

# What's the story? Reporting on asylum in the British media

by Sara Buchanan and Bethan Grillo

According to reporting in much of the British media, particularly (although not exclusively) in tabloid newspapers, we face an asylum crisis: ever increasing numbers of asylum seekers arriving on our shores abusing the benefit system, involved in criminal or terrorist activities and generally posing a threat to the British way of life.

ARTICLE 19 (the Global Campaign for Free Expression) has worked with the Cardiff School of Journalism's Refugees and Asylum Seekers Project<sup>1</sup> to research the content, structure and messages conveyed in media reporting on asylum and the impact of media myths and stereotypes on asylum seekers and refugees.

The findings revealed a significant degree of confusion over the distinctions between asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants in terms of their legal status and reasons for being in Britain. The number of articles, the issues addressed in news and feature reports, the selection of sources, the language, imagery and presentation of statistics combined to distort the scale and nature of the asylum 'problem', narrowed the parameters of the debate to concern about abuse of the system and completely disregarded the human rights and welfare of vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees.

## Research methodology

A key feature of the research methodology was the direct involvement of asylum seekers and refugees as researchers and interviewees. Asylum seekers and refugees who had been living in Britain for varying lengths of time were asked about their experience of the British media as consumers and as subjects of media interviews. We monitored coverage of the asylum debate in six national newspapers (the *Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Sun*, the *Daily Express* and the

*Daily Mirror*) and television news bulletins on the BBC, Channel 4, ITV, Sky News and Channel 5. The final phase of the research involved interviewing journalists and/or home affairs and political editors on most national newspapers along with the press officers of key NGOs working in the refugee sector.

Over a three-month period (October-December 2002) in the six newspapers monitored we identified:

- 51 different labels describing individuals seeking asylum in Britain, including meaningless and derogatory terms such as 'illegal refugee' and 'asylum cheat'
- consistent blurring of the distinctions between asylum seekers and economic migrants
- heavy reliance on government officials and politicians as well as Migration Watch UK (a right-wing anti-immigration think tank)<sup>2</sup> as sources for news reports and opinion pieces
- an almost complete absence of photographs of refugee women (four images out of a total of 82)

- repetition of stock images of male asylum seekers with their faces partially covered 'breaking into Britain'
- regular quotation of unsourced asylum statistics and lack of contextual explanation of official government statistics (particularly in the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and the *Sun*)

Perhaps one of the gravest and most unfortunate tendencies uncovered by the research was the media's failure to employ correct terminology reflecting the legal distinction between refugees and economic migrants. The terms 'illegal immigrant', 'asylum seeker', 'refugee' and 'migrant' were used as synonyms. The sheer number of misleading terms which reporters and editors use to refer to people arriving in Britain to claim asylum is mind-boggling.

The numbers debate – how many asylum seekers, refugees, illegal immigrants, economic migrants and would-be refugees were arriving in Britain every year, every month and even every minute – generated two articles per week between the beginning of October and the end of December 2002. The battle for public opinion was focused on this issue; the analysis and interpretation of official statistics and speculation about what future figures would show formed the basis of one third of opinion pieces. In addition, reporting on many other issues of the day – the state of Britain's public services, the rise in gangland crime and the distribution of funds raised by the UK's National Lottery – was introduced and contextualised with reference to the latest asylum 'shock figures'.

*published in the  
Daily Mail,  
29 November*

## Images

Television coverage, although seemingly less hostile than the tabloid press towards asylum seekers and refugees, nevertheless conveyed strikingly similar



messages and stereotypes. The repetitive use of particular images – groups of men hanging around in Sangatte or on the streets of Dover, the iconic image of men running along the rail tracks just outside Calais – supported the powerful thesis of invasion and threat generated by the tabloid press. Photographs in the print media showed mainly male asylum seekers and very few of the men pictured were identified by the accompanying captions which instead suggested sinister motivations for their anonymity.

There were very few photographs of refugees or asylum seekers with their families or in an everyday domestic or work setting. The heavy editorialising of images showing relieved asylum seekers arriving at Britain's shores, accompanied by jibes about luxury hotels and giant pizzas being delivered to them by BMW, conspired to generate anger among readers that these individuals were receiving benefits to which ordinary hard-working British people would never be entitled. The inclusion of supposedly 'comical' political cartoons in the press further degraded and stereotyped asylum seekers and refugees.

*published in the  
Daily Mail,  
November 2002*

### Impact on asylum seekers and refugees

The overwhelmingly negative media coverage of asylum has a direct impact on asylum seekers and refugees who feel alienated, ashamed and sometimes threatened as a result. Many of the interviewees reported direct experience of prejudice, abuse or aggression from neighbours and service providers, which they attributed to the way in which the media informs public opinion. Some interviewees expressed their loss of confidence as a result of exposure to negative media coverage.

Many described the injustice they felt towards the media and, by extension, the British public who believe that they only came to Britain to abuse the welfare system and to seek employment. As one interviewee commented: *"...it is a no win situation because if you work, you are accused of stealing jobs and if you do not work, you are seen as scroungers"*. It was felt by another interviewee that the media taps into the normal everyday pressures experienced by the average British person and uses these as a vehicle to launch attacks on refugees



and asylum seekers, blaming them for everything from NHS waiting lists to stealing boy/girlfriends.

