian. Billig is particularly critical of what he describes as the 'preference for rebellion over discipline' (210:200) within theoretical models of humour. In other words, he rejects an understanding of humour as inherently positive, anarchic or liberating. Instead, he argues that laughter and ridicule perform a disciplinary function through which social life is regulated and our values more often than not reinforced rather than challenged (for example, ridicule is a particularly effective means of proscribing forms of behaviour as socially unacceptable). His description of 'the joking rebel' (p.209) is particularly illuminating in light of the contemporary fashion for edgy comics:

> The position of the joking rebel is a valued one. It is much celebrated in the entertainment products of the media. These products do not encourage their audiences to become rebels in an absolute sense, for their rebelliousness conforms to the standards of the times (Billig, 2010:209)

The edgy comedian is invariably celebrated in popular culture as the untameable outlaw or 'taboo-breaker' (Hunt, 2010a:182): (s)he is the spokesperson for all of those opposed to the ideological straitjacket imposed by a PC establishment. However, Billig's contention that the joking rebel in fact 'conforms to the standards of the time' (2010:209) forces us to think more closely about where the parameters of acceptable comic discourse actually lie. This section of the chapter has chosen to draw heavily upon jokes about disability as this has emerged as one of key 'taboo-breaking' topics associated with edgy comedy and the new offensiveness. Although the new offensiveness has emerged around a more general discursive repositioning of comic discourse (also encompassing matters like race, gender or sexuality) it is notable that 'edgy' comics appear more comfortable with some 'taboo-breaking' topics and transgressions than others; and that this is particularly true with regard to jokes which remove irony from the joke-telling process itself (such the Harvey Price joke). For example, such jokes may incorporate the targeting of 'chavs', as well as homophobia and sexism (including a fashion in recent years for misogynistic rape jokes). However, edgy comedians tread more carefully around the topic of race, where they are more likely to carefully construct and signpost their ironic persona in order to keep a clear distance between the comedian and their politically incorrect utterances[163]. Mintz (1985:76) described how a joke may illicit different responses from an audience, including the 'anthemic' response which is approving of the sentiments expressed by the comic on stage. Hunt (2010a) also notes that whilst many controversial white male comedians are willing to project sexist or homophobic personas to an audience, they 'will not risk an 'anthemic' response to racially sensitive material' (p.183).

This is important because it suggests that the rebelliousness of the edgy comedian takes place within certain parameters of which s/he is aware and which in this sense adhere to 'the

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[163] In his study of stand-up comedy and the nature of offence, Sturges argues that, 'Stand-up comedians, despite their own sense that they defy restriction and popular perception of their material as often offensive, do monitor their material for potential offence. They assess the extent of offence and modify their performances in response. In some cases they apply personal formulae to this process' (2010:279) After having observed stand-up performances and conducted informal interviews with comedians as part of his study, he also states that, 'possibly the most consistent message that the comedians offered was that they regarded race as a topic that must be touched on with sensitivity and offence avoided' (p.286).

standards of the time' (Billig, 2010:209). (It is also worth reiterating that despite the 'outlaw' status of the 'edgy' comedian; all of the comics named and used in this section of the chapter are TV-friendly performers who sit firmly within the comedy mainstream). Comedians may be less willing to risk an 'anthemic' response to racially sensitive material because they view racism as more serious than other transgressions. However, this undermines the assertion that 'we all know' edgy jokes are 'just jokes' or 'ironic'; and cannot adequately account for why disabilist jokes do not risk pandering to bigotry in the same way as racist jokes.

6.4.3 Summary and conclusions

What, therefore, is the significance of the enduring appeal of politically incorrect forms of discourse? In order to answer this question this chapter has categorised humour which targets historically disadvantaged groups and/or deploys negative social stereotyping as evidence of politically incorrect discourse. The thesis argues that the rules of the game governing comic discourse have become increasingly grounded in *who* is saying something, as well as what, or how something is said. In this respect, the 'incorrect' utterances of pre-PC comics such as Jim Davidson or Chubby Brown remain overwhelmingly detached from and rejected by our mainstream media. However, this chapter also rejects the idea that 'old school' comedians have been usurped by a liberal or PC consensus within British comedy in the 21st century. Instead, it argues that the expression of politically incorrect language and viewpoints becomes legitimised through possession of cultural capital resources; and that, ironically, these resources may include the symbolic capital attached to a comedian or audience who are assumed (rather than demonstrated) to share a broadly liberal sensibility. Bourdieu (1990:54) describes how our tastes and perceptions are habitually formed through our regular experiences, or habitus. Our habitus will, therefore, condition our tastes and perceptions of comedy, thereby granting the post-alternative comic permission to engage in 'edginess'. However, we have no easy way of ascertaining whether, and to what extent, an audience accepts or rejects the illiberal utterances and viewpoints expressed by a comedian, irrespective of whether we perceive the comedian as 'old school' and regressive or 'edgy' and challenging.

Of course, the 'acceptable offensiveness' of the modern edgy comic is also legitimised through *how* something is said and rests largely upon the use and assumption of irony. This chapter has explored how the assertion of irony grants legitimacy to various forms of

politically incorrect humour. In view of this, how should we understand the popularity of such humour; particularly in view of its enduring appeal in the post-alternative comedy world? This thesis argues that edgy comedy has emerged as a signifier for a polyphony of comic voices. These voices include: (i) those which critique or draw attention to various social issues, taboos or inequalities (such as the mocking of Gareth's use of politically incorrect language in the extract taken by this chapter from *The Office*); (ii) those that build irony into a joke or performance to deflect critique of politically incorrect utterances (such as the segment used from *Telling Jokes*); and (iii) those which engage in an unambiguous celebration of politically incorrect utterances (such as the material selected from *Tramadol Nights*). A performance may also switch between comic voices, making any overarching reading of a particular routine more difficult to obtain. A further factor which sits somewhat awkwardly next to the assertion of irony as a 'get out of jail free card'[164] (Finding, 2008) for otherwise questionable content, is the reputation of the modern edgy comic as a straight talking 'truth teller' who bravely defies political correctness. If politically incorrect content can be defended on the grounds of both 'irony' and straight-talking 'honesty' then interpreting the 'true' meaning of such content becomes yet more indiscernible.

The popularity of the jokes examined by this chapter is not, therefore, reducible to one particular meaning or a single set of associations. Consequently, this thesis cautions against viewing humour described in popular or journalistic discourse as 'politically incorrect', 'edgy' or 'offensive' as *necessarily* comparable with the derogatory humour typically associated with some of the content from the pre-PC comedy era. Indeed, some humour identified as 'politically incorrect' may actually be more usefully viewed as sharing the commitment to anti-racism, or anti-discrimination, now associated with the radicalism of alternative comedy[165]. However, the data also suggests that the invocation of political correctness enables jokes which would once have been viewed as regressive or conservative to be discursively reimagined as transgressive or 'edgy'. It cautions against viewing comedy which unambiguously 'kicks down' or chooses its targets carefully so that the 'rebelliousness conforms to the standards of the time' (Billig, 2010:209) as challenging or carnivalesque.

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[164] This quote is taken from a *Guardian* article by Finding, 'Laughter as a weapon'. [Online] Available at: http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/nov/08/comedy-television (Accessed 11th December 2014)
[165] For example, Richard Herring's 'politically incorrect' *Hitler Moustache* (2010) show actually satirised racism and prejudice.

As our understanding of what might constitute 'offensive' humour has become more contestable as a consequence of the emergence of 'edgy' comedy, it has also become more difficult to unequivocally condemn comedy which 'kicks down' or relies upon negative stereotyping. However, despite this, 'offensive' content continues to be met with resistance as well as approval. (Resistance might include the response provoked by contentious jokes on social media sites; such as the *Twitter Storm* following Ricky Gervais's repeated use of the word 'mong'). The ironic climate in which much contemporary comedy resides continues to reflect both the subjective nature of offence, and the multiplicity of ways in which 'politically incorrect' utterances are understood. Our response to 'offensive' forms of humour (particularly the rise and regularity of the Twitter Storm) is also suggestive of an increasingly democratised and participatory discursive space within which the right to offend or to take offence has become increasingly elevated. The following chapter explores our preoccupation with disputes of offence through examination of some of these discursive spaces.

Chapter 7. Political Cartoons and 'offensiveness'

Figure 3. Martin Rowson. *New Humanist*. 2007[166]
https://newhumanist.org.uk/1623 (permission to use granted)

> It's my job, as a satirical cartoonist, to give offence. But I need immediately to qualify that statement. I see my job as giving targeted offence, because satire, to borrow H L Mencken's definition of journalism, is about comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable…if I draw rude pictures of people less powerful than myself, what I do ceases to be satire, and creeps into one of the wider spheres of aggressive, bullying humour and into areas I consider offensive. (Martin Rowson, 2009:22)

7.1 Introduction

The thematic focus of this chapter is the giving and taking of offence on grounds of religious belief or identity. In choosing this focus the chapter recognises how offensive language or behaviour directed at others on the basis of religious or cultural identity is increasingly regarded as comparable to prejudice like racism or homophobia. Indeed, in his exploration of anti-immigrant discourse and the tensions caused by the presence of the foreign subject within the UK, Grayson describes how 'the new racism has shifted the terrain…away from

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[166] Although this chapter focuses primarily on the giving and taking of offence on religious grounds, the response provoked by this cartoon of 'New Atheist' writers, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, illustrates our preoccupation with offence more widely. Some readers of *New Humanist* magazine interpreted the depiction of Richard Dawkins in the cartoon to be homophobic and the depiction of writer, Christopher Hitchens, was also felt by some to be offensive to overweight people. An online discussion of the offence caused by the cartoon is available on the *New Humanist* website. [Online] Available at: http://blog.newhumanist.org.uk/2007/11/new-humanist-cartoon-controversy.html (Accessed 24th September, 2014)

strict notions of biological inferiority to cultural unsuitability' (2013:385). In this respect, the shifting discursive terrain reflects the increasingly social and political unacceptability of biological explanations of the inferiority of different groups. Nevertheless, the various sanctions against such explanations - often attributed colloquially today to the emergence of 'PC' - sit within a broader socio-cultural environment in which representational practices continue to engage in the 'Othering' or stereotyping of different social groups:

> The mainstream media, though differentiated by medium, outlet, genre and subject all too often produce shocking examples of xenophobic reporting and racist portrayal, while often publicly committing to the ideals and practices of an inclusive multi-ethnic, multicultural society. (Cottle, 2000:3)

What, therefore, might controversies concerning religious identity contribute to the complexities and competing narratives surrounding how different groups are portrayed, or how we respond to forms of expression deemed by some to be 'offensive' on religious grounds or culpable in the production of negative stereotypes of those who share a religious affiliation? This chapter uses political cartoons[167] as data with which to explore our preoccupation with 'offensiveness', including the competing ideas and positions regarding the nature of offence. The thesis will argue that disputes of offence contain an increasingly individualised dimension which may be overshadowed by our concern with identity politics and group membership.

The chapter begins with an overview of the history and nature of political cartooning and explores the idea that we live in a 'post-secular' society (Habermas:2008) in order to situate the thematic focus of the chapter within an accurate wider socio-cultural context. It then undertakes an intertextual analysis of political cartoons using the work of cartoonist, Martin Rowson. This section of the chapter uses cartoons which comment upon the relationship between religion and broader social or political issues to explore how competing voices and identities assert their right to be offended, or to offend. It also examines how imagery becomes attached to a 'floating chain of signifieds' (Barthes, 1977:39) using cartooning commenting on Israel's actions in the Middle East which has attracted accusations of anti-Semitism[168]. Finally, this part of the chapter will argue that the methods typically deployed

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[167] Section 7.4.3 of the chapter will also use British newspaper editorials which comment on cartooning as data.
[168] As anti-Semitism refers to hostility towards Jews (who may or may not be religious), it is generally recognised as a form of racism rather than purely religious based prejudice. However, hostility to Jews emerged

by cartoonists (such as stereotyping through the use of unflattering caricature) has drawn cartoons further into the creation (as well reporting) of political discourse.

Following this, the chapter will investigate more closely *how* cartoons create discourse. Firstly, it undertakes a representational analysis of the response in the UK national press to the publication of the Muhammad cartoons in the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten.* Secondly, it applies Barthesian semiology to the use of imagery in the online *Jesus and Mo* comic strip. The chapter will argue that representational practices have contributed to the appearance of polarised and homogenised positions regarding what might constitute 'offensiveness'. However, the chapter maintains that these practices deflect our focus from the multiplicity of ways in which offence continues to be understood and the diversity of voices which compete to be heard within contemporary disputes of offence.

7.2 Political Cartooning and the significance of Religious Identity

7.2.1 The history and nature of cartoon satire

Cartoons appearing in publications such as newspapers, pamphlets and posters have long been vehicles for lampooning and satirising religious and political figures, ideas and institutions. Political cartooning has been described as 'an outgrowth of caricature' (Keane, 2008:848) - an artistic form associated with the exaggeration or simplification of a character, usually in order to produce a satirical or comic imitation. The idea of the cartoon as a satirical device, and as a form of social commentary, has an extensive history. For instance, the invention of the printing press facilitated the use of cartoon satire by Protestant reformers during the Reformation, as images of the Papacy started to appear which made use of insulting and defamatory visual puns (see e.g. Hughes, 2010:272-273; Keane, 2008:849)[169]. Political cartoons have also been categorised as 'cartoons of opinion' (Keane, 2008:849; Kemnitz, 1973:82) as they have played an important role in criticising and checking the exercise of political and/or religious power. Kemnitz (1973:82) describes this type of cartoon

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from and remains embedded in religious difference. The Oxford English Dictionary (2012) defines anti-Semitism as 'hostility or prejudice against Jews' (p.27) and a Jew as 'a member of the people whose traditional religion is Judaism and who trace their origins to the ancient Hebrew people of Israel' (p.390).

[169] Hughes (2010) describes these visual caricatures as having constituted part of the propaganda war during the Reformation. He highlights one example of a cartoon (c.1520) which depicts Pope Leo X as a lion and 'Antichrist' figure. Keane (2008:849) also argues that visual caricatures containing an underlying political message have 'a long and varied history since Martin Luther employed [them] against his opponents'.

as a 'primarily visual means of communicating opinions and attitudes or of "summing up" situations; humour may be present but it is not a necessary part of a cartoon of opinion'.

More problematically, cartoons of opinion have also been used to promote racial or religious prejudice. Thibodeau (1989:483) asserts that 'prior to the civil rights movement, a cartoonist could probably portray blacks in an openly stereotypic or derogatory fashion with relative impunity'. Meanwhile, Goodwin (2001:854) has described the history of anti-Semitic cartoons within Europe as responsible for depicting Jews 'as demons - ugly, lecherous, grasping and evil – unlike other humans'. The British caricaturist, George Cruikshank (1792-1878) is accused by Appel (1971) of having pioneered the graphic caricatures used within satirical publications such as *Punch* or *Puck* magazine, in which the Irish were 'pictured with the faces of subhuman 'Celtic gorillas'' (p.372). Furthermore, this type of caricature was often underpinned by an anti-Catholic as well as anti-Irish sentiment. At different points, therefore, cartoon satire has both challenged religious and political authority, and reinforced negative stereotypes about less powerful racial, ethnic or religious groups. As a visual tool of communication, therefore, political cartoons may be used to 'afflict the comfortable'[170] *or* those less powerful.

In 2008, Keane asserted that 'there is no contemporary official tolerance for racially offensive cartoons' (p.856). This position can be attributed to broader changing societal values which have largely rendered the sorts of imagery highlighted by Thibodeau (1989) or Goodwin (2001) as no longer acceptable within mainstream media discourse. Nevertheless, political cartoons continue to be described in the literature as a politically incorrect form of visual communication (see e.g. Emlinger, 2000; Gilmartin and Brunn, 1998:536; Taras, 2008:163; Hughes, 2010:274). For example, Gilmartin and Brunn (1998:536) assert that the format of a political cartoon invariably enables the expression of viewpoints within mainstream publications, such as national newspapers, which would be deemed 'too extreme, mean spirited or "politically incorrect" to verbalise in an editorial essay column'. The left-leaning British cartoonist Steve Bell is described by Hughes (2010:274) as disregarding 'the new politically correct notion of *lookism*: the fact that Brown has a glass eye is often glaringly apparent, as was the blindness of David Blunkett'[171]. Therefore, whilst Keane may be correct to point to a general intolerance for racist content, political cartoons nevertheless continue to

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[170] This is a reference to the quote from Martin Rowson included at the beginning of this chapter.
[171] See Figure 4.

be appraised for their use of representations which appear in a present-day context to be wilfully politically incorrect.

