

**Arguing about Muslims: (Un)Reasonable argumentation in letters to the editor.**

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*Abstract*

This article analyses letters to the editor written on or about Muslims printed in a British broadsheet newspaper. The pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation is applied as a model for explaining and understanding the arguments employed in the sampled letters. Our presentation of pragma-dialectical theory focuses on argumentative reasonableness. More specifically, we introduce the four dialectical stages through which any argument must pass and explain the ten rules of critical discussion that participants must follow throughout if they are to resolve the argument. The article focuses in particular on the letter writers' use of argument schemes – that is, the manner in which these writers use arguments to support their standpoints. We conclude by highlighting the role that unreasonable arguments can play in perpetuating racialised inequalities and hence the importance of analyzing argumentation.

*Keywords*

Argumentation, pragma-dialectics, reasonableness, broadsheet newspapers, readers' letters, Muslims

*1. Introduction*

Newspapers print a wide range of correspondence from their readers. On a daily basis, most newspapers print question and answer pages on specific and general topics,

problem pages of advice columnists, as well as letters to the editor. These pages serve as forums for opinion, dialogue and debate; they allow the readership of a paper ‘to express their opinions, their fears, their hopes – and, just as important, air their grievances’ (Jackson, 1971: 152).

There are clearly many ways in which letters’ pages can be studied (see Lynn & Lea, 2003; Morrison & Love, 1996; Richardson & Franklin, 2003; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, 2002). We believe that letters to the editor are primarily argumentative: they are designed to convince readers of the acceptability of a point of view and to provoke them into an immediate or future course of action. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969: 4) argue that ‘the object of the theory of argumentation is the study of the discursive techniques allowing us to induce or to increase the mind’s adherence to the theses presented for its assent.’ To date, the theory of argumentation that we consider to be the most sophisticated and practicable is the pragma-dialectical model developed by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992, 1994a, 2004). Van Eemeren *et al* (1996: 5) define argumentation as ‘a verbal and social activity of reason aiming at increasing (or decreasing) the acceptability of a controversial standpoint for the listener or reader, by putting forward a constellation of propositions intended to justify (or refute) the standpoint before a rational judge.’ Although the theoretical and analytical efficiency of the pragma-dialectical approach is now well established, fewer articles have applied the model empirically (though see van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 2005) and fewer still have examined argument schemes (though see Garssen, 2002; Snoeck Henkemans, 2002). Here we attempt to plug a few of these gaps. This article will first introduce the principal features of this model of argumentation, before focusing in more detail on the

(un)reasonable argument schemes which *Guardian* letter writers employ when discussing Islam and Muslims.

## 2. *Letters to the Editor*

‘Letters to the editor’ represent the model genre of readers’ letters. Historically, letters to the editor ‘played a role in establishing the distinctive sphere of journalism [...] and were constitutive of an increase in the amount of space devoted to politics by the press’ (Bromley, 1998: 148). They remain dominated by criticism, debate and the airing of political grievances, and assumedly are open to the views of all. According to Wober (2004: 50), the letters page of *The Times* is ‘a meeting place in which those who ruled, those who were ruled and a wide range of experts contributed and shared opinions. [...] In Parliament, politicians spoke directly to themselves and their fellows; in the letters page of *The Times*, politicians, experts and electors all spoke together.’

However, certain opinions are included more frequently than others. Richardson and Franklin (2004: 476), for example, demonstrate that ‘during the 2001 United Kingdom General Election campaign, the letters pages of local newspapers were colonized by political parties as part of their broader media based campaign strategies.’ Between elections, Wober (2004: 52-3) shows that 36.9 per cent of letters included in *The Times* are written by members of the social elite – in other words, MPs, Professors, Officers of Associations (e.g. the Christian Socialists Movement, Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society, etc.) and ‘people in organizations which speak for and try to keep order.’ Further, the views of certain letters (and their writers) have more resonance, more power and hence more effect in shaping public opinion than others. Consider the relative influence of a letter in a broadsheet newspaper compared with a

letter in a tabloid. ‘Quite simply’, Wober (2004: 53) writes, ‘a letter in the Daily Express, Mail or Mirror, even on a serious matter, is unlikely to be seen by legislators or civil servants.’

Letters to the editor stand as an indication of a newspapers’ perception of ‘the ideological boundaries of *legitimate* or *fair* comment’ (Allan, 1999: 93). The inclusion of prejudice, and ‘everyday racism’ in such letters therefore stands as an indication of the extent to which racist views have ‘become part of what is seen as ‘normal’ by the dominant group’ (Essed 1991: 288). Further, journalistic discourse is an important site in the *reproduction* of prejudiced argumentation. Wilson and Gutierrez (1995: 45) for example show that ‘negative, one-sided or stereotypical media portrayals and news coverage do reinforce racist attitudes in those members of the audience who do have them and can channel mass actions against the group that is stereotypically portrayed.’ Muslims have been particularly unfortunate in this allocation of negative stereotypes, and are frequently associated with ignoble traits of intolerance, threat, terrorism and an implacable opposition to modernity (Karim, 1997; Poole & Richardson, 2006; Richardson 2001a, 2001b, 2004; Said, 1995).

With these points in mind, this article will examine letters on and about Muslims printed in a broadsheet newspaper. We did not want to be accused of purposefully selecting the most rabid examples possible (and they are out there), hence we chose the *Guardian* – a broadly left-liberal British broadsheet newspaper – for study.<sup>1</sup> Ian Mayes (2001), the readers’ editor for the newspaper, describes the letters page as ‘among the more important parts of the paper’ and ‘the paper's principal forum of reader opinion’. On any normal day, the *Guardian* receives around 300 letters competing for a place in this forum. In times of political controversy, this can increase considerably – for

example, it doubled during the first week of the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Mayes, 2003). This article examines letters about, or referring to ‘Islam’, ‘Muslim’ or ‘Muslims’, printed between January 1 and May 31 2004. This period produced a sample of 86 letters, or an average of 1.75 per day, perhaps demonstrating the scale of ‘debate’ on and about Muslims printed in this newspaper alone.

