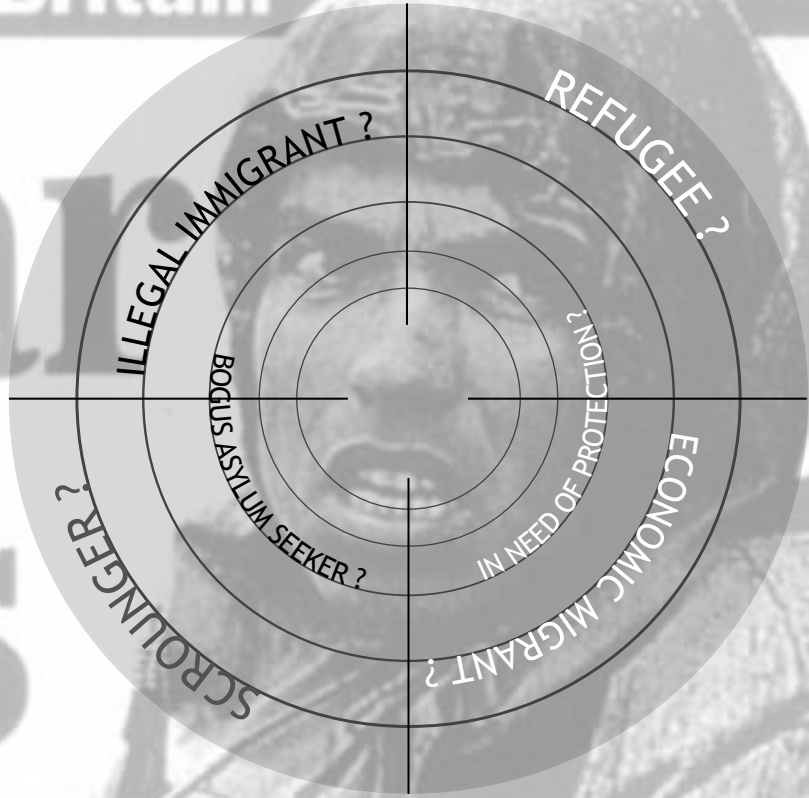


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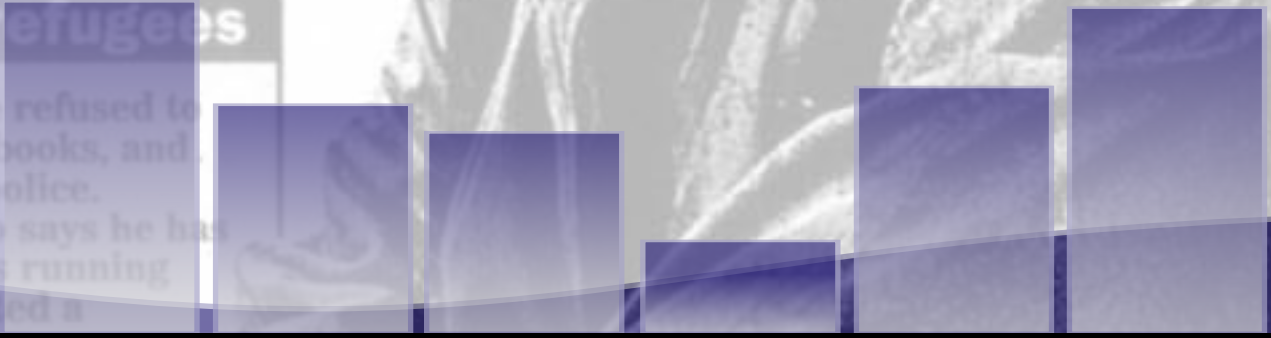
ROUGHING
IT: One of
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What's the story?

RESULTS FROM RESEARCH INTO MEDIA COVERAGE
OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN THE UK



FRONT COVER

Photograph published in Daily Express on 07 November 2002 with the article entitled 'New asylum fear as camp closes', reporting the closure of the Sangatte refugee camp in France.



BACK COVER

Marthe is from Cameroon where she was arrested, imprisoned and tortured for campaigning for self-determination for Cameroon's English-speaking minority. She sought protection in the UK and was one of the first asylum-seekers to be denied state support under the section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

Photography: Jenny Matthews
Copyright: Refugee Action 2003

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The research was conducted by **Sara Buchanan**, **Bethan Grillo**, **Terry Threadgold** and **Nick Mosdell**. The research interviews with asylum seekers and refugees were carried out by **Ghias Aljundi**, **Dorothy Effuah Awoonor-Gordon**, **Zafir Behlic**, **Abdi Dahir**, **Mahdi Fathi**, **Besim Gerguri**, **Amadu Khan**, **Aliya Elagib Mahmoud**, **Gabriel Nkwelle** and **Murtaza Ali Shah**. The coding for the print media monitoring was carried out by **Pauline Donaldson**, **Katherine Hayward** and **Gita Widya Laksmi**.

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The views represented in this report are the sole responsibility of **ARTICLE 19**.

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note on terminology

Asylum seeker: a person who is in the process of applying for asylum.

Refugee: the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to refugees defines a refugee as a person who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country...”

In addition to granting indefinite leave to remain to Convention refugees, the Home Office also grants permission to stay to persons who are judged to be in need of protection on humanitarian grounds. Until April 2003 this complementary category of protection was called ‘Exceptional Leave to Remain’, and is now called ‘Humanitarian Protection’.

In this report, the term refugee is used to refer to Convention refugees and persons who have been granted Exceptional Leave to Remain or Humanitarian Protection. This broad definition reflects the common understanding and usage within the refugee sector.

Immigrant: A person who leaves their country of origin voluntarily and enters the UK for a variety of reasons for example to work, study, join family.

Illegal immigrant: A person residing in the UK without permission. An asylum seeker is NOT an illegal immigrant. Under the 1951 Convention, anyone has a legal right to apply for asylum in the UK and remain in the country for the duration of their asylum claim.

foreword

The *Times* recently carried out a straw poll of various sections of the population to find out how well they might be able to answer “citizenship test” questions of the type they thought David Blunket might have in mind. One group questioned were themselves new British, having arrived here and been granted British nationality. According to *The Times* report, when they were asked ten questions about British history, culture, and institutions the only answer any of them got wrong was to the question of how many people seek asylum here every year. They all plumped for a vastly inflated figure.

If even our newly arrived fellow citizens have an inflated idea of how many people are trying to get here, what chance that the indigenous population has got it all in perspective? Most of us have to rely on the mass media to tell us the truth, not just about the numbers, but about the processes, the law, and about the stories of human relationships, hardships, or aspirations that lie behind every single new arrival.

ARTICLE 19 shows clearly here for the first time what a long way the British media have to go to get coverage of this issue right: not to sanitise it, not to minimise it, but to report it fairly and accurately. Get it right, and the media can offer us real insight into a critical area of public policy. Get it wrong, and they will give us not insight but incitement.

Not least of the findings reported here is the reluctance of newly-arrived asylum-seekers and refugees to challenge the way they find themselves misrepresented in the press and broadcast news. Characteristically, they want to keep a low profile, they don’t want to make a fuss, they simply want to get on with their new lives and not draw too much attention to themselves. It sounds very much like living in fear, here, today, in the UK.

Immigration policy is fertile ground for political mischief, and both the main parties appear at least as interested in courting public opinion as in leading it. If we cannot rely on our politicians to give a lead, we desperately need newspapers and broadcasters who put their duty to inform ahead of their duty to corner market share.

Richard Ayre
Chair, ARTICLE 19

executive summary

Photograph published
in Daily Express on 29
November 2002

FACT ?

SENSATIONALISM ?

BLAIR'S IMMIGRATION TIMEBOMB

The ARTICLE 19 project *Asylum seekers, refugees and freedom of expression in the UK*, aimed to explore the ways in which the issue of asylum, and asylum seekers and refugees, are represented in the media, the extent to which asylum seekers and refugees feel able to participate in the public debate on asylum and immigration, and the impact media coverage has on their everyday lives. The research project was conducted in partnership with Cardiff University School of Journalism and developed in consultation with organisations concerned with supporting the rights and welfare of asylum seekers and refugees. The direct involvement of asylum seekers and refugees as researchers and as interviewees was a central feature of the project. In May 2003, the initial findings of the research were published in a case study of media coverage of asylum and refugee issues surrounding the story of the closure of the Red Cross centre at Sangatte. These findings were presented at the seminar: 'INSIGHT OR INCITE?', on 15th May 2003, which brought together refugee organisations, journalists and refugees, the discussions of which are reflected in this final report.

MAIN FINDINGS

1 Media reporting of the asylum issue is characterised by the inaccurate and provocative use of language to describe those entering the country to seek asylum. 51 different labels were identified as making reference to individuals seeking refuge in Britain and included meaningless and derogatory terms such as ‘illegal refugee’ and ‘asylum cheat’.

2 Media reporting, particularly in the tabloid press, consistently fails to correctly distinguish between economic migrants and asylum seekers or refugees. The terms immigrant and asylum seeker are used as synonyms rather than as distinct terms to accurately convey the specific status and situation of individuals.

3 The asylum debate focuses overwhelmingly on the number of people entering the country to claim asylum, but the numbers which are presented in print and broadcast reports are frequently unsourced, exaggerated or inadequately explained. Contextual analysis of the relevance and meaning of official statistics is missing from the debate.

4 Images used to accompany print and broadcast reports on the issue of asylum are dominated by the stereotype of the ‘threatening young male’. Women and children are rarely seen and stock images of groups of men trying to break into Britain are used repeatedly.

5 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.

6 Asylum seekers and refugees feel alienated, ashamed and sometimes threatened as a result of the overwhelmingly negative media coverage of asylum. 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.

7 Asylum seekers and refugees are not hostile to the media, in spite of the negative coverage, 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.

8 Refugee women 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.

9 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Labels and Language

1 Politicians and government officials should take the lead in using accurate terminology when speaking about asylum and immigration policy and in setting a tone for the debate which reflects the fact that on average every year an estimated 40-50% of those who apply for asylum in Britain are judged to have legitimate grounds for remaining in the UK, either as Convention status refugees or as persons in need of humanitarian protection.¹

2 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 also distinguish between economic migrants and refugees.

3 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.

4 The Press Complaints Commission in consultation with refugee organisations should develop soft guidelines on news reporting on asylum and immigration issues. The use of threatening and pejorative language to describe asylum seekers/refugees should be addressed in these guidelines.

Numbers and Statistics

5 The media should take care to source all statistics and explain the origin of numbers which are quoted without a verifiable source.

6 The media should place reportage of numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in context, both historical and in relation to the arrival and recognition rates of asylum seekers and refugees in other countries.

7 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

8 The media should seek to portray asylum seekers and refugees in less stereotypical ways, in particular by including more images of women and children in their reports.

9 Acknowledging the challenges they face, refugee organisations should explore ways in which they can offer the media alternative and more representative images.

10 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.



11 The **media** should find opportunities to present refugees as individuals whose stories are worth telling, rather than merely examples of a generic ‘problem’.

12 **Refugee organisations** and **refugee community organisations** should join forces to launch a national branded campaign to counter the overwhelmingly negative image of asylum seekers and refugees in the public debate.

13 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 that can be provided by the NGO sector.²

introduction

Our concerns

In 2001, ARTICLE 19 initiated a research project to investigate the media representation of asylum seekers and refugees, and the media's role in informing the public policy debate on asylum and immigration in Britain. A central focus of the research was to find out the perceptions and experiences of asylum seekers and refugees themselves, and to assess to what extent their voices are heard in the public arena. As a freedom of expression organisation, we are concerned with the right of everyone to be able to seek, receive and impart information and express their opinion without fear of the consequences. In this research, neither did we expect to, nor did we find any legal restrictions on the right of refugees and asylum seekers to express their views.³ However, we did encounter varying levels of discomfort, anxiety and fear among asylum seekers and refugees about the implications of speaking out.

Asylum and immigration is one of the most contentious policy issues of recent years. As with any issue of public interest, the media has a vital role to play in informing the public policy debate. In the interests of promoting a pluralistic media environment, journalists should also take care to reflect a diversity of voices and opinions in their reporting. In addition, when reporting on sensitive social issues such as asylum, the media has a particular responsibility to ensure that the manner of reporting does not prejudice the rights and welfare of vulnerable individuals.

Even without undertaking a systematic study of the representation of asylum seekers and refugees in the British media, the overwhelmingly negative and hostile nature of coverage is hard to avoid. The issue is rarely off the front pages of the tabloids and the relentless repetition of dramatic headlines which speak of an asylum 'crisis' has undoubtedly influenced the presentation of successive government policies which have seemingly sought, above all, to reduce the number of asylum seekers entering the country. Press releases from the Home Office speak principally in negative terms of 'extending and securing Britain's borders', 'searching vehicles to root out would-be clandestines' and 'clamping down on benefit shopping'.⁴ Policy is presented as a series of combative measures designed to weed out those who 'abuse the asylum system' and to prevent 'illegal immigrants' from entering the country in the first place in order to free up resources and help 'genuine refugees'. But are these definitions so clear-cut? Are we being informed by the media or merely having our prejudices

ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS ?