Figure 4. Steve Bell *The Guardian* 2004
http://www.theguardian.com/cartoons/stevebell/0,7371,1373351,00.html
(permission to use granted)

This understanding of political cartoons as 'non-PC' is made possible partly through the mechanisms employed by cartoonists in order to produce a satirical or critical point. In their analysis of newspaper editorial cartoons, Buell and Maus (1988) discuss how 'exaggeration and distortion are the cartoonist's stock in trade' (p.847). Although cartoons are capable of communicating complex messages about people or events, the medium nevertheless generally relies upon crude stereotyping and unflattering representations in order to make a comical or political point (see e.g. Buell and Maus, 1988:856; Mazid, 2008:436)[172]. The use of humour also often includes a degree of incongruity, so that the serious and unserious are deliberately juxtaposed for comedic effect. This 'stock in trade' reliance upon distortion, stereotypes and the humorous treatment of serious topics leaves cartooning potentially exposed to accusations of offensiveness or insensitivity in the treatment of its subject matter, including cartoons which are perceived by some to be offensive on religious grounds.

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[172] For example, in Buell and Maus's study of 246 newspaper editorial cartoons during the 1988 US Presidential nomination process, they describe the insults conveyed through graphic imagery as containing a level of 'crudity and offensiveness' (1988:847) that was far less evident within written newspaper editorials or opinion pieces. For instance, cartoon caricatures of Democrat candidate, Michael Dukakis, consistently portrayed him as 'boring, humourless and short' whilst written articles focused more directly upon policy issues (p.851).

7.2.2 Religious identity, offence and the 'Post-Secular' Society

In 2008, Habermas drew attention to how fewer sociologists continued to support the (once widely accepted) hypothesis that there was a 'close linkage between the modernization of society and the secularization of the population' (p.17). It has also been suggested that, 'secularization may be valid as a specific process that has been underway in particular social settings, but as a meta-narrative of Western history, it fails utterly' (Aldridge, 2007:65). When considering the experience of the affluent societies of Europe which underwent a decline in religious observance in the post-war period, Habermas argues that the endurance of religious belief within these societies, together with 'the visible conflicts that flare up in connection with religious issues give us reason to doubt whether the relevance of religion has waned' (2008:17). Increasingly, therefore, sociologists have made use of the concept of 'post-secularism' in order to make sense of the 'return' of religion within contemporary Western societies (see e.g. Harrington, 2007; Bahram, 2013; Bruce, 2013; McLennan, 2010; Nickleson and Sharpe, 2014; Nynas, Lassander, and Utrianinen, 2014).

In the UK today, disputes concerning religious identity and religious based claims of offence have acquired an increasingly high public profile. It is worth recognising that despite the preponderance of sociological theories of secularisation,[173] the post-war decades also witnessed noteworthy controversies arising from these grounds. In 1977, the magazine *Gay News* was found guilty of blasphemy after a private prosecution was brought against it by the campaigner Mary Whitehouse[174]. Two years later, the *Monty Python* film *Life of Brian* was also accused of blasphemy, and was banned by various local authorities on the grounds that it was offensive towards Christianity. However, although these cases opened up impassioned discussion over the relationship between religious censorship and free expression, the *Gay News* trial has also been described as bringing to an end prosecutions for blasphemy as a means of protecting Christianity from insults (see e.g. Thomas, 2007:347; Allard and Hannabus, 1994:19-20). In 1994, Allard and Hannabus suggested that whilst controversies over religious based offence would continue to arise in the UK, Christianity no longer exerted the authority it once held over matters concerning free speech and artistic expression. In

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[173] For example, in 1966, Bryan Wilson had argued that the public sphere was becoming less dependent upon religious values, practices or institutions, although religion still maintained an influence over many people's lives in a privatised capacity.

[174] Thomas's study of the history of censorship in modern Britain describes how the trial was held after Mary Whitehouse had objected to a poem and illustration published in the magazine about a centurion's love for Christ at the Crucifixion (2008:346-347).

particular, they claimed the 1980s had 'accelerated an entrepreneurial attitude' towards moral values dependent upon 'individual choice rather than any religious doctrine' (p.14). Furthermore, they asserted that, 'if faith is regarded as a major referential framework at all, it is set within the context of pluralism and a multi-faith theology' (p.14).

The literature has recognised how media discourse surrounding religion adopted a sharper tone following the events associated with the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001[175] (see e.g. Sheridan, 2006; Brenkman, 2007; Habermas, 2008; Ibrahim, 2010; Klug, 2012). Much of this has concerned the narrative of conflict between Islam and the West, and has often drawn upon the *Clash of Civilisations* thesis espoused by Huntington (1996) which proposed that in the 21st century cultural and religious identities would emerge as the primary source of global conflict. Although much discussion has been generated around Islam, various religions have become embroiled in controversies regarding the giving and taking of offence. Prominent examples include the protests against the BBC decision in 2005 to broadcast *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, a surreal musical which parodied reality TV and Christianity; and the cancellation of the play *Behzti* in 2004 after rioters objected to its depiction of sexual abuse and murder in a Sikh temple. These sorts of debates lend weight to Habermas's suggestion that secularised societies can be more usefully described today as 'post-secular' as within them 'religion maintains a public influence and relevance, while the secularistic certainty that religion will disappear worldwide in the course of modernization is losing ground' (2008:21). Habermas also claims that the successful maintenance of a post-secular society requires a 'complementary learning process' (p.28) involving tolerance and mutual recognition from both religious and secular mentalities towards beliefs which they themselves reject. However, this also raises the question of *how* such tolerance and mutual recognition are to be maintained in view of a growing plurality and co-existence of religious and cultural worldviews. In his discussion of the contemporary intolerance for racist cartoons, Keane speculates about whether future generations will share a similar disdain for 'religiously offensive' (2008:856) content. However, are cartoons which offend some religious believers necessarily comparable to the sorts of racist depictions previously highlighted by this section of the chapter? (For example, how might we determine whether a political cartoon which portrays a religious figure like the Pope disparagingly, constitutes a form of anti-Catholic

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[175] Of course, prior to 9/11, a major event which forced many societies to reconsider how they should deal with religious based offence was the fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie in 1989, following the publication of his book, *The Satanic Verses*. Many of the arguments which have proliferated on the nature of religious belief and free expression in the 21st century can also be located in the discourse which emanated from this event.

prejudice?) It is therefore worth closely considering how we respond to and make sense of images deemed by some to reinforce bigotry towards religious groups or believers.

7.2.3 Religion and Political Cartooning in the 21st century

Much (though not all) of what religious believers have found offensive in recent years has appeared in the form of humour, often involving parody or satire of religion. Although humour is not an essential ingredient of a political cartoon, most rely upon it in some way in order to express a particular viewpoint. In the 21st century, the most notorious example of cartoon satire has involved the appearance of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*[176]. The events arising from their publication in 2005 led to over 200 deaths resulting from global demonstrations against the imagery used, in addition to assassination attempts upon the lives of the cartoonists responsible for the cartoons.

Controversies arising from political cartoons have become disputatious in part through evolving arguments surrounding the relationship between racism and notions of religious and/or cultural stereotyping. Levey and Modood (2009) have compared Islamophobia with the development of anti-Semitism, arguing that the persecution of Jews was originally 'grounded in their religious beliefs and distinct customs' (ibid:442).

> 'Traditional Judeo-phobia became anti-Semitism only in the 19th century as Jews sought to fully integrate in western Europe…In understanding racism, what is key here, is not that 'blood' was invoked to exclude or condemn all Jews, but the targeting of all members of the Jewish group simply in virtue of their membership' (Levey and Modood, ibid:442)

Increasingly, cultural and religious groups are viewed as racialized categories. For instance, Levey and Modood argue it is possible 'that Muslims can be the victims of racism *qua* Muslims as well as *qua* Asians or Arabs or Bosnians' (p.443). From this perspective, the stereotypical depiction of Muslims in cartoons qualifies as evidence of a form of cultural

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[176] Two further incidents in 2015 now also form part of the wider notoriety surrounding depictions of Muhammad in satirical cartoons. In January 2015 eleven people were shot dead in the offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* which had previously printed cartoons of the prophet. (The magazine's office had also been the target of a fire-bomb in 2011). Further deaths resulted from a gunman who opened fire in Copenhagen in February 2015 at an event discussing free speech. The intended target of the gunman was believed to be the cartoonist Lars Vilks who had depicted the prophet Muhammad with the body of a dog in 2007.

racism which targets and demonises all members of the Muslim group (p.443). It is within this broader socio-political context that this chapter will consider the relationship between 'offensiveness', cartoons and religious identity.

7.3 Reporting Discourse

7.3.1 The role of the Political Cartoonist

'Cartoons of opinion' (Keane, 2008:849) enable a cartoonist to satirise and comment upon topical events as they arise. Humourists and cartoonists have long occupied a position whereby their use of satire allows them to express strong arguments in ways less readily available to political professionals. As Keane argues, some political professionals (such as journalists or politicians) are 'a little in awe of the freedom cartoonists enjoy to commit outrages that would read like lunacy in print' (2008:847). Meanwhile, Taras claims that, 'what is not permitted of the spoken word because of the hegemonic regime of political correctness can be indulged in with graphic representations' (2008:163). Drawing upon the work of Martin Rowson (whose cartoons regularly appear in *The Guardian* newspaper and *New Humanist* magazine) this section of the chapter considers how the meaning of a discursive image depends upon its intertextual relationship with other images or texts. In doing so it explores the relationship between cartoons and discourses of offence, and considers how disputes of offence have facilitated a culture of competing rights.

7.3.2 An intertextual reading of discourses of offence

Kristeva claimed that 'every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it' ([1977] cited in Culler, 2002:116). In other words, the meaning of an image is produced not only through the relationship between the author and their reader(s) but also through the intertextual relationship between an image and other images or texts. Rather than confining its focus to the internal structure of a cartoon, this part of the chapter therefore, also considers how structure has come into being - or the process of 'structuration' (Kristeva [1970] cited in Coward and Ellis, 1977:52).

Some instances of intertexuality within cartoons involve the direct use or appropriation of familiar cultural works – such as films, paintings or literature. For example, figure 5 alludes to one of the best known images in Western art: Michelangelo's depiction of God reaching

out to touch Adam. In figure 5, Adam is replaced by the high-profile atheist and evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins who reads a copy of the scientific book – *On the Origin of Species* (1859) by Charles Darwin.
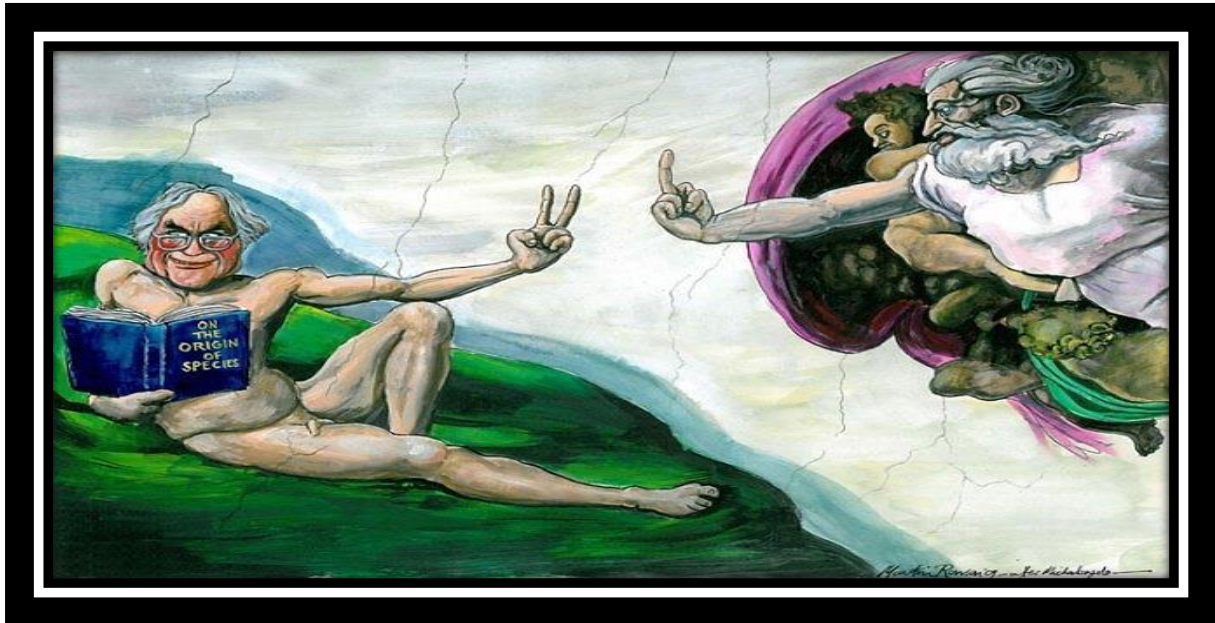
Figure 5. Martin Rowson. *New Humanist*. 2010 https://newhumanist.org.uk/1623/holy-communion(permission to use granted)

The cartoon depicts Dawkins and God as mutually antagonistic figures through their use of hand gestures. Their 'offensive' hand gestures also carry a connotative meaning as their mutual hostility represents wider conflicts, or philosophical differences, within the public arena surrounding matters of religious belief. One feature of our 'post-secular' (Habermas, 2008) society has been a visible reassertion of both religious and atheist identities within public discourse. This has given voice to conflicting arguments regarding the role that religion should play in the public sphere. Firstly, the 'new atheists'[177] argue that religion has a harmful effect on political and social life and that its role in these spheres should be reduced. Secondly, this critique of religion has been characterised by some as exhibiting a form of 'aggressive', 'intolerant' or 'militant atheism'[178]. Furthermore, this view of modern atheism has developed alongside a sense that religious rights are increasingly under threat from a modern secularised society. (The News Discourse chapter of this thesis touches upon this sense when it explores how some opponents of same sex marriage argue that the law

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[177] The 'New Atheism' has been described as an 'anti-religious, anti-theist movement' (Emilsen, 2012:521) which has been popularised in the early part of the 21st century by writers such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens.

[178] For example, Fiala (2009:139) describes 'militant atheism' as 'often dogmatic in its assertion of cognitive superiority'.

enabling same sex couples to marry is an attack upon the rights and values of religious groups. Most notably, Ian Paisely MP refers to the law as an example of 'Christophobia' within contemporary society). These debates form part of our wider participation in, and preoccupation with the giving and taking of offence (in which some believers are 'offended' by 'militant atheism' and so on). Significantly, they also point to a culture of competing rights, in which different groups or identities hold different notions of what might constitute 'offensiveness'.

Figure6.MartinRowson.*TheGuardian,*2010
http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cartoon/2010/jul/12/martin-rowson-row-gender-sexuality-church-of-england(permission to use granted)

For instance, figure 6 appeared in *The Guardian* newspaper following the decision by The Church of England's ruling synod that women bishops should be permitted. The cartoon displays the offence and distress caused to some members of the clergy at the prospect of gay bishops and women bishops. In this example, intertextuality arises less from the direct 're-authoring' of another's work in the cartoon, although we can recognise and interpret familiar codes which transcend the structure of the individual image. For example, the clergy are identifiable through their religious attire, including the former Archbishop of Canterbury (Rowan Williams) who looks on (and away) from the offence caused to members of his clergy. The distress depicted in the cartoon also illustrates the emotive nature of offence, and

how offence is viscerally attached to our feelings, or deeply held beliefs. This is important as it highlights how the very belief that something is offensive may become the overarching grounds for *why* something is considered more broadly in society to be offensive. In other words, the assertion of offence becomes the argument for *why* something is offensive. Finally, the subject matter of the cartoon invites us to consider how we respond to instances where the rights of groups or identities conflict (or appear to conflict) with each another. For example, in figure 6, religious rights conflict with rights regarding gender and sexual orientation. In figure 6, the offence is provoked by the prospect of women bishops, although offence might equally be taken in light of this stance by those who believe women bishops *should* be ordained. Our preoccupation with the giving and taking of offence is, therefore, intensified by the voices of competing groups and positions within a discursive context.

