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Introduction

This book examines the media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers in the United Kingdom, and the impact this has on public understanding and on the everyday lives of different communities in Britain. Much of this coverage presents the issues of refuge and asylum as critical problems for the United Kingdom. Here we look at what the public is told and consider what is left out of the media narratives. We show how the TV and press coverage corresponds with key political events, and how politicians respond to public fears and anxieties which are themselves featured in and also generated by the popular press and other media.

We begin by introducing a short overview of the range of existing research in this area. This includes a brief history of how asylum and refuge have come to be major political issues of debate since the late 1990s. Our own research on the content of the British media follows. In this we analyse two key periods of media coverage in 2006 and 2011. The last section of this work includes a series of interviews with a range of people who have expert knowledge of the creation of media accounts. We also interviewed individuals who had direct experience of the impact media output has on people who are actually seeking asylum. These individuals included both refugees and those who work with them. Finally, we interviewed UK citizens from established migrant communities, who commented on the nature of media coverage and the impact that it had on their own lives.

Other Research

Most sociological studies have focused on 'race' or migration rather than asylum. This research has indicated that media representation of 'race', migration, refugees and asylum seekers largely presents these negatively as a source of 'moral panic', 'conflict', 'crisis' and 'threat'. The long-term trend in media coverage is to 'scapegoat', 'stereotype' and 'criminalise' migrant groups (Buchanan, Grillo and Threadgold, 2003; Castles and Kossack, 1973; Cohen, 2011; Finney, 2003; Hall

et al., 1978; Hartman and Husband, 1974; Kendall and Wolf, 1949; Philo and Beattie, 1999; Philo et al., 1998; Said, 1978; Van Dijk, 1991; Welch and Schuster, 2005).

A key phenomenon raised by media analysis in this area is the language used to describe contested issues. Since 2002, for example, attention has turned to the use of terms like ‘illegal immigrant’ in relation to those seeking asylum. Underpinning this terminology is the assumption that most asylum seekers are not in fact ‘genuine’ and that their motives are economic, something Alia and Bull refer to as the ‘ineligibility myth’ (2005: 27). The phrase ‘illegal immigrant’, imbued with the wholly negative connotations of ‘illegality’, conflates issues of refuge and asylum with economic immigration. In fact, most immigration and asylum laws are civil laws and not criminal laws; ‘illegal’, however, implies criminality. Asylum seekers have done nothing wrong. In 2003 the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) issued guidelines stating that:

NO-ONE is an ‘illegal asylum-seeker’. This term is always incorrect. It cannot be illegal to seek asylum since everyone has the fundamental human right to request asylum under international law.

(NUJ, 2005)

Guidance for journalists produced by Oxfam, the National Union of Journalists, Amnesty International Scotland and the Scottish Refugee Council states that the phrase ‘illegal immigrant’:

although commonly used, is not defined anywhere within UK law. The phrase ‘illegal immigrant’ was found in January 2002 by the Advertising Standards Authority to be racist, offensive and misleading.

(NUJ, 2005: 14)

The term ‘illegal immigrant’ inhibits an informed debate over the issues at stake, as it does not distinguish between categories of migrant. There is also a tendency for asylum seekers whose applications have failed to be considered illegal immigrants by default, whereas the validity of their claim is often confirmed at a later date. According to the Press Complaints Commission:

An asylum seeker can only become an 'illegal immigrant' if he or she remains in the UK after having failed to respond to a removal notice.

(PCC Guidance note on asylum seekers and refugees, October 2003, quoted in Finney, 2005)

Many are granted refugee status on appeal. The United Nations and the trade union movement have thus adopted the term 'irregular migrant' or 'undocumented migrant'. But British journalists and politicians alike continue to contribute to audience misunderstanding, using an idiom which has long been considered to mislead and to bolster racial prejudice (NUJ, 2005: 14). The Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (ICAR) has also highlighted those instances where, although the pejorative 'illegal' is not employed, asylum seekers are included under the general term 'migrants'. The term, they argue, fosters the sense that 'this group [is] very powerful, given its size, and investing in it would bring a shade of danger for the settled community' (ICAR, 2012).