### *3. The Pragma-Dialectical Model of Argumentation*

Argumentation, as we are using the term here, is a written or verbal exchange of views between parties with the aim of either justifying or refuting a standpoint in order to settle a difference of opinion. Even more succinctly, argumentation is a process whereby claims are attacked and defended and differences of opinion resolved. For instance, we may claim, ‘English cricket is the best in the world’. You may be unconvinced by our standpoint and ask us to justify our claim. The exchange that follows between us – where we claim England’s glorious victories over the West Indies in recent test series support our view and you doubt that such easy victories are good reason for accepting our claim, and so on – constitutes argumentation; between us, we are evaluating our claim and your doubt.

However, this notion of argumentation might well serve as the starting point for any account of constructive argument. What distinguishes the pragma-dialectical analysis from others is its account of *the process* by which claims are justified or refuted. In what follows, we shall examine the central elements of the pragma-dialectical model of argumentation. Specifically, we shall first summarize the four stages through which pragma-dialectics suggests argumentation must proceed; second,

we will explain the ten rules that parties to a disagreement must follow throughout if they are to resolve the difference of opinion.<sup>2</sup>

First, the pragma-dialectical model divides argumentation into four distinct stages: the Confrontation stage, the Opening stage, the Argumentation stage, and the Concluding stage. During the Confrontation stage (stage 1), we establish that a difference of opinion exists, and make the nature of that difference precise. In the Opening stage (stage 2), we establish the grounds for resolution and whether it is worth our engaging in an attempt. In other words, we decide who will defend (the protagonist) and attack (the antagonist) which claims, and whether we share enough common ground to decide when a standpoint counts as defended or refuted. In the Argumentation stage (stage 3), we offer and assess arguments for and against the standpoints about which opinion differs. And in the Concluding stage (stage 4), we decide if the difference of opinion has been resolved and who ‘won’ the argument. If the difference of opinion is resolved in the protagonist’s favor, then the antagonist must withdraw their doubt; if it is resolved in the antagonist’s favor, then the protagonist must withdraw their claim.

Second, the pragma-dialectical model proposes a set of ten normative rules that constitute a code of conduct for reasonable discussants. These are discussed individually and at greater length in the next section of the article, but at this point it may be useful to list them all:

1. *the freedom rule*: discussants may not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or from calling standpoints into question.
2. *the obligation-to-defend rule*: discussants who advance a standpoint may not refuse to defend this standpoint when requested to do so.

3. *the standpoint rule*: attacks on standpoints may not bear on standpoints other than the actual standpoint advanced.

4. *the relevance rule*: standpoints may not be defended by non-argumentation or irrelevant argumentation.

5. *the unexpressed-premise rule*: parties may not falsely attribute unexpressed premises to the other party, nor disown responsibility for their own unexpressed premises.

6. *the starting-point rule*: parties may not falsely present something as an accepted starting point or falsely deny that something is an accepted starting point.

7. *the validity rule*: any reasoning in argumentation presented as formally conclusive may not be invalid in a logical sense.

8. *the argument-scheme rule*: standpoints may not be regarded as conclusively defended by argumentation that is not presented as based on formally conclusive reasoning if the defense does not take place by means of appropriate argument schemes that are applied correctly.

9. *the concluding rule*: inconclusive defenses of standpoints may not lead to maintaining these standpoints, and conclusive defenses may not lead to maintaining expressions of doubt concerning these standpoints.

10. *the language use rule*: parties may not use any formulations that are insufficiently clear or confusingly ambiguous, and they may not deliberately misinterpret the other party's formulation.

If followed, these rules optimize argument resolution, but if breached will prevent parties from resolving a difference of opinion. In the section that follows, we shall detail

these ten rules and, where appropriate, use examples from our chosen sample to show why failure to observe the rules prevents argument resolution.<sup>3</sup>

#### 4 *Examples and analysis*

4.1 Freedom rule: Discussants may not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or from calling standpoints into question.

The reason parties to an argument must be free to advance or oppose any standpoint is clear: if parties are not free, then they may be hampered in establishing that a difference of opinion exists between them, or in detailing the nature of that difference. Consider example 1, where rule one is breached:

(1) I find it ironic that the *Guardian* has taken the moral high ground over Kilroy-Silk, while for week in week out Julie Burchill was given carte blanche to write pieces far more derogatory to certain ethnic groups whom she disliked.

Kenny Jones, London (*Guardian*, 12 January 2004)

There are two ways to read this breach of rule one depending on whom we take as parties to the argument. First, we could take it that Robert Kilroy-Silk expressed the original standpoint (that Muslims contribute nothing to British society)<sup>4</sup> and that the *Guardian* expressed doubt about this standpoint. This letter has the implicit conclusion that the *Guardian* cannot doubt Kilroy-Silk's claims, because Julie Burchill in writing for the *Guardian* has also been 'derogatory to certain ethnic groups'. A second reading is that the *Guardian* expressed the original standpoint (that Kilroy-Silk comments are

racist and ill judged); but again this letter has the implicit conclusion that the *Guardian* cannot take this standpoint because of the use of Julie Burchill as a columnist. Whichever reading therefore, the conclusion of the letter is the same: the *Guardian* should be excluded from taking the standpoint it does. Put more formally, such a conclusion is a clear instance of the *tu quoque* variant of the *ad hominem* fallacy. The chief proponents the pragma-dialectical model, describe such a breach of rule one in the following way:

An implication of the first discussion rule is that a party may not improperly harm his collocutor's position as a serious discussion partner in any way. And this is precisely what happens in the various variants of the *argumentum ad hominem* [...]. [I]n the *tu quoque* variant, he denounces an inconsistency in the other party's opinions or behaviour [...] claiming that the other party has no right to speak, thus violating the first rule for critical discussion.