One of the central claims made by intertexual analysis is that to communicate with each other we must use pre-existing codes, concepts and conventions. In view of this, whilst the intention of the author is an important factor which will influence how a cartoon is read, the meaning of a text cannot be reduced solely to authorial intention. Instead, intertexual analysis regards the author of a text as the 'orchestrator' rather than the originator of the 'already-written' (Barthes, 1977:21).

> A text is…a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations…The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. (Barthes, 1977:146)

If we view a cartoon as 'a tissue of quotations', how are we to determine conclusively whether a cartoon might be racially or religiously defamatory? In their discussion of the infamous Danish Muhammad cartoons, Levey and Modood (2009) distinguish between the use of caricature and stereotyping in cartoons:

> We think caricature is one thing, and stereotyping quite another. Caricaturing football hooligans, for example, carries no implication – and no chance of implying – that all football fans are hooligans. The contrary perception is too widely appreciated and entrenched. Stereotyping, however, trades on and reinforces prejudice. (Levey and Modood, 2009:440)

In practice, however, this distinction may be more difficult to delineate or identify. For example, various political cartoons which are critical of Israeli policy in the middle-east have been subject to accusations of anti-Semitism[179]. These accusations are often grounded in the intertextual relationship between the cartoons and anti-Semitic tropes which have historically permeated visual depictions of Jews.

Figure7.MartinRowson.*TheGuardian,*2006
http://www.theguardian.com/cartoons/martinrowson/0,,1823933,00.html (Permission to use granted)

Using a sample of 2000 anti-Semitic cartoons, Kotek ([2004:77] cited in Keane, 2008:855) divided the cartoons into different themes, including the blood libel motif[180], zoomorphism and the "masters of the world" narrative. He focused upon cartoons appearing in the Arabic media in the 21st century and argues that there is a continuation in the use of anti-Semitic themes and stereotypes which had previously been commonplace in European cartoons during the 20th century.

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[179] For example, in 2013, *The Sunday Times* was accused of racism when it published a cartoon by Gerald Scarfe of the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. The cartoon depicted Netanyahu building a wall with blood, in which Palestinians were trapped. *The Board of Deputies of British Jews* denounced the cartoon as 'shockingly reminiscent of the blood libel imagery more usually found in parts of the virulently anti-Semitic Arab press'. Rupert Murdoch subsequently apologised for the 'grotesque, offensive cartoon' and Gerald Scarfe is reportedly claimed to have regretted the timing of the publication of the cartoon on Holocaust Memorial Day. A discussion of the offence caused by the cartoon is available on the *BBC* website. [Online] Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-21239917 (Accessed 26 September 2014) The cartoon image is also available online http://procartoonists.org/tag/benjamin-netanyahu/ (Accessed 26 September 2014)

[180] The blood libel has a long history within anti-Semitic ideology. It originates in the Middle Ages and refers to where Jews were falsely accused of murdering Christian children to use their blood for the baking of Matzah bread.

In 1934 a Nazi cartoonist drew an octopus with a Star of David whose tentacles covered the globe; while [a] cartoon in the weekly La Revue du Liban[181] shows an octopus with a Star of David on its body, its tentacles strangling Fatah, Jihad and Hamas. (Kotek, 2004: 79 cited in Keane, 2008:855)

Figure 7 was drawn by Martin Rowson following the 2006 Israeli-Lebanese conflict (also known as the Lebanon War). It depicts the Stars of David worn over a knuckle duster which is used to punch the bloodied face and body of a young Lebanese boy (the cartoon also shows Hezbollah as a large hornet). However, it was also accused of relying on anti-Semitic imagery[182]. The cartoon demonstrates how signs remain open to interpretation, and thereby constitute 'a floating chain of signifieds' (Barthes, 1977:39). For example, the blood libel is undoubtedly used in anti-Semitic imagery. However, blood is also used to convey a point within many political cartoons, often with regard to the actions of politicians, states or other organisations. (For instance, figure 8 shows George Bush and Tony Blair with blood on their hands – a phrase very familiar within the language of political discourse, and a sign which is used in many cartoons to accuse politicians of causing deaths in political conflicts).

Similarly, a sign like a national flag may be included in a cartoon to signify different things (for example, a flag might be used to signify imperialism, patriotism, or a value like 'freedom'). The Star of David has been used in anti-Semitic imagery as a signifier for all Jews. However, the Star of David also appears on the Israeli flag. Rowson argues that his cartoon uses the Stars of David to represent the State of Israel 'rather than the symbol of worldwide Jewry' (2009:53). In his discussion of self-censorship in public discourse, Loury describes how taking offence is an effective means of closing down debate, or discouraging others from expressing a precluded viewpoint (1994:429). In this context, the accusation of racism becomes a powerful means to delegitimise, or close down critique of Israel. Kotek ([2004:77] cited in Keane, 2008:855) has explored how anti-Semitic tropes continue to pervade imagery in the 21st century. Furthermore, anti-Semitism may also sometimes take the form of critique of Israel[183].. However, this should not preclude critique of Israeli policy, or

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[181] La Revue du Liban is an online Lebanese newspaper.
[182] In his 2009 book, *giving offence*, Rowson describes receiving emails accusing him of anti-Semitism (p.53).
[183] For example, the 2014 Israeli-Gaza conflict coincided with a steep rise in anti-Semitic attacks across Europe. In 2014, Eylon Aslan-Levy set up the online *everyday anti-Semitism* website in order to document anti-Semitic incidents. He argues in *Jewish News online* that 'whatever fine line there was between anti-Israel activism and

prevent cartoons from deploying the same sorts of crude or brutal imagery which is used to comment upon politics and politicians more generally.

Figure 8. MartinRowson *TheGuardian,2006*
http://www.theguardian.com/cartoons/martinrowson/0,7371,1233190,00.html (permission to use granted)

In 1973, Kemnitz (1973:84) highlighted the freedom of cartoons to suggest 'what cannot be said by the printed word'. However, it may be worth re-assessing this assertion in light of our contemporary preoccupation with offence. This part of the chapter has focused upon how cartoons report the news, however, in doing so it also alludes to how cartoons can influence political and social matters as well as comment on them. (For example, the Gerald Scarfe cartoon described in the footnotes of this chapter generated a wider conversation on the nature of anti-Semitism). Today, the power of political cartoons to influence events and generate discourse is closely entwined with their power to offend. This power is partly grounded in the very nature of the medium which often relies on cruel depictions and mockery, delivered with 'a forceful simplicity in expression' (Gottschalk and Greenberg, 2011:193). In view of these factors, the following section of the chapter will focus directly on the events and issues which have arisen from the creation of 'offensive' political cartoons in the 21st century.

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naked anti-Semitism has been blurred, as anti-Israel protest has spilled over into attacks on Jews'. [Online] Available at: http://www.jewishnews.co.uk/everyday-antisemitism-project/ (Accessed 29th September 2014)

7.4 Creating Discourse

7.4.1 Cartoons as creators of discourse

Political cartoons have been described as 'a visual or visual–verbal type of opinion news discourse' (Swain, 2012:82). As such, rather than simply responding to broader socio-political events, they also help to produce and circulate these events. In its discussion of the relationship between religion and political cartooning, this chapter outlined briefly the response following the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*[184]. The Danish cartoons also prompted much discussion within liberal democracies surrounding the relationship between religious identity, self-censorship, and free expression. Much of this has focused upon practical and philosophical questions concerning how speech should be managed in view of the recognition that cartoons may cause serious offence to some; or, that they may be used to denigrate marginalised groups as well as those more powerful (see e.g. Ramadan, 2006; Cohen, 2012; Henson, 2011; Klausen, 2009; Levey and Moodood, 2009; Malik, 2009). No overarching consensus has emerged from these debates as some positions continue to assert the primacy of free expression (e.g. Malik, 2009; Cohen, 2012) whilst others have cautioned against the use of 'religious stereotyping' within satirical imagery (e.g. Levy and Moodood, 2009:441). This chapter, however, is concerned primarily with how discourse surrounding questions of offence and religious belief is produced and understood. In particular, this section of the chapter considers how the discourse surrounding cartoon imagery has contributed to the appearance of a polarisation of opinion between Muslims and non-Muslims regarding what might constitute 'offensiveness'. Before considering this, however, it is worth recalling in more depth the events which led to the Danish Cartoon Crisis.

7.4.2 Background to the Danish Cartoon Crisis

On 30th September 2005, the centre-right Danish daily broadsheet *Jyllands-Posten* published twelve cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. The cartoons differ in the way they depict the prophet – for example, one cartoon directly targets *Jyllands-Posten* and declares that its 'journalists are a bunch of reactionary provocateurs'. Meanwhile, the cartoon that provoked most offence depicts the prophet with a bomb in his turban. The cultural editor of the paper,

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[184] See Section 7.2.3

Flemming Rose, supported publication of the cartoons on the grounds of free speech, and claimed that a culture of self-censorship had emerged within Western liberal democracies which meant that Islam was not subject to the same level of examination, critique or ridicule as other religions. Rose cited various examples to support his claim, most notably the inability of the writer Kare Bluitgen to find an artist prepared to illustrate a children's book on the life of Muhammad. Rose contacted 25 cartoonists and asked them to draw Muhammad 'as they saw him'[185] stipulating that no cartoonists were permitted to remain anonymous. Twelve cartoonists agreed to submit the illustrations which were subsequently published on 30th September 2005. On the 14th October 2005, a peaceful protest was held in Copenhagen against their publication and several imams representing a coalition of Danish Muslim organisations requested to meet with the Danish Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, in order to explain their objections. Rasmussen refused to meet the representatives on the grounds that politicians had no business interfering with a free press. The imams then travelled to Egypt in December 2005 and presented the cartoons (including three additional inflammatory images[186]) at an Arab League meeting. The League issued a statement condemning the images and similar delegations to Lebanon and Syria contributed to further publicity, together with the use of campaigning against the cartoons via digital media. Global protests spread in January and February 2006 across many countries, leading to the torching of Danish embassies, over 200 deaths and attempts upon the lives of the cartoonists responsible for the offending images. The cartoons, therefore, infamously illustrate how images may be constitutive of an event, rather than simply reflective of it.

7.4.3 Representational analysis and the Danish Cartoons

Representational analysis has traditionally concentrated on the ways in which images or texts depict something (such as a particular group of people, or an event). This type of analysis typically focuses upon identifying how a group or an event is misrepresented within an image or text. For example, the Danish cartoon which showed Muhammad with a bomb in his turban, was widely criticised for appearing to depict him as a terrorist. In their analysis of the Danish cartoons, Levy and Modood also accuse the images more generally of unfairly

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[185] Fleming Rose describes his communication with the cartoonists in an article written by him for *The Washington Post* in February 2006, in which he explains his reasons for publishing the cartoons. [Online] Available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2006/02/17/AR2006021702499_2.html (Accessed 01/09/2014)

[186] The additional images included one of a man wearing a 'pig mask' which was later identified as having nothing to do with the prophet. Instead, Cohen (2012:93) describes it as showing 'a French farmer, who was competing in [a] village's annual 'pig squealing competition', complete with plastic snout and pig's ears'.

'targeting Muslims' through their use of 'hostile stereotypes' (2009:443).   This part of the chapter will examine how stereotypes are reinforced through the 'representational practices' (Hall, 1997:259) at work within both visual imagery and written texts. However, it will view representation not simply as something which occurs *after* an event through, for example, the drawing of an image, or the writing of an article. It also regards representation as an important component of an event which contributes to its meaning.

This way of viewing representation is particularly useful in view of the wider socio-political context surrounding the Danish cartoons. The UK press were unanimous in their decision not to republish the cartoons[187]. In their analysis of the press coverage surrounding these events, Meer and Mouritsen (2009:339) report that in the UK there was a 'consistency between the different publications, broadsheet and tabloid, in their criticisms of *Jyllands-Posten* and the reproduction of the cartoons elsewhere in Europe'. This aspect of the Cartoon Crisis is integral to the analysis in this chapter. Using Hall's Representation model, the signifying practices (or practices that produce meaning) at work both in the aforementioned cartoon of Muhammad *and* the reporting of the decision not to republish the Danish cartoons in the UK are explored. Rather than seeking to uncover the 'true' meaning of the cartoons, this analysis is chiefly interested in how our ideas about them and the practices that emerge from these ideas bestow them with particular meaning(s).

Hall maintains that although images do not possess any singular or fixed meaning, ideology can nevertheless attempt to 'fix' the meaning of an image, or text. He describes this 'fixing' of meaning as inextricably bound with the way in which power operates in society.

> Power, it seems, has to be understood here, not only in terms of economic exploitation and physical coercion, but also in broader cultural or symbolic terms, including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way – within a certain 'regime of representation'. It includes the exercise of symbolic power through representational practices. Stereotyping is a key element in this exercise of symbolic violence. (Hall, 1997:259)

Kurt Westergaard drew the cartoon of the prophet Muhammad with a ticking bomb in his turban. In a 2009 interview, Westergaard claimed that he had been trying to 'show that

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[187] Meanwhile, Carle (2006:82) points out that the cartoons *were* republished in newspapers in Germany, Holland, France, Italy, Norway and Spain 'to express solidarity with *Jyllands-Posten'*.

terrorists get their spiritual ammunition from parts of Islam, and with this ammunition…they will kill people'[188]. The Westergaard cartoon has been described as (re)producing a particular stereotype, or way of viewing Muhammad and/or Islam as threatening or violent (see e.g Levey and Modood, 2009; Meer and Mouritsen, 2009). The media portrayal of Islam has received increasing attention within the academic community in the 21st century (see e.g. Sheridan, 2006; Kundnani, A, 2007; Fekete, 2009; Poole, 2009; Esposito, J and İbrahim, K (2011); Petley and Richardson, 2011). Petley and Richardson refer directly to 'a rise of hostile stereotyping' in the post-9/11 era which emphasises the threat that Muslims pose 'to our way of life' (2011:167). In this sense, the cartoon fits within a certain 'regime of representation' whereby different 'practices of representation' (Hall, 1997:260) (such as cartoons, newspapers, TV programmes etc.) produce a form of knowledge about Muslims and/or Islam as threatening or 'Other'.

Hall also argues that 'stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes 'difference'' which is then maintained through a strategy of 'splitting' whereby the 'normal' and 'acceptable' are divided from the 'abnormal and unacceptable' (1997:258).

> Stereotyping, in other words, is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between the 'normal' and the 'deviant', the 'normal' and the 'pathological'… what 'belongs' and what does not or is 'Other', between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', Us and Them. It facilitates the 'binding' or bonding together of all of Us who are 'normal' into one 'imagined community'; and it sends into symbolic exile all of Them – 'the Others' – who are in some way different.. (Hall, 1997:258)

In their analysis of the climate within which *Jyllands-Posten* published the Muhammad cartoons, Levey and Modood describe the 'prevailing situation [as] one in which Muslims in general are being marginalised, disproportionately targeted, and made vulnerable' (2009:433).[189] Within the context of domestic Danish politics, therefore, the Westergaard cartoon fixes 'difference' through stereotyping and maintaining the 'symbolic frontier

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[188] The full interview was with Adrian Humphreys in *The National Post* on 3rd October 2009. [Online] Available at http://www.nationalpost.com/news/story.html?id=2061497#ixzz0SvzxULVo (Accessed 12 September 2012)

[189] A minority of the Danish population - approximately 4.8 % - are reported to be Muslim. [Online] Available at http://www.dst.dk/en/Statistik/emner/befolkning-og-befolkningsfremskrivning/folketal.aspx (Accessed 23 August 2014)

…between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', Us and Them' (Hall, 1997:258). However, this section of the chapter argues that 'difference' is also maintained through the representational practices embedded in the *response* to the Muhammad cartoons within parts of our mainstream media.