REFUGEES ?

IN NEED OF PROTECTION ?

A THREAT ?

'GENUINE' ?

'BOGUS' ASYLUM SEEKERS ?

VICTIMS ?

VILLAINS ?

*Photograph published
in Daily Express on 29
November 2002*

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confirmed? Are government policies really being questioned? How does media coverage reflect the views of the subjects of this debate - asylum seekers and refugees living in Britain - and how does it impact on their daily lives?

News and Public Opinion

The research presented in the following chapters of this report does not include a survey of public opinion, nor does it present new evidence of the way in which the media informs and influences public opinion. It is clear that we cannot make easy assumptions about the relationship between the media content which is analysed in this study, and the anecdotal reports from refugees and asylum seekers who were interviewed about public hostility towards them. To do this would require a follow-up study with audiences to explore further the relationship between regular media representations and the formation of public opinion and attitudes.

However, there is already a body of academic research which reveals a great deal about the role that the media plays in creating and altering public attitudes to particular social issues and groups, such as migrants and refugees. For example, the Glasgow Media Group has shown very clearly what a powerful influence the media can exert on public attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, sometimes developing ways of understanding and sometimes changing existing ways of understanding. In their work on attitudes to migration they found that audiences associated images of ‘boat people’ and other migrants, with political messages about the scarcity of resources in health and education.⁵

A more recent study commissioned by the Information Centre about Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the UK (ICAR)⁶ investigated the role of information in creating understanding between local people and asylum seekers in cases where a significant number of asylum seekers have moved or will be moving into an area for the first time. The interim report is based on interviews in Bicester, where the Home Office plans to build an accommodation centre for 750 asylum seekers, and Leeds which hosted Kosovan refugees from the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme in 1999. The interim findings reveal the way in which the national media often fills the information gap generated when central government consults inadequately, or not at all, with local people on government plans to accommodate asylum seekers in a particular community. Interviewees complained about a lack of basic information and, in drawing their own conclusions about the newcomers to their community, repeated media myths about predatory male asylum seekers threatening their wives and daughters and economic migrants coming to Britain ‘just for the benefits’. When discussing media coverage, most of the interviewees criticised some tabloids for being inflammatory, but nevertheless subscribed to the viewpoints expressed in them. The researchers concluded that “there was a strong feeling amongst those interviewed that the national press serves more to hinder understanding rather than promote it”.

A further illustration of the impact which the overwhelmingly negative coverage of asylum seekers and refugees has had on public opinion in general was provided by the state of public opinion revealed (and perhaps confirmed) by the BBC’s interactive programme ‘You the Judge’, broadcast on the BBC’s Asylum Day, 23rd July 2003. The programme, which aimed to place the studio and external audience in the shoes of an immigration official, demonstrated that even when the facts of individual cases are presented and representatives from organisations advocating on behalf of asylum seekers and refugees are given the opportunity to argue their case, the public votes overwhelmingly to reject asylum seekers. Four real life cases were presented to the studio audience, two of which had been dismissed by the Home Office, one of which had been granted indefinite leave to remain on humanitarian grounds and the fourth had initially been rejected and granted refugee status on appeal. The studio audience and the phone-in audience voted to reject the asylum seekers in all four cases. Nearly 70% of the phone-in audience voted ‘No’.

How the asylum story could be reported

While by no means suggesting that there is a right or wrong way to report on any issue, reporters and editors do make choices: the inclusion or exclusion of contextual information, the emphasis of one element of a situation over another and the selection of sources all determine the angle taken on a particular story and ultimately, the impression it makes on the reader or viewer. Imagining different scenarios makes it obvious to us all how quickly media reporting shapes the ‘common sense’ view of an issue like asylum. Before reviewing the examples of reporting included as evidence in this report, let us imagine how differently the story could have been reported if journalists had pursued some other lines of inquiry. The Sangatte story which dominated coverage during the 2002-3 monitoring periods provides a good case study for this purpose.⁶

From the time the Sangatte centre opened in September 1999, it was almost universally described by the British media and politicians as a ‘problem’ - a magnet and a staging post for asylum seekers on their way to the UK via the Eurotunnel or the back of a lorry. The final closure of the Sangatte centre in December 2002 therefore represented the resolution of a particular problem for Britain and it was no surprise that the domestic political implications featured prominently in the media coverage in the preceding months.

However, Sangatte was also part of a much bigger picture. The complex phenomenon of global migration represents as much of a challenge to other western European countries as it does to Britain and this arguably merited consideration and inquiry.

How many asylum applications do other European countries process and how exactly do they deal with them? Why were the people who ended up in the Sangatte camp apparently so determined to apply for asylum in Britain? Were there particular conditions of French asylum policy and procedure that deterred them from applying for asylum in France? Was the deal with the French just a short-term fix, or was it a precedent for bilateral agreements on asylum in the future? How did the Anglo-French agreement fit with the common efforts being pursued at EU level to develop a fair way to share responsibility between different host countries?

All those who came to Britain from Sangatte under the Anglo-French agreement were from Iraq and Afghanistan. By December 2002, both countries had been the focus of intense government and media attention for many months as part of the on-going 'war on terrorism' and preparations for a military attack on Iraq. The plight of ordinary Afghan people under the Taliban had been vividly described by the British media and the suffering endured for years by Iraqis under Saddam Hussein was well publicised. While it was impossible for journalists to know or find out the individual motivations of all those at Sangatte, were not Afghans and Iraqis highly likely to be fleeing persecution? Was there not a comparison to be drawn or explored with refugees fleeing authoritarian Communist regimes who had been hailed as heroes when they made it from Soviet-oppressed Eastern Europe to the free West?

The arrival in Britain of - among others - able-bodied men and women, with motivation and a variety of skills and professional experience who would be given the opportunity to work immediately, could have been presented as potentially a very positive contribution to Britain's economy and society, particularly in the light of the 'greying' of the European labour force. Stories of successful integration and contribution by other groups arriving in Britain, such as the Vietnamese in the 1980s, are not hard to come by. What made these people, also arriving under a government-led scheme, different? What lessons could be learned from the integration experiences of previous groups arriving in Britain over past decades and indeed centuries?

All these questions could have been considered by a media concerned to 'understand' the events unfolding across the Channel and could equally be applied to many asylum stories which were covered during the periods of our research. Indeed it is hard to imagine how many of the issues which underlie news stories and particularly policy debates on asylum and immigration could be understood adequately without an attempt by journalists to pursue these lines of inquiry.

However, as we shall see, the Sangatte story and other developments in the asylum debate were reported within narrow parameters which excluded analysis of many of these important issues. Few of the questions identified above were addressed and even when they were considered the conclusions were frequently foregone and supporting evidence of dubious accuracy.

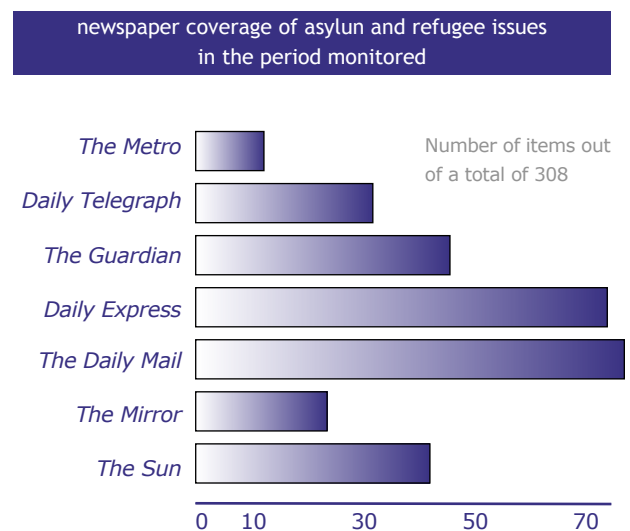
Overview of results from the media monitoring

The research methodology which formed the basis of this study is described in detail in Appendix 1. In brief, the research consisted of three main elements: monitoring of print and broadcast coverage of the asylum debate; qualitative research interviews with asylum seekers about their experiences and perceptions of the British media's coverage of the asylum issue and interviews with journalists and press officers from refugee organisations.

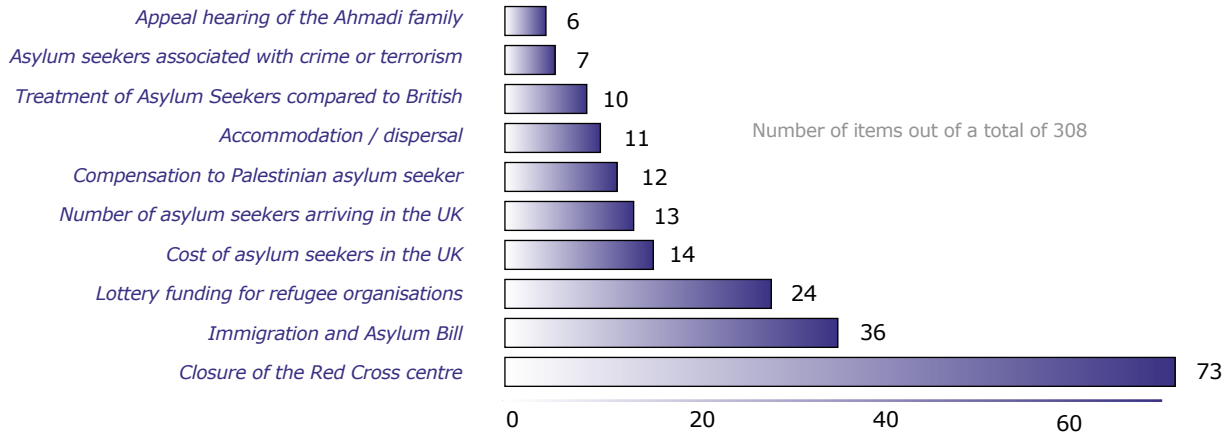
The print media monitoring of the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Sun*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Metro*, was conducted over a 12 week period from October to December 2002 and the broadcast monitoring covered three separate one-month periods: late May to late June 2002, December 2002 and late February to late March 2003. The results of the media monitoring are analysed in the subsequent chapters of this report in the context of the testimonies provided by asylum seekers and refugees about the impact of media coverage on their everyday lives. Below is an overview of the key findings from the monitoring.

Print monitoring

The newspapers which carried by far the most coverage of issues relating to asylum were the *Daily Mail* (25% of items) and the *Daily Express* (24%). The national newspaper



Top ten stories which appeared in print media coverage of refugee and asylum issues in the period monitored



carrying the fewest number of articles was *The Daily Telegraph* (10.3%), while the local London newspaper, *Metro*, had just 12 articles (3.8%). During the 12 week period there were 14 front page articles on asylum - more than one per week. Of these, five appeared in the *Daily Mail* and five in the *Daily Express*. There were only 7 feature articles throughout the period, compared with 26 opinion pieces, 22 editorials and 195 news reports.

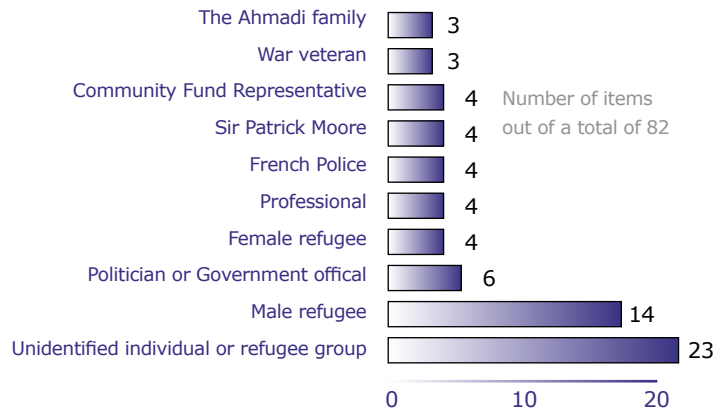
The top five asylum stories were Sangatte, which accounted for 24% of coverage; the Immigration and Asylum Bill (11%); lottery funding for refugee organisations (6.5%); the cost of asylum seekers to the UK (4.5%) and the number of asylum seekers arriving in the UK (4%).

The tone of the language used in both headlines/sub headlines and the text of articles was more often than not coded as having negative connotations. 31% of headlines/sub headlines and 53% of text within items referred to a negative aspect of asylum policy, such as the asylum system as overburdened or record numbers arriving; or to asylum seekers/refugees as bogus, illegal, failed, undeservingly lucky or receiving better treatment than British citizens. Language in 37% of headlines/sub headlines and 26% of text within items was coded as neutral, while less than 10% of items were considered to have predominantly positive or sympathetic language acknowledging asylum seekers/refugees fleeing from human rights abuses and war, or being offered welcome and support by the UK.

In total there were 51 specific different labels used to refer to asylum seekers/refugees. Of these, the label 'asylum seeker' accounted for 15% of all labels used and 'refugee' accounted for 8.5%. 'Illegal immigrant' was the fifth most regularly used term to refer to asylum seekers (behind asylum seeker, refugee, immigrant, reference by nationality), and there were seven additional terms used to denote illegality, including 'illegal asylum seeker' and 'illicit migrant'. There were eight variations of the bogus theme including 'fake asylum seeker' and 'asylum cheat'.

