



ICAR

Media Image, Community Impact Executive Summary

***Assessing the impact of media and political images of refugees and asylum
seekers on community relations in London***

Report of a pilot research study

Commissioned by the Mayor of London

April 2004

Media Image, Community Impact

Media Image, Community Impact

Executive Summary

is published by

**The Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK (ICAR)
International Policy Institute
King's College London**

A project funded by the Greater London Authority

First published April 2004

Reprinted July 2004

ISBN 0 9547024 3 3

Copyright © King's College London 2004

King's College London
Strand
London WC2R 2LS
United Kingdom

Contact details for ICAR

t: 020 7848 2103

e: icar@kcl.ac.uk

www.icar.org.uk

ICAR is an independent information centre that exists to promote understanding of asylum and refugees in the UK context and to encourage information-based debate and policy-making.

The copyright of this publication is owned by King's College London. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors alone and do not in any way represent the views of the Greater London Authority or King's College London.

About the ICAR Project Team

ICAR was set up at Kings College London in 2001 to encourage understanding, public debate and policy-making about asylum and refugees in the UK based upon accurate and unbiased information. It has particular expertise on public attitudes and community relations.

In order to draw on a wide range of expertise this research was conducted by a core staff team, based at the Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees, with the guidance of an Academic Director based at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies.

Advice and/or additional work was undertaken by a number of project advisers, and by volunteers. Other agencies were also consulted for their expert opinions. The GLA provided advice and support and set up a project advisory group which met twice to discuss plans and findings.

Project staff

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Kirsteen Tait | Project Manager, Director, Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees, Kings College London |
| Dr Roger Grimshaw | Academic Director, Research Director, Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, King's College London |
| Kate Smart | Project Researcher |
| Barbara Nea | Project Assistant |

Project advisers

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Mike Jempson | Director, The MediaWise ¹ Trust |
| Rich Cookson | Freelance Journalist, The MediaWise Trust (conducted interviews with editors) |
| Dr Terry Threadgold | Director of the Tom Hopkinson Centre for Media Research and Head of Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University |
| Zafir Behlic | Senior Development Officer, Refugee Action, freelance refugee journalist (produced focus group materials) |
| John Retallack | Playwright and Director, Company of Angels |

We are grateful for the invaluable help received from the following volunteers: Rachel Puttick who analysed media samples. Charlotte Hardie and Alex Perkins for compiling newspaper cuttings.

Other individuals and organisations consulted

Article 19
Association of London Government
Commission for Racial Equality
European Council on Refugees and Exiles
Metropolitan Police Service Diversity Directorate
The Monitoring Group
Zrinka Bralo, Refugee journalist

¹ Previously known as Presswise

The Project Advisory Panel comprised

1990 Trust
Association of London Government
Black Londoners Forum
Commission for Racial Equality
Home Office
London Refugee Voice
Muslim Association of Britain
Metropolitan Police Authority
National Union of Journalists
National Assembly Against Racism
Press Complaints Commission
Refugee Action
Refugee Council
Refugee Womens Association
The RAM Project, Media Wise Trust

Background

London has for centuries been a city of immigration. The most striking feature of this in recent years has been the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees from all parts of the world. Asylum seekers have a legal right to seek asylum in the UK guaranteed by the UK government through its signing of the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

The Greater London Authority (GLA) has become increasingly aware that asylum seekers and refugees in London are suffering harassment, although information on the scale of the problem is sketchy. It is in the interest of all London communities that factors which might lead to community tension and harassment are identified and action taken to improve community relations. In particular, there is a responsibility to safeguard the welfare of asylum seekers and refugees who have a legal right to be in the UK and are likely to have already suffered victimisation in their country of origin.

A number of groups have raised their concerns with the GLA that media coverage was adding to these tensions. As numbers of asylum seekers has risen, there has been a greater interest in asylum issues in the media, particularly the national newspapers. Although there is some reporting which is sympathetic to the plight of asylum seekers and refugees and recognises the contributions they can make, many stories have highlighted the presence of what are commonly termed '**bogus asylum seekers**' who, it is argued, claim asylum even though they have not suffered persecution, in order to seek '**a better life**'. Incidents of asylum seekers and refugees involved in criminal activity, benefit fraud, illegal working, forged documents etc achieve prominence in newspaper stories. Criticisms of the government for failing to ensure an effective asylum system regularly occur in newspaper articles; some argue that the system is too harsh, most that the system is too soft. Others concentrate on the inefficiency or cost of asylum procedures.