Imagery acts as a form of language which becomes invested with meaning in ways which are culturally conditioned and rely upon familiar signifiers and conventions. The same image or content, therefore, can acquire different meanings within different discursive communities. For example, within Sunni traditions of Islam visual depictions of Muhammad are typically prohibited as they are associated with idolatry[190]. From this standpoint, irrespective of the 'offensive' nature of the imagery, the very presence of such images would be deemed blasphemous and highly problematic. Ridanpaa asserts that the overriding interpretation placed upon the satirical Danish cartoons within the Western media 'lay within the context of the Western religious world and its previous satires and not within the context and principles of the Muslim world' (2009:733). Nevertheless, the UK press unanimously refused to reprint the cartoons[191]. How useful, therefore, is it to view the response of the UK media as residing firmly within the context of the 'Western religious world and its previous satires'? In order to explore this further it is worth recalling the response to the cartoons from British national newspapers. The following newspaper editorials from 2006 outline the position taken by each paper explaining their decision not to republish the cartoons.[192]. All the editorials share the view that the cartoons should not be published because of the offence this would cause to Muslims.

> To duplicate these cartoons…has an element of exhibitionism to it…**The offence destined to be caused to moderate Muslims should not be discounted**…It cannot be valid for followers of a religion to state that because they consider images of the Prophet idolatry, the same applies to anyone else in all circumstances. Then again, linking the Prophet to suicide bombings supposedly undertaken in his honour was incendiary. (*The Times* 3 February, p.23.)

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[190] This may help to contextualise why the writer, Kare Bluitgen was unable to find an illustrator for his children's book on the life of Muhammad.

[191] It is also worth remembering that support for *Jyllands-Posten* was by no means unanimous across the Danish media. Meer and Mouritsen (2009:339) point out that whilst some national newspapers (such as the popular tabloid *Ekstra Bladet*) supported the decision to publish the cartoons, others were critical of it - including the conservative-leaning broadsheet, *Berlingske Tidende*, and the left-leaning broadsheet, *Information*.

[192] The newspapers chosen for this representational analysis are selected to reflect a cross-section of British daily newspapers. They include: (i) the right-leaning broadsheet, *The Times*; (ii) the right-leaning 'red-top' tabloid, *The Sun*; (iii) the right-leaning 'middle-market' tabloid, *The Daily Mail*, and;(iv) the liberal-left broadsheet, *The Guardian*.

The cartoons are intended to insult Muslims, and **the *Sun* can see no justification for causing deliberate offence** to our much-valued Muslim readers. (*The Sun* 3 February, p.6.)

…**an obligation of free speech is that you do not gratuitously insult those with whom you disagree.** While the *Mail* would fight to the death to defend those papers that printed the offending cartoons, it disagrees with the fact that they have done so. Rights are one thing. Responsibilities are another… (*The Daily Mail* 3 February, p.14.)

The Guardian believes uncompromisingly in freedom of expression, but not in any duty to gratuitously offend. It would be senselessly provocative to reproduce a set of images, of no intrinsic value, which pander to the worst prejudices about Muslims. (*The Guardian* 4 February, p.34)

Different newspapers choose to emphasise some arguments and concerns more visibly than others (for example, *The Times* opted to provide a web link to the cartoons on the grounds that this balanced the right to free speech more carefully against the wish not to cause offence). However, the editorials are striking in their unanimity (for example, both the right-leaning *Mail*, and left-leaning *Guardian* balance the right to free speech against the responsibility not to 'gratuitously offend' or 'insult' Muslims).

Critical analysis has revealed how narratives of 'difference' or 'Otherness' are normalised and (re)produced within various political, popular cultural and media sources (see e.g. Lalioti, 2005; Chauhaun, 2013; Grayson, 2013). Media representations of 'difference' may be maintained through written or spoken words, as well as imagery. Hall's model of analysis encourages exploration of the specific practices involved which allow a type of language[193] (whether words, sounds or imagery) to carry meaning, or reinforce 'difference'. This chapter argues that popular representations of Islam and/or Muslims have helped to maintain a 'symbolic frontier between…what 'belongs' and what does not or is 'Other'…between Us and Them' (Hall, 1997:257). This is maintained, firstly, through crude or negative stereotyping which produces a particular regime of representation of Muslims as violent or radicalised. This form of stereotyping has been explored and documented by analysis of the

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[193] Language is defined broadly by Hall as incorporating 'any sound, word, image or object which functions as a sign' (1997:19). He defines signs as 'the general term we use for words, sounds or images which carry meaning' (1997:18).

media portrayal of Muslims, especially in the post-9/11 era (see e.g. Poole, 2009; Morley and Yaqin, 2011; Alsultany, 2012). However, this thesis argues that the practice of representing Muslims as a distinct group who are collectively 'offended' by imagery such as the Danish cartoons also reinforces the 'symbolic frontier' between 'Us and Them'. It argues that the signifying practices at work in the editorials used here as data naturalize 'difference' between Muslims and non-Muslims who are assumed to uphold distinct identities and values. However, an important distinction between this and the aforementioned negative stereotyping is that the 2006 editorials occupy a position which purports to *protect* Muslims from denigration or offence.

The editorials agree unreservedly that the cartoons should not be shown as they are gratuitously offensive, or insulting to Muslims. However, Downs draws attention to how 'Muslim opinion is a complex tapestry, not a monolith' (2011:609). He argues that

> Most Muslims in Europe accept and support the basic principles of liberal democracy, and many Muslim faithful had no problem with the cartoons; and many who had a problem disavowed any kind of legal or political reaction (Downs, 2011:609).

The British newspapers, however, conceal this diversity of opinion and frame the affair as a clear conflict of interest between Muslims and free speech. They also contribute to the appearance of a polarisation of positions on freedom of expression which reinforces a homogenised view of both Muslim and non-Muslim opinion. For example, both *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mail* pronounce their commitment to free speech as they simultaneously outline their 'responsibility' not to offend Muslims. *The Times* editorial also identifies 'moderate Muslims' as a group it does not wish to offend by reprinting the cartoons. However, this way of classifying those who may be offended arguably reinforces a view of 'moderate Muslims' as a unified 'offended' group or community.

Significantly, the firm line taken in the editorials against the giving of offence also sits awkwardly with some of negative news stories surrounding Islam and Muslims within British newspapers in recent years. For example, Poole has described *The Daily Mail's* 'construction of Muslims [as] explicitly negative' (2009:135), and Meer and Mouritsen declare *The Sun's* position on the Danish cartoons surprising as it is 'rarely sympathetic to minority sensitivities' (2009:324). How, therefore, do we make sense of the juxtaposition between the

preponderance of negative stories about Muslims in many British newspapers, and the simultaneous desire of these papers not to cause offence to Muslims by refusing to republish a series of cartoons which had generated a major international news story? The explanations given by UK newspapers for their refusal to republish the cartoons have been criticised for being based more upon fear than the principled objections outlined in the various newspaper editorials examined here (see e.g. Carle, 2006; Malik, 2009; Cohen, 2012). Such fears may be well-grounded in view of the global reaction following the initial publication of the cartoons[194]. Within Denmark, numerous violent plots targeted Flemming Rose and Westergaard specifically, and the employees and property of *Jyllands-Posten* more generally, along with other newspapers that reprinted the cartoons. Many newspaper sellers also refused to distribute *Jyllands-Posten* (whether through fear, or principled objection). Within this context it is reasonable to suggest that British newspaper proprietors, editors, journalists or distributors held serious concerns about their own and others' safety. However, this was not the main line of reasoning adopted by the editorials examined for this analysis. Their meaning, therefore, is partly evoked by what they do *not* say, or by the reader 'knowing' what is not said[195].

The data used in this representational analysis suggests there is an inconsistency in the desire to avoid offence with regard to the cartoons, and the way in which Muslims are often otherwise represented in many parts of the British press. In other words, the denouncement of 'offensive' imagery has developed alongside the negative stereotyping of Muslims which is woven into popular narratives surrounding the cultural cohesiveness and distinct status of Muslims and/or Islam. This is not to dismiss that real offence *was* caused to many Muslims as a consequence of the Danish cartoons, or to downplay the severity of the violence and response provoked by the cartoons internationally. However, the media discourse surrounding these events has contributed to narratives which homogenise Muslim opinion, and frame the affair as a straightforward clash between Islam and the liberal-democratic principle of free speech. This binary outlook also informs the increasingly emboldened backlash against multiculturalism which is predicated on a 'crisis of multiculturalism' (Lentin and Titley, 2012:123) involving the emergence of 'parallel societies' (ibid).

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[194] Section 7.3.2 briefly describes the violence which followed internationally in the wake of their publication.

[195] In their comparative analysis of the response to the Muhammad cartoons in the Danish and British press, Meer and Mouritsen point out that a 'recurring theme' in reader's letters and blog comments to British newspapers was that the decision not to republish 'was not, in fact, because of tolerance and restraint, but an outcome of intimidation and the threat of violence' (2009:349). For a detailed description of their examination of reader response to the *Independent* and *Guardian* newspapers see pages 348-351 of their analysis.

This part of the chapter suggests that our preoccupation with group identity and identity politics has helped to shift focus away from the individualised dimension of disputes of offence. The data examined in the newspaper editorials represents Muslim opinion as monolithic and homogenised whilst ignoring the diversity of opinion *within* as well as between communities. The representational strategies at work within the editorials also attempt to secure discursive 'closure' around what might be considered offensive to Muslims as a group. However, the nature of offence remains highly subjective and there is no unified 'Muslim' or 'non-Muslim' opinion regarding the cartoons, or whether the decision not to reprint them in the UK was justified. This thesis maintains that our preoccupation with identity politics and group membership undermines the significance of personal identity which is also embedded in disputes of offence. Whilst personal identity may sometimes be closely aligned with group identity, it is also felt or experienced in a multiplicity of ways. In view of this diversity of experience, the following part of the chapter examines the British web comic 'Jesus and Mo' and explores how attempts to 'fix' or create discursive closure surrounding matters of offence - including what is understood to be offensive on religious grounds - may be unsettled or challenged by competing voices.

7.4.4 Background to the 'Jesus and Mo' web comic, and the denunciation it has provoked

Jesus and Mo is a British web comic which describes itself as 'dealing in religious satire'[196]. It was launched in 2005 and produces a weekly online comic strip which features the religious figures, Jesus and Muhammad[197]. In the comic strip, Jesus and Muhammad live together and sometimes visit their local pub where they engage in topical discussion with an atheist bar attendant (who is never drawn and is known simply as 'Barmaid'). The cartoons consist mainly of critique, or ridicule of religion (including religious texts, beliefs and practices). They are created by an artist who uses the pseudonym, Mohammad Jones, in order to protect his real identity for reasons of personal safety.

Although the cartoons have not ignited the global fury generated by the Danish Cartoons, several instances demonstrate how cartoon imagery has emerged as a battleground upon which contemporary battles over free expression and claims of offence are fought. Firstly, in

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[196] This quote is taken from the *Jesus and Mo* webpage. [Online] Available at: http://www.jesusandmo.net/ (Accessed 12th September, 2014)

[197] In some comic strips, Moses (the Abrahamic prophet) and the Hindu God, Ganesh, also appear.

2012 the University College London (UCL) Atheist Society published a frame from the web comic on their Facebook page in order to promote the society's social events[198]. The UCL Student Union requested the removal of the cartoon on the grounds that students needed to 'understand the balance between freedom of expression and cultural sensitivity'[199]. Upon learning of this, the Atheist Society at the London School of Economics (LSE) also reproduced the cartoon on its Facebook page. Forty official complaints were made to the university objecting to the image and the Student Union issued a statement condemning the 'offensive nature of the content' which they argued was 'not in accordance with our values of tolerance, diversity and respect for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or religious affiliation'[200] A petition in support of the right to display the image showing Jesus and Muhammad sharing an alcoholic drink in a pub gathered 3000 signatures. Following this, the UCL and LSE Student Union's conceded that university societies maintained the right to advertise their events at their own discretion whilst reasserting their disapproval of the image.

A further incident occurred in 2013, also involving the LSE. Members of the LSE Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Student Society were told they would be removed from the university Freshers' Fair unless they covered up t-shirts they were wearing featuring a *Jesus and Mo* cartoon[201]. The LSE Legal and Compliance Team reportedly told the Atheist Society that wearing the t-shirts could be considered 'harassment' and could 'offend others' or create 'an offensive environment'[202]. After two students, who had been forced to cover up their t-shirts, made a formal complaint to the university, the LSE issued an apology from its director.

[198] [Online] Available at: http://www.lulu.com/shop/mohammed-jones/jesus-and-mo-vol-2/paperback/product-3915157.html (Accessed 10 August 2015)

[199] The quotation is lifted from a *Guardian* article which was published on 13 January 2012 and titled 'Muhammad Cartoon row: student Atheist Society claims victory'. [Online] Available at: http://www.theguardian.com/education/2012/jan/13/muhammad-cartoon-student-atheist-society (Accessed 13 September 2014)

[200] The quotation is taken from a *New Humanist* article, published on 24 January 2012, and titled 'Jesus and Mo cartoon censorship controversy reaches LSE'. [Online] Available at: http://blog.newhumanist.org.uk/2012/01/jesus-mo-cartoon-censorship-controversy.html (Accessed 13 September 2014)

[201] The t-shirt designs are available online at: http://www.godlessgifts.co.uk/#!product/prd1/1777436825/jesus-%26-mo-fitted-t-shirt%3A-how-y%27a-doin%27%3F and https://doinggod.wordpress.com/2014/02/04/times-show-us-jesus-mo-its-the-price-of-freedom/ (Accessed 10 August 2015)

[202] This quote was reported in an article on the *national secular society* webpage, posted on 4 October 2013: 'LSE Student Society intimidated at Freshers' Fair over "offensive" t-shirts'. [Online] Available at: http://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2013/10/lse-student-society-intimidated-at-freshers-fair-over-offensive-t-shirts (Accessed 14 September 2014)

Professor Craig Calhoun stated that 'with hindsight, the wearing of the t-shirts on this occasion did not amount to harassment or contravene the law or LSE policies'[203].

Finally, the *Jesus and Mo* cartoons briefly became a national news item in January 2014 when an image was tweeted by Maajid Nawaz[204] (chairman of the counter-extremism think-tank, the Quilliam Foundation and then a parliamentary candidate for the Liberal Democrat leader). Nawaz had appeared as a studio guest on an episode of *The Big Questions* [205] in which the cartoons were discussed (including the aforementioned incident at the LSE Freshers' Fair). Nawaz has since stated that he posted the image on his Twitter account following his appearance on *The Big Questions,* in order to encourage a debate among Muslims about what is acceptable within their faith.

Following his tweet, Nawaz received death threats and a petition was set up calling for him to be deselected as a parliamentary candidate[206]. Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg, responded by stating that although he would not personally have tweeted the cartoon out of 'respect' to people of all faiths, he defended the right of Nawaz to do so on the grounds of free speech, and refused to drop him as a parliamentary candidate[207].

7.4.5 A Semiotic study of the Jesus and Mo cartoons

Semiology (which was described by Saussure as 'the study of the role of signs as part of social life' (1983:15)) is deployed as a foundation for this analysis of how meaning, or particular messages, are communicated through cartoon imagery. Drawing upon the relationship between denotative and connotative readings of the *Jesus and Mo* cartoons this

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[203] The quote is an extract from the full apology, and is taken from the *Guardian* article 'LSE apologises to students asked to cover up Jesus and Muhammad T-shirts', which was published on 20/12/2013. [Online] Available at: http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/dec/20/lse-university-apology-students-atheism-tshirt-religion-jesus-muhammad (Accessed 14 September 2014)

[204] The image is available online: https://homoeconomicusnet.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/20140127-002048.jpg (Accessed 14 August 2015). In his tweet Nawaz stated, 'This image is not offensive and I'm sure God is greater than to feel threatened by it'.

[205] *The Big Questions* is a BBC programme which debates moral, ethical and religious questions.

[206] The petition described Nawaz as having posted 'offensive and disrespectful images' of 'the Prophets Muhammad and Jesus', and attracted over 20000 signatories. A counter-petition pledging support for Nawaz also attracted over 8000 signatories.