There was a reference to the nationality/ethnicity of the asylum seekers/refugees in 40% of the items coded. Exactly half of these references were to Iraqis, Iraqi Kurds or Afghans.

Top ten photographs used to illustrate articles on refugee and asylum issues in the period monitored



Half of the photographs that appeared in the press during this period were of male refugees and there were only four photographs of refugee women out of a total of 82. There were six photographs of politicians or government officials, five photographs of celebrities, four photographs of French police and four photographs of a representative of the Community Fund. The remaining 18 photographs included doctors, war veterans, campaigners, members of the public and a building identified as a new hostel for asylum seekers.

Broadcast Monitoring

A total of 53 items were coded during the monitoring. In the first sample period, there were 24 items, in the second 13 items and in the third there were 16 items. Of these, 24 (45%) were taken from the BBC and 18 (34%) from ITV1. Ten items were lead stories with 21 items being mentioned in the opening headlines but appearing further down the running order. The average running time for an item was two to three minutes.

The television coverage tended to focus on just one story across all channels in each month covered, with the exception of February-March 2003.

In May-June 2002, the coverage revolved around the change of government in France and rumours that the Sangatte camp would be closed. This period captured two key events: a shift in French domestic policy towards Sangatte and the proposed changes to Britain's asylum policy, whereby rejected asylum seekers would be deported immediately either to their country of origin, or the country through which they had passed, from where any appeal would have to be lodged.

In December, the main story, as in the print media was the closure of Sangatte and the arrival of some of its former residents in London. This period focused on two key chapters of the story: the confirmation of the closure of the camp (on 2nd December) and then the arrival of the first group in Britain (5th December).

In February-March 2003, there were three related items that involved local reports. On ITV, on February 28th, a report from Sittingbourne showed residents protesting at not being consulted about "government plans to house asylum seekers in a hotel", also called "an asylum centre". In fact, the proposal by the government was for the construction of an induction centre. On the same day, on the BBC, a story from Peterborough concerned "local authorities struggling to cope" with an 'influx' of asylum seekers which is "creating dangerous social problems". The story is constructed as a local example of the consequences of the failure of government policy. The third local story, also on BBC, a week earlier, reported the efforts of village residents in Nottinghamshire to reverse a decision to 'remove' a Latvian couple prior to their appeal against a rejected asylum application. This story was also presented as an instance of government inefficiency or failed policies, the couple having lived in the village long enough to be running the local pub.

Introductions/headlines to items referred to asylum seekers/refugees on 44% of occasions, to asylum seekers, refugees and the asylum policy in general on 25% of occasions and solely to the asylum policy in general on 11.5% of occasions. References to immigrants/migrants or immigration/migration policy were less common, accounting for 7.5% and 2% respectively. Generally the tone of language in these introductions was considered to be neutral towards asylum seekers/refugees (49%), although explicit mentions of the UK offering support or welcome were made in 16% of items and the issue was referred to as a 'problem' in 12% of items. Within the items themselves, asylum seekers/refugees were referred to as a 'problem' in 15% of items, while language was considered neutral in tone in 12% of items. References to welcome or support were made in 11% of items, but there were an equal number of references to asylum seekers/refugees as failed or rejected. Meanwhile, 7.5% of items associated asylum seekers/refugees with criminal activities.

Of the specific labels used throughout the items, 'asylum seekers' accounted for 24% and 'refugees' for 19%. Other labels included 'illegal immigrant' which accounted for 7%. Specific labels of nationality were used in 21% of items while general references to nationality were made in 68% of items, with the most common being from countries where European and American troops had been engaged in conflict (Afghanistan) or were thought to be on the brink of conflict (Iraq).

There were 61 different images coded in all of the items of the sample. As many of the pieces featured brief interviews, images of interviewees are common throughout the sample, with 23% featuring a politician or government official and a further 11.5% featuring images of a spokesperson from a refugee organisation. Where asylum seekers/refugees were pictured, they were almost always young men, with only one item featuring a female asylum seeker/refugee, although there were scenes of mixed gender groups, primarily inside Sangatte.



use of statistics

the numbers game

Article published in *Daily Mail*
on 29 November 2002

Much of the media coverage relating to asylum and immigration focuses on the issue of numbers. During the research period, the debate about how many immigrants - asylum seekers, legal migrants and illegal economic migrants - were arriving in the UK every year, every month and even every minute attracted claims and counter claims from a range of experts, commentators, politicians and celebrities. Together with articles on a closely related theme - the cost (rarely the benefits) of asylum seekers to Britain - the numbers debate generated just over two articles per week. The battle for public opinion was focused on this issue: the analysis and interpretation of statistics formed the basis of just over one third of opinion pieces on asylum and immigration between October and December. In addition, many other issues relating to asylum, such as the state of our public services and the rivalries between criminal gangs from Eastern Europe being played out on the streets of London, were introduced and contextualised with reference to the latest 'shock figures'.

Sources available to journalists

Before analysing some examples of the way in which numbers were imagined and statistics were used, it is worth considering the statistical sources that are available to journalists. In fact there are only two reliable original sources of statistical information on the numbers of asylum seekers arriving in Britain: the Home Office and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The *Home Office*⁸ publishes quarterly statistical bulletins on asylum seekers and annual reports on statistics relating to economic migration. The quarterly bulletins on asylum cover three-month periods and are published on average two months in arrears. The statistics are broken down into: the number of applications received, the number of initial decisions made, and of these, the number of people granted asylum, the number granted exceptional leave to remain (renamed Humanitarian Protection as of 1st April 2003), and the number of rejected applications. A separate set of statistics shows the number of appeals that are granted, rejected and withdrawn. In addition, the bulletins contain information

Daily Mail COMMENT

**BRITAIN,
BOGUS
ASYLUM
SEEKERS,
AND WHY
ENOUGH IS
ENOUGH**

on the number of failed asylum seekers who have been deported and the number of asylum seekers in detention. The latter figures on detention are limited to a percentage breakdown of asylum detainees by nationality, sex, and length of time in detention. There is no statistical information about the number of children in detention, the stage at which individuals are detained - for example, how many are detained on entry and how many are detained pending deportation - or to reflect the category of secure institution in which individuals are held.

The Home Office does not publish figures for the number of failed asylum seekers who have not been deported and may still be in the country. The implications of this 'information gap' will be discussed later in this chapter, as will other problem areas that have been pointed out by refugee organisation press officers and journalists.

The *UNHCR*⁹ publishes comprehensive statistical information on a range of issues related to the state of refugees throughout the world. This information includes comparative data on the number of asylum applications in different Western countries, the number of refugees hosted in different regions of the world and longitudinal trends - all of which information is particularly valuable for placing Britain's 'asylum crisis' in context.

Other sources of information include refugee organisations, such as the Refugee Council¹⁰ who re-publish Home Office asylum statistics on their websites and in factsheets, with a clear reference to the source. On occasion refugee organisations also publish original research supported by their own statistics on particular issues relating to the experience of asylum seekers as they pass through the asylum procedure, for example the number of unaccompanied minors staying in bed and breakfast accommodation.

In addition to official statistics related to arrival and the asylum procedure, provided by the government and UNHCR, there are also alternative statistics produced by think tanks, most notably Migration Watch UK. This latter organisation describes itself as an 'independent think tank' intending 'to monitor developments, conduct research, and provide the public with full and accurate facts placed in their proper context'.¹¹ In spite of repeated attempts, the authors of this report were unable to speak to the Chairman, Sir Andrew Green, to discuss some of Migration Watch's statistical claims that were reported in the media during the periods monitored.

Selected numbers misrepresented as facts

As discussed in the introduction, the monitoring sample showed that journalists frequently refer to the number of asylum seekers, refugees and/or migrants, casually, without reference to their source or if obtained from unofficial sources, with little comment or explanation to properly inform the reader of their likely credibility.

In the coverage of Sangatte, for example, much of the exaggerated and unsourced claims were made prior to the conclusion of the agreement with the French government and therefore in the absence of official confirmation by the Home Office of how many people would be coming to Britain. Rather than admit that the number was simply not known, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and *The Sun* made use of the uncertainty to speculate about the impending arrival of 'thousands' of asylum seekers.

This kind of speculation is typical of the way in which information is fed into the numbers debate. Of the 113 print articles that made a reference to numbers of asylum seekers or refugees, just over half - 52% - quoted numbers without attributing them to a source.

A particular trend towards the end of 2002 was for journalists to speculate on the number of asylum applications that would be recorded for the entire year, based on the publication of figures by the Home Office for the number of arrivals for the third quarter (i.e. July-September). Their guesses never under-estimated the figures, only ever over-estimated them, sometimes by more than 50%. The preliminary figures for the year 2002, which were published by the Home Office at the end of February 2003 showed how exaggerated and therefore misleading such estimates can be. These preliminary figures stated that there were 85,865 asylum applications in 2002, estimated to be 110,700 including dependants¹² and the revised figures released in August were slightly lower: 84,130 asylum applications; 103,080 including dependants¹³.

What were the media's imagined numbers? On 9th December, the *Daily Mail* claimed that the 29,100 asylum seekers arriving over three months in summer was "equivalent to 116,400 a year and the highest figure ever." On 16th December, the *Daily Express* also referring to the record figure for the third quarter stated that, "Figures are likely to stay high, taking the total for the year to around 120,000." On the same day, the author of an opinion piece in *The Daily Telegraph* disputing the wisdom of the government's decision to issue 175,000 work permits, stated, "This is on top of the 130,000 asylum applications every year, never mind the unknown number of economic migrants entering illegally." The speculations were between 116-130,000; the reality was 85,000 (or 103,000 including dependants).



Arguably there is nothing wrong with journalists making an educated guess in advance of the release of official figures as to what those figures will reveal. However, none of the claims mentioned above was accompanied by an explicit explanation to inform the reader that while the figures for the third quarter were 'official', the figures for the fourth quarter, and therefore for the whole year, were as yet unknown. Nor was there any contextual analysis of the statistics of this quarter against previous quarters or any attempt to assess the push factors which might have been responsible for an upsurge in asylum applications during this three month period.

A further problem is that estimates are frequently presented as part of a barrage of figures, which are listed consecutively with little or no indication as to whether they come from an official source. To take the example of the *Daily Mail's* estimate of the total number of asylum seekers for 2002, this was just one of many figures presented in an article, headlined: "NOW THERE'S ONE ASYLUM CLAIM EVERY SIX MINUTES", an assertion that was repeated in the first line of the article. This statement was not attributed to any source, yet it was elevated to the status of fact by its appearance as a headline and central feature of the article. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, we can only assume that the journalist himself has done his own maths to come up with the alleged rate of arrival of asylum seekers. In a subsequent paragraph, we are given a clue as to how this figure has been produced: "*The number of asylum applications in October - estimated by immigration officers at 8,500 - is the biggest ever for a single month*" We are then told that "*the true figure is even higher when dependants are included, taking it to 10,500 per month.*" The reader is thus presented with an apparently alarming statistic - that one asylum seeker is arriving every six minutes - that has been mathematically construed from an estimated figure of the number of applications in just one month, made by an unnamed source, whose apparently 'official' status nevertheless implies some credibility.

The same article provides an example of another much used technique to introduce alarming statistics into the debate. Following from the estimate by the unnamed immigration official(s) the journalist states:

"And that does not include the number of illegal immigrants - said to average 5,000 a month - who never even apply for official refugee status."

There is no way for the reader to know where this figure has come from - who 'said' that it averaged '5,000 a month?' But its inclusion immediately following a statement based on information from an immigration official creates the impression that it too could be an official estimate.

This kind of assertion of figures based on implicitly authoritative, yet unspecified sources is particularly prevalent in the *Daily Mail*. In another article on 26th November, announcing the claim by Migration Watch that one in 20 people living in London is a migrant, we are told that "*Some analysts believe that at least £600 million a year, one per cent of the entire NHS budget, is going on immigrants who are not entitled to treatment*". Reference to 'some analysts' makes it sound legitimate. Who defines whom as an 'analyst'? What about the other analysts not part of the "some"? What did they believe?

The BBC and ITV use similar figures and strategies. On 28 February 2003, ITV quoted the figure of 110,00 applications per year of which 66% are refused, and only 12% deported. This leads them to conclude that 41,000 people remain each year in the UK after their asylum bid has failed and that there are "*200-300,000 living illegally in low-paid jobs*"¹⁴. These unsourced, authoritative-sounding but largely speculative numbers are then used to explain and estimate the burden on local resources. Thus the BBC on 28 February 2003, talked about a "*system in chaos*" and "*local authorities struggling to deal with the strain*":

"Official sources say 'There are just 400 asylum seekers in Peterborough', but the local council says there are 4000".

The arrival of "*so many*" is said to be "*creating dangerous social problems.*" There is no attempt to confirm or deny the local council's claims or indeed the 'official' claim, and again the figures are alarmist without any facts being established.