In 2007, the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) raised concerns about the media's use of words like 'surge' and 'flood' and the inherently negative associations they convey (Joint Committee on Human Rights (JHCR), 2007). The Cardiff School of Journalism, tracing recent trends in media coverage of asylum seekers, recorded 51 different labels employed by journalists to refer to asylum seekers in Sangatte, near Calais in 2002. These included 'parasites', 'scroungers', 'would-be immigrants' and 'asylum cheats' (Buchanan et al., 2003: 50). The study also highlighted the development of military metaphors in these contexts, which fostered the sense of an invasion or attack, including the phrases 'legions of young men', 'ranks of migrants', 'massing at Calais' and 'looking like a rag tag army of conscripts' (Buchanan et al., 2003: 50). They also found that statistics were being exploited to augment this impression of an impending 'threat'. These 'alarmist statistics' were repeatedly exaggerated and unsourced, as, for example, with the number of 'immigrants' estimated to be at Sangatte, variously placed at 1,589, 1,800 and 5,000 (2003: 52). The statistics were being used without contextual analysis of their meaning, and where official statistics were lacking, speculation and exaggeration of immigrants (and 'illegal immigrants') had become routine in some sections of the media (2003: 52). The media were found to

be relying primarily on official sources such as the government and police. Conversely, little space was allotted to refugee voices even via non-government organisations (NGOs), with the voice of women seeking asylum being the least represented. In another study of the Sangatte coverage, Article 19 found that ‘The term “flood” appeared a total of nine times ... seven times in articles about Sangatte. Used less frequently were “deluge”, “mass exodus” and “mass influx”.’ They found that this language was not confined to the tabloids, but that it appeared in the broadsheets as well (Article 19, 2003: 51).

Recent research by the Oxford Migration Observatory found that ‘respondents indicate asylum as the most commonly chosen answer when questioned about reasons for migrating, whereas asylum seekers are one of the smallest groups among immigrants (4%)’ (Migration Observatory, 2011: 10).

Studies, including those on Sangatte, have criticised the omission of a political context, an omission which has the potential to mislead audiences about the causes that lie behind asylum seeking. The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) for example noted in its 2005 audience reception studies that ‘Virtually no participant mentioned events such as the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan as potential drivers of asylum’ (Lewis, 2005: 14). Alia and Bull’s *Media and Ethnic Minorities* discusses refugees among other groups of ethnic minorities in Britain, and highlights a number of ‘myths’ they say characterise the coverage of asylum. In addition to the ‘ineligibility myth’ mentioned above, these include the ‘cost myth’, which emphasises refugees as a financial burden, the ‘social cost myth’, which stresses cultural harm to the ‘British way of life’, and the ‘criminality myth’, which casts them as criminals or terrorists (2005: 27–8).

James Curran in his *Media and Democracy* (2011) and Roy Greenslade in ‘Seeking scapegoats: the coverage of asylum in the press’ (2005) both provide examples in which the tabloid press ran a number of false and exaggerated stories in 2003. These accounts focused around the eating of animals that are either considered taboo or are typically protected as symbols of British heritage. Curran describes how:

The story was judged to be so important that the Sun (July 4, 2003) cleared its front page to reveal that ‘Callous asylum seekers are barbe-

cuing the Queen's swans', under the banner headline 'SWAN BAKE'. 'Eastern European poachers', the paper reported, 'lure the protected Royal birds into baited traps, an official Metropolitan Police report says.' Its continuation story inside the paper recorded unambiguously: 'Police swooped on a gang of East Europeans and caught them red handed about to cook a pair of swans.'