[207] Nick Clegg gave his views during an LBC radio interview. His words were reprinted in an *Independent* article on 30/01/2014, 'Nick Clegg will not drop Lib Dem candidate Maajid Nawaz who tweet a cartoon of the prophet Muhammad and Jesus'. [Online] Available at: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/nick-clegg-will-not-drop-lib-dem-candidate-maajid-nawaz-who-tweeted-a-cartoon-of-the-prophet-mohammed-and-jesusclegg-will-not-drop-lib-dem-candidate-9095691.html (Accessed 14 September 2014)

analysis uses Barthesian semiology to explore the steps through which the broader messages of the *Jesus and Mo* cartoons are communicated. In the cartoon used by the UCL Atheist Society Jesus and Muhammad are shown sitting in a bar together and sharing a drink. The T-shirts worn by students at the LSE Freshers' Fair displayed two images: firstly, Jesus is shown saying 'Hey!' to Muhammad, who replies by saying 'How ya doing?'; and secondly Jesus and Muhammad are depicted with banners protesting against the drawing of prophets. Each cartoon includes the text 'Jesus and Mo' in order to make clear the identity of the two figures. However, their identity is also conveyed through the use of signifiers such as their religious attire (we recognise Jesus as he is wearing a crown of thorns; and Mohammad through his beard and turban). In the cartoon used by the UCL Atheist Society the bar pump and pint glasses also act as signifiers which suggest that both figures are drinking together in a bar or pub. The images displayed in the T-shirt designs also use text which provides anchorage as it allows the reader to choose between possible denotative meanings of the images. In particular, the text used on the banners carried by Jesus and Muhammad makes it clear that the cartoon is satirising religion[208]. A connotative reading, however, allows us to link this denotative description to one which looks at the way in which an image is understood, at a broader, more associative, level of meaning (Hall, 1997:164). In other words, the signs identified in the denotative reading are attached to a further set of signifieds. In exploring this wider cultural dimension, this thesis nevertheless maintains that meaning remains polysemic. Unlike traditional Saussurean models of semiotics, it is therefore primarily concerned with the complex 'play' of meaning at work within imagery rather than simply the analysis of language's rules and laws.

What messages, therefore, do the cartoons convey? The images used do not obviously mirror some of the crude or negative stereotyping previously highlighted by this chapter (such as the use of imagery linking Muhammad to terrorism, or extremism). Indeed, the image used on the t-shirt in which Jesus and Muhammad greet each other is striking in view of how innocuous the dialogue between the two religious figures is. In this respect, the literal meaning of cartoon (in which Jesus and Muhammad exchange a friendly greeting) also acquires the connotative meaning that an innocuous image is able to offend some believers. In a similar vein, the denotative reading of the image used by the student Atheist Society has already encouraged us to assume that Jesus and Muhammad are drinking alcohol. If we link

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[208] The banners held by Jesus and Muhammad declare 'stop drawing holy prophets in a disrespectful manner now!'; 'Religion is not funny' and 'If this doesn't work I say we start burning stuff'.

this to its wider cultural significance - or connotative meaning – then this depiction taps into and mocks religious prohibitions surrounding the consumption of alcohol. By displaying Jesus and Muhammad engaging in 'everyday' interactions (such as sharing a drink together, or greeting one another in a friendly manner) the connotative meaning of the cartoons is that religion (including its beliefs and practices) is treated with a particular reverence which satire should mock.

Any analysis of how representation operates on a broader cultural level can also not ignore how the cartoons clearly disregard the Islamic taboo against depictions of the prophet Muhammad. From this, we may come up with the connotative message that such taboos are ripe for mockery. (The web comic also knowingly pokes fun at this prohibition by claiming that the Muhammad it uses is actually a 'body double')[209]. Finally, the use of textual anchorage in the image depicting slogans on banners makes explicit through a denotative reading that the cartoon is ridiculing religious based claims of offence, particularly its prohibitions upon 'disrespectful' drawings. Barthes (1977) had introduced the idea of anchorage primarily in relation to advertisements or photographs which appeared in newspapers, magazines or other visual forms of media. He argued that the main function of anchorage was ideological. (For example, the captions attached to newspaper photographs are typically presented as simply descriptive rather than 'anchored' to encourage a preferred reading). Indeed, Barthes was particularly interested in how the relationship between a sign (whether this takes the form of text or an image) and wider culture is deeply ideological (rather than relatively arbitrary, as in traditional Saussurean semiotics). According to Barthes, the two 'orders of signification' (denotation and connotation) combine to produce ideological myths about the world. These myths make dominant cultural and historical values appear 'natural' or self-evident. The role of semiotic analysis, therefore, is to 'denaturalise' these myths.

Does the ridicule of religion within the cartoons shown here help to circulate ideological myths about the world, and how usefully can these cartoons be viewed as upholding dominant cultural values? The *Jesus and Mo* web comic was created and surfaced within the

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[209] The full interview in which the *Jesus and Mo* cartoonist makes this claim is available online at: http://www.jesusandmo.net/about/ (Accessed 15 September 2014)

context of our 'post-secular' society[210]. One feature of this society has been the reassertion within it of atheism and secularism as important and visible identities[211]. Emilsen (2012:524) argues that what distinguishes the 'new atheist movement' from earlier forms of atheism is 'the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) ways it critiques and attacks Islam through its 'scattergun' critique of religion in general'. The Introduction of this chapter points out how prejudice on grounds of religious and/or cultural identity has emerged as a significant trigger or factor within contemporary disputes of offence. Chapter Five of this thesis also highlights how our growing concern with disputes of this nature is reflected in some of the language used to debate these disputes, including the emergence of neologisms (such as 'Islamophobia' or 'Christophobia'[212]). Some of the prejudice directed at religious groups and believers is attributed to the newly galvanised atheist or secular 'movement', or what Fiala (2009) describes as 'militant atheism'[213]. From this perspective, might the mockery of religion in the *Jesus and Mo* cartoons be viewed as fuelling a secular form of prejudice against religious groups, or those with strongly held religious beliefs? In particular, does its mockery of Islam (and Islamic norms) reinforce dominant cultural values or ideology through its targeting of a minority religion[214]?

In order to answer this, it is worth returning briefly to the taboo against visual depictions of Muhammad which is adhered to by most Sunni traditions of Islam. In Shia Islam, however, images of Muhammad have been present historically within Islamic art, and there is no overall consensus across the faith over whether images should be prohibited.

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[210] Section 7.2.2 describes in depth the idea espoused by Habermas (2008) that Western societies can today be usefully described as 'post-secular'.

[211] This reassertion can be observed in the plethora of books published in the 21st century which are critical of the role and powers of religion. They include *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins (2006), and *God is Not Great* (2007) by Christopher Hitchens. Many of the 'New Atheists', such as Richard Dawkins, also attract a high media profile and public following.

[212] Although the term 'Christophobia' is not part of our mainstream lexicon, it was used by MP Ian Paisley in a Commons debate to describe the vilification of Christian beliefs and values. It therefore, forms part of a wider narrative of the modern-day persecution of religious beliefs and believers.

[213] Labels like 'militant atheism' are increasingly drawn upon in media and political discourse in the 21st century. For example, in February 2012, the then Conservative chairman, Baroness Warsi, denounced Richard Dawkins in a speech as a 'secular fundamentalist' and warned that Britain was under threat from a rising tide of 'militant secularism'. In her speech, she also argued that religion was being 'side-lined, marginalised and downgraded in the public sphere'. In his study of 'The Politics of New Atheism' Schulyske (2013:788) refers to how terms such as 'aggressive atheism' are also evoked in academic discourse surrounding religious and ethical debates.

[214] Of course, globally Islam is a major world religion adhered to by 1.5 billion people. The *Jesus and Mo* cartoons also ridicule religion more generally, although Jesus and Muhammad form its main focus. However, within the specific context of the UK, the cartoons choose to ridicule a powerful prohibition within a religion adhered to by a minority of its population.

> Even though Islam is often conceived and presented as a religion that prohibits pictures, there are important differences between various regions, times and religious interpretations when it comes to the question of the representational and visual arts. (Larsson, 2011:50)

In a similar vein, not all Muslims who entered the discussion surrounding the events provoked by the *Jesus and Mo* cartoons were offended by the images. Most notably, following the furore caused by his decision to tweet a *Jesus and Mo* cartoon, Maajid Nawaz claimed that he was 'speaking up for Islam against the loudmouths who have hijacked it'[215]. Furthermore, the censorship of such imagery in parts of our mainstream media may help legitimise or privilege the position of those offended (or help to designate them as the authentic voice of an entire group or community)[216]. It is also notable that *Jesus and Mo* is a small online web comic and is not published in print form. (No British national newspaper has published a *Jesus and Mo* cartoon, although the small circulation atheist magazine *The Freethinker* used to publish one every month[217]) .The creator of the web comic also uses a pseudonym for reasons of personal safety and the website is regularly subject to online attacks. This broader context suggests that it is misleading to view the imagery as reinforcing dominant cultural values or ideology. Nevertheless, despite Maajid Nawaz's claim that the *Jesus and Mo* cartoons are 'inoffensive', others disagree and believe the imagery to be 'Islamophobic' and/or insulting to those with religious faith more generally. The range of readings an image is open to, therefore, draws our attention to the subjective nature of offence and how disputes of offence are enacted around our personal feelings or beliefs, even when these are embedded within broader identities about group membership or religious identity.

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[215] This quote is taken from a *Guardian* article written by Nawaz.on 28th January 2014. [Online] Available at: http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/28/speaking-islam-loudmouths-hijacked (Accessed 18 September 2014)

[216] For example, *The National Secular Society* (NSS) expressed concern when *Channel 4* chose to pixelate the image of Muhammad in their coverage of the row over Maajid Nawaz's use of the image on Twitter. In a letter to Channel 4, the NSS wrote '..you have become complicit in a trend that seeks to insidiously stereotype all Muslim people as reacting in one uniform way (generally presented as overly sensitive and potentially violent)'. In a responding statement, Channel 4 stated, 'The senior editorial team decided that the showing of the entire illustration, whilst likely to cause offence, was not integral to the story, and therefore took the decision to pixelate'. [Online] Available at: https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/4569/channel-4-accused-of-censorship-over-jesus-mo-story (Accessed 18th September 2014)

[217] The *Jesus and Mo* cartoons are also used to illustrate the 2013 book by Russell Blackford, *50 Great Myths About Atheism.*

7.5 Summary and conclusions

This chapter has drawn upon religion and religious identity in order to make sense of our preoccupation with the giving and taking of offence, including the relationship between the changing conditions of debate and the nature or character of debate. Analysis of the various data sources (including the controversies they have provoked) demonstrates how the assertion of offence contains a regulatory power which may be used (with varying degrees of success) to preclude or discourage 'offensive' forms of expression. The chapter also suggests that the very assertion of offence is increasingly taken as the grounds for *why* something is felt to be offensive more broadly. This regulatory aspect of 'offence taking' is manifest in various ways in some of the examples examined in this chapter: for example, the use of cartoon imagery to critique Israel may be discouraged by those who believe the imagery to be anti-Semitic and/or encourage an anti-Semitic viewpoint, whilst depictions of Muhammad are censored by the UK press as a consequence of the offence they continue to cause.

An important focus of the chapter is how representational practices within our media avert attention from the individualised dimension at work in the taking of offence. For example, representational analysis has enabled this project to observe some of the ways in which distinctions are made between 'Muslim' and 'non-Muslim' positions, or between 'secular' and 'religious' identities. In this respect, the response to the Danish cartoon controversy on the part of the British press homogenises how those who share an identity (in this instance, as 'Muslims') might construe and interpret 'offensiveness'. The newspaper editorials are, therefore, unanimous in their declaration that the cartoons are offensive to Muslims. This binary way of categorising entire groups can be observed more broadly in media and popular discourse surrounding the giving and taking of offence. For instance, disputes of offence are often understood as shaped by the competing interests and grievances of different groups so that categories like gender, class, ethnicity, or sexuality also become homogenised in ways which echo our conceptualization of religious identity. This in part is a reflection of the language of identity politics and of the power differentials it seeks to uncover, describe and challenge. However, this way of grouping together different identities may also obscure the diversity of opinion and experience *within* each group or amongst those who share a common identity.

The data analysis also draws attention to the ways in which the changing conditions of debate impact upon how disputes of offence are enacted and perceived. Firstly, this thesis suggests

that the emergence of new media technologies (such as the online opportunities for debate created by Twitter or Facebook) has contributed to an intensification of pre-existing discussion and social contestation around what might constitute 'offensiveness'. For example, the controversy arising from the decision by Maajid Nawaz to retweet a *Jesus and Mo* cartoon propelled various viewpoints and arguments into the foreground of media discourse. However, the argument over whether or not it is blasphemous to depict the prophet Muhammad in visual imagery predates both the creation of Twitter and the *Jesus and Mo* website. In this sense, although the creation of new discursive opportunities can be viewed as helping to amplify or intensify the discussion of particular arguments, it is more difficult to claim that the very nature of debate has changed as a consequence of the changing conditions in which it takes place[218].

Secondly, the emergence of new discursive spaces also provides a stronger voice and platform for those who may once have been side-lined or marginalised within the traditional mainstream media. Crucially, the relatively democratised nature of new media technologies (like Twitter or the blogosphere) encourages a multiplicity of voices to participate in the process of creating discourse. For example, the cartoons which appear on the *Jesus and Mo* website are unlikely to have been published within our national press (particularly in the years following the Danish cartoon controversy). Similarly, the controversies provoked by the web comic encourage us to recognise the diversity of opinion and dissenting voices which prevail *within* (as well as between) communities, and cautions against the homogenisation of those who share a common identity[219]. In summary, this chapter asserts that the significance of group membership and identity needs to be considered alongside the significance of this individualised dimension. It also aligns this with the regulatory power of the assertion of offence, whereby offence has become increasingly attached to the distress caused to our sense of selfhood or personal identity.

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[218] The idea that social media has exposed forms of discourse which once remained 'hidden' with our 'back-stage' selves is addressed by this thesis in Chapter Five using Goffman's dramaturgical model.

[219] This thesis has drawn attention to the diversity of opinion within groups or communities, however, it is also worth noting that this diversity of opinion will be influenced by the many factors which help to form an individuals' identity such as their gender, age, class or sexuality. When considering disputes of offence, therefore, it also worth considering the significance of the intersectionality of these different factors. For example, the arguably 'offensive' and 'non-PC' creation of the character *Vicky Pollard* (who appeared in the popular sketch show *Little Britain*) has been explored in light of her representation as both female and working class (see Lockyer; 2010:101-103).

Chapter 8. Conclusion

8.1 Introduction: 'the paradox of PC'

This project arose from an interest in the discursive formation of political correctness (PC) and in how the language of PC has become attached to an entire range of questions encompassing the politics of language, and disputes involving the giving and taking of offence. The central problem or paradox which initially guided the nature and direction of the research process is the largely disparaging way in which PC is typically viewed despite its purportedly progressive goals. The emergence of this paradox was examined in Chapter Two as part of a wider exploration of the discursive emergence of political correctness, including the different ways in which PC continues to be interpreted or understood. In pursuit of why this paradox has arisen, the project embarked on an examination of the available literature in Chapter Three which particularly sought to make sense of the overwhelmingly negative signification of PC. The chapter found that although this negative signification was largely attributed in the literature to a censorious component within political correctness (see e.g. D'Souza, 1991; Loury, 1994; Gitlin, 1997; Browne, 2006) there was little discussion of a further paradox: how does the powerful censoriousness which is attributed to PC co-exist alongside the popular expression and celebration within our wider culture of anti-PC rhetoric and sentiment? The focus of the research, therefore, expanded to also explore this paradox together with the tensions which continue to underlie how PC is understood as both a progressive political project *and* a censorious, or regressive, broader cultural phenomenon.