The concern with the number of illegal immigrants in the country is consistently returned to in news articles, opinion pieces and editorials. It has given life to a heated debate about the need for ID or entitlement cards to exclude all those who have no legal right of residence in Britain from accessing public services. This is a legitimate debate but one in which imagined numbers have been cynically employed to support particular editorial lines at the cost of providing information to the public. Many articles, such as the one in the *Daily Mail* mentioned above, assert that there are thousands of illegal immigrants (including failed asylum seekers who have not been deported) in the country. Quite legitimately they claim that the number is 'unknown' because the Home Office does not compile these statistics, but this does not inhibit them from guessing at the number, and suggesting by reference to unspecified sources that the guess is a fact. The Home Office knows and publishes the number of failed asylum seekers who are deported each quarter, but admit that they have no way of knowing how many failed asylum seekers leave the country voluntarily and therefore how many are still here awaiting deportation.

As a result, the debate has moved beyond the reproduction and analysis of official statistics. The premise of 'we don't believe the government's figures on asylum' is a perfectly legitimate point of departure for an article. The media's vital role in a democratic society as a watchdog on government, includes the essential task of investigating, interrogating and if necessary

hunting for undisclosed, official statistics on a variety of issues of public interest. However, the practice of right-wing newspapers and commentators' claiming to know the true figure without explaining how they have arrived at such a figure is in fact counterproductive to informing the debate. The television coverage too makes these kinds of speculative calculations and in many cases takes a similarly cynical view of the government's figures.

Migration Watch has made much of the government's inability to state how many people are illegally residing in the UK. Consequently, it has become a popular source of 'alternative statistics', not only for theories about the 'true number' of illegal immigrants in the country, but as a source of rebuttal for government statements on just about any issue relating to asylum and immigration. Scepticism about the government's figures on the part of journalists is rarely paralleled by scepticism about Migration Watch's counter-figures. Migration Watch was quoted as a main source for 10 articles on asylum and quoted an additional 14 times. It was referred to specifically for statistical information in 11 out of 113 articles (10%), second only to the Home office and UNHCR quoted as the source in 37 articles (32%). The fact that journalists referred to Migration Watch to question government statistics is not the issue. What is problematic is the way in which these alternative 'numbers' were presented: as headlined statements of fact, with conflicting references to asylum seekers and migrants and with a lack of contextual information to enable the reader to judge for themselves the credibility of the interpretations presented.

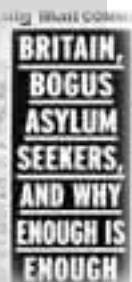
In the *Daily Mail* on 26th November 2002, a front page headline news article reported on evidence given by Migration Watch to an investigative review of asylum seekers and refugees in London being undertaken by the Public Services Committee of the London Assembly. The article was headlined and began with two attention grabbing, but confusing statistical claims. The headline stated that 'ONE IN 20 IS A MIGRANT', while the first line read "*one in 20 people living in London is an asylum seeker or a refugee*". These are two quite different interpretations of the same apparently simple 'number'. They can not both be true. We do not know what the alleged 1 in 20 were, though we are invited to be sure that it was 1 in 20.¹⁵

Struggling with numbers; explanations of bad practice

Journalists from the right wing press, interviewed as part of the research, acknowledged that Migration Watch had become an important source of information for them when writing about immigration and asylum. While some were uncomfortable with the prominence and credibility the organisation was awarded in their newspaper, others did not question their own or their colleagues' reliance on Migration Watch as the main source of information for many of their news articles. One journalist suggested that Migration Watch was used as a source, for two main reasons: primarily, because representatives were always available to provide information or comment on a broad range of issues and secondly, because it has become "the acceptable voice of the anti-immigration argument". A journalist from a newspaper traditionally more sympathetic to asylum, suggested that the organisation had filled the vacuum left by the Conservative Party when they dropped asylum from their frontline policy issues.

There was a mixed reaction to the question of whether the confusion in the debate is caused by a lack of accessible and hard facts. One journalist identified the government's acknowledged ignorance of how many failed asylum seekers were residing in the country, or how many economic immigrants entered illegally and did not even apply for asylum, as the factor driving the speculation in the debate. Some journalists who were interviewed complained that statistical information about asylum and immigration was difficult to find, while others claimed they knew exactly where to find it and did not have any problems. One journalist suggested that the problem was clearly one of interpretation and journalists and headline writers were too quick to seize on asylum statistics that suited their editorial position regardless of the credibility of sources.

Press officers from refugee organisations expressed concern and frustration that there was so much speculation about numbers in the media that was simply not supported by the facts. One explained that journalists working to deadlines are simply baffled by statistics and in his experience they are relieved when they are talked through the latest figures.



What could be done?

There was a consensus among refugee organisation press officers, that the Home Office could do more to provide a stronger contextual analysis of the statistics in their quarterly bulletins and plug some of the information gaps.

With regard to the former, a key complaint was that in the *quarterly bulletins* the Home Office does not present a composite number of positive decisions which would include those granted asylum under the terms of the UN Convention definition of a refugee, those granted Exceptional Leave to Remain (or Humanitarian Protection as it is now called), and those granted either asylum or leave to remain on appeal. This creates a false impression, which is regularly quoted in the media, that only 10% of asylum applications are found to be 'genuine'. This is because the number of asylum seekers granted Convention refugee status is usually between 10% and 11%. In fact, the *annual* statistical reports by the Home Office do offer an estimate of the overall number of applications in a year which result in a positive decision and which for 2002, for example, showed that 42% of asylum seekers are eventually granted permission to stay.¹⁶

Another issue raised in relation to the provision of official information, was the inadequacy of the statistical information provided by the Home Office about asylum seekers in detention, limited to providing absolute numbers and a breakdown by nationality and sex. One press officer reported the frustration felt by colleagues attempting to publicise concern about the legitimacy of detaining so many asylum seekers, when basic information about who is being detained, at which category of secure institution, for how long and at what stage in the procedure, is not made available. He added that attempts in the past to secure more detailed information via a parliamentary question had failed.

Finally, the Home Office decision last year to abandon monthly statistical bulletins on asylum in favour of quarterly updates was also the subject of some debate during the research. The Home Office explained that their decision arose from an intention to present an analysis of medium and long-term trends, rather than provide information that simply reflected short-term fluctuations. The journalists interviewed in the research questioned this decision. While some hinted it was merely a cynical ploy by the government to take the heat out of the immigration debate, one made the more serious point that in terms of providing information to the public, the shift from monthly bulletins to quarterly ones could only be regarded as a regressive step.

Conclusion

Judging from the sample of media reports analysed during our research, the less frequent publication of Home Office asylum statistics has certainly not diminished speculation and gross exaggeration in reportage about the number of asylum seekers and immigrants in Britain, rather the opposite. Nor does it seem to have brought greater insight or clarity to the debate. In the absence of official statistics others will fill the vacuum, which leaves the government with the problem of doing battle with inaccurate and sensationalist claims. Arguably, the greatest challenge for the media lies not in imagining numbers to compensate for the information deficit, but in understanding the significance of official and verifiable statistics, correctly attributing them to a source and placing them in a meaningful context.

This is as true for the television coverage of numbers as it is for the print media. The technology which enables the production of mobile graphs and figures on the television screen constructs the appearance of authority and fact. This is usually accompanied by a presentation of the 'facts', often by a studio journalist complete with board pointer who 'explains' the figures to the audience. The presenting journalist becomes the *de facto* and visual source of the information, even when none is actually provided and speculation is not acknowledged.

This whole mode of presentation appears much more reasonable, much less sensational and much more 'public service' than the constructions of the tabloid press but, in the end, it conveys the same messages and becomes a part of the same manufactured 'common sense' that circulates about the asylum issue. Countering such mediated 'common sense' requires a systematic attempt by broadcasters to use considered and less loaded language to inform the public about issues which involve a complex array of numbers and sources.

use of images

a picture paints a thousand words

The constant repetition of particular photographs and footage in the media has created a set of definitive images that illustrate the immigration and asylum debate in the UK. The repeated appearance of these images in a broad and disparate range of articles and news items ensures that over time, they communicate a more consistent message than the various written and verbal reports they accompany.

Although our study showed clear editorial differences in the treatment of the asylum issue by the newspapers and programmes monitored, these boundaries were blurred by the use of remarkably similar imagery by many of them. The impact of imagery is often much greater than the content of articles or television programmes, and contributes to the regular drip-feed¹⁷ of information that forms myths around the asylum issue and creates ‘ambient’ news which continuously surrounds, and is absorbed by, readers and viewers. Pictures are much more powerful than the text itself - they are seen by every reader, but every reader does not read all of every story.

The material collected shows us clearly who is visible in, and who is absent from, the debate. However, what is more ambiguous, is how the images are used to create a context and tell a story in their own right. Airport scenes, for example, may signify borders and the infringement of these borders. Sangatte shown from the air provided a setting for several of the stories in the monitoring periods and illustrated the bounded and restricted nature of refugee life. The collective body of images described below overwhelmingly placed the emphasis of the coverage, both visually and verbally, on the communication of risk and fear.

Overview of images in the print media sample

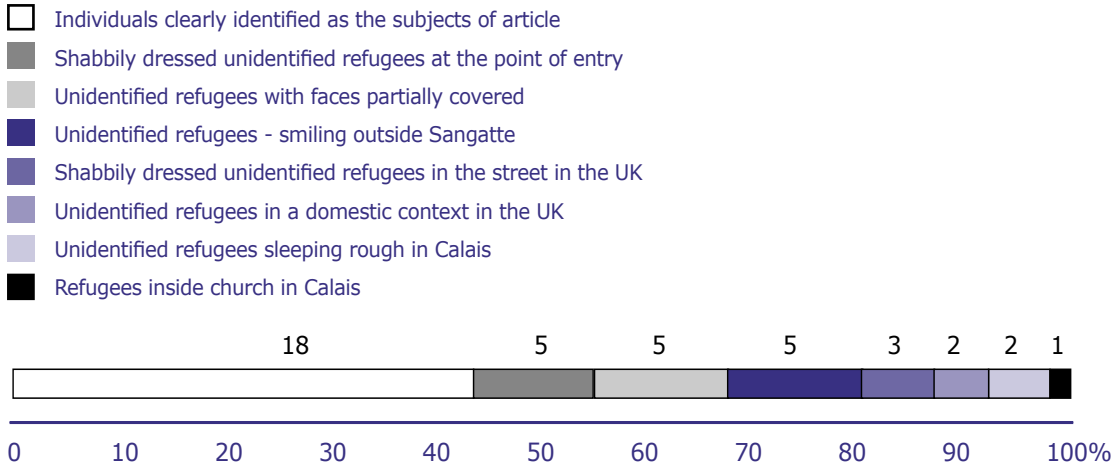
A total of 82 photographs were coded in the print monitoring sample. Exactly half of these were photographs of asylum seekers or refugees, most commonly depicted as shabbily dressed men in transit, men climbing over fences, groups of men fighting with police and men running towards the channel tunnel in large numbers. Apart from a story relating to an



Photograph published in The Guardian on 13 November 2002

asylum seeker who won an unfair dismissal case, asylum seekers/refugees were rarely portrayed as identifiable individuals, but rather were shown in anonymous groups, often with their faces partially covered. With the exception of three photographs out of the total 82, there were no photographs of refugees or asylum seekers with their families or in an everyday domestic or work setting. Meanwhile, female asylum seekers/refugees were present in just four of the total 82 photographs, and two of these were of the same woman, Mrs Ahmadi, whose family’s deportation and subsequent asylum hearing in Germany attracted generally sympathetic coverage from the media. The remaining two of the four photographs showed a portrait of a woman who had been treated as a slave in Britain and a Roma mother begging with her child. Unlike in the broadcast coverage, there were no images at all of refugee women or children in the coverage of Sangatte, despite the fact there were women and children at the Red Cross Centre and amongst the first group to be brought to the UK.