(Curran, 2011: 17)

Upon closer investigation, it emerged that there had been no arrests, nor was there a police report, only an internal memo clarifying the rules on poaching. Nick Medic, a Serbian exiled journalist who initiated the complaint and wrote to the police, quoted a letter he received from Det. Supt. Tristram Hicks saying:

Nobody has been arrested or charged in relation to offences against swans. The Sun ... referred to asylum seekers being responsible. We have no information at all that supports this contention and indeed when we spoke to [the reporter], he agreed that this was a mistake.

(quoted in Medic, 2004)

This was sent on to the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), which concluded that the paper 'could provide no evidence for the story' (Curran, 2011: 17). By means of clarification, five months later the PCC compelled the *Sun* to issue a clarification on p. 41 stating merely that 'nobody has been arrested in connection with these offences', a statement which failed to acknowledge that there was no evidence asylum seekers were responsible (Medic, 2004).

Oxfam has outlined how negative portrayals of asylum seekers in the media impact directly on communities in terms of harassment and racial abuse (JCHR, 2007: 99). In a study conducted in 2003 at King's College London (KCL), ICAR discussed the possible links between media coverage of this kind and patterns of social tension within communities, including 'racist attacks and street harassment'. ICAR highlighted a series of alarmist headlines, which included the following key words:

- arrested, jailed, guilty
- bogus, fraud, illegal
- failed, rejected.

The report found that the language used in racist incidents ‘appeared to mirror themes current in the newspapers under study’ (Casciani, 2004). Intriguingly, the research conducted by ICAR indicated that local coverage of asylum and immigration is likely to be more positive and less hostile than national coverage. In 2005, ICAR observed that London’s local newspapers ‘do not tend to comment on policy and are mainly concerned with positive local interactions between individual asylum seekers/refugees and host community members’. It concluded that, in contrast to national coverage, in London’s local press:

There is no appetite for generically linking asylum seekers/refugees to crime, and concerns that asylum seekers are a burden or get preferential treatment are outweighed by belief in their contribution to London’s economy and culture. Inflammatory, extreme and fear-inducing language is avoided and articles are well-sourced; a wide range of organisations and individuals is used as sources.

(ICAR, 2005)

In 2007, the JCHR study conducted for the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) described media coverage as ‘potentially shaping the way in which sections of the public viewed asylum seekers, refugees, new migrants and even ethnic minorities more broadly’ (JCHR, 2007: 99).

UK media coverage has also been criticised for exaggerating the number of refugees applying to the United Kingdom for asylum. The UK Independent Race Monitor’s Report in 2005 stated that ‘repeated reference to abuse and reducing the numbers of asylum applicants tend to reinforce popular misconceptions that abuse is enormous in scale when in fact it is a small proportion of people who enter the UK’ (Coussey, 2005: 100). This misconception appears to be especially prevalent among journalists. According to a study produced by the Cardiff School of Journalism, the journalists interviewed expressed their suspicions that ‘asylum seekers’ were often in reality economic migrants, though they could provide no evidence to support this belief (Gross, Moore and Threadgold, 2007: 45–6). This study also questioned the failure of journalists to follow up on the deportation of ‘failed asylum seekers’. This was explained in terms of both cost and safety, raising the question why refugees seeking asylum are deported

to locations from which it would be too dangerous for journalists to report (Gross et al., 2007: 55–6).

Intriguingly, certain journalists in the right-wing press have attempted to resist the way in which they are instructed to cover asylum stories. Greenslade notes that in 2004, following a series of stories in the *Express* regarding what was referred to as an ‘invasion’ of Roma asylum seekers, the paper’s own journalists took ‘the unprecedented step of writing to the Press Complaints Commission to complain about being put under pressure by their senior executives to write slanted articles’ (Greenslade, 2005: 22). This was not their first attempt to address working practice within the *Express*: in August 2001 the paper’s union members complained of its ‘sustained campaign against asylum seekers in pursuit of circulation’ (Greenslade, 2005: 22). Greenslade notes that ‘After some consideration, the PCC said it could not intervene citing its role as a body dealing with complaints from members of the public not from journalists’ (2005: 22).