(van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1994b: 64)

Preventing a party from taking a standpoint, then, as with Kenny Jones' letter above, means that a difference of opinion cannot be opened up or dealt with and consequently, resolution is barred.

4.2 Obligation-to-defend-rule: Discussants who advance a standpoint may not refuse to defend this standpoint when requested to do so.

This rule ensures that any claims made are subject to reasonable critical scrutiny. In order for our scrutiny of a standpoint to be reasonable and critical, we must test whether that standpoint is defensible; if no one accepts responsibility for a claim and undertakes to defend it, then we cannot progress beyond the opening stage and so cannot settle our difference of opinion. Consider example 2, where rule two is breached<sup>5</sup>

(2) Dr Carey, we are told, denounces moderate Muslims for refusing to condemn the “evil” of suicide bombers (Islamic world is violent, says Carey, March 26). Moderates, on the whole, don't like to use terms like evil. We leave that to the neo-conservatives. And “condemn”? I thought religion was supposed to urge us to understand our fellow humans, to think “There but for the grace of God...” even as we deplore both the act and the conditions that led to it. [...]

Who are his comments for? They can't really be for Muslims, “moderate” or not. They will please those who subscribe to the renewed attitude that west knows best. [...]

Ahdaf Soueif, London (*Guardian*, 1 April 2004)

For the sake of the example, let us assume that Carey's standpoint is part of a wider dialogue; his call for moderate Muslims to publicly condemn suicide bombers is a request for Muslims to defend an antecedent standpoint – that moderate Muslims should not have to publicly condemn suicide bombings.<sup>6</sup> We shall take this letter as a response to Carey's request to defend the standpoint. Perceived in this way, the letter clearly evades the call to defend. A refusal to accept that Carey has requested ‘moderate Muslims’ to defend a standpoint is tantamount to a refusal to accept a call to defend. Without a defense, argumentation will not develop past the Opening stage, the original

standpoint cannot be subjected to critical scrutiny and therefore there can be no resolution of the difference

4.3 Standpoint rule: Attacks on standpoints may not bear on standpoints other than the actual standpoint advanced

This requirement ensures that attacks and defenses pertain to the standpoints and difference of opinion identified in the confrontation stage. Clearly, unless the parties' attacks and defenses pertain to the standpoints and claims in question the difference of opinion cannot be resolved. Rule three is breached in example 3:

(3) In calling for more legal protection on the grounds of religion, Faisal Bodi conveniently forgets the recently introduced "religiously aggravated, threatening, abusive or insulting behaviour" provisions that protect Muslims as well as followers of other religions [...]

Or would Bodi really like to see some kind of variation on the blasphemy law, which would prevent open discussion - and criticism when necessary - of his religion? This would be an extremely regressive step and completely unacceptable in a free society. Muslims and other religious minorities have protection under the law from personal attack and harassment. [...]

Terry Sanderson, National Secular Society (*Guardian*, 13 January 2004)

In the second paragraph, the arguer contradicts a standpoint that Faisal Bodi has not advanced. The arguer attacks the idea of varying the blasphemy laws to protect Muslims from discrimination on the grounds of religion; this, as is implicitly acknowledged in

the first paragraph, is not the standpoint in question. Consequently, the arguments advanced in this letter do not contribute to resolving of the difference of opinion in question; they are attacks on a separate standpoint and therefore part of a different argument.

4.4 Relevance rule: Standpoints may not be defended by non-argumentation or irrelevant argumentation

This requirement ensures that the standpoints on which parties differ are critically assessed through argument relevant to the difference of opinion. If you attack our claim on the grounds that ‘only idiots believe that kind of thing’, then you are not using critical argument to assess our claim, you are attacking us. If you use argument that is not pertinent to the assessment of our claim, then you are using irrelevant argument. Both of these things will bar a resolution of our difference of opinion: one is not addressing the standpoint with argument, the other is not addressing the standpoint. Consider example 4, where rule four is breached:

(4) You quote the spokesman of the Muslim Council of Britain as saying that “if anyone had made a rant against black or Jewish people there would be no question of temporary suspension - they would be out straight away” [...] [B]ut when BBC Newsnight review contributor Tom Paulin praised the murder of Israeli settlers, there was no question of suspending him. [...]

Neville Nagler, Director General, Board of Deputies of British Jews (*Guardian*, 14 January 2004)

In example 4, the claim from the MCB that Nagler opposes concerned racism against ‘Black or Jewish people’, yet he invokes comments against ‘Israeli settlers’. Assuming that the arguer’s report of Tom Paulin’s comments is accurate, ‘Israeli settlers’ is not an appropriate example of ‘Black or Jewish people’; Tom Paulin may express hatred of settlers, yet still feel benign towards ‘Black or Jewish people’. Consequently, invoking Tom Paulin’s comments on Israeli settlers is not the same as invoking defamatory comments on ‘Black or Jewish people’; only the latter is relevant to this argument. This invoking of anti-settler comments distracts us from the standpoint on the treatment of racist/anti-Semitic comments and shows why irrelevant argument bars resolution.

4.5 Unexpressed-premise rule: Parties may not falsely attribute unexpressed premises to the other party, nor disown responsibility for their own unexpressed premises.

This requirement ensures that all and only those elements of the parties’ arguments are assessed. This is essential since many arguments contain implicit premises and claims. For example: if we support our claim that ‘English cricket is the greatest’ by saying, ‘Hey, they beat the West Indies easily’, then, implicitly, we suggest that any team that beats the West Indies easily is a great team. If you are to assess our argument properly, you need to make a precise extraction of the premise left implicit. Otherwise, you could distort our argument with the result that our difference of opinion – that is, the original, undistorted difference of opinion – cannot be resolved. Consider example 5, where the arguer distorts a key premise of Osama Saeed’s article<sup>7</sup>:

(5) Osama Saeed's article does not represent true Islam as a faith and religion, but politically motivated by Iraq. It is utter rubbish to suggest that Muslims will not vote for Blair over Iraq. In fact, in Islam people with conviction and belief are truly respected.

