

Reading 10

The Sun: no longer bonkers?

By Ian Cook

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Hold the front page. Yes, you read it here first. *The Sun* – the paper that famously published the headline ‘Bonkers Bruno Locked Up’ – is to send its health editor on a mental health training course. *Sun* editor Rebekah Wade says she may also attend.

The training course – run by mental health charity SANE – is the latest twist in a complicated chain of events that saw publication of the ‘bonkers’ headline, followed by fierce criticism of the paper by the charity, and finally rapprochement.

On Tuesday 23 September 2003, *The Sun* published the offensive headline ‘**Bonkers Bruno Locked Up**’. For later editions, this was toned down to ‘**Sad Bruno in mental home**’. The coverage was roundly condemned by the main groups in the mental health field. At SANE, chief executive **Marjorie Wallace** said it was ‘ignorant reporting’ and that ‘it did both the media and the public a huge disservice’.

The next day, SANE received a telephone call from *The Sun*. The paper wanted to launch an appeal in Bruno’s name to raise funds for the mental health charity, and offered SANE five hundred words on the problems of mental illness. *The Sun* gave more coverage to the issues under a more acceptable headline: ‘**Time and space to heal**’. A *Fund for Frank* was launched, and a few days later Marjorie Wallace agreed to meet **Rebekah Wade**, the paper’s editor, for lunch to discuss what language was acceptable if ‘bonkers’ wasn’t.

“Rebekah Wade asked me to lunch and she said, ‘Why can’t I use bonkers, and what else would do?’ What I said there was really quite simple. I remember having the conversation with her predecessor, David Yelland. He said, ‘What’s a three letter word I can put in a headline rather than nut or mad?’ I said, ‘What about ill? Because that’s what it is – ill. Someone’s ill and they go to hospital’. [Rebekah] sort of said. ‘Well yeah, maybe’.”

‘Rebekah and *The Sun*’s health editor are coming to do our training on our helpline – SANELINE. We are just fixing a date now. It will entail seventy-two hours of learning how to handle calls from people who are distressed, and learning all about mental health problems – so that shows commitment. I doubt Rebekah will stay for the whole course, but I think the health editor will.’ Marjorie Wallace stressed that it was *The Sun* editor’s suggestion.

As well as the training course, SANE is working on another initiative with *The Sun* to help brush up the tabloid’s language. It’s a ‘style guide’, which SANE will draw up for *The Sun*, and which will explain the sorts of terms that are more accurate and don’t give offence.

The style guide idea may be the biggest challenge for SANE. The charity needs to find a series of words that serve both the interests of Britain's best-selling tabloid, whilst not heaping up prejudice against people in the same situation as Frank Bruno.

'We have offered to produce a style guide for them about mental health language. We will do the draft and run it through a group of people with mental illness, but we don't want to get too prissy and precious about this. You also do a disservice to the people you are writing about because you make them look prickly and fussy on top of being disabled, when they are actually prepared to take things on the chin. Frank Bruno has used the word "nutter" about himself.'

'Two or three years ago, there was a movement called Mad Pride. I know people who call themselves mad. What they say is that it's OK if we use these words, but we don't want other people to use them about us.'

Marjorie Wallace said that it wasn't just the words in that now famous headline that disturbed her. It was stereotyping too. 'Almost more disturbing than "bonkers" was the idea that he would be locked up. It was the image that it created of a completely false stereotype from history, where people with white coats come and take people away and then they are thrown into an asylum and they don't get out again. It was really the false image that was more distressing.'

Language is a battlefield, or so they say. It's certainly a complicated area, and if the style guide idea is to work it requires commitment on both sides. Writing in *The Independent* shortly after the 'bonkers' headline, Marjorie Wallace said that SANE has always believed the way forward is not to beat the media over the head when they get it wrong but to work with journalists to get it right, and use the moment when the public's interest is aroused to combat misconception.

So, will *The Sun* deliver? Only time will tell. Marjorie Wallace is cautiously optimistic. 'There's always going to be someone who slips back, but I think they are on alert now not to use some words and to be more careful'.

The habits of a lifetime may, however, prove hard to break. *The Sun* has won Mind's *Bigot of the Year* award more often than any other paper. And the Frank Bruno story was hardly a one-off.

If Marjorie Wallace is successful in persuading *The Sun* to change its language, other groups of disabled people may follow. After the infamous Abu Hamza headline 'Sling your hook!', one wonders if an approach from the **Limbless Association** might see *The Sun* promoting a more positive line on other disabilities – or does the new style guide only apply to disabled people who also happen to be national heroes? Watch this space.