Assessing the precise impact of the media on people's understanding of the world is a difficult task, while estimating the media's influence on behaviour is even more challenging. Nevertheless, inaccurate and unbalanced reporting is commonly suspected by refugee supporting agencies, community groups, local authorities, the police and researchers to contribute to racist attacks on asylum seekers and refugees and to be a barrier to integration because of the feelings of insecurity and isolation which it engenders in refugees. Even though many asylum seekers and refugees do not read newspapers and/or originate from countries where reporting is highly inaccurate, reporting of asylum issues by UK newspapers is regularly cited by refugee supporting organisations as one of the biggest problems affecting the quality of life of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK.

The culmination of this concern was seen last year when UNHCR expressed criticism of the British media in meetings with the Home Secretary.²

The GLA has a responsibility to work towards ensuring that London is a safe and cohesive community. It can only do this through recognising and addressing the needs of the many diverse communities that make London a uniquely vibrant world city

² Report on UNHCR Website June 2003 *UK: UN concern over coverage of asylum seekers, discussed in more detail in the chapter **Existing research and other relevant literature** in the full report.*

Aims and objectives

The Greater London Authority commissioned the Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (ICAR), an independent information centre on asylum and refugees in the UK at Kings College London, to conduct a three month research project from August –October 2003 to explore the possible link between media reports and community tension including harassment. The ICAR team drew on specialist support from leading university centres.

The research set out to see how far media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers, and political commentary about them represented in the media, contributed to:

- racist attitudes and activity in London;
- crime against refugees and asylum-seekers communities living in London, and fear of crime amongst them;
- other risks (if any) to community relations in London.

The research set out to do this by:

- analysing press coverage of refugees and asylum seekers over a two-month period in a representative sample of the national and local London press; stories on asylum and refugees were collected and analysed between August and September 2003. The data was analysed in 2 ways: by headlines and content using a method developed by the organisation Article 19.
- using focus group sessions to explore the impact of the media on community relations in two London boroughs with significant refugee and asylum seeker populations. This involved focus groups drawn from members of the public who were asked how they responded to particular examples of media coverage and whether or not they perceived any impact by the media on local community relations
- interviewing local refugee groups and officials in the two boroughs
- reviewing existing knowledge about the possible link between political and media statements, community tension, and incidence of racial harassment through a literature survey, in the UK and beyond;
- interviewing the editors of regional and local newspapers to shed light on editorial policies and current community relations.
- Investigating the extent of harassment in two London boroughs with significant refugee and asylum seeker populations, by means of interviews and incident monitoring. A number of refugee community organisations were asked to monitor any incidents of harassment of refugees and asylum seekers during this period. Incident monitoring forms were developed for this purpose to give an indication of normally unreported harassment. This would help to indicate how widespread harassment actually was.

These are extremely complex issues but, in spite of not being able to investigate thoroughly all potential areas covered by the research question, results suggest that the study has gathered sufficient information to be able to make recommendations regarding media reporting of asylum issues and provide pointers towards further research.

Summary of findings

The findings show that unbalanced and inaccurate media images are frequent and powerful, with the potential to increase community tension. Some press coverage is unbalanced and lacking in accuracy in ways likely to increase tension, and in some circumstances tension does exist between members of established communities and asylum seekers and refugees which leads to harassment. Resentment displayed and language used in harassment reflect themes in press reporting and indicate a link back to media coverage but more needs to be known about how far and in what ways the reporting may trigger hostile action against asylum seekers and refugees.

This influence is of course not straightforward. It can be limited by the resilience and scepticism of the people and communities receiving these messages, and by their experience of diversity in daily life. On the other hand the influence of the messages can be amplified by uncritical reading of newspapers, a sense of resentment and injustice rooted in deprivation, and by low appreciation of diversity. But resilience to media images does not mean that it is safe to conclude that reporting of asylum does not need to be balanced and accurate.

