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Media That *Moves*

Creating anti-racist representations
of Gypsies and Travellers
in the UK media

SUMMARY REPORT



About this project

Media that Moves is a joint initiative by [Leeds Gypsy & Traveller Exchange](#) and [London Gypsies and Travellers](#), in collaboration with [PIRC](#).

The project aims to gain a deep understanding of the systems that perpetuate negative stereotyping of Gypsies and Travellers, focusing in particular on the role of the media. It aims to find out about the key influences on the media and the stories they produce, how they arise, and the sorts of [‘frames’](#) of Gypsies and Travellers that emerge.

Together, we have learnt from **30 interviews** with people from journalists, editors, academics, and people from Gypsy and Traveller organisations. We’ve also drawn on some great resources and existing research, which you can find out more about in our [Full Report](#). With this knowledge, over a series of workshops within our community, we’ve examined how current patterns of thought and influence can be broken, and ways of bringing about a reframing of Gypsies and Travellers.

This resource is produced for people who want to understand what Gypsy and Traveller groups face in the UK media. We cover this subject in a broad, non-technical way, aiming to capture central themes and dynamics, rather than specific insights into how particular media organisations operate. We hope that this provides useful groundwork for advocacy groups who want to inform their media strategies, and for allies, both inside and outside the media, who can work towards anti-racist representation of Gypsies and Travellers.

Media framing

The news media, film and TV have an important role in shaping how the public think about Gypsies and Travellers. For most people, this is their only source of 'information', as they will never have knowingly met a Gypsy or Traveller, or learned about their communities, culture and histories at school.

What is the media reporting?

Many, many stories!

One of the most striking things is the sheer number of articles about Gypsies and Travellers. When a researcher reviewed three years of coverage in 12 of the biggest online newspapers, he found a total of 365 news stories, features and opinion pieces. That's **a story in a big national every 3 days**, not to mention the stories in other nationals, TV stations, or the many local outlets. What's more, the Daily Mail and the Daily Express produced more than half the stories, showing that there is something of a tabloid campaign to over-represent, as well as mis-represent, Gypsies and Travellers.

Campsites & crime

Most news stories are about 'unauthorised' campsites and crime. Across all newspapers, opinion pieces written by Gypsies and Travellers are rare. There

is better reporting in outlets like the Guardian and the Independent, where topics of racism and poverty are more likely to be covered, but this is far outweighed by tabloid stories of camps and crime. And, even in the better stories, **what's often missing are structural issues** about access to land and services, and we rarely see articles celebrating pride in family, community and culture. Several journalists also spoke of how organisations like the BBC are afraid of being called too liberal.

Common problems

Much reporting is distorted and exaggerated. There may be some factual basis behind a story, but there will often be inaccuracies. Here are some of the **common ways that media undermines Gypsies and Travellers**, whether intentional or not:

- ✗ Misspelling Gypsy and Traveller, and not using capital letters.
- ✗ Failing to engage with anyone from the communities when researching the story.
- ✗ Mis-representing, e.g. taking comments out of context, using stock images of rubbish.
- ✗ Over-representing on crime stories, e.g. reporting more crime involving Gypsies and Travellers than other communities, focusing on the Traveller in a mixed group.
- ✗ Biased image selection, e.g. ignoring people, capturing shelters and waste, showing children alone, and pixelating faces (particularly of men) like photos of criminals.

Issues engaging with the media

For **advocacy groups or individuals** from Gypsy and Traveller communities engaging with the media, there are a number of **obstacles**:



Lack of control:

No control over editing of stories, or moderating of comments.
Aggressive interview style on live TV and radio.



Representation vs. protection:

The need to minimise risk and mitigate harms, while also sharing personal stories and having a voice within the media.



False balance:

Being asked for comment simply to give 'balance' to an otherwise hostile piece.