Handrin Marph, London (*Guardian*, 26 May 2004)

We can take Saeed's standpoint to be that the Labour government's invasion of Iraq has jeopardized its Muslim vote. A key unexpressed premise for this argument is: 'the Muslim vote' will decrease as the deaths of Iraqi Muslims increase. However, the reading that Marph gives to this premise is: *no* Muslim will vote for the Labour government due to the deaths of Iraqi Muslims. This is an uncharitable reading of the (unexpressed) premise; the argument works far more clearly when Saeed's implicit premise is that the *majority*, rather than *all*, of Muslims will withdraw their support from Labour. By anyone's standards, the claim that not a single Muslim will vote for Labour is extreme, and therefore unlikely to be the intended reading of Saeed's premise. Consequently, Saeed himself may well agree with Marph's standpoint that "It is utter rubbish to suggest that Muslims will not vote for Blair over Iraq", but since this is a distortion of Saeed's unexpressed premise, such an agreement would not constitute a resolution.

4.6 Starting-point rule: Parties may not falsely present something as an accepted starting point or falsely deny that something is an accepted starting point.

This requirement ensures that parties observe the grounds for resolution identified in the opening stage. If, in our discussion of your claim that you are justified in your belief in God, we agreed that 'justified belief' meant 'rational and logical belief', neither of us

can distort this starting point. You cannot claim that we agreed that faith counted as a justification if that is not our agreed starting point; such a move would bar resolution of our difference of opinion. Consider the example 6, where rule six is breached:

(6) Natasha Walter makes the point that some Muslim women choose to headline their freedom by wearing the *hijab* (When the veil means freedom, January 20). True, but I can imagine there to be many women living in the west upon whom there is still an intolerable, male-driven burden to cover up. How do we protect these women?

Matthew Stadlen, London (*Guardian*, 21 January 2004)

The starting point of argumentation is Walter's claim that wearing the *hijab*, currently curtailed by the French ban, may be viewed as an expression of freedom. Here, although Stadlen acknowledges that Walter *has* successfully established this starting point ('Natasha Walter makes the point that some Muslim women choose to headline their freedom by wearing the *hijab*. True [...]'), he then proceeds with argument as though this were not the case. Rather, he suggests that the subject under examination should be whether "there is still an intolerable, male-driven burden to cover up." This is a clear case of denying an accepted starting point. Clearly, if discussants agree in the first instance on what counts as grounds for resolution, only for one or other of them to later change their minds, their difference of opinion will not be resolved.

4.7 Validity rule: Any reasoning in argumentation presented as formally conclusive may not be invalid in a logical sense.

This requirement ensures that argument claimed as logically valid *is* logically valid. For instance, we claim ‘English cricket is the greatest’ and we support this by arguing: ‘look, reason it out. If English cricket *is* the greatest, then England would have beaten the West Indies easily. They did beat the West Indies easily; therefore, English cricket is the greatest. See!’ Here, we have presented our argument as formally conclusive when it is in fact logically invalid.<sup>8</sup> Rule seven is also breached in example 7:

(7) Denys Graham writes that, in time, European Muslims will adapt to life in the West through the adoption of European ways of thought and behaviour. I'm sure this will happen for many. But he ignores the fact that Muslims have been in direct contact with Western societies for 150 years and more, and have changed very little. [...] The Islamic world dictates behaviour in every aspect of human rights, not just in religious matters. This leaves almost no room for manoeuvre.

Dr Denis MacEoin, Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne (*The Observer*, 15 February 2004)

Here, (in addition to a glaring historic inaccuracy) the arguer projects a characteristic of part of a group onto the whole group, thereby making a formally invalid inference from some (or part) to all (or the whole). Specifically, the arguer projects an assumed characteristic of Muslims in the ‘Islamic world’ (that is, ‘the Middle East’) onto all Muslims, including those Muslims living in Europe. This is a classic approach of prejudiced argumentation, and it is unfounded: all aspects of the behavior of Muslims in Europe are not dictated by the alleged characteristics of a sub-group of Muslims living in ‘the Islamic world’.

4.8 Argument-scheme rule: Standpoints may not be regarded as conclusively defended by argumentation that is not presented as based on formally conclusive reasoning if the defense does not take place by means of appropriate argument schemes that are applied correctly.

We shall make an extended examination of this rule in the next section of the article so there are no examples here. Instead, it is enough to say that this requirement ensures that when we are defending our claims with non-formal arguments, there are still schemes and forms of arguments that we must conform to and use appropriately if our argumentation is to be successful.

4.9 Concluding rule: Inconclusive defenses of standpoints may not lead to maintaining these standpoints, and conclusive defenses may not lead to maintaining expressions of doubt concerning these standpoints.

This requirement ensures that if the protagonist successfully defends the original claim, then the doubt is withdrawn; if the antagonist successfully casts doubt on the original claim, then the claim is withdrawn. Unless this rule is followed, and we withdraw from argumentation in the appropriate circumstances, then we cannot settle our difference of opinion. Violations of this rule do not have to take place in a dialogue: they can occur in written form, directed at non-present parties. In such cases we can say that the rule has been violated when the protagonist claims conclusive support for a standpoint when no such support exists.<sup>9</sup> Consider example 9, where rule nine is breached:

(9) Wantonly bombing Falluja and killing hundreds of its civilians as a result, and then describing these deaths as an accident, shows either great naivety or great stupidity. Such an approach merely confirms Western indifference to Iraqi suffering and Western double standards.