Coverage of asylum in these papers is extensive. A survey in 2002, which examined twelve weeks of coverage in seven major newspapers, found that by far the most articles concerning asylum seekers were found in the *Daily Mail* and the *Express*. In the *Daily Mail* this made up 25 per cent of the paper’s total content, and in the *Express* 24 per cent (Article 19, 2003: 14–15). The Glasgow Media Group has also flagged up the danger of such media portrayals as enabling and providing ‘a rationale for changes in asylum law’ (Philo and Beattie, 1999: 196). The Cardiff School of Journalism underscored these concerns in 2003, saying that ‘the relentless repetition of dramatic headlines which speak of an asylum “crisis” has undoubtedly influenced the presentation of successive government policies which have sought, above all, to reduce the number of asylum seekers entering the country’ (Buchanan et al., 2003: 12).

Asylum laws have indeed undergone substantial changes intended to regulate the number of applicants successfully claiming asylum in Britain (Hauser, 2000). On a more specific level, the UK Independent Race Monitor’s Report has raised concerns as to whether ‘hostile, inaccurate and derogatory’ media coverage could also influence individual decisions made by immigration caseworkers, ‘as it makes caution and suspicion more likely’ (Coussey, 2005: 100). The JCHR reiterated

this point in 2007, warning of the potential for 'hostile reporting ... to influence the decision making of officials and Government policy' as well as a possible link between such reporting and 'physical attacks on asylum seekers' (2007: 101).

We can thus identify some very clear patterns emerging in media coverage in terms of the subjects covered or avoided and the specific news angles taken. When we began our work in this area we interviewed a series of journalists to assess how the subject of asylum and refugees was being discussed in newsrooms.

Comments from Journalists

We spoke with seven journalists from the BBC, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Star*, Associated Press and other news outlets including broadsheets. Their views were given under conditions of confidentiality. They made very pertinent comments about the conditions under which stories are produced and what they saw as the routine assumptions with which journalists work. These comments fell into three broad areas: story content and news angles; the nature of newsrooms and decisions about the inclusion of stories; and assumptions about readers and audiences.

With regard to the first of these categories, a journalist from a tabloid spoke of the demonisation of asylum seekers, migrants and refugees and how they were consistently treated as a single negative category of people:

Certainly when it comes to the idea of illegal immigrants and asylum seekers, very often they are just interchangeable terms. There's no attempt ever made to explain what these terms mean. The message always is that they're bad. The idea that an asylum seeker is not an illegal immigrant is completely lost, they are all a problem.

In this way asylum seekers, migrants and refugees join a list of stigmatised peoples and can thus be equated with other ethnic and social minorities. As the journalist notes:

You know, there's nothing better than a Muslim asylum seeker, in particular, that's a sort of jackpot I suppose. You know, it is very much the cartoon baddy, the caricature, you know, all social ills can be traced back to immigrants and asylum seekers flooding into this country.

Another journalist commented on how the language of asylum and refugees had become linked to external issues such as the seeking of benefits:

The language itself, the difference between refugee and asylum seeker. You don't hear the word refugee any more, it's asylum seeker all the time. It's been re-classed as somebody looking for benefits.

Some journalists spoke of severe problems with the accuracy of stories. One journalist working for a broadsheet had decided, on a personal impetus, to fact-check stories appearing in the tabloids. This interviewee noted in particular how the immigration figures used therein consistently exaggerated the number of migrants who were living in the United Kingdom. Another journalist, who had worked on a tabloid, made the point that inaccuracy often derives from information that has been deliberately excluded from a story. The idea is to leave out any elements that contradict the main theme that is being pursued:

I have been told in a newsroom, leave that line out and that line out, then we have got a story – leave out the bits that didn't suit.