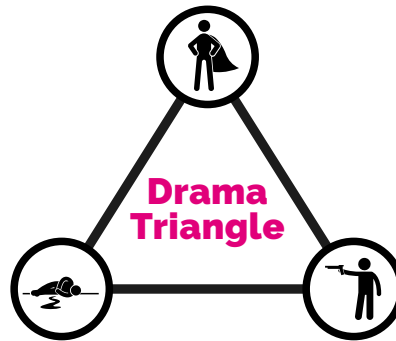
"It actually did cause some quite rigorous conversations in the newsroom, where it was felt very much that actually we can be too soft on Gypsies and Travellers."

Journalist

Why the media misrepresents Gypsies and Travellers

There are many forces that influence a media outlet's decision of what stories to tell and how to tell them.

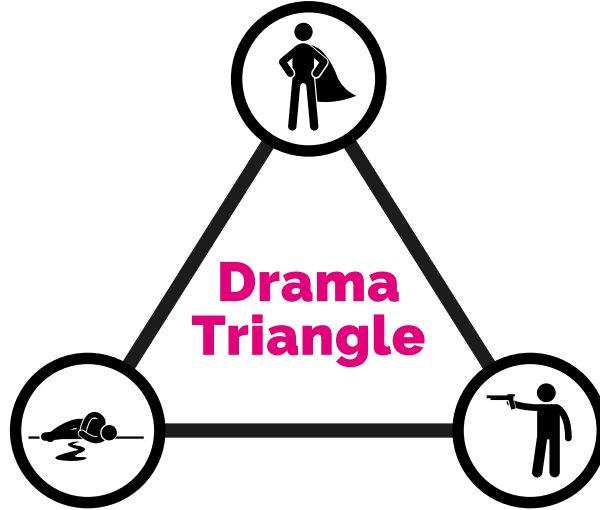
Here are **three big ideas** that can help explain this.



Moral Panic and the Drama Triangle can help us understand why Gypsies and Travellers are framed as villains and outsiders, and Churnalism explains why journalists produce such high volumes of low quality stories.



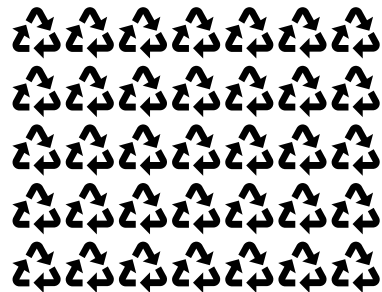
Moral Panic happens when the media define something or someone as a threat to the values and interests of society. There will be some existing public prejudice, but this is exaggerated by the media, with the help of politicians and lawmakers, to create a sense of 'us versus them'. The media will blame 'them' when things go wrong, and defend 'us' (the status quo). Moral panics benefit news organisations because they increase the numbers of readers and viewers. They also benefit people in power, who can use moral panic to control the population and reinforce authority. Over the centuries we have seen this happen with witches, Muslims, gay people, and, of course, Gypsies and Travellers. The media know they can build on existing stereotypes to build a grand narrative that a group threatens our children, our homes, our most cherished values.



In many news stories, and storytelling in general, there is a drama triangle—where you have a villain, and a victim and a hero. For most stories on Gypsies and Travellers, people in the community are the villain—criminal, immoral, violent, invader—and framed as the problem. Sometimes people are framed as victims—like stories about experiencing discrimination or being at greater risk of suicide—but these stories can be more about pity than justice. And, occasionally, Gypsies and Travellers are framed as heroes, like the story about the Traveller Christmas food bank challenge. The villain-victim-hero is an established storytelling structure. But the problem with the Drama Triangle is that Gypsies and Travellers are rarely allowed to be normal people living their lives.



Churnalism



This idea pairs ‘journalism’ with ‘churn’, and was first used by journalist Wazeen Zakir to describe how most reporters rely on press releases and new agencies for stories, often copy/pasting material, rather than finding and researching original stories. Newspapers have had a huge decline in revenue over the past 15 years, because of the move to online news, less paying readers and less advertising profit. Churnalism is a response to this. There is pressure on news organisations to produce stories while keeping costs down. One of the ways to do this is to reduce the time staff spend gathering original stories, doing research and checking sources. It results in lower quality reporting on everything, including Gypsy and Traveller stories, where journalists will often rely heavily on a press release from a local authority, without researching the story properly.