Main findings: media monitoring and audience impact

- The study found clear evidence of negative, unbalanced and inaccurate reporting likely to promote fear and tension within communities across London. There was most evidence of this in the national press that reported on asylum issues far more frequently than either the local or black and ethnic minority press.
- The main parties dominated the political sources quoted in news stories. In contrast, there was little reference to legal instruments or to organisations working on behalf of asylum-seekers and refugees.
- The portrayal of allegedly overwhelming but unspecified influxes of asylum seekers from abroad was likely to bring apprehension to readers' minds while the frequent reporting of criminality among asylum-seekers and refugees was likely to induce fear.
- The language of sections of the press was found to be mainly or frequently unbalanced, negative and in some respects potentially alarming. In some feature articles it appeared that disparate information was welded together in a manner likely to alarm readers.
- The survey of coverage showed that emotive language is frequently used when reporting asylum issues. Focus group participants believe that much of the more contentious coverage may be inaccurate and unbalanced, but in less extreme cases it can be difficult for them to determine when coverage is based on reliable facts and figures.
- Scepticism alone is not enough to correct factual inaccuracies or the impressions given about particular events, statistics or individuals.
- Newspapers differ widely in their presentation of news and information about asylum and refugee issues but some appear willing to print articles based on information reported to them which they consider newsworthy without thorough investigation of the reliability of that information or its sources.
- Local newspapers are more likely than national ones to interpret their role as providing a balanced picture on issues that affect local people. Media impact is most powerful when national and local newspaper images coincide.

The role of television was not explored in this research; however, on the basis of comments made by several participants television clearly also has the potential to influence public opinion on asylum issues. This needs to be further explored.

Community Impact

Although there has been no public conflict in the boroughs researched, low-level harassment and abuse remains a persistent problem of significant but unmeasured dimensions. There is evidence that refugees and asylum seekers are directly affected by the predominantly unbalanced and inaccurate newspaper reports – they feel unwelcome and fearful.

- Community leaders believe more strongly in the effect of the media on community tension than did focus group participants. Individuals interviewed in focus groups may not concede that they are significantly influenced by press reporting of asylum, but they acknowledge some effect on their opinion and believe that it has an impact on community tension by influencing the views of Londoners in general, particularly those who read papers uncritically.
- Hostile attitudes to asylum seekers and refugees and attacks on them are most likely when hostile media images coincide with local experiences of deprivation and competition for services in short supply locally e.g. health and housing.
- It is commonly believed by many who were interviewed for this research that media reporting which is hostile to asylum seekers and refugees has a greater effect on those who are involved in racial harassment of asylum seekers and refugees, because it reinforces and legitimises their prejudices.
- Responses from community leaders indicate a widely held belief that young people are influenced by the media even if they don't spend much time reading newspapers, because their views are influenced by family and friends who are newspaper readers.
- Quotations from national and local politicians in the media are regarded as influential in forming local opinions but not much information on this point arose from the research.
- The issues about which there is local resentment towards asylum seekers and refugees reflect themes in press reporting. More evidence is needed to establish how far and in what ways reporting may trigger hostile action against asylum seekers and refugees: links have been identified in past research literature; some of those interviewed in the two boroughs believe that a present link exists and the language used in actual incidents bears out this belief. The role of rumour in exacerbating resentment needs to be further explored.

Factors that limit the impact of the media on communities

In general Londoners, as represented by the community leaders and focus group participants interviewed in this research, claim to be highly resilient to media images of refugees and asylum seekers. This is partly because their opinions tend to be formed by everyday contact with a diverse local population which includes asylum seekers and refugees and other ethnic minority communities, and partly because of widespread and strongly expressed disrespect for the press.

Several factors in the community acted as filters or barriers against the build up of fear and tension.

- Scepticism about the press created resistance to the more alarming implications of some newspaper reporting.

- Access to a wide range of information sources put alarming press reporting into a different context.

On the one hand attitudes expressed by participants reflected concerns strongly featured in the press sample such as those about crime or financial motives for migration.

On the other hand it was perceived that asylum seekers and refugees were made into scapegoats – for the problems of society, made worse by the impact of deprivation on established communities.

Harassment

The evidence of the local interviews and the results of local monitoring indicate that the asylum seeker and refugee population has experienced a significant amount of undocumented and unreported harassment and abuse. This unrecorded suffering has not emerged in the press to the degree that might have been expected. Partly because of their silence, asylum seekers and refugees have avoided the spotlight of the media.

The main findings are:

- Harassment of refugees and asylum seekers is occurring on a daily basis, according to refugee community leaders.
- This harassment is largely unrecorded and rarely reported to the authorities, and therefore unrecognised.
- There is anecdotal information to suggest that the incidence is increasing.
- The police and local government are alert and anxious about possible community unrest and harassment of asylum seekers and refugees following negative, hostile and inflammatory press coverage and there is evidence that their policies have adapted to minimise the impact.
- Refugees and asylum seekers who have been victims of harassment and representatives of refugee communities feel strongly that the press presents hostile images of asylum seekers and refugees, that this is in itself a form of harassment and that it increases the likelihood of local harassment of individual asylum seekers and refugees.
- Evidence from one borough which has a specialist racial harassment monitoring unit suggests that refugees and asylum seekers may be being targeted.