The journalist gave this illustration from a story about Muslims snubbing war heroes:

You know there's an angle you can take, or there's some facts which you can cut out or you can reposition some facts.... it had been a St. George's Cross medal ceremony in which two Respect [people] who were Muslims, hadn't got up and applauded. So that ran ... the fact that Muslims had snubbed our war heroes. What was not mentioned in any of the stories was that there was loads of other Muslims there from all sorts of different political parties who did stand up and applaud, but by completely just removing that one fact it became a situation where it seemed like the only Muslims that were in the room weren't applauding.

Journalists also spoke to us about the nature of newsrooms and the conditions under which they worked. These varied depending upon the maturity and status of journalists. Those who are older or employed as staff reporters are more able to exert some authority over

what they cover. As one of the interviewees commented, younger journalists are in a weaker position:

It's not a meritocracy, it's authoritarian – you do what you're told. It's an authoritarian system in a way, you're just told how to write and if you don't write it in the way they want then it's only going to come back to you to write it again.

An example was given of a woman who had criticised the stories about asylum seekers:

She very openly spoke out and said 'I don't want to write these kinds of stories, you know, I don't want to do this.' As a result, she got absolutely, sort of, screamed off the news room floor and for the next couple of weeks she was given every anti-Muslim, anti-asylum seeker story to do, every single one until she just resigned.

As another journalist from a major broadsheet observed, so fierce is the competition among younger journalists to climb the career ladder that they require little coercion to write such stories. Rather, their desire to progress professionally is encouragement enough:

Invariably it's the younger reporters who are sent out to do these sorts of monsterring jobs – because they want to get on. The newsroom is an authoritarian place. A more experienced reporter could refuse. One editor had a terrible reputation for bullying but the imbalance between news editor and young inexperienced reporter is enough to get the person to put their conscience aside and go and monster an asylum seeker.

This journalist also noted how they would typically use a reporter from an Asian background so that the paper 'covered itself':

In general the approach used to be to use young reporters of Asian background to 'do their own'. [A reporter] was used to do a lot of these stitch-up jobs on asylum seekers. The paper wants to cover itself by using a reporter of an ethnic background to do these sort of jobs.

The journalists interviewed also revealed the difficulties of covering stories which offered an alternative perspective. One journalist who worked on a tabloid generally thought to be on the left of the political spectrum commented on a specific story:

I had to fight very hard for stories that were sympathetic to refugees or asylum seekers. I was smuggled into an asylum holding centre and interviewed a woman who had been sex-trafficked and was facing deportation, but it was still hard to get that published.

A third crucial issue discussed here was how assumptions in the news room about the beliefs of readers and audiences affected the choice of stories and the news angles that were taken. As one journalist put it:

There's an assumption in the news desk that the readers will believe that there are not enough jobs, that there are simply too many people coming in, there are too many problems in our own country and it's difficult to put in sympathetic stories on asylum or refugees.

It is also the case that some journalists share the assumptions that are imputed to the readers and viewers. A senior BBC journalist commented to us on his own view that the problems of 'genuine' refugees had been compounded because of the numbers of economic migrants who had sought to claim asylum. Another spoke to us about how many refugees were coming to Britain:

If we did a story about Rwanda or suffering, these readers would think 'It's very sad that it is happening but why are they coming here?' They would think 'Why do most people come to Britain?'

In fact, only a small minority of refugees in the world come to the United Kingdom. Most do not have the funds or resources to travel to developed countries, and refugees more commonly remain in the countries neighbouring those from which they have been displaced.

To what extent then is media coverage of asylum and asylum seekers, which conflates the issue with that of economic migration, helping to fuel hostile attitudes towards refugees? The journalists with whom we spoke were reflective about their own work, and indicated that there was at least some discussion in their newsrooms about the impact of particular stories. But there is a pressing need for a deeper investigation of the impact of media on society as a whole, of the construction and development of public belief, of the interaction between media agendas and the actions of the state, and the consequences of this for particular communities. This book responds

to this, and to calls for more investigation into media content and its impacts from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UK politicians, academics, and NGOs such as the Refugee Council and the International Red Cross.