What it's like in the newsroom

Newsroom culture is 'pale, male and stale'

Journalism has a problem of representation, particularly in its senior staff. At the time of writing, every single top editor in the UK is white, and most have been privately educated.

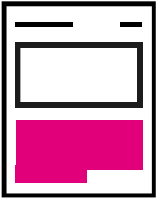
The people in power aren't always leading the way on racial representation. Many outlets have big equality and diversity initiatives, but these don't usually explicitly extend to Gypsies and Travellers, and nor do they necessarily impact editorial decisions. Training courses on this subject, if offered, will tend to be voluntary. And style guides, if they exist, are not always known about or followed.

At the same time, many journalists—reporters, freelancers, even editors—are on insecure contracts. They work to close deadlines in a highly pressured environment. Unless they are protected (e.g. by their union), they face a real risk of losing their jobs if they stick their neck out.

"On capital letters, I'm not sure whether it's in any style guide. I do remember a dispute in a local paper between sub editors and editors on whether to capitalise or not." **Journalist**

Journalists, editors, owners

Media outlets differ in how power is distributed and how much autonomy lies with journalists, or different levels of editors. These descriptions offer a common pattern.



Journalists have limited control on the final story. Typically, they will pitch stories at daily meetings, but it is often senior staff that decide which ones are 'news'. There is often no time to do research beyond a press release.



Editorial control varies, but will usually decide the framing, the headlines and photos. For this reason, many journalists say that their job is easier if they just try to think like their editor.



Ownership is heavily concentrated in the UK. Three companies (News UK, Daily Mail Group and Reach) own 90% of the national titles. Much like journalists have to think like their editors, editors have to think like the owners.

The politics of the newsroom

The politics and worldviews of the **owners help set the culture and agenda** of the newspaper, filtering through to the editors, shaping the choice and framing of the stories. Most readers perceive news outlets to have a political affiliation and this is a factor in where people choose to get their news.