News and feature articles on asylum rely heavily on politicians, official figures and the police as sources of information and explanation. Individual asylum seekers and refugees are only quoted when they themselves are the subject of a report and rarely contribute directly to the policy debate. Direct quotes from refugees and asylum seekers were completely absent from articles about the second most reported 'asylum story' in the monitoring periods, the Immigration and Asylum Bill. While those responsible for policy formulation – politicians and government officials – understandably led this debate, refugees and asylum seekers arguably had some contribution to make considering they would be directly affected by its outcome. Indeed, they might well be knowledgeable about the wider implications in the countries, regions and groups from which they came. However, this was a dimension of the debate that was almost completely missing from print reports, which treated refugees and asylum seekers almost exclusively

as mere passive objects of policy making.

In spite of the negative coverage, asylum seekers and refugees are not hostile to the media and many describe their sense of duty to speak out and highlight human rights abuses in their own countries and counter the myths about refugees in the UK. Nevertheless they are wary of 'hidden agendas' and rely on trust established by refugee organisations to facilitate contact with the media. All insist on anonymity and very few are willing to be photographed or filmed. Refugee women in particular are frustrated by the lack of interest by the media in issues which affect them and feel that misguided assumptions about their role in their own communities can act as a barrier to journalists approaching them for an interview. Both men and women think that the media fails to adequately reflect the experience of refugee women in Britain.

Asylum seekers and refugees are reluctant to complain about inaccurate or prejudicial reporting. Interviewees expressed a mixture of doubt that their views would be accurately represented and concern about the consequences of being seen to complain.

### The way forward

So where do we go from here? Is the media's seeming obsession with asylum a story that will run indefinitely? As long as it continues to sell newspapers, the answer to this question is probably an emphatic yes. When the media prioritises market share over its duty to accurately and objectively inform the public, there will need to be a dramatic culture change within the industry before the asylum debate becomes genuinely constructive. However, we firmly believe the situation can be improved.

Since a seminar in May 2003, organised by ARTICLE 19 to bring together the media and the refugee sector, the Press Complaints Commission has issued a guidance note which alerts newspaper editors to the problems that can occur as a result of inaccurate, misleading or distorted terminology in reporting on asylum and refugee issues, and reminds them that pejorative or irrelevant reference to a person's race, religion or nationality is prohibited under Clause 13 of

the Code of Practice.<sup>3</sup> At the invitation of the BBC, ARTICLE 19 also attended an editorial meeting at the BBC in June in order to speak directly with journalists about the issues involved in reporting on asylum. In order to build upon these and other steps forward, ARTICLE 19 has made the following recommendations:

### Labels and language

- **Politicians and government officials** should take the lead in using accurate terminology when speaking about asylum and immigration policy. Comments should reflect the fact that an estimated 40-50% of those who apply for asylum in Britain each year are judged to have legitimate grounds for remaining in the UK, either as Convention status refugees or as persons in need of humanitarian protection.
- **Reporters, sub-editors and editors** should be aware of the correct use of terminology in the asylum and immigration debate. They should avoid inventing labels which are essentially meaningless and should distinguish between economic migrants and refugees.
- **Refugee organisations** should develop a glossary of correct legal definitions with clear explanations of their meaning and the context in which they should be used.
- The **Press Complaints Commission** should vigorously promote the recently published guidance note on reporting

on asylum and refugee issues to ensure that all editors are fully aware of its intent and meaning.

### Numbers and statistics

- The **media** should take care to source all statistics and explain the origin of numbers which are quoted without a verifiable source.
- The **media** should place reportage of numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in context, both historical and in relation to immigration to other countries.
- The **Home Office**, in consultation with refugee organisations, should review the publication and presentation of statistics on asylum and immigration. They should address both the information gaps which are highlighted in this report and consider ways in which statistics can be made clearer by a more detailed and contextual accompanying analysis.

### Representation of refugees and asylum seekers

- The **media** should seek to portray asylum seekers and refugees in less stereotyped ways, in particular by including more images of women and children in their reports.
- **Refugee organisations** should explore ways in which they can offer the media alternative and more representative images.
- Refugees and asylum seekers should be asked for their opinion on policy issues and given the opportunity to make a greater contribution to the debate. This requires **journalists** to seek them out as sources on a broader range of issues and for **refugee organisations** to be (even more) prepared to facilitate

exchange between the media and refugees.

- The **media** should find opportunities to present refugees as individuals whose stories are worth telling, rather than merely examples of a generic 'problem'.
- **Refugee organisations** (national and community-based) should join forces to launch a **national campaign** to counter the overwhelmingly negative image of asylum seekers and refugees in the public mind and seize the initiative in the public debate.
- The **media** should consider the benefits of recruiting exiled journalists who, in addition to their professional experience as journalists, could provide specific insight into issues relating to the countries and circumstances from which they have fled. This requires proactive action by the media to create opportunities for refugee journalists and for the media to use the networks and connections with refugees which can be provided by the NGO sector.<sup>4</sup>

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1. See: [www.cf.ac.uk/jomec/research/research\\_asylum.html](http://www.cf.ac.uk/jomec/research/research_asylum.html)

2. See: [www.migrationwatchuk.org](http://www.migrationwatchuk.org)

3. See: [www.pcc.org.uk/reports/edit\\_detail.asp?id=20](http://www.pcc.org.uk/reports/edit_detail.asp?id=20)

4. See for example, The Directory of Exiled Journalists, set up by the PressWise Refugees, Asylum Seekers and the Media Project: [www.ram-project.org.uk/directory](http://www.ram-project.org.uk/directory)