Recommendations and Action Points

This study has moved the debate forward by providing the first snapshot of harassment of asylum seekers and refugees in London obtained in recent years. In addition, while a number of researchers have conducted monitoring of media reports on asylum, this is the first study to juxtapose media monitoring with local points of view and cases of harassment.

The report makes the following recommendations:

- That the GLA press for more accurate, balanced, and referenced information about asylum seekers and refugees in London to be made widely available. This should be in a variety of formats and be available to the media and all sectors of the community.
- That the GLA find ways of providing accurate, balanced and referenced information about asylum seekers and refugees in particular for young people in London, in appropriate and innovative formats. This will help to counteract the misinformed views

that they often hold. This information should answer the questions that young people ask about asylum seekers as well as challenging the misconceptions they hold.

- That the GLA promote monitoring of racial incidents against asylum seekers and refugees, consistency in monitoring conducted by different agencies and compilation of monitoring results from different agencies across the London area. This should be done after discussion with the Metropolitan Police, race equality forums, refugee community organisations and other relevant bodies.
- That the Home Office commission a study that will promote better understanding of the involvement of asylum seekers in crime and the criminal justice system. This research suggests that some media coverage associates asylum seekers with illegal and criminal activities in a manner which is inaccurate and unbalanced. The lack of data on asylum and crime makes it difficult to sustain a complaint about this in spite of the fact that police sources claim that asylum seekers are relatively unlikely to be involved in crime and more likely to be victims of crime.
- That the GLA discuss with refugee support agencies how they might be able to provide information which takes into account both media deadlines and media interest in real life stories, in order to encourage the balanced use of sources in media coverage of asylum issues and asylum seekers.

Media coverage of asylum issues

The central issue of this research is its findings on media coverage. The press have the right to raise issues of interest to their readers but it is important to balance this against the need to respect human rights and the safety and cohesion of communities. Asylum seekers and refugees are vulnerable to many forms of harassment including physical attack. Unbalanced press reporting of asylum issues is likely to increase community tension and particularly influence perpetrators of harassment.

Inaccurate use of terms

ICAR welcomes the recent Press Complaints Commission (PCC) guidance on the use of accurate terminology in reporting on asylum seekers and refugees published in October 2003. Reporting that confuses asylum seekers with economic immigrants and people who enter the UK illegally is likely to generate hostile attitudes to asylum seekers.

The report recommends that:

- The GLA commission independent monitoring of media compliance with PCC guidance, for at least a six month period and that the GLA work with the PCC to discuss ways in which the scope of this guidance could be extended so that some of the additional concerns raised in this report can be addressed.
- The GLA should take practical steps to facilitate greater accuracy on reporting of asylum issues in London by providing assistance to journalists seeking reliable sources of information. To this end, it is recommended that the GLA set up an independent fact checking facility for the media's reports on London as soon as possible.
- The report also recommends that the Mayor of London discuss the main findings of this report with the proprietors of national newspapers which regularly write unbalanced and inaccurate reports about asylum policy, asylum seekers and refugees.

- That the GLA welcomes coverage of asylum issues by local media that is generally more balanced than that of some of the national media, and shows greater concern about the effect on their local community
- That the GLA should work with London's local community leaders, especially those responsible for community cohesion and safety, to develop more effective strategies for discussing with the local, London-wide and national press their concerns about links between media coverage and local community tension.

Further research is also needed into the impact of political images on television and radio none of which could be satisfactorily explored within the limits of this research.

Copies of the full research report are available from ICAR, Kings College London, The Strand WC2R 2LS and on the Greater London Authority (GLA) and ICAR websites:

www.london.gov.uk

www.icar.org.uk

the INFORMATION CENTRE *about* asylum *and* refugees IN THE UK



ICAR

KING'S
College
LONDON

University of London

©King's College London 2004

First published April 2004

By ICAR

King's College London

Strand

London WC2R 2LS

Contact details for ICAR

Felicity Heyworth

t: 020 7848 2103

e: icar@kcl.ac.uk

www.icar.org.uk

ISBN 0 9547024 3 3

Copyright

Media Image, Community Impact