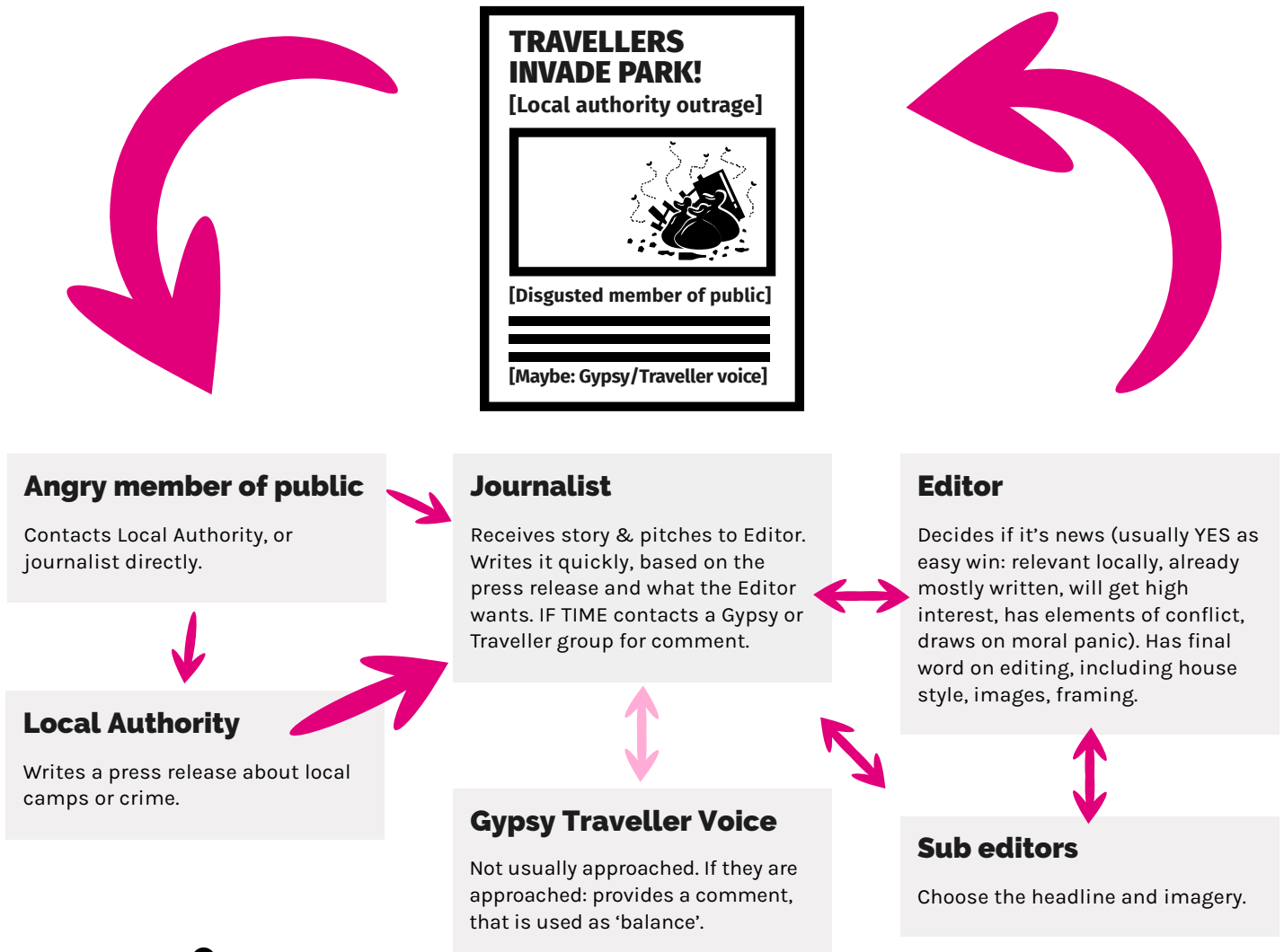
““ I overheard one of the editors saying ‘Oh just because we’ve had *** training doesn’t mean we’re going to stop writing about Travellers leaving litter and faeces everywhere.’”**

Journalist

““ I didn’t want to publish those photos [of rubbish] because I didn’t see it as relevant. But my editor basically forced me to.”

Journalist

The harmful story cycle



Drama Triangle



Moral Panic



Churnalism

Key influences on press culture

Of the many influences on the newsroom, the business model is a notably strong force, and regulation is notably weak.

Some of the key aspects to highlight are:

Gypsy and Traveller stories are seen as ‘easy wins’

In an environment where outlets are trying to make money, and reporters have no time, a Gypsy or Traveller story is often perceived as an easy way to fill space and generate interest.

“Stuff about Gypsies sells in terms of the amount of clicks you get and the amount of advertising revenue you can get off the back of it.”

Journalist

Reader metrics are carefully studied

The move to online means that it’s even easier to get data about readers and reader habits, like what people read, what they share, how long they stay on a site, and where they go next.

“Metrics have always been carefully studied but they’ve never, ever been so carefully studied, as they are in the digital age.” **Journalist**

Journalists assume that sensationalist stories do better

Tabloid journalists, particularly, follow the rule of the thumb that conflict and scandal sell, so produce Gypsy and Traveller stories in this vein. It may not be true that these stories always sell best, but it is believed.

"Prejudice is a business model." **Journalist**

Regulation is very weak

At the moment most of the UK press is self-regulated (paid for and controlled by the industry itself). There are two regulators (IPSO and IMPRESS) but they are both voluntary. IPSO, which most papers have signed up to, has several **significant flaws**:

- × **Time:** It takes a long time to respond, often months for complaints.
- × **Teeth:** In its first five years, it did no investigations, and charged no fines. It also can't require newspapers to apologise, or to put corrections in a place of equal prominence.
- × **Discrimination:** IPSO won't even consider complaints about coverage that targets groups of people, like Gypsies and Travellers, it deals only with abuse of individuals.