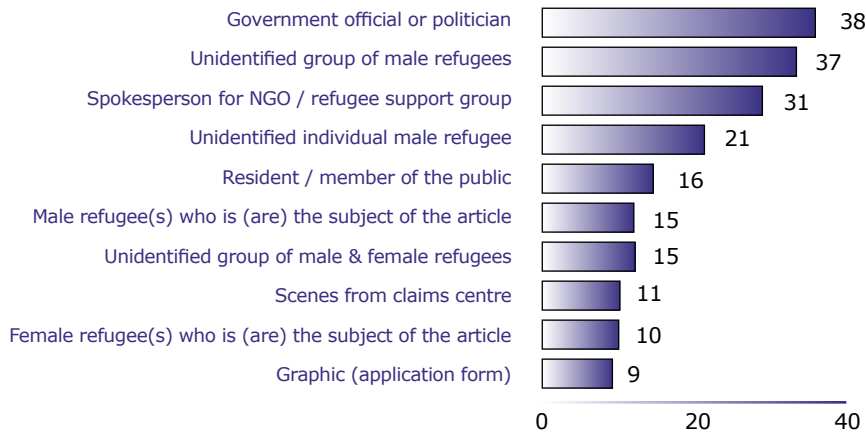
The use of threatening images (of 41 photographs of refugee men)



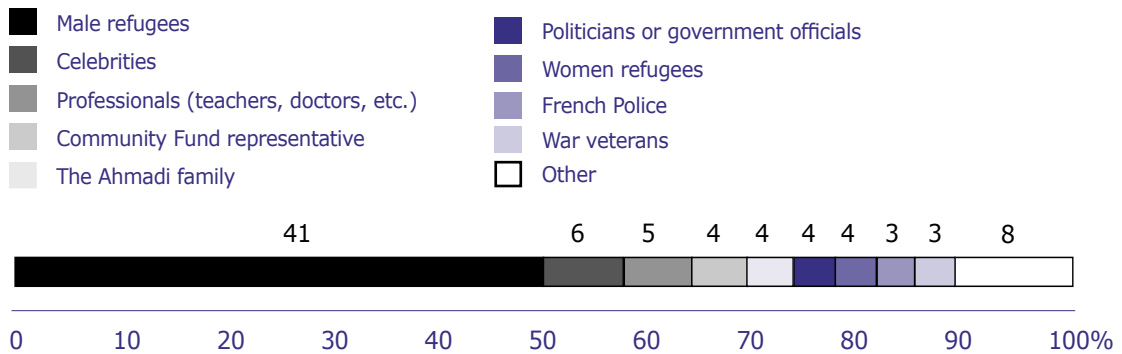
Overview of images in the broadcast media sample

There were 61 different images coded in the broadcast sample and the images used in headlines, trailers, introductions and headline re-caps were dominated by scenes of the Sangatte camp and by the use of a passport-stamp style graphic. In addition, there were numerous images of men climbing down from the back of lorries in which they had been discovered by police and queues outside asylum claims centres in the UK. The footage supplied by the British freight company EWS - of men running along the tracks at the Eurotunnel freight yard and trying to break into train carriages - also accounted for a significant proportion of the images which introduced and framed the news items on asylum. Of the images used within the items themselves, the EWS footage dominated and the second most common single image was that of groups of men walking through the gates of the Sangatte camp. The only images of women or children were those which appeared in the ‘inside Sangatte’ stories in May-June 2002 and again in December 2002,¹⁸ the pictures of fathers and children (young sons) in the BBC May 2002 coverage,¹⁹ and footage of a mixed group of people eating on the grass by a church outside Sangatte.²⁰

Top ten images used in broadcast media during the period monitored



Graph to illustrate the dominance of photographs of refugee men (of total of 82 photographs)



Prevailing stereotypes

The dominant stereotype that emerged from both the print and broadcast coverage of asylum was that of the young dangerous male breaking into Britain and threatening our communities.

It was common in the monitoring sample for images of individual men to be shown with their faces covered. Often the individuals would be shown close-up, staring directly into the camera. In one case, an Iraqi refugee was shown leaving a church that had been occupied by refugees once the Sangatte camp had been closed to new-arrivals, flanked by two French police men and with his coat pulled over his face.²¹ This image in particular was reminiscent of footage with which most of us are familiar, showing criminals in high-profile legal cases leaving Courts in Britain, protecting themselves from the media and often an angry public. Whilst these photographs portray their subjects as menacing and akin to criminals, there is no acknowledgement of the fact that they may not want to be identified for fear of risking the lives of the families they have left behind or exposing themselves in a new country they know little about.

Such images were not only used to accompany the dramatic story of Sangatte. The *Daily Express*, a paper well-known for advancing the theory that Britain is losing control of its borders, printed a photograph showing a group of three young men in the street with the caption: “WE’RE IN: A group of illegal immigrants at Dover.”²²

This photograph appeared directly above the strap line “As peers call for asylum seekers amnesty, a town is in fear” which referred to a second article on the same page about a police station that is to be converted into a drop-in centre for asylum seekers. The combined effect of the photograph of the young men wandering the streets and the picture of a boarded-up police station, seem designed to fuel readers’ concerns that asylum seekers are at best disruptive to the local community and at worst dangerous. The initial impressions created by the images are underlined in the text of the article which raises fears that the drop-in centre may become a magnet for ‘illegal immigrants’ despite its “interview and holding rooms as well as fingerprint and photograph facilities”. This coverage either helped create, or resonated with, the views of residents in Bicester who cited “a threat to local security, and particularly to women” in their key concerns relating to the government proposal to build an accommodation centre for asylum seekers.²³ Again, there has been no attention paid in the media to the difficulties of asylum seekers who spend many months waiting for their asylum claims to be processed without permission to work and who therefore must spend more time ‘hanging around’ than they would otherwise like or be accustomed to. Due to the associations made by the media between groups of men lingering in town centres and their criminal tendencies, it is possible that these men have become intimidating for members of the public, even those who have no direct experience of refugees and asylum seekers living in their area.

Within the broadcast news items there were two common patterns of images which conveyed the message that asylum seekers are somehow outside the law and normal bounds of society. The first demonstrated explicitly, or by implication, the illegal attempts being made by the residents at Sangatte to get to Britain. This included the dominant EWS footage, referred to above, images of men walking away from Sangatte, groups of refugees walking towards or watching the freight yard at Calais, men climbing down from lorries and men being held in a cell. The second pattern, which reinforced connotations of criminality, depicted the process once asylum seekers reach the UK. The prevailing scenes of queues outside claims centres and footage inside the centres, where documents are checked and in one case fingerprinting is shown, allow no possibility for asylum seekers to be viewed as ordinary people.

In the December television coverage, the BBC in particular replicated the *Daily Express* focus on Dover as a town being flooded by asylum seekers and used a similar image of three young men in a street in the town, as the external journalist reported: “in some streets, everyone we spoke to was a newly-arrived asylum seeker smuggled in, in the back of a lorry”.²⁴ This confirms two central myths around asylum: firstly, that asylum seekers are spilling over our borders uncontrollably and secondly, that asylum seekers are criminal by definition.

A second stereotype emerged in the series of photographs that illustrated the arrival in the UK of men from Sangatte at the beginning of December. The *Daily Express* even advertised on its front page a picture exclusive of asylum seekers arriving in Britain.²⁵ Cynical captions ensured that the subjects of the photographs appeared to be gloating and self-satisfied. For example, there were two photographs of asylum seekers showing victory signs accompanied by the captions “victory...refugee’s signal” and “Migrants: Ministers want more work permits issued”²⁶. Another montage showed the bus that brought the first group from Sangatte to Britain next to a photograph of three men waving from their hotel window, above the headline “WE LOVE BRITAIN TOO”²⁷. It was this particular article which appeared in *The Sun* that adopted an outraged tone to describe the “£80-a-night hotel” in which the refugees stayed and their first night spent “tucking into takeaways and guzzling pop”.

Other photographs showed male refugees cheering under the headline “SANGATTE VIPS”,²⁸ with the caption, “we’ve made it: two delighted Iraqis wave and smile from their hotel balcony”, and showing a thumbs up sign. How the ‘thumbs up’ visual was to be interpreted was given by the headline “EU migrant tide fear as Straw lifts jobs barrier” glossed by the sentence “influx: A refugee arrives from Sangatte last week”²⁹.

The heavy editorialising of these images converted potentially inoffensive, or even heartening, photographs into tools to communicate a very particular message to the reader: refugees and asylum seekers are undeserving recipients of better treatment than the average British citizen.

In this context of ‘ambient’ news, the use in the television coverage of an image of a man making a victory sign, which was often shown behind the presenter in the studio to accompany headline news on the arrival of the group from Sangatte, is extremely problematic.³⁰ Although the television coverage does not follow *The Sun*’s line at all, with most of the coverage being welcoming in tone,³¹ the victory sign contributes to the ambivalence and confusion surrounding the coverage of this event.

On 5th December, 2002, interviewees including politicians and refugee organisation spokespeople as well as members of the newly-arrived group make up the bulk of the images used.³² The majority of images used in headlines, trailers, introductions and headline re-caps are of the first group to arrive from Sangatte (only men), waving from coaches (36%) or from hotel windows (27%). Within the items these two images again dominate - 34% were men waving from behind curtains at the hotel windows, 17% of the coach convoy and a further 8% of men waving from the coaches. The combination of these images with the defining victory sign creates an inescapable impression that these men have ‘won’ in a ‘battle’ with the British government and the British people, and are therefore self-congratulatory, not merely happy and grateful to be here. Consequently the reader is ‘positioned’ as experiencing part of a national humiliation or defeat.

Photographs and television images have an instant and lasting impact upon the reader/viewer and are used, much in the same way as banner headlines, to attract attention. In the print media, as in the television coverage, some of the images used were either irrelevant to the main subject of a story or overplayed a minor reference in the accompanying article or news item. One such example was a photograph that appeared in the *Daily Express* in December which showed riot police wrestling a group of men to the ground with the caption:

“HELD BACK: French riot police restrain new refugees who are trying to enter the permit centre.”³³

The inclusion of the photograph, which was twice the size of the article, suggested that this confrontation was the main focus of the article. In fact, the article only made a minor reference to this incident and was otherwise about the passage of the first group from Sangatte to Britain.

Images of men running along the railway tracks to board trains to Britain cropped up in a variety of contexts, even when there was no direct relevance to the story. The *Metro*, for example, published an article in December 2002 which announced the government’s decision to house 1,200 refugees from Sangatte. Whilst the article focused upon the domestic immigration policy and the procedure for those arriving in the UK, the photograph showed “desperate immigrants” in Calais.³⁴ This image has been repeated so often in newspapers and on television that it has become emblematic of the asylum discussion, no matter what aspect of the issue is being examined.

In a similar way, in the television coverage of the events leading to the closure of Sangatte there is a heavy visual focus on men struggling with police and chanting that they want to get to England and will not give up. For example, in the few minutes of coverage of Sangatte on 2nd and 3rd December, 2002, groups of men outside Sangatte chanting ‘England’ as their desired destination were used alongside headlines, headline re-caps, trailers and introductions to the items as well as within the news

items themselves. The emphasis on this particular representation of events quite closely parallels what is described above as happening in the *Daily Express*. Once again, given the homogeneity of media coverage of these events in general there is really no alternative view for any reader/viewer to identify with, recognise or understand.

Searching for images; explanations of bad practice

Some journalists³⁵ viewed the examples of images which we identified as problematic, as simply an accurate record of the situation. According to one tabloid reporter interviewed as part of the research, it is common to receive phone calls from members of the public asking reporters to visit their hometown where men loiter in the streets and intimidate members of the public. A broadsheet journalist pointed out that the rise in tabloid coverage of the immigration issue matches the dispersal of young, single asylum seekers across the country which for the first time has provided a visible basis for readers' worries. Tabloid newspapers, he argued, are keying into these concerns and striking a nerve with their readership. Furthermore, if it is a newspaper's intention to reinforce a sense of being 'under siege', it is good tactics for the press to print pictures of packs of young men with covered faces, preferably fighting with police or tearing down infra-structure, and not photographs of individuals in normal everyday settings.

None of the journalists interviewed admitted to an editorial policy in which refugees and asylum seekers should be presented in a particular light but it is common practice on some newspapers to recycle what are considered to be 'good', 'generic' images to illustrate a topic several times. One picture desk editor acknowledged that their stock of photographs is male dominated and that many of the images are of individuals in key asylum centres and hotels. Refugee organisations do occasionally supply photographs of their clients to the media to accompany stories focusing on their work but these are guided by strict policies to protect privacy that are not always compatible with journalists' deadlines. For example, a newspaper could only publish a photograph taken at the Refugee Council's one-stop service if every individual appearing in the shot had granted written permission. Although the Refugee Council does have its own archive of photographs, photographers who have donated many of them may not wish them to be reproduced by newspapers for profit. There are other sources which offer more varied images, for example, "Exile Images" provides an online database of 4000 photographs of exile which is available for picture researchers to download.³⁶

Satire or Mockery? The Use of Cartoons

The inclusion of supposedly 'comical' political cartoons in the press degraded asylum seekers and refugees, and encouraged readers to mock them and subscribe to stereotypes that have been actively promoted by the media. In a large cartoon printed in *The Sun* newspaper, a group of male refugees from Sangatte were depicted queuing at a job centre, some of them laughing, others leering at a naked woman in *The Sun*, with the caption:

Cartoon published in *The Sun* on 6 December 2002



*"it seems that they all want to marry a Sun page 3 girl and be given a flat in Bristol".*³⁷

A second cartoon published by *The Sun*, which appeared next to an opinion column, showed people being 'turned away from the inn' with the innkeeper saying "how many times do I have to tell you? - There's **no more room**"³⁸. The cartoon was published in response to a reader's letter which supported the Government's "soft-line on mass immigration"; the caption read "...Jesus, Mary and Joseph were asylum seekers too. Yes, but there weren't 37 million of them"³⁹.

Four of the eight cartoons in the sample focus on the alleged numbers of asylum seekers entering Britain. One shows an immigration minister leading a mass of refugees from Sangatte to Britain as if he were the pied piper,⁴⁰ and a second depicts Tony Blair guiding the way for refugees who trample the Union Jack underfoot as they run towards the coast

with the caption *"Come on in. You'll be all right. We've just borrowed £100 billion"*⁴¹. This last cartoon appears above an article that announces Gordon Brown's admission that he may have to raise taxes.