Kaz Knowlden, Bristol (*The Observer*, 23 May 2004)

Here, the arguer is too quick to treat their standpoint as confirmed. If we take the standpoint to be ‘the West is indifferent to Iraqi suffering’, then the Western powers’ account of the carnage in Falluja (‘as an accident’) does not *confirm* the standpoint. As Knowlden claims, at best it shows Western naivety or stupidity, but not indifference. Therefore the arguer cannot conclude that their standpoint has been successfully defended (or *confirmed*); more is needed.

4.10 The language use rule: Parties may not use any formulations that are insufficiently clear or confusingly ambiguous, and they may not deliberately misinterpret the other party’s formulation.

This rule ensures that vague and ambiguous language does not prevent resolution. Suppose we claim that the English cricket team is the ‘greatest ever’ test side, however we are using ‘greatest’ in a vague sense to mean combined weight. Your arguments – that minor victories against below strength test sides do not constitute greatness – will not affect our claim and so contribute nothing to resolution. Indeed, if our real claim, that they are the heaviest test side, is made clear there may not even be a difference of opinion to resolve – you might agree with us. Consider example 10, where rule ten is breached:

(10) The Organization of the Islamic Conference recently met. On the agenda were the usual anti-US and anti-Israel rants, but not one mention of Islamic terrorism. If the larger Islamic world is serious about tackling Islamic terror, then surely it should bother to discuss it.

Michelle Moshelian, London (*Guardian*, 5 May 2004)

We shall see this example again in the following section, but here, the significance of the argument rests on the vague and ambiguous phrase ‘the larger Islamic world’. It is not clear what the ‘larger Islamic world’ refers to. Potential referents include: Islamic states; leaders of such states; inhabitants of such states; religious figures and/or institutions; all Muslims regardless of state; or a host of alternatives. It is crucial to our assessment of the standpoint to be clear what the standpoint is actually claiming. The vagaries of the noun phrase ‘the larger Islamic world’ allow the arguer to make a broad claim based on the agenda of the OIC that a more precise use of language would most probably rule out. Unless the arguer makes ‘the larger Islamic world’ more precise, then we cannot make a critical assessment of their standpoint, and we cannot resolve any differences.

#### 4.11 Summary

Argumentation is a critical process where standpoints are either justified or refuted and differences of opinion resolved. This process has four stages: the Confrontation stage, where parties establish that a difference exists; the Opening stage, where parties establish starting points; the Argumentation stage, where parties offer critical defense and assessment of claims; and the Concluding stage, where parties establish the result

and make the appropriate withdrawal of claims or doubts. To ensure that the resolution of differences is optimized throughout these four stages, parties must adhere to the ten rules outlined above. A breach of these rules results in a failure of argumentation and hence prevents the resolution of a difference of opinion. With this summary in hand, the remainder of this article will examine argumentation schemes in letters to the editor. Specifically, we are interested in examining unreasonable argumentation schemes in readers' letters, or the letters that breach rule eight.

### *5. (Un)Reasonable Argumentation Schemes*

Argument schemes are fundamental to successfully resolving a difference of opinion. As shown above, Rule 8 of the pragma-dialectical model states: a standpoint may not be regarded as conclusively defended if the defense does not take place by means of an appropriate argument scheme that is correctly applied. The argument scheme is the manner in which 'the arguments and the standpoint [or conclusion] being defended are linked together' (van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Snoeck Henkemans 2002: 96). In other words, the argument scheme is the means by which an arguer defends his/her standpoint, or 'the type of connection between the explicit reason [argument] and the standpoint [conclusion]' (Ibid.). This defense of a standpoint may be done correctly or incorrectly.

Pragma-dialectical theory maintains that there are three categories of argument scheme. Consider the following three arguments:

(11) 'Of course Tony Blair is a liar - he's a politician.'

[And being a liar is characteristic of politicians]

(12) ‘While we still cringe at the horrors committed in Nazi Germany, we should equally cringe at the extermination of over 4000 unborn children per day in the United States.’ (Christian Action Council, cited in Clark, 2003: 196)

[And murder is comparable to abortion]

(13) ‘The prospect for peace in Israel looks slight; the latest attack has seen to that.’

[And attacks lead to a diminished likelihood of a peaceful resolution]

The arguments above are examples of the three different types of argument scheme suggested by pragma-dialectical theory. The differences between them become clearer when we consider the *unexpressed premises*, provided in the square brackets. In example 11, the argument (‘he’s a politician’) is linked to the standpoint (‘Tony Blair is a liar’) by a *symptomatic* relation: the argumentation rests on the assumption that lying is a necessary characteristic of being a politician. Example 12 is clouded by emotional language, but the argument (‘we object to Nazi atrocities’) is linked to the standpoint (‘therefore we should object to abortion’) by a *comparative* relation: the argumentation rests on the assumption that murder and abortion are comparable and therefore that we ought to view them in the same way. In example 13, the argument (‘there has been an attack’) is linked to the standpoint (‘therefore peace is unlikely’) by a *causal* relation: the argumentation rests on the assumption that this attack, or perhaps violence *per se*, diminishes the possibility of peace.

Each of these three types of argument scheme entail different criteria of soundness and, because of this, each ‘type of argumentation corresponds to certain assessment criteria’ (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992: 98) to establish whether the relation between argument and standpoint is reasonable. By choosing one argument

scheme over another to support a standpoint, ‘the arguer invokes a particular testing method in a dialectical procedure, in which certain critical reactions are relevant, and others not’ (Ibid.). We consider each of the three examples above to be, to varying degrees, *unreasonable* by the terms of the model. To explore why this is the case, each argument scheme requires further discussion.

