

Working with the media: notes for refugee advocates

by Melissa Phillips

Earlier this year I received a phone call from a journalist wanting to do a story about immigration detention. I explained in detail the issues for asylum seekers placed in centres in remote parts of Australia, the problems associated with the privatization of detention centres and the length of time many people had been detained. After about 20 minutes, she told me she needed “a new angle on the story”. Feeling that I had presented enough ‘angles’, I was frustrated by her reaction to an issue which for refugee advocates was so important. Why wasn’t the story itself enough? The journalist, obviously disappointed, ended our conversation and said she would think more about what I had said. No story was produced.

Recently, as the article by Sharon Pickering makes clear, there have been many stories of ‘illegal immigrants’ coming to Australia in ‘boatloads’. Accounts of asylum seekers released from detention centres and then processed for social security payments have proven irresistible for current affairs producers eager to air a story about ‘illegals’ to raise the ire of viewers. These stories operate by working on pre-conceived, and often racist, myths about people seeking to enter ‘our’ country.

While the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) continues to challenge these dominant myths through media releases, ensuring our position appears alongside the government’s in press reports, and through our website, we often face the problem of having to be reactive rather than proactive. It is easier for hard-pressed journalists to paraphrase rhetoric in government press releases than go out looking for the ‘other story’. Set out below are some of the issues faced by RCOA and other organizations

working with and for refugees and asylum seekers when we try to negotiate the world of the popular press and challenge negative representations of our clients.

Does it have to be ‘us’ versus ‘them’?

When the media contacts RCOA for an opinion we invariably present one which is against that of the government. Recently our Executive Director has appeared several times in debates against the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs. There are several problems associated with this. The media loves conflict and wants us to contribute to this by pitting us as a non-government advocate in opposition to the Minister. It can be very difficult to work within this narrow framework but the opportunity to appear and present our perspective is invaluable. A possible longer-term consequence is that being pitted as special interest groups who oppose government policies undermines the possibilities for constructive dialogue with government.

We don’t publicize what we do; we just do it.

Many social workers and case managers work for organizations that are so busy responding to issues that they do not have the opportunity to stop attending to clients and start publicizing their work. It can thus be difficult for RCOA to find stories to highlight. Whereas when a company makes an important sale it might put out a press release, a local Migrant Resource Centre does not see a ‘success’ with a client as an opportunity to raise awareness about their work. Related to this lack of PR skills is a further problem:

If I had wanted to work with the media I would not have done social work.

Put simply, many of the people who work with refugees and asylum seekers are social and community workers. We do not have media training. For us, the media, like the world of policy and government, is unknown territory we have to learn to negotiate. Our skills are not in the media and we work with our clients, not journalists. Recognizing this gap, and taking a proactive approach, some Migrant Resource Centres have started to organize media skills courses for workers to learn how to cope when their community suddenly becomes a 'hot topic' for the media. Workers have learnt that ensuring positive press is vital for how their clients are received by the host community. It might be that media skills training needs to become part of professional development for community workers at the 'coal-face'. Key agencies need to continue to educate their members about the role of the media and encourage workers to expand their knowledge and hone their media skills.

How can we represent our clients and not label them?

Popular media coverage of any issue depends on stereotypes. In the case of refugees this can mean labelling them as victims, recipients of welfare payments and therefore a burden on society or, even worse, as carriers of disease. How to represent our clients, particularly for agencies seeking to secure financial support for their work with people in need, is an ongoing challenge. On the one hand we need to demonstrate that refugees are in need of help but on the other we do not want to reinforce stereotypes. One solution for the Council has been to highlight successful examples of refugees who have been helped by Australia. For example in 1998 the Council used Ms Tan Le, then Young Australian of the Year, as a positive model of a young, successful, former Vietnamese refugee. This year's Australian of the Year, Sir Gustav Nossal, also came to Australia as a refugee and we have been granted permission to raise awareness about this in talks that we present.

So profound is the influence of the mass media on people's lives and the ways

that communities respond to refugees that it cannot be ignored by those working with and for refugees and asylum seekers. This is especially the case when governments use the media to publicize their policy decisions. The media has become a maze through which those of us in the community sector must learn to negotiate. We need to acknowledge from the start that that which has the potential to do the most good also has the potential to cause considerable damage.

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For a UK perspective on countering media misrepresentation of asylum seekers see the information on the RAM project on page 39 of this issue of *Forced Migration Review*.



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