A cartoon sandwich board declares that there are *"400,000 REFUGEES IN LONDON"* which is framed by the caption *"Couldn't Ken Livingstone slap a congestion tax on them?"*⁴², and the story that there is one asylum claim every six minutes is captured in a cartoon portraying a Home Office official on the phone declaring *"It's getting worse, Minister - now they are trying to get into the Guinness Book of Records..."*⁴³

It is interesting to note that not all of the cartoons are attached to stories but are stand-alone items presumably included to provide some light relief in the newspaper whilst simultaneously driving home the paper's anti-asylum stance. They sum up the editorial line instantly and perfectly, and do not require any effort on behalf of the reader to pick up on the message. This is precisely the sort of material which may be re-told in conversation or passed around a group of friends, family, co-workers simply because of its 'amusement value'. In this way, the anti-asylum message is shared through gossip and normal social interaction which allows it to seep much more easily into the collective consciousness. It also legitimises what would normally be considered to be socially unacceptable behaviour - to ridicule and demean a vulnerable group. The cartoons demonstrate that in the case of refugees and asylum seekers, anything goes. Whilst cartoons have traditionally formed an important part of social commentary in the media, particularly in the satirical analysis of events, a distinction must be made between their use to show up public figures -- who have knowingly accepted this dimension to their public life -- and ordinary people who, as a result, are belittled and humiliated.

What the subjects say

The reluctance of asylum seekers and refugees to be publicly identified is certainly a factor in the scarcity of diverse images and undoubtedly explains why so many of the photographs which journalists do manage to take show asylum seekers/refugees effectively hiding their faces from the camera. Among the asylum seekers and refugees interviewed in the research, even those who appeared most confident insisted that they remain anonymous when interviewed by journalists. Interestingly, this condition was never cited as a problem and appears to be universally respected by journalists.

Nevertheless, many interviewees explained that they were too scared to be photographed. They feared being identified by their persecutors back home and thus endangering the lives of their friends and relatives they had left behind. Some also expressed reluctance to identify themselves as asylum seekers or refugees to people they had got to know in this country who were unaware of their immigration status. For example, a refugee from Pakistan claimed that he hides his immigration status from the people whom he meets because he thinks that if they know he is a refugee, they will not respect him. Another interviewee explained that if members of her community knew she was a refugee, they would automatically assume she is living on benefits and is trying to take a council house from a local family. A man from Bhutan expressed the sense of shame he felt when his photograph appeared in the press, it is *"something you cannot bear because it makes low dignity and you will have something in your mind which is not easy to live with"*.

Many of the interviewees directly stated or implied that they were nervous because of the unpredictable reaction of their next-door neighbour. One woman who expressed enthusiasm for talking to the media said that she would never agree to be photographed and when asked why responded:

"I blame the media for that because the media are not giving a good picture about the refugees. So I don't want to be identified as a refugee, [I would] commit an interview as long as nobody will identify me...I want to protect myself..."

Cartoon published in *Daily Mail* in November 2002



Some even cited fear of being physically attacked or harassed. A Kurdish man from Iraq who has lived in Dover for six years believes that if his photograph were to appear in the newspaper, his life would be in danger. Several refugees and asylum seekers referred to the murder of a young Kurdish asylum seeker in the Sighthill estate in Glasgow in summer 2001 and this case appears to be at least partly responsible for their apprehension at being identified.

Others had objections to assumptions made by the media, which are reflected in the way in which photographs of refugees tend to be framed. A female journalist from Bosnia objected to being pigeonholed by the media and felt that she lacked credibility due to the way in which women - and particularly refugee women - are portrayed in the press. Although she has been photographed twice for *The Guardian* newspaper, she has felt uncomfortable with the reporter's response to her, often commenting with surprise on how nicely dressed she is to which she replies "yes, what do you expect me to wear, a scarf? And to cry all the time?" She feels that the image of female refugees and asylum seekers in the media has shaped the opinions of individual journalists which has, in turn, altered their attitudes towards her as a person. She thinks that refugee organisations are also guilty of perpetuating stereotypical images of women in their own literature and promotional material. She felt undermined by these images and now feels more reluctant to be photographed in case she unwittingly contributes to this trend.

There were a few interviewees who already enjoy a public profile through their work or community activities who stated that they would not mind being photographed. For example, an Iranian asylum seeker from Glasgow said he would be willing to be photographed or filmed because in his opinion, this would depict his situation exactly as it is, thereby providing an accurate record of his experience and circumstances. In general, those who had been in the UK for longer than five years tended to express greater ease about having their photograph taken, although two Syrian asylum seekers said they would be comfortable being photographed, despite being in the UK for less than a year. Similar evidence about the preparedness of asylum seekers to be photographed, and different evidence of the willingness of local journalists to use them, is also available from a number of local support groups such as the Media Working Group in Cardiff.⁴⁴

Conclusion

In conclusion, the problem is not the fact that the images described above appear in the media. We would not wish to argue that it is not legitimate to film or photograph particular people or situations, such as the confrontation between police and some of the refugees at Sangatte. The problem lies with the relentless repetition and over-emphasis of precisely those images that reinforce particular stereotypes and a failure to source more diverse images to illustrate the many other aspects to the asylum issue.

Greater efforts are made in the television coverage to present balanced and informative accounts of the issues. For example, on 30 December, Channel 4 ran a feature on asylum in Denmark, presented in the context of how other countries in Europe deal with asylum. This feature showed many mixed groups of refugees of different ethnic background sitting in a cafeteria in a Red Cross Centre, Muslim families in a shopping centre and a woman climbing into a parked car, thereby depicting refugees as settled, integrated and part of everyday Danish life.

However these efforts are consistently undermined by the relentless use of stock images which may have 'news value' but are not in any sense impartial or even accurate images of the news events being reported, resulting in a partial and therefore stereotyping-fictional account of asylum seeking. This account excludes the possibility that for everyone who seeks asylum - regardless of whether they are predominantly young men - there is a human story of families and lives disrupted by some abnormal event which has forced people to leave their homes.

The result is a vicious cycle: as long as the media continues unremittingly to project images of refugees and asylum seekers that are one-dimensional and overwhelmingly negative, they will continue to feed the distrust and hostility of the public towards these groups. This, in turn, inhibits refugees and asylum seekers from agreeing to be filmed or photographed for fear of the public's reaction to them.



use of sources

refugees struggling to be heard

In both the print and broadcast media coverage of the asylum debate we hear a great deal about asylum seekers and refugees, but it is rare to hear the voices of individuals explaining for themselves why they have fled their countries or reflecting on their new situation in Britain. Is this because refugees are reluctant to speak to the media, perhaps scared of the consequences for their families or friends back home, or maybe wary of the reaction they may receive from the British public? What kind of choices are made by journalists: when do they seek out refugees as sources for their stories and what kind of questions do they ask? If and when they are present in the debate, who among the refugees get to speak, and how? If refugees are absent in the debate, who is speaking for them and how does this affect our understanding and impression of asylum seekers and refugees and the way in which government policy determines how they live their lives in Britain?

Overview of sources in the print media sample

There were 202 news and feature articles in the print sample, 182 of which relied on a named source. When writing about asylum and immigration, journalists depend heavily on politicians and officials as the main source of information and comment. Politicians, central and local government officials together accounted for the main sources in 71 articles (39%) and were quoted an additional 136 times. Other key contributors to informing and shaping the debate are professionals (teachers, doctors and lawyers), who were the main source in 11 articles (6%) and quoted an additional five times; and the police who were the main source of information in five articles (3%) and quoted an additional 12 times.

The Community Fund and Migration Watch UK were also prominent as sources in the print monitoring sample for quite specific reasons. The National Lottery-financed Community Fund became the subject of a tabloid 'hate' campaign (with the exception of *The Daily Mirror*) from September 2002 onwards, following its decision to award a grant to the National Coalition Against Deportation Campaign (NCADC) and a spokesperson for the Fund was subsequently quoted as the main source in 10 articles (5.5%). Migration Watch UK rose to prominence as a critic of immigration policy, and in particular of the government's alleged statistical under-representation of the scale of the 'asylum problem', following the publication of numbers of arrivals during the summer of 2002. Migration Watch UK was the main source in 10 articles and quoted an additional seven times. Furthermore, Migration Watch's interpretation

Photograph published
in *Daily Mail*
on 9 October 2002

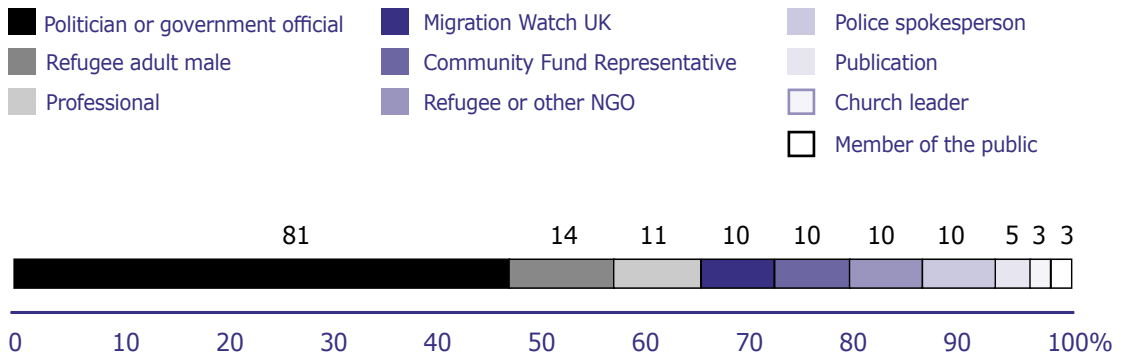


of facts and figures featured in nearly all the key areas of the immigration and asylum debate during the three month period. They were the main source in articles on four out of the top five 'asylum stories'.

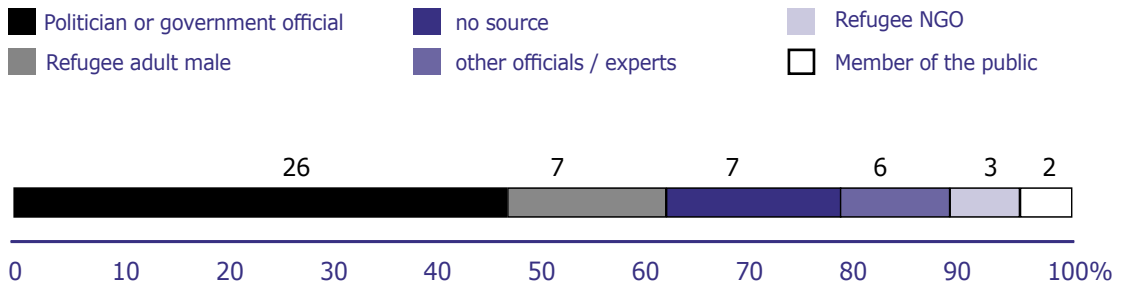
NGOs which support and advocate on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers (such as the Refugee Council, Refugee Action, the NCADC, Amnesty International, Liberty) were by no means absent from the debate, but were called upon to react to running stories, far more frequently than they initiated them. They were the main source in 8 articles (4%) but were quoted on 24 occasions when their quotes appeared as responses to statements made by other sources leading the debate.

Refugees were quoted as the main source in 14 out of 182 articles (8%) and were quoted as secondary sources an additional 20 times. While it is fair to say that refugees were out-voiced by politicians and other officials in terms of the number of occasions on which they are granted the opportunity to speak - in the entire sample of 202 news or feature articles, there was only one quote from a refugee community organisation - they were by no means completely excluded or ignored. What is clearly noticeable is that in all six newspapers monitored, refugees were quoted as sources in exactly the same stories.

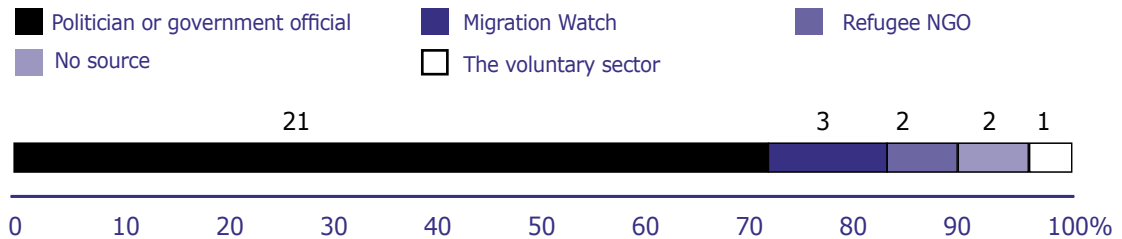
Top ten sources in news and feature articles in the period monitored



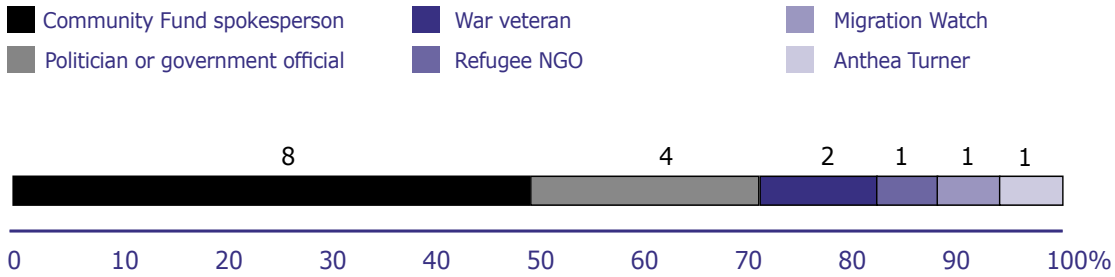
In 51 articles about the Closure of Sangatte - who is the main source?