This final chapter will use the thesis findings to consider the contribution to knowledge this project has made. In doing so it demonstrates how this knowledge contributes to the insights and critical observations gained through advanced research within the field of cultural sociology. It will also suggest how further research within this field might build upon some of the findings it discusses. The chapter begins by appraising how successfully the research process has made use of the conceptualisation of PC as a floating signifier – an approach which was outlined near the beginning of the research process (see Chapter Two) in order to avoid the pitfalls associated with labelling particular examples of language or behaviour as 'PC' or 'non-PC'. Secondly, it briefly discusses what was learnt from the review of the literature undertaken in the third chapter in light of how this part of the thesis contributed to the formation of its core research objectives in Chapter Four. Thirdly, the chapter describes the knowledge gained from this project and how it contributes to the current literature. This will include a summary of the key research findings, including how they were obtained. Each

of the three core research questions are addressed in turn using the relevant knowledge acquired from the investigations undertaken in the data analysis chapters. This core section of the chapter (see Section 8.4) argues that although the thesis findings do not suggest that a liberal orthodoxy pervades throughout contemporary discourse, the rules of debate have nevertheless shifted to reflect wider social and political change regarding how we view social problems like racism or sexism. However, it also argues that the rules of debate remain temporal and contextual and that the varying levels of PC present (and absent) in different discursive contexts contributes to a culture of inconsistency and uncertainty over what might constitute 'offensiveness'. This section of the chapter will also argue that the focus in academic analysis and journalistic commentary on the relationship between disputes of offence and identity politics (especially the focus placed upon structural inequalities between different social groups) may overshadow the ways in which PC disputes contain an individualised component. In other words, the 'right to offend' and 'the right to be offended' are also increasingly grounded in the distinct ways in which individual identity is felt and exhibited. Finally, the chapter uses the implications of the thesis findings to suggest areas of future research. It suggests that in order to make sense of the disparate ways in which offence is understood, research might explore more directly the relationship between an audience and various 'offensive' forms of expression. This might involve questioning an audience about how they experience or understand the nature of 'offensiveness'.

8.2 '…political correctness [is] more easily recognised than defined…'[220]: How Political Correctness has been conceptualised throughout the thesis.

Though this project arose from its interest in how PC is discursively aligned to a range of arguments and practices, it has also found that the alignment of PC to some seemingly disparate phenomena has produced particular challenges when attempting to research and make sense of what political correctness might actually mean. Defining certain words or behaviour as 'PC' or 'non-PC' suggests that PC can be identified using a readily observable checklist of words or measureable criteria. However, this way of categorising words and behaviour is itself part of the discursive process through which PC has emerged and which this thesis has sought to explore. For this reason, from the outset, the project has approached PC as a floating cultural signifier which is attached to different things by different people,

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[220] This is taken from a longer quote by Hughes (2010:9) which describes the difficulties involved in defining political correctness.

within different discursive contexts. PC, therefore, has been understood throughout the research process as a mobile cultural signifier which might be aligned to a number of signifieds: (i) a new politics of language; (ii) an authoritarian movement to be mocked; and (iii) a new politics of identity and political activism. This way of viewing political correctness - which was advanced and developed in the genealogy chapter - has proven to be a useful way of exploring how various meaning(s) become attached to the concept and language of PC. In a similar sense, the notion of 'political incorrectness' has been viewed as a signifier for the repudiation of the new politics of language and identity or as concurring with the signification of PC as an authoritarian movement to be mocked. Despite having approached political correctness (and political incorrectness) this way, the research process has not always found it easy or possible to separate PC as a discursive construct from some of the tangible phenomena to which it is often attached. For example, the data sources have used some material which has been labelled in journalistic commentary as 'politically incorrect'. In describing particular jokes or instances of online discourse as 'politically incorrect' this thesis has also entered the labelling process although the jokes or phenomena it describes might be construed in any number of ways[221]. In this sense, the research process has reaffirmed the notion that PC is attached to a number of possible signifieds and that any overarching or conclusive definition of 'PC' is in practice difficult to sustain. However, this has also demonstrated that the very contestability of the label 'PC', together with its durability and elasticity as a powerful signifier of a range of phenomena, makes it worthy of in depth exploration.

8.3 'a censorious movement to be mocked'[222]: Linking the negative signification of PC to the literature review and research objectives.

Two overarching arguments made within the genealogy chapter helped to inform how the investigation of the literature was conducted. Firstly, the genealogical examination of the emergence of PC as a cultural signifier observed how PC was able to surface as an overarching label under which other signifiers (such as feminism or multiculturalism) could be placed and then viewed as constituting part of a 'new' broader political movement or hegemonic project. Secondly, many of the disputes or arguments which were discursively

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[221] For example, the subjective nature of humour means that there is no necessary consensus over what might make a joke 'politically incorrect' despite this thesis having labelled particular jokes this way.

[222] This is a reference to one of the principal ways in which this project has approached PC as a cultural signifier (see Chapter Two).

attached to political correctness - along with the people and practices identified as 'PC'- preceded the reification of PC in the early part of the 1990s[223]. What is crucial with regard to the process of reification is that PC emerged as a powerful way of disparaging those labelled 'politically correct': to be labelled thus was also to be labelled as 'intolerant', 'easily offended' or 'censorious'.

In view of this, the review of the literature in Chapter Three considered how academic analysis had made sense of the generally negative way in which PC is understood. Overwhelmingly, the negative signification of PC has been attributed in the literature to the censoriousness of PC rather than a repudiation of its purportedly progressive and non-discriminatory goals[224]. The studies examined also drew attention to what was viewed as the excessive prioritisation given by PC to the policing of 'offensive' words and language (see e.g. Ehrenreich, 1992; Hall, 1994). This general acceptance of the censorious nature of PC across the political spectrum suggested that further analysis might investigate whether, how and to what extent PC censoriousness *is* manifest today within different discursive contexts. Where substantial analysis had taken place it had tended to use the field of sociolinguistics to ascertain how language has acquired an increasingly key role in the struggle for social or political change (see e.g. Cameron, 1995; Lakoff, 2000). However, analysis had not typically focused upon the relationship between political correctness and representation more generally, or sought to account for the increasing newsworthiness of disputes over the giving and taking of offence within public life[225]. Furthermore, although the literature had discussed how PC had acquired an overwhelmingly negative signification, there was little direct exploration of the positive signification of political incorrectness or the appeal of politically incorrect forms of expression within some levels of discourse. Finally, despite the changing conditions of debate over recent decades - which have been generated by a range of factors including political, cultural, technological or legal change - a significant portion of the

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[223] For example, the examination in Chapter Two of the situation comedy *Till Death Us Do Part* demonstrates how what are often regarded as contemporary or 'PC' preoccupations over the nature of offence (in this case the use of racist language within popular entertainment) predate the emergence of the language of PC within everyday discourse.

[224] This position was articulated across the political spectrum within the available literature, including those on the political right (see e.g. D'Souza, 1991; Phillips, 1994) as well as various authors who self-identified as having a liberal-left political affiliation (see e.g. Hall, 1994; Loury, 1994; Gitlin, 1997). The idea that PC could not be legitimately associated with an excess of censoriousness was supported by only a minority of authors who both identified themselves as left leaning (see e.g. Wilson, 1995; Feldstein, 1997).

[225] In particular, there was little discussion in the available literature of the high profile given to disputes of offence within the reporting of stories as news.

literature was written as the language of PC initially emerged within mainstream discourse in the early part of the 1990s. This thesis, therefore, has attempted to address the relationship between the changing conditions of debate and how disputes of offence are produced and enacted today within a number of different levels of discourse.

8.4 Drawing conclusions regarding the 'paradox of PC'

8.4.1 '…political correctness…is liberal in its aims but often illiberal in its practices… (Hughes, 2010:4)':[226]Has PC generated a liberal orthodoxy?

The quote by Hughes which introduces this part of the chapter makes a familiar claim against PC which has guided how the first core research question (along with its sub-questions) was composed. The core question asked how are we to account for the meaning(s) attributed to PC, particularly the common assertion that it has engendered a form of liberal orthodoxy within wider society. In order to answer this core question, further sub-questions asked how a liberal orthodoxy might be identified and whether the conditions of debate suggested that particular viewpoints are precluded or stigmatised in any way. The final sub-question also asked what the nature of the relationship was between the discursive contexts in which discourse takes place and how the giving and taking of offence is more broadly understood. Chapter Five addressed the first research question and its sub-questions using case studies which drew upon source material embedded within the production and circulation of news. Using *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian* newspapers as data sources, the first case study rejected the assertion that a liberal-left or politically correct orthodoxy had taken hold across this area of the broadsheet media. However, it also identified different attitudes and approaches within each paper towards free expression which suggested that in particular circumstances the 'liberal' *Guardian* was more circumspect in its view of free expression than the 'conservative' *Telegraph*. This concluding chapter argues that the censorious element exposed within *The Guardian* emanates from a particular view of the role of power within society. This view of power largely concurs with the conceptualisation of language outlined by Cameron in the literature review which described language as a 'shaper of ideas' (1995:122) that has power to influence as well as reflect broader attitudes and structural inequalities.

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[226] This is taken from a longer quote addressing the meaning of PC within the book *A History of Semantics and Culture* by Hughes (2010:4).

In order to identify how the paradox of a 'liberal orthodoxy' might be recognised, the first case study considered whether there was a consensus or uniformity across all four articles used as source material which adhered to a liberal-left political agenda[227]. In view of how PC is a signifier for a politics of language and a censorious movement to be mocked, the study also looked for evidence of the preclusion of particular viewpoints or 'illiberal' utterances within the content of each article. Unsurprisingly, as a newspaper which identifies itself with the politics of the modern liberal-left, *The Guardian* articles expressed support for anti-racist principles and greater social equality. However, both articles were also reticent in their commitment to free expression in circumstances where they felt this might reinforce social inequalities or forms of social stereotyping. Most notably, cartoons which had recently appeared in the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* were criticised for reinforcing anti-Muslim prejudice[228]. Both *Guardian* articles also displayed a concern with 'offensive' forms of expression or representation: the aforementioned satirical cartoons and the sale of golliwog toys at a seaside arcade. In this sense the articles demonstrate why a paradox remains at the heart of how PC continues to be understood. In other words, the study showed how the 'liberal' aim of anti-discrimination becomes aligned with the 'illiberal' practice of precluding 'incorrect' speech or forms of expression.

Viewed in isolation, the source material from *The Guardian* suggested why PC might be viewed more broadly as having inculcated a form of liberal orthodoxy within our mainstream media. However, this position was more difficult to sustain when viewed alongside the source material from *The Daily Telegraph*. Both *Telegraph* articles explicitly denounced 'political correctness' on the grounds that it was responsible for suppressing free speech and proscribing 'incorrect' viewpoints. However, the study also found that any suppression of 'incorrect' viewpoints was asserted rather than demonstrated in both articles. For example, whilst expressing the view that Islamist terrorism is a fundamental threat to Western values, the *Telegraph* journalist, Peter Mullen, simultaneously referred to how his views had 'long remained unsayable' because they were not 'PC'. Furthermore, although both *Telegraph* articles declared their hostility towards political correctness, they nevertheless partook in the

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[227] By using the term 'liberal-left' I mean to refer broadly to the principles associated with the contemporary political left which have emerged from identity politics over recent decades (including principles such as anti-racism, opposition to homophobia or support for group rights).

[228] The article had commented on the decision of the magazine to print cartoons of the prophet Muhammad in 2012 following the violent protests against the anti-Islamic film 'The Innocence of Muslims' (see Chapter Five).

taking of offence, a proclivity more commonly attributed to the 'politically correct'. However, rather than expressing offence at racism or other forms of prejudice, *The Telegraph* journalists were offended by number of other targets, many of which they described as 'politically correct'. These targets included the 'biased' news coverage of the *BBC*; '*Guardianistas*'; the politician George Galloway and supporters of Julian Assange[229].

Although the research findings rejected the idea that a liberal orthodoxy pervades contemporary broadsheet journalism, this concluding chapter nevertheless argues that the findings reaffirmed the claim that liberal principles may become attached to censorious practices[230]. In the articles examined in *The Guardian* newspaper, censoriousness arose from an aversion to causing offence to groups considered to be less powerful or discriminated against in some way. Causing offence (as a consequence of the use of 'offensive' forms of expression or the sale of racist items like golliwog dolls) was also felt to contribute to underlying structural inequalities and wider patterns of discrimination between different groups[231]. In this respect, this conclusion suggests that as the distinction between tangible discrimination against people (in terms of, for example, the unequal treatment of different groups) and what is considered to be offensive to some people has become less clear, social contestation over the nature of offence has simultaneously intensified.

However, this thesis also argues that the critique of PC has a propensity to conflate cultural or linguistic change which has been led by real change in attitudes towards social problems like racism or sexism with the imposition of a new form of censoriousness or orthodoxy of thought and expression. For example, the review of the literature outlined studies which critiqued PC as a phenomenon which closes down debate through the misuse of labels such as *racism* or *homophobia* (see e.g. Green; 2006; Browne, 2006). However, the disapproval of golliwog dolls expressed in *The Guardian* article mirrors an increasing lack of acceptance of racism or racist imagery more broadly within society. In other words, the disavowal of racist forms of expression or representation does not necessarily arise from a 'liberal' form of

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[229] In the newspaper articles the BBC and Guardian are directly criticised for their 'political correctness' (see Chapter Five).

[230] This argument is made explicitly by Hughes (2010) at the start of this part of the chapter, however, it is an argument which has been reiterated more generally in the case against PC examined in the literature review (see e.g. Hall, 1994; Loury, 1994; Gitlin, 1997)

[231] For example, *The Guardian* also referred to how police had taken action against those displaying golliwog dolls on the grounds that they incited racial hatred. [Online] Available at: http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/sep/21/golliwogs-vile-throwback-tory-mps (Accessed 8th January 2015)

censorship which is imposed upon an otherwise 'illiberal' majority. Nevertheless, the subjective and contestable nature of offence also suggests why PC remains discursively aligned with censorious practices. The view that cartoons in the magazine *Charlie Hebdo* are 'unhelpful' (see Chapter Five) embodies the equivocal approach towards free expression which is sometimes attributed to PC. In this instance, *The Guardian* article directly linked the cartoons to wider anti-Islamic feeling across Europe. However, this position also invites further consideration of how forms of expression or representation come to be regarded more generally as 'offensive' to entire groups[232]. This matter is revisited in the conclusions drawn from the third research question to be discussed in this final chapter. However, the conclusions drawn from the first research question begin to suggest that our concern with the structural inequalities between different groups may have encouraged a homogenised or generalised view of what members of different groups deem to be 'offensive'.

In the review of the literature (see Chapter Three) PC is also overwhelmingly viewed as having emerged from the politics of the liberal-left. Although this project explored how the politically left-leaning *Guardian* has critiqued 'offensive' forms of expression, it has also explored how *The Telegraph* has taken offence over a range of disparate matters and concerns. In this sense, although the journalists writing in both newspapers were offended by different things, the taking of offence became the manner in which their arguments were made. This conclusion therefore recommends that our understanding of disputes of offence is broadened so that opposition to political correctness (as deployed in *The Telegraph* articles) is recognised as sharing a propensity to take offence more typically attributed to the 'PC' liberal-left. Furthermore, both *Telegraph* articles also stigmatised opposing viewpoints through their use of the negative signification of PC. Ironically, therefore, the accusation of 'political correctness' has become a strategy for precluding or stigmatising 'PC' opinions in a way which mirrors the censorious practices ascribed to PC.

The first research question was also interested in considering how the discursive context in which debate takes place impacts upon its rules and conditions including how the giving or taking of offence is more widely understood. The second case study, therefore, undertook an analysis of a different form of political discourse at work within the institutional setting of

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[232] This issue with specific regard to the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons was powerfully reignited following the murder of *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists in Paris in January 2015. One of the principal issues discussed following the killings has been whether some of the cartoons used in the magazine were racist.

Parliament. It argued that within this formal setting demonstrable support for any form of prejudice was discouraged by those MPs engaged in political debate. However, it also argued that the language of PC had helped to create a less readable discursive environment rather than one in which a liberal orthodoxy is rigorously adhered to or reinforced. The study produced a thematic examination of the various arguments made by Members of Parliament involved in the debate in the House of Commons in 2013 which led to the legalisation of same sex marriage. It found that arguments both for and against the bill relied chiefly upon the themes of equality, rights and discrimination in order to support their case. Crucially, throughout the parliamentary debate, MPs opposed to same sex marriage were nevertheless eager to distance themselves from accusations of homophobia. In other words, MPs holding an arguably 'non-PC' opinion expressed this opinion within a discursive context which reflected the outcome of a lengthier process of linguistic, social and political change independent of the debate itself. In this respect, this concluding chapter argues that the language of PC *has* changed the conditions of debate in that politicians are unwilling or unable to make demonstrably homophobic pronouncements[233]. However, within the House of Commons, the conditions of debate on this occasion also permitted different voices to be heard and MPs did not seek to preclude any particular opinion from discussion.