"How would we feel about it if the Daily Mail were publishing 10 articles every month on illegal campsites? There's no way you can use the editors code, you can't apply IPSO's code to that scenario. It just doesn't work." **Academic**

When complaints aren't upheld, it emboldens racism

When regulators reject complaints, then that sends feedback to a newspaper or broadcaster that they have a green light to continue misrepresenting Gypsies and Travellers.

"Whenever people go to challenge things that are definitely racist but that don't technically break the rules, it emboldens [the outlets] to do it."

Advocate

Gypsy and Traveller groups don't always understand the media

Gypsies and Travellers, and their advocacy groups, sometimes avoid engaging with media, or only respond reactively. One journalist spoke of how their approach meant they weren't always getting the platform when they needed it.

"[Gypsy and Traveller organisations] didn't know how to present their work, they weren't giving comments. Like if a journalist rings up and says "I want a comment" they mean they want it now. Not after it's been run past the trustees and back down a week later for a statement. Then the story is over." **Advocate**

See the [full report](#) to read more about what influences press culture.

This map summarises some key influences on the newsroom identified by journalists and advocates. The size of each bubble indicates how powerful we think it is currently.



**Business &
Advertising**



**Advocacy
Groups**



**Social Media
Sites**



**Training
& Education**



**Readers &
Public Opinion**



Regulation



**Politicians &
Celebrities**

Here, in more detail, we show the direction of influences and indicate (with the size of the arrows) how much power they seem to have currently.

Advocacy Groups

Although many Gypsy and Traveller groups do excellent media work, they can be distrustful and don't always understand media. Under-resourced groups, especially, tend to engage reactively, rather than pitching stories.

Training & Education

Baseline understanding of Gypsies and Travellers is low for journalists and wider public. No formal education about Gypsies and Travellers in schools, journalism colleges or in-house induction.

Regulation

Press are self regulated and membership is voluntary. Most are members of IPSO, which takes a long time to respond, doesn't have teeth and only considers discrimination against individuals. Unsuccessful claims embolden racism.

Business & Advertising

Main revenue for newspapers is advertising, selling on content, and circulation & membership. Journalists are pressured to create trending content. Bad Gypsy and Traveller stories about conflict, crime and scandal are considered easy wins.

Owners

Editors

Journalists

Social Media Sites

Drive a third of traffic to news sites, and take a share of revenue. They use algorithms newspapers can't control and have very little accountability for misinformation spreading. Give newspapers feedback on readership.

Readers & Public Opinion

Media caters to prevailing stereotypes, but is also the main influence on public opinion. Newspapers monitor reader's online behaviour, readers give feedback through comments and complaints.

Politicians & Celebs

Affect what the newsroom decides to cover when they have significant influence on social media and/or personal relationships with journalists and news editors. Also often follow press and social media closely themselves, to monitor public opinion.

What can be done to change this?

Perspectives on how change happens

Speaking to journalists and advocates, we heard broadly **three perspectives** on how to encourage better media representation of Gypsies and Travellers:



Support good practice

e.g. pitch accurate and relevant stories, form better relationships between journalists and Gypsies and Travellers, support staff training and offer style guides.



Punish bad practice

e.g. make complaints, and campaign for changes to regulation.



Wider cultural shifts

e.g. organise around big moments, bring communities together, build stronger allies, and encourage more diversity in newsrooms and halls of power.

Call to action for journalists

Journalists interested in improving coverage at their outlet can:

- ❑ **Try harder to contact people in Gypsy and Traveller communities,** rather than hiding behind the excuse that they are ‘hidden’ or ‘secretive’.
- ❑ **Carry out an audit** of your outlet’s Gypsy and Traveller-focussed stories
- ❑ **Push for better stories** and do the research, avoiding the trap of false balance.
- ❑ **Resist misrepresenting Gypsies and Travellers** looking to advocate resources for advice on dos and don’ts.
- ❑ **Ask subeditors to keep an eye on the ads** and watch for inappropriate content.
- ❑ **Request that comments are moderated** or simply turned off.
- ❑ **Check Diversity & Inclusion initiatives include Gypsies and Travellers.**
- ❑ **Whistleblow within the organisation,** drawing attention to biased coverage, or go public with an exposé of how the outlet campaigns against Gypsies and Travellers.
- ❑ **Unionise!** And use the union to protect you if you want to take action.