### 5.1 Symptomatic argumentation

Symptomatic argumentation is based on a relation of concomitance, association or connection. According to van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992: 97), the argument ‘is presented as if it is an expression, a phenomenon, a sign or some other kind of symptom of what is stated in the standpoint.’ A symptomatic relation can be indicated in an argument by terms such as: ‘...*is characteristic of*...’; ‘...*is typical of*...’; ‘...*illustrates*...’; ‘...*is evidence of*...’; ‘...*implies*...’; or a variety of other phrases (see Snoeck Henkemans, 2002: 188). More formally, the argument scheme for a symptomatic relation is as follows:

Standpoint	Y is true of X
Argument	<i>because Z is true of X</i>
Unexpressed premise	<i>and Z is symptomatic of Y</i>

The most important aspect of all three argument schemes is the unexpressed premise on which the relation is founded. When faced with a scheme based on a symptomatic relation, it is essential to interrogate to basis of this relation. Van Eemeren,

Grootendorst and Snoeck Henkemans (2002: 98) suggest the following two critical questions to ask of symptomatic arguments:

- Aren't there other non-Ys that have the characteristic Z?
- Do *all* Ys have the characteristic Z?

Further:

- Is it correct to claim that 'Z is true of X'?
- Do Ys *always* display the characteristic Z?

Therefore, in considering the case of lying being a characteristic of politicians (example 11), we need to ask: are there any non-politicians that are liars?; do all politicians lie?; and do politicians *always* lie? The answers to these questions (respectively: yes, unknown & no), we feel, suggest that the argumentation – 'Of course Tony Blair is a liar, he's a politician' – is unreasonable.

In our sample of letters to the editor, faulty symptomatic argumentation took two principal forms: a false or insufficient supporting premise and hasty generalization. In example 14 (also examined above for violating rule 5), argumentation failed because the supporting premise was false:

(14) It is utter rubbish to suggest that Muslims will not vote for Blair over Iraq. In fact, in Islam people with conviction and belief are truly respected. Within the pure context of Islam, Tony Blair's extraordinary conviction to rescue Iraqi people from the evil tyrant that for more than 35 years kept murdering and raping his fellow Muslims are not arguable.

Handrin Marph, London (*Guardian*, 26 May 2004)

Fitting this letter into the symptomatic argument scheme, the argumentation can be reconstructed as follows:

*Standpoint* Muslims will still vote for Tony Blair

*Because* ‘in Islam people with conviction and belief are truly respected’

Muslims will vote for people with conviction and belief

*And* ‘rescuing Iraqi people’ is evidence of Blair’s convictions and beliefs.

Here, the supporting premise is inaccurate. In other words (referring back to our critical questions) it is not correct to claim ‘Z is true of X’. Like all with other religions and belief systems, the respect of Muslims depends not upon one holding beliefs but upon *what* one believes – immoral, perverse or corrupt values are obviously not respected. To take an extreme example: Muslims would not confer respect to someone who believed that infanticide is a legitimate practice, regardless of how sincerely such a belief was held. The issue, therefore, is not whether Blair *has* beliefs or convictions, but what exactly these *are* and whether he remains convinced of them despite compelling evidence that he was wrong or that they caused harm. Because of this, the argumentation is unreasonable.

Second, letters adopting symptomatic argumentation failed due to hasty or over generalization. The fallacy of hasty or over generalization occurs ‘if a standpoint is a generalization based upon observations which are not representative or insufficient’ (van Eemeren *et al*, 1996: 302). For example:

(15) The Organization of the Islamic Conference recently met. On the agenda were the usual anti-US and anti-Israel rants, but not one mention of Islamic terrorism. If the larger Islamic world is serious about tackling Islamic terror, then surely it should bother to discuss it.

Michelle Moshelian London (*Guardian*, 5 May 2004)

Fitting this letter into the symptomatic argument scheme, the argumentation can be reconstructed as follows:

Standpoint     The ‘Islamic world’ is not serious about tackling Islamic terror  
*Because*       A recent OIC meeting left Islamic terrorism off the agenda  
*And*            Not talking about an issue indicates a lack of interested in it

Here, on the basis of a single event, the arguer makes an unsupported general point about the conduct of the OIC and expands this further to make a still more general point about ‘the larger Islamic world’. This is a *pars pro toto* synecdoche, typical of racist discourse, in which the characteristics of a part are incorrectly transferred to the whole. It is unreasonable to make a general point about the willingness, or otherwise, of the OIC to tackle ‘Islamic terror’ on the basis of one meeting. The observation is *not representative*, since the OIC has explicitly condemned such activities in the past. Further, it is *insufficient* to use the actions of the OIC to make a general point about the ‘Islamic world’ (whatever this is supposed to be). The OIC does not represent the views of many Muslims – particularly given that many of its members are Heads of States of regimes responsible for some horrendous violations of *Muslim* human rights. Referring back to our critical questions, it is not correct to claim that ‘all Ys have the

characteristic Z'. In sum: the supporting premise is neither representative nor sufficient and hence the argumentation is fallacious.

## 5.2 Comparison Argumentation

As stated above, comparison argumentation is based on a relation of analogy. An arguer defends his/her standpoint by showing that what is stated in the argument is similar to that which is stated in the standpoint 'and that on the grounds of this resemblance the standpoint should be accepted' (van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Snoeck Henkemans, 2002: 99). A comparative relation can be indicated in an argument by terms such as: '*...equally...*'; '*...similarly...*'; '*...so too...*'; '*...any more than...*'; as well as by using more implicit allusions or evocations. More formally, the argumentation scheme for a comparison relation is as follows:

Standpoint:	Y is true of X
Argument	<i>because</i> Y is true of Z
Unexpressed premise	<i>and</i> Z is comparable to X

As before, the most important aspect of this argument schemes to interrogate is the unexpressed premise on which the relation is founded. Specifically, van Eemeren, Grootendorst and Snoeck Henkemans (2002: 99) suggest that we need to ask:

- Are there any significant differences between Z and X?

Further:

- Is it correct to claim that 'Y is true of Z'?