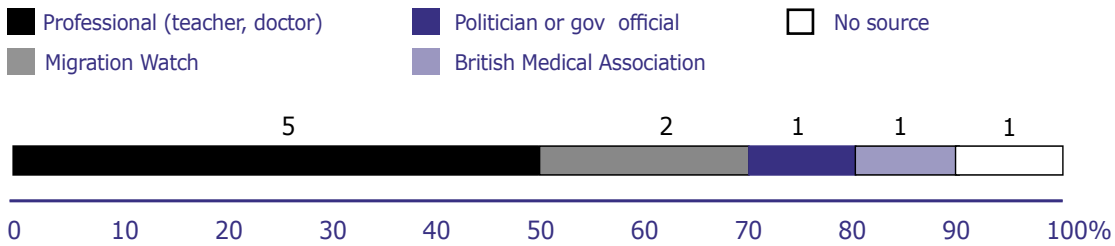
In 29 articles about the Immigration Bill - who is the main source?



In 17 articles about Lottery funding for refugee organisations - who is the main source?



In 10 articles about the cost of asylum seekers - who is the main source?



As the graphs show, the vast majority of quotations from refugees in the October-December monitoring period appeared in articles about the closure of Sangatte. The only other stories for which journalists drew on direct accounts from refugees or asylum seekers were those in which the individual was the main subject of the story. These stories concerned the case of a Palestinian asylum seeker awarded £9000 compensation in an unfair dismissal case and the case of two Jamaican homosexuals who were awarded refugee status, having successfully claimed that the State had failed to protect them from persecution as members of a particular social group.

Directly quoted views and experiences of refugees are 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.

Similarly, no quotations from refugees appeared in news or commentary pieces about the number of asylum seekers arriving in Britain, a debate that provides the context for the discussion for many issues relating to asylum and which is therefore crucial to informing public opinion. This issue of numbers was dealt with from an abstract perspective in which claims and counter-claims about the credibility of Home Office statistics were debated by Migration Watch, media commentators, politicians and celebrities. In the three-month monitoring period, only two articles explored the question of whether asylum seekers choose their country of destination. In one, a refugee was quoted but only as a secondary source while the main source was an academic. It remains an interesting question: why did journalists not seek out asylum seekers or refugees to find out why so many of them leave their homes and come to Britain? In particular, why were foreign correspondents and foreign news sources (so frequently used for example in the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, the main countries of origin of asylum seekers entering the UK during 2002⁴⁵) not mobilised to explore these issues?

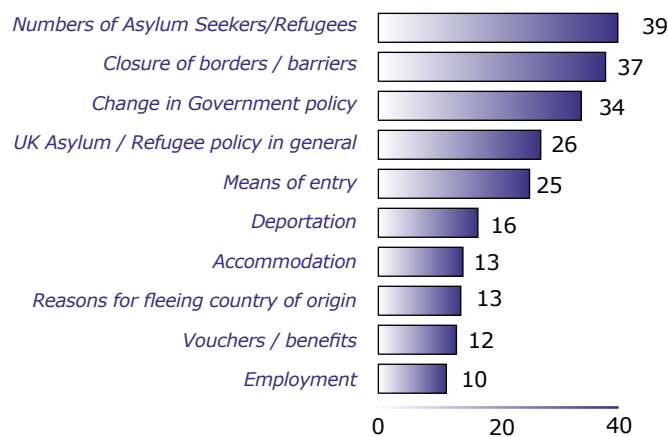
Overview of sources in the broadcast media sample

There were a total of 53 separate news items in the broadcast sample. The majority of these items (75%) were structured by a studio introduction by the newsreader/presenter followed by a more in-depth report from a journalist which contained footage of the location of the story or images from the station’s archives, as well as interviews with key figures. These key figures are referred to as *additional sources* since the journalist, in most cases, is considered to be the main source. *Additional sources* comprise all people who speak during the news item and also included any reference made by the journalist to another source (for example, ‘the government’ or ‘Home Office figures’).

In contrast to the print media, the most common additional source to appear in the two months monitored for broadcast coverage was an adult asylum seeker/refugee, appearing on 23 occasions (18%). The second most frequently quoted individual was the UK Home Secretary, David Blunkett, who was quoted on 20 occasions (16%). An adult female asylum seeker/refugee was featured just once and an asylum seeker/refugee under the age of 16 was featured on only three occasions (2%). Other sources that featured in the news included Nicolas Sarkozy, the French Interior Minister (6%), Oliver Letwin, the UK Shadow Home Secretary (5.5%) and Margaret Lally, spokesperson for the Refugee Council (5%).

Given the focus on the imminent or actual closure of Sangatte in the periods monitored, this accords with the comments made above about the number of interviews with asylum seekers around this particular story. They were accessible and present in groups for mutual support when speaking to journalists and they were used to illustrate the main points of the journalist's narrative and not as experts on asylum issues. It was also common to recycle the same sources, for example, on 5 December 2002, the BBC, ITV and Channel 4 all used the '30-year old mechanical engineer' who is said to have "paid thousands to get as far as Sangatte" and who says he wants "to start by studying English." As in the print media, there was little exploration of people's motivations for leaving their countries and seeking asylum in the UK. On 3 December 2002, all channels used the images of men outside Sangatte chanting versions of: "I want England", or talking of England as "a dream", but no-one asked them why. When the Sangatte story died down in the media, asylum seekers ceased being used as sources altogether.

Top ten themes in broadcast media coverage of refugee and asylum issues in the period monitored



As in the print media, refugees and asylum seekers did not appear as sources to comment upon policy issues. On 28 February 2003, for example, the announcement of new figures that suggested a 20% rise in the numbers of asylum seekers featured in many of the news headlines. When this story was broadcast, David Blunkett, Oliver Letwin and refugee groups were all quoted. When asylum seekers themselves were interviewed on the same day, it was in the context of discussing black market employment and not on why large numbers of asylum seekers leave their countries. They were not treated as serious participants in the discussion but merely as illustrations of failed government policies and in the process, were actively or implicitly defined as illegal or quasi-criminal. At the same time, the responsibility of *employers* of 'illegal workers' was almost entirely omitted from coverage and debate. Ignoring those who offer illegal employment places the blame for this phenomenon entirely on those who seek it and implies a natural illegality to their behaviour.

Willingness of refugees and asylum seekers to speak to the media

Perhaps contrary to people's expectations, many refugees are not media shy. The interviews conducted with refugees and asylum seekers revealed that, in spite of being on the receiving end of an overwhelmingly hostile press, asylum seekers and refugees are willing and in some cases very keen to speak to the media. About half of the refugees and asylum seekers in the research sample had been interviewed by a newspaper, radio or television journalist since arriving in Britain. Of these individuals with direct experience of the British media, only two had reservations about repeating the experience. One said he hated doing interviews "because it would not result in changing real life and that is annoying"; another said he had been put off by what he viewed as irrelevant questions posed by the journalist, questions which he feared put the life of his family in Serbia in danger.

The majority of the interviewees (including those with no previous contact with the media) said they would be willing to talk to a journalist in the future. While a few viewed the prospect with apprehension, others were confident that they could handle the situation, being journalists themselves or used to acting as spokespeople for their community and/or refugee organisation. A common sentiment expressed by many of the interviewees was determination to correct the negative representation of asylum seekers and refugees that they felt dominated the media coverage. A Bosnian woman, living in Leeds for over five years said she didn't like newspapers as they were *"biased, especially about asylum seekers: if you read between the lines they say these people are scroungers, they come to screw the country"*. Nevertheless, she had taken part in an interview with Radio Leeds and the *Huddersfield Examiner*. As long as a journalist was interested in her life in Britain, rather than excavating painful details about her family and experiences back in Bosnia, she said she would be willing to talk to the media again. An Ethiopian woman, whose brother, father and husband had been killed, said she would like to communicate with people in Britain - *"to explain to people who are not happy to have refugees in their country that the world is for human beings."*

However, such expressions of willingness to engage with the media were accompanied by many words of caution and apprehension about whether the media, the system and the British public could be trusted. The perceived sources of risk were various.

A woman from Iraq explained: *"In my country the secret police persuade [pressure] the families of wanted persons, so I would be worried. I would also be concerned about consequences in this country. I don't know what I can say that is different from the government. I don't trust any government in this world."* One man from the Democratic Republic of Congo said he needed *"time to trust the system"* before agreeing to talk to the media. A woman from Sierra Leone who was approached via the Scottish Refugee Council to do a television interview shortly after she arrived, refused as she was wary of how people would react if they knew she was a refugee: *"not about trusting the media, but the reaction of people."* A female journalist from Bosnia who has given numerous interviews to print and broadcast media since arriving in Britain over 5 years ago, said that when talking about the asylum issue she sometimes wondered whether her criticism of the government would backfire and jeopardise her asylum claim, *"but"*, she concluded, *"I am a journalist and I believe in free speech."*

Facilitating contact between refugees and the media

What is clear from all the testimonies is that the role of refugee organisations as mediators is crucial. Many of the interviewees insisted they would only talk to journalists who were referred to them by organisations they knew and trusted. Journalists interviewed as part of the research also highlighted their need for refugee organisations to connect them to individual refugees and one expressed frustration that on occasion, a refugee organisation she contacted was not able to do this.

Refugee organisation press officers stressed the difficulty of marrying the need to meet media demands with the task of preparing refugees they put forward for interview in order to (i) preserve a trusting relationship with their clients and (ii) ensure their clients know what to expect when they undertake media work. They explained that they often found themselves in the position of negotiators, in effect bargaining with journalists over what their clients would and would not be happy to talk about, particularly if their clients are vulnerable, such as children. In under-resourced working environments, the process is very labour intensive, and they suggested the media would be unrealistic to expect that all their demands could be prioritised at high speed. Furthermore, the number of requests which refugee organisations receive from the media means that they can - and have to be - selective about which they respond to. One press officer estimated that he and his colleagues only considered a third of requests to be worth a response. He added that they were more likely to consider requests that match his organisation's key corporate themes, for example a request to interview refugee women, or if it was clear the interview would genuinely provide an opportunity for a client to speak in their own words.

The burden on over-stretched intermediary organisations could be lightened if journalists are prepared to invest time and energy in developing direct relationships with *local* refugee communities and observe certain basic tenets of good practice. The positive remarks made by interviewees in Leeds who expressed satisfaction with the outcome of interviews they had given to Radio Leeds and the *Huddersfield Examiner* proves that this can be done. Interviewees were reassured by guarantees of anonymity, being told exactly what the interview would be about, when it would be printed or broadcast and in one case being shown a copy of the text before going to print. In 2002 - 2003, PressWise's Refugees, Asylum-Seekers and the Media (RAM) project organised a series of regional forums in the UK which enabled representatives of the refugee and asylum seekers support sector, journalists and individual refugees and asylum seekers to discuss face-to-face the difficulties of reporting refugee and asylum issues at a local level and to draft some recommendations in relation to how they might be overcome. This method was an effective way of bridging both communities and may be worth exploring at a national level.

Is willingness and mediation enough ?

The incidence of quotations from asylum seekers and refugees in a narrow selection of news stories in the media monitoring sample, the lack of voice given to refugee women, and the manner in which quotations are presented, pose further questions for journalists and refugee organisations.

The policy debate

One of the journalists interviewed in the research suggested that it did not make sense to seek out individual refugees and asylum seekers to comment on policy issues as their views could not possibly be representative of all refugees and asylum seekers in the country. However, this does beg the question, would the same be true if a journalist was seeking a local resident's view on a policy decision to place an accommodation centre for asylum seekers in their neighbourhood? Comment by an individual directly affected by a policy provides insight, which can be as valuable as a representative reflection of a larger number of views.

Furthermore, it is because the voices of asylum seekers and refugees are not heard in the debate, that it has been reduced to such narrow parameters, allowing politicians and journalists alike to speak only of reducing numbers and securing borders, while ignoring the human consequences of policies designed to deter new arrivals. On the one hand, asylum seekers exist on the margins of society, prohibited from working and in some cases shielded completely from the public if detained or accommodated in centres which make everyday social interaction virtually impossible. It is thus easy to ignore their voice when, in fact, what happened to them in their own countries - their reasons for fleeing to Britain - should inform the policies which determine what happens to them and how they are treated here. On the other hand, refugees who are well settled in the UK and have the benefit of having experienced the asylum process and the measures put in place for their initial reception and integration would be excellent commentators on the formation and practical application of asylum policy.