“*The greatest sin that the media has with us is that they never bothered to pick up the phone to actually speak to the people who are affected by the story.*”

Advocate

What campaigners & advocates can do

Find more on these recommendations, including examples, in the [full report](#).



Find and pitch 'good' stories

Good stories are humanising and told directly by Gypsies and Travellers. They avoid the trap of the drama triangle and move on from the debate of 'good Gypsy versus bad Gypsy'. They work towards a new and better grand narrative: Justice for Gypsies and Travellers protects what *all of us* hold dear: our freedoms, rights, safety and community. When pitching, look for soft media opportunities (commentary, entertainment, arts and lifestyle) as well as the usual suspects in the news cycle.



Target and build relationships within media

Advocates need to try to understand the context journalists work in and the pressures they are under. Approach journalists who have written better pieces on Gypsies and Travellers, or seem to understand the politics of racial representation. Research and make the business case as well as the moral case to editors, by showing (where possible) that good stories work for their business model too.



Offer training and resources for journalists

Advocates can try to address the lack of education about Gypsies and Travellers. Approach the institutions that offer training—journalism colleges, the NCTJ, the NUJ and the news outlets themselves—and pitch this as an equality issue. Offer style guides and resources.



Support Gypsies and Travellers to join and engage with media

Engaging with the media is scary and often leads to burnout, so advocacy groups should support people with interview practice, peer-to-peer support, and media training. Help get Gypsies and Travellers in the newsroom by funding placements on courses and in industry.



Complain about comments, trolls and adverts

It's worth calling out poor reporting, inappropriate adverts and hateful comments below the line. But there needs to be capacity to respond quickly and often, and a social media strategy in place to target journalists and editors.



Campaign on regulatory and legal grounds

Advocates can campaign for press regulation to be changed so it can be more easily used to address racism. One specific goal could be that IPSO extend their guidelines on discrimination to cover groups of people rather than just specific individuals. Another campaign target could focus on the algorithms of social media platforms that decide who sees what, reward sensationalist stories and drive a third of traffic to news sites. These kinds of campaigns will find common cause in other misrepresented groups.



Organise and build allies

There is an opportunity to raise the public understanding of Gypsies and Travellers as a misrepresented ethnic group by joining forces with more powerful racial justice organisations. Approach local councils, too, for allies that can push for better stories and better local policies.

**The battle of
the narrative:
Where we're
coming from**



**Drama
Triangle**

Gypsies and Travellers
are framed as villains.



**Moral
Panic**

Story signals a threat
to society and settled
people.



Churnalism

Most of the text is copy
pasted from press
release.

The battle of the narrative: What we're fighting for



3D Characters

Use soft media, including film and TV to portray Gypsies and Travellers as complex, real people living their lives, rather than villains, victims or heroes.