In the case of example 12 above, we need to ask: are the mass murders committed by the Nazis really comparable to abortion in the USA? This is a tricky example, since it rests on a matter of moral conscience and on the terms in use. If abortion is viewed as the termination of an *unborn child*, then the analogy is perhaps acceptable because we are comparing the taking of life with the taking of life; if abortion is viewed as the termination of a *fetus*, then the analogy is perhaps unreasonable because the categories are not comparable. In this case, we leave it to the reader to decide.

Looking towards our sample of letters, we found many examples of faulty analogous reasoning, which took two principal forms: insufficient argument; and poor grounds for comparison. First, then, in some letters analogy failed because of an insufficient *argument*. For example:

(16) Turkey - a secular republic - also bans the wearing of *hijab* and the fez in all public buildings. It does not seem that this is a controversial issue there.

George Eaton, Hitchin, Herts (*Guardian*, 14 February 2004)

Fitting example 16 into the comparative argument scheme, the argumentation can be reconstructed as follows:

Standpoint	Banning the veil shouldn't be an issue for France
<i>Because</i>	Banning the veil isn't an issue for Turkey
<i>And</i>	Turkey is comparable to France (both are secular republics)

In fact, the banning of the *hijab* in Turkish public buildings *has* been a significant problem for Turkish Muslims some time. In other words (referring back to our critical questions) it is not correct to claim that ‘Y is true of Z’. The policy ensures that Muslim women who feel that it is immodest not to wear the veil, are excluded from attending University or working for public sector employers. Turkish ‘laic’ ideology, ruthlessly enforced by the military, has ensured that even democratically elected politicians have been threatened if they are considered ‘too Muslim’. - We do well to remember that the ruling moderate Islamist Welfare Party of Necmettin Erbakan was ousted from power in a military coup in 1997. Similarly, Merve Kavakci, the elected Turkish MP for Istanbul, was prevented from taking her oath of office and jeered out of the parliament when she walked into the Turkish Parliament wearing a headscarf. Eleven days later, her citizenship was revoked and she was ‘accused of a number of charges – from “instigating hatred amongst people” to “striving to destroy the laic structure of the Turkish state”’ (Kavakci, 2004: 32). She currently lives in the USA.

Therefore, example 16 is not only a fallacious analogy, it is also highly counter-productive to the arguer’s aims. It seems that, on the evidence provided, there *is* grounds for an analogy between the laic systems of France and Turkey, but it operates in an opposite direction to that proposed: the veil *shouldn’t* be banned in France because of the problems it *has* caused in Turkey.

Second, in some letters, the analogy failed because of the components of the unexpressed premise of the analogy were not sufficiently comparable. In other words (referring back to our critical questions) it is not correct to claim that ‘Z is comparable to X’. For example:

(17) Tolerance works both ways (When the veil means freedom, January 20). It is no more intolerant to require Muslim women not to wear *hijab* in a non-Muslim country than to require non-Muslim women to wear a headscarf in a Muslim country.

Robin Gill, Oxford (*Guardian*, 22 January 2004)

Again, fitting example 17 into the comparative argument scheme, the argumentation can be reconstructed as follows:

Standpoint     It is not intolerant to require Muslim women not to wear the veil  
*Because*        It is not intolerant to require non-Muslim women to wear the veil  
*And*             Requiring Muslim women not to wear the veil is comparable to requiring  
                         non-Muslim women to wear the veil.

To be clear, Muslims women who wear the *hijab* do so for reasons of modesty: they consider it to be immodest to expose certain parts of their body (their torso, their head or in some cases their face) to men they're either not married to, or are outside of their immediate family. Put this way, the modesty of non-Muslim women is, at heart, not that dissimilar. A more fitting analogy would therefore have been: 'It is no more intolerant to require Muslim women not to wear the veil than it is to require non-Muslim women to go topless'. When reformulated in this way, the unreasonableness of the argument is clearly evident.

### 5.3 Causal argumentation

Finally, we have causal argumentation. Here, 'the acceptability of the premises is transferred to the conclusion by making it understood that there is a relation of *causality*

between the argument and the standpoint' (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992: 97). A causal relation is indicated in an argument by terms that refer to consequences or outcomes, such as: '*...creates...*'; '*...makes...*'; '*...gives rise to...*'; and many others. More formally, the argumentation scheme for a causal relation is as follows:

Standpoint	Y is true of X
Argument	<i>because Z</i> is true of X
Unexpressed premise	<i>and Z</i> leads to Y

As with the other two argument schemes, the most important question to ask interrogates the unexpressed premise of the scheme:

- Does *Z always* lead to Y?

So too should we question the acceptability of the premises:

- Is it correct to claim that *Z* is true of X?

Looking to the causal argumentation in example 13, we therefore need to ask: does an act of violence always diminish the possibility of achieving peace? We think not. On the contrary, violence may *increase* the long term possibility of peace if it is directed in the name of justice and in accordance with international law. Therefore, without knowing more about the context of the violence referred to, this argumentation may or may not be unreasonable.

Looking again at our sample, causal argumentation is a regular choice of *Guardian* letter writers. Frequently however, this appropriate argument scheme is incorrectly applied. Take example 18:

(18) The veil is not only a threat to no one, but banning it causes a serious threat to tolerance in the French society. Young Muslim girls will now increasingly enroll in private Islamic schools where they will be exposed to like-minded Muslim girls. So, rather than growing up wearing the veil, but with a great exposure to people from different beliefs and cultures, they will grow up still wearing a veil on their heads, but with another invisible one around their minds.

Dr Sami Mahroum Toronto, Canada (*Guardian*, 12 January 2004)

This interesting argument suggests that banning the veil in public buildings poses a threat to French society. – Not, as we believe, because it intentionally discriminates against a section of French society (in effect creating a hierarchy of human rights), but because it will may remove French Muslim girls from an educational system which ‘teaches them to be tolerant’ of people with different beliefs and cultures (i.e. the White majority). In contrast, the arguer suggests that the greater ‘exposure’ of French Muslim girls to ‘like-minded Muslim girls’ may result in an invisible veil being drawn ‘around their minds’ and hence should be rejected. Fitting this letter into the casual argument scheme, the argumentation can be reconstructed thus:

Standpoint     Banning the veil is a bad idea

*Because*        Being insulated from French beliefs and culture is a bad idea

*And*             Muslim girls will choose to attend Muslim schools, leading to them

being insulated from French beliefs and culture.