Nevertheless, many MPs opposed to same sex marriage argued that their views were unfairly stigmatised by their political opponents as 'homophobic' and 'bigoted'. In this respect, the rules of debate were felt by some politicians to discourage the expression of an unpopular viewpoint held by a minority of the politicians present. This is important because it illustrates how the belief that viewpoints are stigmatised contributes to our preoccupation with 'offensiveness' together with the expansion of victimhood. In the literature review, Browne (2006), Green (2006) and Saunders (2011) described how opinion is policed and viewpoints precluded in order to gain political advantage through claiming the status of 'victimhood'. These authors have described PC as a product of identity politics in which 'victimhood' is asserted in order to silence political opponents or stigmatise them as bigots. However, the second case study found that many MPs who opposed the same sex marriage bill also adopted a language of victimhood in order to support their position. Conservative authors such as Green (2006) have argued that victimhood is generated through the misapplication of words such as *homophobia* directed towards the purportedly *homophobic* in order to discredit

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[233] Chapter Five provided an examination of how mainstream British politicians are less able or willing to rely on homophobic arguments than was once the case.

them. However, this thesis argues that the debate in Parliament demonstrates how those *labelled* as homophobic may also constitute part of a wider propensity to draw upon 'victim status' (Green, 2006:45) as a way of making a point or argument. In this instance those opposed to same sex marriage constitute the 'victim group' as a consequence of holding an unpopular or politically incorrect opinion. The Literature Review chapter has highlighted how the conceptualisation of victimhood developed by Green (2006) downplayed the significance of inequalities such as racism or sexism within modern society. However, this concluding chapter also argues that strategies more typically attributed to the 'politically correct' are identifiable when observing the way in which politically incorrect viewpoints are articulated. In other words, the use of victimhood is a strategy which resonates beyond what is commonly recognised as 'PC' opinion.

The research findings from the first two case studies rejected the view that PC had imposed a liberal orthodoxy across contemporary discourse, whilst also accepting that the rules of debate within formal political discourse had shifted to accommodate wider social and political change regarding how we view racism, sexism or homophobia. This concluding chapter has also suggested that the assertion of offence and language of victimhood is not exclusively utilised by people and practices typically labelled 'PC'. Instead, it argues that these strategies are also adopted by those who pronounce their opposition to political correctness or express viewpoints which would be regarded more generally as politically incorrect.

The third case study undertaken in the news discourse chapter began to address how technological changes have influenced the nature of debate and it is therefore revisited in more detail in Section 8.4.3 of this chapter. Its findings, however, echoed the general unwillingness to endorse racism or homophobia in any way within the context of formal political discourse. The study had explored discourses of offensiveness and drew upon the BBC news coverage of the 'Twitter Storm' arising from the appointment in 2013 of England and Wales's first Youth Police and Crime Commissioner, Paris Brown. The *BBC* reporting of Paris's tweets lends weight to the assertion that particular viewpoints or attitudes are today discouraged within 'official' forms of discourse. In this instance, the discouraged viewpoints included tweets deemed to be racist, sexist and homophobic. However, the third case study also drew attention to the difference between what is regarded as acceptable within the relatively 'formal' context of news reporting and what might be commonplace within

everyday discourse. In doing so it highlighted the endurance of politically incorrect language on the social media site *Twitter* – a site which has become notorious for its contribution to the generation and discussion of disputes over the giving and taking of offence. In examining the relationship between the nature of debate and the context in which it is held, the study made use of the distinction between our front stage and back stage selves - a notion advanced by Goffman (1959) in his dramaturgical model of social interaction. The case study argued that what may once have remained largely confined to our one-to-one interactions or our 'back stage' selves has now acquired a presence and permanency on the 'front stage' as a consequence of the use of sites such as *Twitter*. In the case of the Paris Brown *Twitter Storm,* one level of discourse (the 'formal' world of news reporting) expressed a disavowal of another level of discourse (the 'informal' or less regulated world of social media). Paris's tweets demonstrate that politically incorrect utterances continue to form a part of everyday social interaction despite the shifting conditions of debate described in this thesis. In view of this, the second research question sought to account for the purpose and appeal of politically incorrect forms of expression.

8.4.2 'My favourite noise in comedy is the laugh followed by the sharp intake of breath'[234]: What is the appeal of politically incorrect discourse?

Despite the increasing intolerance of racist or homophobic language outlined in the previous part of this chapter, the second research question directly addressed the enduring presence and allure of politically incorrect forms of expression within some levels of discourse. The thesis therefore asked how we should characterise or identify political incorrectness and account for its popularity within some discursive contexts. In view of the aforementioned disdain for racist or homophobic language, it also asked what strategies enable politically incorrect language and rhetoric to nevertheless continue to be accepted or legitimised. Finally, the project asked whether any overarching meaning could account for its appeal. The thesis chose to answer these questions primarily through an examination of contemporary popular British comedy - undertaken in Chapter Six - for two principal reasons. Firstly, contemporary comedy has produced various forms of humour described as 'politically incorrect' within popular or journalistic discourse. Secondly, comedy can be distinguished

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[234] This quote is from Jimmy Carr and is taken from a newspaper interview in 2009 in which he discussed his style of humour, especially in view of the offence generated by a joke he had made that year about the Paralympics. (The joke was examined in Chapter Six). [Online] Available at: http://www.ablehere.com/latest-disability-news/275-paralympics-joke-was-totally-acceptable.html (Accessed 27th January 2015)

both from the 'formal' nature of political discourse explored in the previous case studies, and from the 'informal' and relatively unregulated nature of discourse generated by social media. Popular comedy therefore widened the scope of the project to include a different level of discourse from that previously considered in Chapter Five.

The research findings concluded that political incorrectness had emerged as a signifier which is attached to a number of meaning(s). (In this respect, the label mirrors how political correctness has been understood throughout this project as a floating cultural signifier). The label 'politically incorrect' is therefore generally attached to the rejection or critique of the politics of language and of identity previously outlined in the genealogy chapter (Chapter Two). However, Chapter Six also argued that the appeal of humour described in journalistic discourse as 'politically incorrect' could not be reduced to any singular meaning or one set of associations. Instead, it claimed that humour popularly described as 'politically incorrect' signified a polyphony of voices: (i) those which critiqued or drew attention to social problems like racism or sexism rather than celebrated them; (ii) those that used irony carefully as a way of rehabilitating racist or sexist content and/or deflecting critique of it, and (iii) those which unambiguously celebrated the expression of politically incorrect utterances. The thesis also argued that a comic performance may move between different voices making any overarching reading of its meaning difficult to obtain.

In view of these findings, this concluding chapter argues that the language of PC has contributed to the emergence of a more complex and less readable discursive environment. (In this sense, the findings concur with the analysis previously undertaken of parliamentary discourse in which politicians are described as using the language of PC in order to support the 'non-PC' position of opposition to same sex marriage). However, the meaning of language embedded within the comic discourse examined in this project is clouded in different ways. Rather than using the language of PC to legitimise politically incorrect beliefs or positions, comic 'incorrectness' has become legitimised as a consequence of our underlying assumptions about the essentially 'correct' values of a comic performer and their audience. In other words, the use or assertion of irony has become a tool with which politically incorrect utterances maintain the potential to be legitimised, rehabilitated and immunised from critique. In this respect, the comedy chapter reaffirmed the position taken in the literature review with regard to the rehabilitative power of irony to legitimise 'offensive' material (see e.g. Finding, 2008; Hunt, 2010).

However, this thesis has also suggested that notions of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' forms of 'offensive' humour are increasingly attached to *who* tells and enjoys a particular joke or performance as well as *what* the joke is, or *how* it is told. It used Bourdieu's capital theory in order to account for this and support its claim that a comic (or audience) in possession of higher levels of cultural capital is generally granted greater freedom to engage in and enjoy non-PC humour[235]. Higher access to cultural capital resources, therefore, helped explain why Jimmy Carr is thought of as 'edgy' whilst Chubby Brown is simply 'offensive'. Firstly, Brown was found to lack the various symbolic markers[236] which have helped legitimise the 'offensive' comedy of Carr. These markers included Jimmy Carr's ubiquitous media profile, his acquisition of respected comedy awards and self-identified status as a 'liberal'. Secondly, although Brown is a very popular comedian, he was found to lack the social capital[237] which has enabled Jimmy Carr to maintain his prominent media profile. Thirdly, the use of linguistic capital (the ability to use language - such as speech patterns or dialects - viewed more broadly as legitimate) also legitimised the 'offensive' comedy of Carr and enabled him to be perceived as 'edgy', 'challenging' and 'dark' where Brown was viewed as simply 'crude' or 'regressive'. Crucially, cultural capital also gave post-alternative comics (like Jimmy Carr or Frankie Boyle) the skills and knowledge to distinguish between which politically incorrect jokes remained truly taboo and which could be rehabilitated as 'edgy' or 'challenging'[238].

The higher cultural capital resources of the post-alternative comic, therefore, were found to be transmutable into a wider social acceptance of a comic's 'ironic offensiveness' irrespective of how a joke is told or constructed. To demonstrate this, the project used examples which illustrated how comedians have become progressively more confident to remove irony from the joke telling process itself. For example, Chapter Six discussed the now infamous joke told by Frankie Boyle on his 2010 Channel Four show *Tramadol Nights*

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[235] Cultural capital refers to the values, dispositions and knowledge which give people advantages within society. Chapter 4 outlined capital theory in more depth before Chapter 6 used it to help answer the second research question.

[236] Symbolic markers are acquired from symbolic capital which refers to the advantages accrued through status or reputation (see Chapters 4 and 6).

[237] Social capital refers to the advantages gained from valuable connections between groups or individuals (see Chapters 4 and 6).

[238] For example, the comedy chapter pointed to how 'edgy' comedians were generally happier to engage with some 'taboo' topics rather than others. In particular, white stand-up comedians remained cautious of material which might be construed as racist.

about Harvey Price. In this joke, the presence of irony rested upon the assumptions made about Frankie Boyle as a performer, including how he and his humour should be interpreted. This is significant as it suggested that our understanding of irony has become less dependent upon how carefully irony is signposted within the construction of a joke and more about *who* tells or enjoys the joke. Of course, the aforementioned joke *did* cause offence to many people, as have other 'offensive' jokes told by contemporary 'edgy' comedians. Nevertheless, the post alternative comics explored in this thesis are also mainstream figures who are defended as 'dark' or 'taboo-breaking' – a defence rarely made for the obviously 'unenlightened' pre-PC comic.

Using Bourdieu's capital theory, the comedy chapter therefore concluded that comedy labelled as 'offensive' or 'politically incorrect' is granted legitimacy where it is assumed that the post-alternative comic and their audience possess the cultural capital skills which with to distinguish between 'edgy' comedy which is 'ironic' and the straightforwardly regressive humour of the 'pre-PC' comic like Chubby Brown. However, although capital theory allows us to make sense of why some forms of 'offensive' humour are legitimised, how can we account for the emergence in recent years of the 'new offensiveness' explored in Chapter Six? In other words, why have a cluster of legitimised forms of 'offensive' comedy become so popular at this particular point in the post-alternative comedy era, especially in view of our wider social disavowal of racist, sexist or homophobic discourse? This concluding chapter argues that two underlying conditions have made this possible. Firstly, it suggests that the use of irony (either as a way of critiquing forms of bigotry or deflecting criticism of contentious material) has acted as a gateway for humour which chooses to remove irony from the *process* of joke telling and appears superficially to allow the 'old' offensiveness to morph into the 'new'. Within this discursive climate, it is increasingly difficult to ascertain what meanings(s) really underlie 'ironically' sexist or homophobic material. The comedy chapter began with an historical overview of the relationship between PC and British comedy in which it outlined overarching shifts within British comedy which it mapped as 'pre-PC', 'PC' and 'post-PC' eras. This mapping exercise also recognised how popular comedy in the 'post-PC' era has deployed irony in order to discuss or ridicule racism, homophobia or sexism whilst ensuring that the basic principles of anti-racism or anti-sexism remained in place. This concluding chapter argues that this provided a point of emergence from which the modern 'edgy' comic could appear and create a form of humour which is less careful to signpost irony:

nevertheless, such humour has continued to be defended as 'ironic' whilst objections to it are dismissed as ill-founded or as 'missing the point'.

The second condition which made the 'new offensiveness' possible is our 'official' acceptance of principles such as non-racism or non-sexism (as observed in the case studies examined in the news discourse chapter of this thesis). The comedy chapter used Bakhtinian dialogism to explore whether contemporary 'edgy' comedy could be regarded as a playful subversion of principles like these. The research findings claimed that discourse surrounding political correctness has enabled jokes which would once have been viewed as problematic to be discursively rehabilitated as transgressive or 'edgy'. The findings also cautioned against viewing comedy which unambiguously targets those less powerful as challenging or carnivalesque. This concluding chapter suggests that the process of discursively rehabilitating jokes which target those less powerful as 'edgy' or 'subversive' has contributed to a wider confusion in society about what might constitute 'offensiveness'. Ironically, the 'acceptable incorrectness' of the post-alternative comedian is attributed at least partially to the broader triumph of political correctness. In other words, because shifting attitudes have made us aware that homophobia or sexism are unacceptable, utterances which appear to be superficially homophobic or sexist lose their power to reinforce prejudice. Of course this also rests upon the assumption that we *do* all share a common disdain for homophobia or sexism. It also presents a problem when we seek to account for the appeal of politically incorrect humour. The methodological framework adopted by this thesis eschewed the use of interviews or other methods of directly questioning how an audience might view some of the comic material it has used as data. Instead, it has undertaken a thorough analysis of the social practices at work which help legitimise or stigmatise 'offensive' comedy and considered how humour popularly identified as 'politically incorrect' becomes attached to a number of different meanings. However, this research process has also reaffirmed that there is no easy way of discerning whether (or to what extent) an audience views a superficially sexist or homophobic joke 'ironically' regardless of whether that joke is told by the 'edgy' post-alternative comedian or the 'old school' comic such as Chubby Brown. This is particularly pertinent in view of the previously described shift in the nature of comic discourse defended as 'ironic'. How, for example, do we know that an 'edgy' audience who laugh at jokes which unambiguously rely upon negative stereotyping or the targeting of those less powerful does so ironically?

It is worth reflecting upon the conclusions made in this part of the chapter by considering briefly a Twitter Storm which arose in November 2014 concerning the 'offensive' humour of the comedian 'Dapper Laughs'[239]. Dapper Laughs has caused offence primarily because of the misogynistic content of much of his material[240]. Unlike Chubby Brown he is a young comedian and therefore not a product of the pre-alternative comedy (or 'pre-PC') era: similarly, the audience Dapper Laughs was able to attract through social media are overwhelmingly young adults. Both the initial popularity of Dapper Laughs and the backlash he subsequently generated force this thesis to reflect upon some of the general assumptions and arguments drawn upon in this concluding chapter. Firstly, the sudden demise of O'Reilly's career as a consequence of the offence he caused demonstrates that today's comedians are not immune from censure despite the increasing elasticity with which the 'irony' defence is invoked. Although O'Reilly has posthumously defended Dapper Laughs as a 'character' act rather than a straightforward endorsement of 'laddish' or misogynistic values he has not generally been able to utilise the defence of irony as successfully as other contemporary comics. Secondly, allowing for the subjective nature of offence (together with the subjective nature of what might constitute 'good' or credible comedy), the inability of O'Reilly to successfully rely upon the defence of irony reaffirms how legitimised forms of 'offensive' comedy are attached to cultural capital resources. O'Reilly lacks the linguistic capital to convince that he is 'edgy' or 'challenging' and the young audience he acquired via social media are generally working class and therefore less likely to be credited with the cultural capital skills required to appreciate 'edgy' comedy[241]. Thirdly, the assumption that we share a disdain for sexist or regressive values is problematized as a consequence of our greater exposure to people's 'back-stage' selves through social media sites like Twitter. The

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[239] 'Dapper Laughs' is the performing name of comedian Daniel O'Reilly. Dapper Laughs became known through social networking and social media sites (including Facebook, Twitter and the video sharing service, Vine). He acquired a significant following on social media and in September 2014 he was also given his own show on ITV2 entitled *Dapper Laughs: On the Pull.* Following a tweet posted by Dapper Laughs in which he complained about a poor review he had received, a Twitter Storm took place involving his fans and those offended by his misogynistic jokes and 'laddish' brand of humour. An online petition requesting ITV to drop his show also gathered over 68000 signatures. In November 2014 ITV announced they would not be renewing *Dapper Laughs: On the Pull* and a forthcoming tour was also cancelled. O'Reilly also announced that he was 'retiring' the character Dapper Laughs in view of the offence he had caused although he has subsequently posted a video on You Tube resurrecting the character.