New Grand Narrative

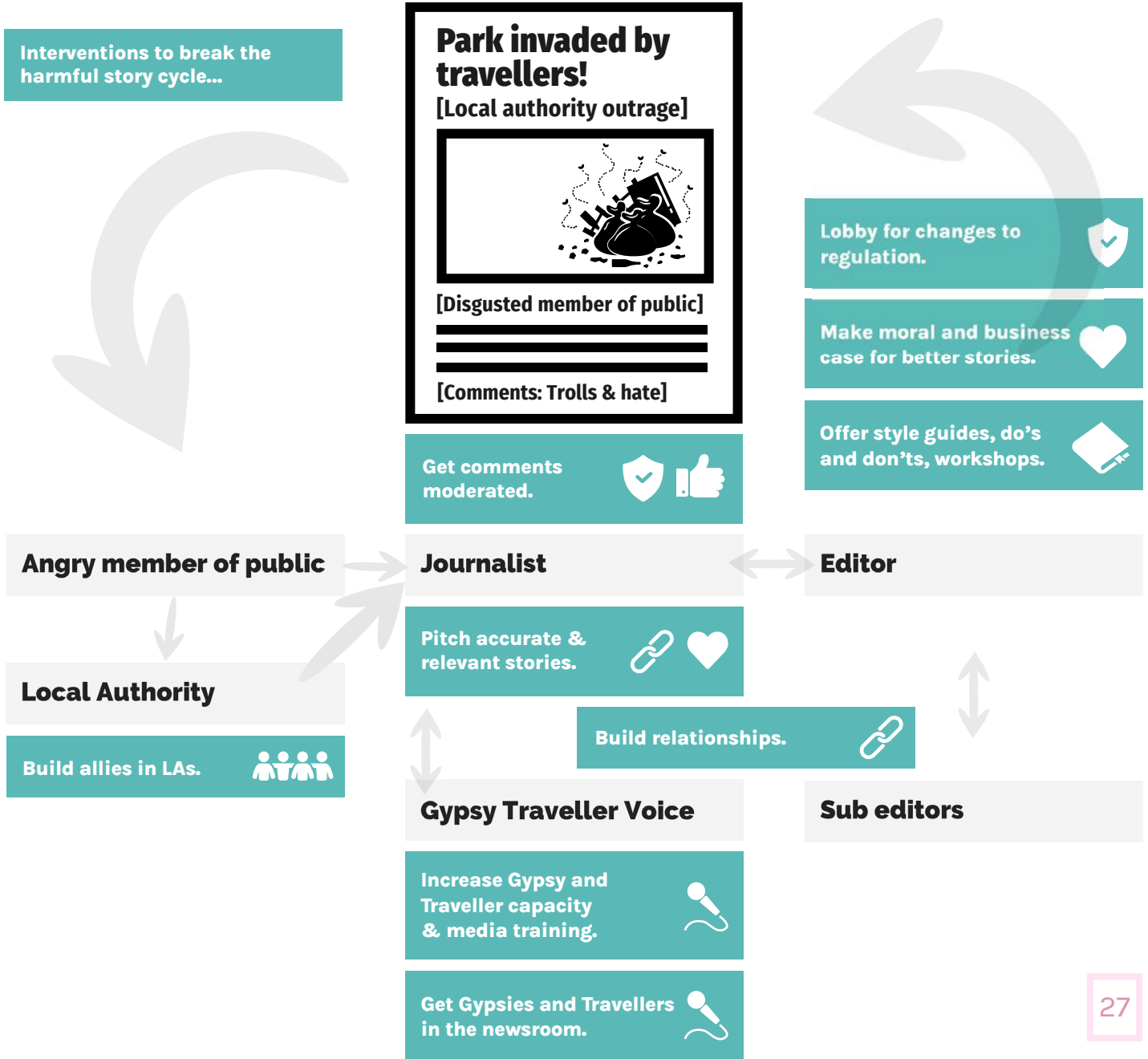
Talk about how justice for Gypsies and Travellers protects what everyone holds dear: freedoms, rights, safety, community.



Easy Good Stories

Help journalists by offering resources: find & pitch stories, give Gypsies and Travellers voices, do well researched Opinion pieces.

Breaking the cycle...



“*I mean, I've got the stats to back it up that my Traveller pieces that are really balanced really do well for the company, so it's in the company's interest to be appropriate.*”

Journalist

“*We need more of us Gypsies and Travellers in there, working behind the scenes, being prepared to get our hands dirty in telling the stories of our communities and becoming storytellers. Because if we don't, then nothing will change.*”

Journalist

For more guidance on how to work towards anti-racist representation of Gypsies and Travellers in the UK media, you can read our

Media That *Moves* Full Report

bit.ly/mtm-full

References

A fully referenced version of this work is available in the **Full Report**.

Acknowledgements

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For a full list of those who were interviewed and contributed to the research, see our *Media That Moves* **Full Report**.

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