Laid out in this way, the unexpressed premise of this argument can now be interrogated: the arguer claims that banning the veil is a bad idea because it will deny French Muslim girls access to the only forum in which they will be exposed to French beliefs and culture. On this basis, is this causal argument reasonable? We consider this unexpressed premise – that French Muslim girls schools cause their pupils to be insulated from ‘French beliefs and culture’ – and the accompanying assumption – that French Muslim girls only come into contact with ‘French beliefs and culture’ through laic French schools – to be incorrect. In other words (referring back to our critical questions) it is not correct to claim that ‘Z leads to Y’. As such, the causal argument scheme is being incorrectly applied, producing this unreasonable argumentation.

## *6. Conclusion*

We have seen that treating letters to the editor as argumentation offers grounds for a fruitful analysis. In particular, using the pragma-dialectical model of argumentation provides a framework in which to place letters to the editor, and a set of normative standards by which to judge their success. In other words, we can treat letters to the editor as part of an argumentative exchange geared towards resolving differences of opinion, which must abide by the ten rules outlined above in order to optimize resolution. Using these characterizations as a normative standard, we can see how, and why, so many of the arguments employed in those letters discussing Islam or Muslims go awry.

At the heart of argumentation is the argument scheme – or the means by which an arguer links the argument to the conclusion and hence defends his/her standpoint. The pragma-dialectical model offers three categories of argument scheme – symptomatic, comparison and causal argumentation - that the authors of letters to the editor are capable of employing. Each of these three types of argument scheme entails different criteria of soundness, different assessment criteria and hence methods of dissecting and evaluating its reasonableness.

Finally, argumentation does not exist in a vacuum. As stated above, argumentation functions to convince an audience of the acceptability of a point of view and to provoke them into an immediate or future course of action. – It is ‘a process that aims at exerting an influence on one’s opinion, attitude, even behavior’ (Grize, 1990: 41, cited in Amossy, 2003: 13). Argumentation on the subject of Islam and Muslims must therefore be considered in relation to this function. Unreasonable argumentation – argumentation that breaches the ten discussion rules and therefore breaks a normative standard of critical discussion – in such a context is often far from being an academic matter. Unreasonable argumentation about Islam and Muslims can, at best, hamper our judgment and impede understanding; or, at worst, actualize and reinforce underlying racial or ethnicist inequalities (Essed, 1991: 52), encourage the social stratification of religious communities and perpetuate discrimination against Muslims. The pragma-dialectical model excels at revealing how this is achieved.

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<sup>1</sup> Our sample also includes the *Observer*, the sister paper of the *Guardian*, printed on a Sunday.

<sup>2</sup> We shall omit any discussion of the pragma-dialectic accounts of argument reconstruction and fallacy theory. These are important features of the pragma-dialectic account, but they are less crucial here than an understanding of the stages and rules.

<sup>3</sup> Clearly there are approaches to the reconstruction and analysis of argumentation that do not adopt the normative approach of the pragma-dialectical model. For instance, van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004: 14-15) outline an “anthropological perspective” on argumentative reasonableness, that views rationality as “culture-bound and thus relative. From such a perspective, ‘rationality’ and ‘reasonableness’ are not universal and object concepts, but culture-bound and (inter)subjective ones” and therefore that

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“arguments have the force to persuade an audience [...] due to the beliefs that specific audience has”. In contrast, the pragma-dialectical model adopts a critical perspective on reasonableness. From such a perspective, “all argumentation is regarded as a part of a critical discussion between parties that are prepared to abide by an agreed *discussion procedure*. [...] The proposed procedural rules are valid as far as they really enable the discussants to resolve their differences of opinion” (p.16, emphases added). It is exactly such a philosophical perspective on reasonableness that drives the analysis in this article.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Kilroy-Silk wrote a column, headlined ‘We owe Arabs nothing’ that was printed in the British tabloid newspaper *The Sunday Express* (4 January 2004). Amongst other points, he asked: ‘We’re told that the Arabs loathe us. Really? [...] What do they think we feel about them? That we adore them for the way they murdered more than 3,000 civilians on September 11 and then danced in the hot, dusty streets to celebrate the murders?’ In the subsequent furore he was sacked from his presenting job at the BBC, and has since launched a political party called Veritas that campaigns on a single-issue anti-immigration platform.

<sup>5</sup> Identifying cases where rule two is breached in reader’s letters is difficult since the interchange that occurs between letters and articles differs from verbal interchange where direct calls to defend claims, and direct refusals are easy to detect. This example, then, requires a little coaxing.

<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, this dialogue is contrived, but not too far fetched; ‘moderate’ Muslims silence might be taken as the implicit standpoint that there is no onus upon them to condemn these bombings explicitly (this is a better reading than taking silence to mean support). Carey’s call, then, is for ‘moderate’ Muslims to defend this standpoint, or ‘retract’ and publicly condemn suicide bombings.

<sup>7</sup> Here although we reconstruct the argumentation as an example of an unexpressed premise fallacy, we acknowledge that this letter could, from certain points of view, be treated as a standpoint fallacy. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

<sup>8</sup> For readers familiar with formal logic, it is presented as an argument taking the form *Modus Ponendo Ponens*, but in is, in fact, of the form *Modus Tolendo Ponens*; I have committed the fallacy of affirming the consequent.

<sup>9</sup> Note that to show an argument does not conclusively support a standpoint is not the same as refuting that standpoint; it merely shows that the protagonist must do more. In terms of the four stages, a violation of rule 9 should see an argument return to the third Argument stage.

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