[240] His humour has also included homophobic and racist references, although these have been less central to his act.

[241] This factor has been alluded to in some of the journalistic commentary on the moral controversy surrounding Dapper Laughs. For example, whilst critical of his comedy, Hugo Rifkind also points out 'his fans are predominantly young, white working-class men; a part of society outperformed by almost every other. When they leer at women in the street, chances are those women have far better prospects than they do'. [Online] Available at: http://www.spectator.co.uk/columnists/hugo-rifkind/9367042/you-shouldnt-watch-dapper-laughs-but-you-really-shouldnt-let-the-likes-of-me-stop-you/ (Accessed 27th January 2015)

problem of internet 'trolling' (which encompasses various forms of verbal abuse) has generated much discussion in the 21st century. In the Twitter Storm arising from the case of Dapper Laughs, it is doubtful that the sexist attitudes expressed by fans of Dapper Laughs on Twitter - including the vituperative way in which many were expressed - can be dismissed as largely 'ironic'.

Chapter Five of this thesis described how the conditions of debate within 'official' forms of discourse (such as parliamentary discourse) discouraged any apparent support for racist or otherwise 'incorrect' viewpoints. The 'officialdom' of PC, therefore, helped this project make sense of why some of the comedy explored in Chapter Six is felt to be subversive or 'edgy'. Meanwhile, the label 'politically incorrect' continues to be used as a signifier for a range of comic voices. Within the ironic context in which these voices speak, this conclusion also argues that the intention of a joke along with how it is understood by an audience is not always clear. More broadly, this ambiguity of meaning contributes to wider social contestation and confusion about what is or is not 'offensive'. In order to make sense of this ambiguity and confusion it may be worth considering in more depth the myriad of ways in which offence is taken or understood by different people.

8.4.3 'Offence, both given and received, hinges on the dynamic conflict between values, held by different cultures, groups, individuals or generations.' (Rowson, 2009:5): Why are we preoccupied with disputes of offence?

The third research question continued to explore our concern with disputes of offence, particularly in light of the changing conditions of debate over recent decades. In doing so, it sought to build upon some of the matters raised in the research findings previously outlined: in particular, it continued to observe the social contestation arising from the contextual and subjective nature of 'offensiveness'. The third core research question, therefore, asked how we should make sense of our enduring preoccupation with the giving and taking of offence, including the discussion this generates within the mainstream media. The first sub-question asked what the relationship is between the nature of debate surrounding 'offensiveness' and the changing conditions of debate – especially those driven by new media technologies. Finally, the second sub-question asked whether the participatory character of many discursive spaces has helped to facilitate a culture of competing rights surrounding the giving and taking of offence. The cartoon chapter (Chapter Seven) directly explored the issues raised by the

third research question and its sub-questions, although the knowledge obtained from all three data chapters has contributed to the research findings and conclusions outlined in this final part of the thesis.

The research findings suggest that our preoccupation with disputes of offence is sustained by various factors, some of which co-exist in a symbiotic manner with one another. Firstly, Chapter Seven argued that the assertion of offence has acquired a regulatory power over the rules of debate which may be used to discourage unfavourable or 'offensive' forms of expression[242]. The chapter also suggested that the assertion of offence is especially powerful as it may be taken as grounds for *why* something is accepted as offensive more generally. In this respect, the assertion of offence becomes a way of creating discursive closure around a particular issue or point of discussion. However, the attempt to create discursive closure may also generate disquiet precisely because the nature of offence remains highly contestable and subjective. The quotation from the cartoonist Martin Rowson at the start of this part of the chapter draws attention to how the giving and taking of offence rests upon a 'conflict between values' held by different people. This thesis has previously noted how some forms of expression have become less socially acceptable as a consequence of changing values which have emerged from broader social and political change[243]. However, as there is no overall consensuses regarding the acceptability of many contentious forms of expression, disputes of offence continue to preoccupy us.

The literature has generally focused on how PC has contributed to an increased sensitivity surrounding the giving of offence within the public arena (see e.g. Loury, 1994; Gitlin, 1997; Browne, 2006). This might be observable in the way in which MPs wished not to be viewed as homophobic or bigoted in anyway in the parliamentary discussion examined in Chapter Five. However, much of the comic discourse used as data in this project explicitly rejected contemporary fears concerning the giving of offence. This conclusion argues, therefore, that our preoccupation with the nature of offence is also sustained by the assertion of the right to offend. It suggests that although our 'official' selves may have developed a greater sensitivity about how we should speak or interact with others, the celebration of 'the right to offend' within some levels of discourse has also helped to sustain moral controversies and social

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[242] For example, the cartoon chapter described how the cartoonist Martin Rowson had been criticised for anti-Semitism as a consequence of having drawn cartoons which were critical of Israeli policy in the middle-east.

[243] For example, Section 8.4.1 discusses how golliwog dolls are generally viewed by today's generation as racist.

dilemma regarding what utterances should or should not be socially acceptable. For example, Chapter Six recognised how many disputes of offence arising from contemporary controversial comedy arose from the use of humour which would once have been marginalised as regressive in the post-alternative comedy era[244]. In this respect, these disputes are embedded within a discursive environment which has arguably become *less* PC in recent years.[245] The controversies arising from non-PC comedy, therefore, cannot necessarily or solely be attributed to our increased sensitivity surrounding the use of racist or sexist language. Instead, these controversies are also discursively aligned with the rehabilitation of non-PC forms of humour as 'edgy' or 'taboo-breaking'. This project views this rehabilitation - which is underpinned by the (re)assertion of the right to offend in the 'post-PC' comedy era - as an important factor which sustains the newsworthiness of disputes of offence. In this respect, our preoccupation with offence is bolstered by contemporary discourse - such as that of the 'edgy' comedian - which revels in the symbiotic relationship between the giving and taking of offence. More generally, the comic 'incorrectness' observed in this project forms part of a wider social and discursive practice in which 'daring to offend' is celebrated as an important victory for freedom of speech and expression under a presumed PC orthodoxy[246].

The relationship between the changing conditions of debate - particularly those which have emerged as a consequence of new media technologies - and the nature of debate has also been addressed in this project[247]. This conclusion has discussed how the Paris Brown Twitter Storm illustrates that our 'back stage' and 'front stage' selves (and thereby our 'private' and 'public' selves) are increasingly entwined. The emergence of new media technologies has therefore placed discourse which was once primarily retained within the 'back stage' into the 'front stage' and therefore the wider public arena. Social media has undoubtedly contributed to our preoccupation with 'offensiveness' as it has provided a relatively unregulated space within which people are encouraged to participate in discussion and argument. In this respect, social media has provided people with more opportunity both to offend and be offended.

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[244] I am referring here particularly to some of the forms of comedy described as 'edgy' in journalistic discourse which celebrate the use of politically incorrect rhetoric and remove irony from the process of joke telling.

[245] Of course, the comedy chapter also discussed at length how modern 'incorrectness' is nevertheless defended as 'ironic' or 'knowing'.

[246] The celebration of the non-PC as 'freedom-loving' and 'anti-authoritarian' can be observed within popular culture beyond the humour used as data in this project. For instance, the sacking of *Top Gear* presenter Jeremy Clarkson by the BBC in March 2015 (following an incident in which he physically attacked a *Top Gear* producer) contributed to his reputation amongst many as an anti-establishment figure out of step with the 'PC' credentials of his employer. This reputation has been sustained by many 'incorrect' utterances Clarkson has made throughout his career.

[247] It is worth noting, for example, that many of the moral controversies provoked by modern comedy have acquired a high media profile in part as a consequence of the activity they have generated on social media.

However, the emergence of social media may have helped to intensify prior arguments - or provided them with greater exposure - rather than necessarily indicate any fundamental shift in how the positions people hold are formed as a direct consequence of their engagement with new discursive spaces[248]. This conclusion, therefore, suggests that the changing conditions of debate allow us to observe more directly some of the positions which arise regarding a controversial issue together with how these positions are articulated[249]. Importantly, the democratised nature of social media also foregrounds the diversity of opinions there might be regarding a particular issue of social contestation.

This exposure to a range of opinion is potentially illuminating in light of the conclusions drawn in the cartoon chapter. The chapter argued that representational practices may contribute to the apparent homogenisation of how those who share a particular identity might define or interpret the nature of 'offensiveness'. To demonstrate this it considered how distinctions were made between 'Muslim' and 'non-Muslim' identities during the process of news reporting. Using Hall's representation theory, the data analysis found that British newspaper editorials in the aftermath of the Danish Cartoon Crisis represented Muslim opinion as monolithic and irrevocably distinct from the values upheld by non-Muslims. The data analysis also suggested that this binary way of viewing social difference weakens our ability to recognise how opinion is diverse, instead encouraging us to view opinion as largely reducible to the position presumed to be taken by a wider social group who share a common identity. An important consequence of the user generated nature of social media is that it alerts us to this diversity of opinion and problematizes the binary way of viewing social difference which is sometimes reinforced by representational practices at work within traditional forms of media.

This project therefore suggests that disputes of offence should be understood as containing an individualised dimension which sits alongside a wider dimension encompassing the politics of group membership and group identity. In doing so, it argues that structural factors involving power differentials between different groups continue to underpin disputes arising from the giving or taking of offence on grounds such as racism, religious identity or

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[248] This of course is not to say that opinions are not formed or influenced by communication via social media. Rather that social media has become another vehicle or means through which opinion is exchanged and explored.

[249] Although this thesis has argued that social media allows us to explore its users' opinions and gives access to people's 'back stage' selves, it also acknowledges that it only grants access to the 'back stage' selves users are prepared to share with others.

homophobia. In this sense, the struggles over the use of language or representation which have been explored in this project represent a wider struggle over who has power in society. The imbalance of power which the politics of language and identity has sought to challenge continues to be reflected in our everyday usage and understanding of concepts like *racism, sexism* or *homophobia*. However, the significance of group rights (including what might be considered 'offensive' to a particular group) should be explored alongside the diversity of opinion which exists within and across different groups regarding what is or is not 'offensive'. In addition, any analysis of power differentials between different groups should also recognise the complexities of power struggles *within* a group or between those who share a common identity[250].

The critique of PC described in the literature review and investigated in the main body of this thesis has, however, chosen to focus largely upon a different understanding of the significance of power. This understanding has been less interested in how language may be used to reinforce power differentials between different social groups and instead has focused upon how taking offence has the power to control what can and cannot be said. Examination of some of the data sources used in this project has reaffirmed how taking offence allows a regulatory power to be exercised over the rules of debate[251]. Our preoccupation with the giving or receiving of offence, therefore, remains embedded in the complex relationship between different ways of viewing the power of language. However, this project also suggests that we consider more closely how notions of group rights or victimhood are utilised to regulate debate. PC has typically been viewed in the literature as involving the avoidance of language or behaviour deemed as 'offensive' or detrimental to historically disadvantaged groups (see e.g. Hall, 1994; Loury; 1994; Green, 2006). However, the research findings reveal that the assertion of offence is utilised in more complex and variable ways. For example, Chapter Five observed how politicians opposed to same sex marriage adopted a language of victimhood in order to support their position in the parliamentary debate on this issue. It also observed how religious rights were invoked by different politicians in order to both support and oppose the legalisation of same sex marriage. In these instances, the language of victimhood was adopted by those *opposed* to a policy intended to engender

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[250] For example, the cartoon chapter recognised how British Muslims responded in different ways to the publication (and subsequent non-publication) of the Danish cartoons of the prophet Muhammad. However, despite this, British national newspapers represented Muslim opinion as homogenous.

[251] The regulatory power of offence taking has been explored more directly in the cartoon chapter. However, this is a trend which can be observed more generally in campaigns to inhibit the expression of unfavourable viewpoints of forms of expression.

greater legal and social equality, and religious rights cited to support conflicting opinions. This conclusion, therefore, contends that the discourse surrounding PC - including that which encompasses our preoccupation with group identity and the politics of language - may overshadow how the 'right to offend' or 'to take offence' are also attached to the many ways in which individual identity is felt and experienced. In particular, it recommends that we also consider how the assertion of offence is grounded in the hurt offence is felt to cause to our personal identity (including the distinct and variable ways in which this is attached to broader notions of group membership, such as religious, ethnic or gender identity).

Finally, this conclusion suggests that the contemporary preoccupation with offence, including its ongoing newsworthiness, has encouraged a culture of competing rights in which different voices assert their right to offend or be offended. This culture is observable in various ways. Firstly, Chapter Six found there was a symbiotic relationship between the right to offend and be offended surrounding disputes over the 'offensive' nature of modern 'edgy' comedy. This relationship can be observed more generally in the battle between today's veneration and vilification of anti-PC rhetoric and discourse[252]. Secondly, Chapters Five and Seven suggest that competing notions of group rights are used in order to influence debate or decision making. For example, Chapter Five observed how the debate in the House of Commons on same sex marriage encouraged some participants to pitch gay rights against religious rights. Within this context, some MPs felt that same sex marriage was an affront to their religious rights or freedoms[253]. Thirdly, the data analysis chapters also suggest that competing positions exist *within* different groups (or amongst those who share a common identity) regarding what is or is not offensive, although our concern with identity politics and group rights may have drawn the focus of debate away from this. (For example, despite the attempt to pitch gay rights against religious rights, some politicians used their religious faith to argue in favour of same sex marriage). Despite our preoccupation with group identity, the user led nature of modern media technologies has provided a greater exposure to this diversity of opinion. One consequence of this is that traditional forms of media may potentially emerge as more sensitive to the diversity of viewpoints which continue to contribute to our preoccupation with disputes of offence.

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[252] By anti-PC discourse and rhetoric I mean to refer generally to the disdain expressed in society for political correctness from sources such as tabloid newspapers or popular figures like the TV presenter, Jeremy Clarkson.
[253] The intertexual analysis of cartoons in Chapter seven also drew attention to how religious rights may be pitched against gender equality.

8.5 Looking towards ways of exploring offence and the politics of self-hood.

A key question arising from the research findings is how the giving or taking of offence should be managed within a society which purports to value both the principle of freedom of expression and social equality between different groups and individuals. This question is particularly important in view of how the opportunities to offend or be offended have expanded in recent years along with the willingness of people engage in these opportunities. It also highlights the precarious or disputable nature of the aforementioned principles. Firstly, what we say or how we express ourselves is subject to various legal, social or contextual constraints and secondly, our general acceptance of formal equality between different groups nevertheless sits alongside the perseverance of different forms of social inequality. One of the ways in which social inequality is felt to be sustained is by forms of expression which some people find offensive. However, the imposition of discursive closure around 'offensive' forms of expression does not erase 'offensive' ideas or help us grasp whether or why expression which offends may also cause harm.

In view of this, future research might investigate more directly the relationship between 'offensive' forms of expression (such as the telling of sexist jokes or the exhibition of contentious imagery) and their audience. In choosing to examine data from popular cultural and media sources this thesis opted not to directly question the consumers, readers, critics or fans of these sources. However, doing so might also enable us to engage more meaningfully with how, whether and why offence is given and taken[254]. In particular, it would allow analysis to probe how offence is attached to the ways in which personal identity is felt and experienced. This might also facilitate greater understanding of disputes of offence in which different values and identities appear to be in conflict with one another – an occurrence likely to be increasingly common as more people wish to engage in such disputes. Of course, this approach would also involve wrestling with the less readable discursive environment which this project identified as having emerged alongside the language of PC. Within this environment unconcealed endorsement by people of racism or other forms of prejudice has become less socially acceptable. In addition, despite the prevalence of disputes of offence

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[254] For example, this conclusion has pointed out that it is difficult to make any generalised claims about whether an audience views the 'offensive' jokes of a comedian ironically without initiating a direct engagement with that audience.

many people remain unwilling to confess that offence is in fact taken as they wish not to be labelled 'PC'. Nevertheless, if we are to understand the ways in which offence is attached to the politics of self-hood, research might consider more closely how people view or engage with 'offensive' forms of expression.

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