Mediators may act unintentionally as barriers to the views of refugees and asylum seekers being fed more directly into the public debate. Refugee organisation press officers did express reservations about the wisdom and the feasibility of creating opportunities for refugees or asylum seekers to comment directly on policy questions posed by the media. One press officer explained that while journalists do on occasion ask to speak to refugees about policy issues, she would be cautious about approaching asylum seekers for this purpose unless they had been in the country long enough to gain an understanding of how the system works. This is an understandable concern as refugee organisations have their own policy and advocacy agenda which they work hard to communicate to the media, and the effectiveness of their message undoubtedly depends on its coherent and consistent presentation.

An interesting initiative by Save the Children, aimed at bringing young refugees to the forefront of their campaigns, demonstrates one way of feeding the views of refugees more directly into the public debate, while mitigating against the risk of different voices sending out conflicting messages. The development of self-advocacy groups has enabled young refugees and asylum seekers to prioritise the issues they wish to advocate, with the backing of the organisation, through the media. Concerns about the government's proposals for young asylum seekers to be educated inside accommodation centres was one such issue, which was highlighted by young people during the parliamentary debates on the Immigration and Asylum Bill in Autumn 2002. Sadly, this initiative was not picked up in coverage of the political debate in the six newspapers monitored during the same period.

Absence of refugee women

A striking feature of the sources referred to in the articles in the monitoring sample is the almost exclusive reliance on male refugees as sources. Male refugees were the main source in 14 out of the 182 sourced print articles (8%) and were quoted an additional 18 times. Female refugees were never relied upon as the main source and were quoted in only two articles, both of which reported the successful appeal against deportation by a Sudanese woman who had been kept as a slave by a diplomat in London. In the entire broadcast sample, an adult female asylum seeker was only featured once, as an additional source.

As discussed above, other than individual asylum cases which featured during the monitoring periods, both of which concerned male asylum seekers, Sangatte was the only story for which journalists sought refugees as sources. Why were the women and children - admittedly in the minority, but nevertheless present at the camp - excluded from offering their testimony to reporters? And was it merely a coincidence that the individual stories grabbing the headlines during this period were about male asylum seekers, or does this reflect a general lack of interest in the situation and experiences of refugee women?

Journalists interviewed as part of the research suggested that decisions about which individual cases they profile and seek out for interview are based purely on considerations of their newsworthiness. The lack of feature articles published during the periods monitored is undoubtedly a factor in the scarcity of representation of refugee women in the media coverage. News reports are unlikely to provide an opportunity to explore any issue in great depth or allow an individual the space to represent their views in a considered and meaningful way.



Press officers from refugee organisations offered some insight into why features about individual refugees are harder to get into the media, as well as ideas about the stereotypical perception of the concerns of refugee women which dictate media agendas. Although much of their work is reactive, press officers consider pro-active attempts to get stories they want in to the public domain to be an important part of their media strategies. However, the speed with which media agendas change can undermine months of hard work and preparation. For example, Refugee Action devised a campaign and accompanying research to focus attention on refugee women in the UK. Having secured the interest of *The Daily Mirror* in running a feature, the news agenda shifted to military action in Iraq and the feature was deferred. A similar example was provided by Save the Children, who had to explain to young clients who had invested considerable time in taking part in the development of a feature article for a broadsheet, that it had been dropped at the last minute in favour of another story.

Press officers also complained that journalists wishing to interview their clients sometimes have unreasonable expectations when seeking out individuals to profile in a feature article. They often present wish lists of age, nationality, and violations - a common request is to interview women who have been raped. Unless an individual volunteers the information, refugee organisations would not know the particular details of their clients' asylum case and it is therefore not always easy to fulfil such prescriptive demands, especially in a short timeframe. In addition, press officers would be very cautious about the manner of the approach by a journalist to such sensitive subject matters. Some refugee women are willing to talk about their experiences, but journalists do not always have the time, or if they did, would they demonstrate the necessary sensitivity to deal with the issue appropriately? In such a situation, press officers effectively act as gatekeepers and always try to prevent a distressing incidence of insensitive interviewing or inappropriate publication being added to the traumas women have already experienced.

It is also possible that journalists and press officers carry with them assumptions about the role and sensitivities of women from different cultures, which act as a barrier to approaching refugee women for interview.

The women who were interviewed as part of the research and who came from diverse backgrounds challenged some assumptions. The majority said they did not mind whether a male or female journalist interviewed them and only three said categorically that they would not wish to be interviewed by a man. An Indian woman who has been in this country for over five years said when she first arrived she would have felt more comfortable with her husband present in such a situation, but now she would feel confident talking to a male journalist on her own. One woman said she felt a female journalist would be more likely to take her seriously. The majority of the women interviewed, and a few of the men, admitted that refugee women's concerns and interests were simply not represented in the media. One woman attributed this to a more general disinterest in refugee communities, while at least two women expressed particular frustration about the public's ignorance of the role of women from different cultural backgrounds that was perpetuated by the media. A woman from Sierra Leone passionately objected to the fact that people in this country assume that in different cultures men are considered superior and therefore only approach men. A Sudanese woman said she felt her neighbours were initially suspicious of her and her husband as refugees and were surprised when they saw a Muslim woman driving a car and doing more than just raise her children and go to the mosque. "*I blame the media, no one else,*" she said.

The exclusion of women and children from articles about asylum seekers and refugees means that we are only hearing half the story of asylum. As the male head of the household is more often than not the asylum applicant on behalf of the family, women are generally less visible in the asylum process.⁴⁶ Perhaps because they mainly feature only as part of an estimated number of dependants in Home Office asylum statistics they are of less interest to the media, which is so preoccupied with debating the scale of the 'asylum problem' and less interested in discovering the human stories which lie behind the statistics. Yet the way in which women are treated in their countries of origin and the reasons behind their flight are incredibly important to our understanding of their needs once they arrive in Britain and to devising the policies which will ensure they are adequately protected and supported. It is therefore essential that their voice is heard in the public debate.

Being framed

This leads us to the question of whether pushing for extensive quotations from refugees and asylum speakers - whether men or women - in reporting on more dimensions of the asylum issue will be enough to improve the quality of reporting. Unfortunately the evidence from the media monitoring showed that even when refugees and asylum seekers were given the opportunity to speak, their quotes were framed in such a manner, that any potential insight into their situation, the reason behind their flight, their concerns was nearly always lost. The complex combination of the positioning in the article of different sources, accompanying photographs, headlines, the emphasis placed on what the refugee says, and the commentary provided by the journalist, can undermine an insightful quote or give it an entirely different meaning altogether. The overall impression created by the language in the articles in which refugees are the main source illustrates well the complexity of the representation. In nine out of 14 of the print articles, in which refugees were given an opportunity to speak for themselves, asylum seekers and refugees were described in primarily derogatory terms. In three articles they were described as lucky or undeserving 'chancers'; in two articles they were presented as receiving better treatment from the authorities than British people; in two other articles their desperation to reach the UK was explained by what they hope to gain when they arrive, rather than in relation to the

danger they have left behind; and in one article they were described as robbing or exploiting the system.

Heavy editorialising of refugee quotations was especially evident in the reports on Sangatte. As discussed in the case study⁴⁷ the *Daily Mail* reporter covering the story of Sangatte commented specifically on the absence of harrowing tales of persecution and torture in between quotations of expressions of joy by Iraqi Kurds on their way to Britain. It was implied that if such stories were not told, this showed the 'experiences' had not occurred. *The Sun* framed its quotations from the men at Sangatte in similar terms.

*'Abdullah Ahmed, 19, said "This is my dream. I am really, really happy today. England is beautiful, it is where I have always wanted to go." He admitted he was surprised to get free entry into his dream country.'*⁴⁸

In contrast, the impression created by a report in *The Guardian* was quite different. An article on the first group of Iraqi Kurds and Afghans from Sangatte to arrive in the UK, included a quotation by an Afghan father who had been living in the UK for two years. He is described arriving at the hotel, where the group is staying with clothes for his wife, daughter and brother-in-law, after discovering just hours earlier that they had arrived in the country. The man explains that he is excited to be finally reunited with his wife and his 4-year-old daughter: *"This is the first time I will see them. Afghanistan is very dangerous. I want to say thank you very much for this country."*⁴⁹

Reports by the *Daily Mail*⁵⁰ and the *Daily Express*⁵¹ on the decision to grant asylum to the two homosexual Jamaicans further illustrate the value of including direct quotations from refugees, but also the ease with which the voices of refugees are overshadowed by a newspaper's editorial line. Both reports included a substantive quote from one of the individuals explaining why he fled to the UK.

'One of the successful applicants said he had been continually tormented because of his sexuality. "Being gay in Jamaica is a hell-house. When I was walking down the streets, I didn't know who was going to attack me. I would be dead now in Jamaica."

This first hand account of the danger of being a homosexual in Jamaica is followed by an accurate explanation of the legal basis upon which the decision to grant asylum rests: *"the Home Office said that Jamaican applicants were eligible for asylum if they could prove that their government was failing to protect them from persecution."*

Unfortunately, both reports carried headlines designed to prejudice the reader before he/she has had a chance to read the testimony of the refugees concerned. The *Daily Mail* report appears under the headline: "GAYS ASYLUM VICTORY". In the case of the *Daily Express*, the headline also undermines the factual explanation of the basis for asylum by suggesting that asylum will be granted to anyone who claims to be a homosexual: "GAY, JAMAICAN? COME ON IN..."

Conclusion

In conclusion, more direct quotation from the individuals concerned, with their history and their reasons for seeking asylum in Britain would greatly contribute to a more thorough and informed reporting on asylum. Overcoming the tendency to treat asylum seekers and refugees as passive objects of policy making with nothing to contribute to the broader debate is a challenge for both the media and the refugee sector.

In particular, reporters and sub-editors should bear in mind that opportunities for refugees to give more than sound-bite quotations are key to achieving real insight into an issue as complex as asylum. Editors should give some consideration to why it is that connections are rarely made between the stories of human rights abuses, civil war and political chaos, which regularly feature in the international pages of newspapers, and on television, and domestic coverage of the numbers, motivations and purposes of asylum seekers arriving in Britain.

In order to counter a misperception - that has been deliberately fostered by certain sections of the media - that all asylum seekers are young men 'on the make', it is essential to include more women and children among those interviewed. With this challenge for reporters, comes a responsibility to avoid stereotyping women from different cultural backgrounds and to approach all those men and women, whose traumatic experiences have made them vulnerable, with sensitivity and consideration.

Finally, the development of trust between journalists and refugee organisations, and between journalists and refugee communities, is the fundamental basis for better reporting. This requires real understanding from the media of the constraints (both in terms of resources and the sensitive nature of the subject matter), within which press officers in refugee organisations are working; as well as continued efforts by refugee organisations to provide journalists with access to refugees and asylum seekers who wish to speak to the media.



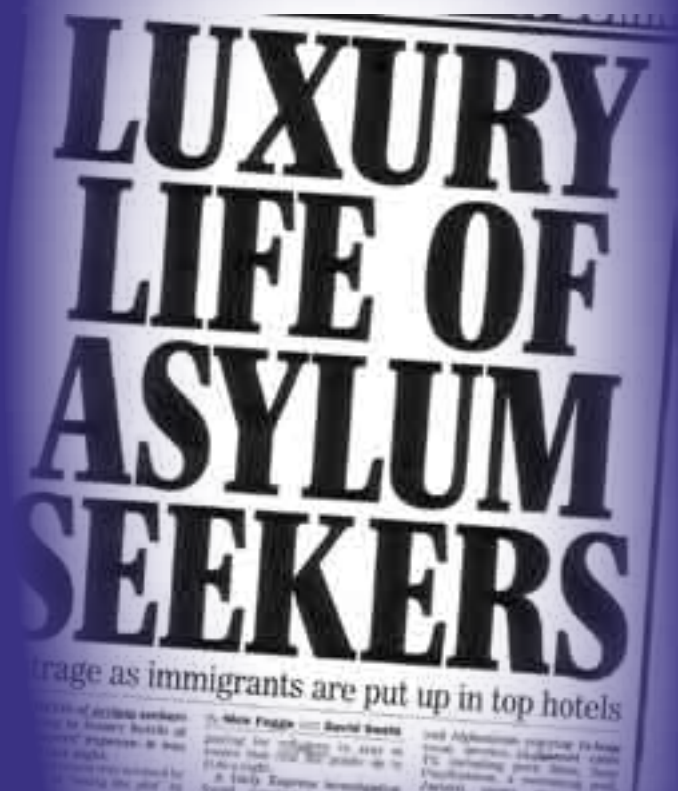
the impact of myths on refugees and asylum seekers

Following the discussion of the nature of UK media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers, we now turn to the impact this coverage has on the lives of refugees and asylum seekers. Whether the media leads, or responds to, public opinion is an age-old question, but what is indisputable is the heightened level of public interest; be this a result of, or a motivation for, the volume of coverage devoted to asylum. The refugees and asylum seekers interviewed in the research had clear views about how they thought media coverage had influenced the ways in which they were perceived, and they also related a range of consequences for their everyday lives. While it has not been the purpose of this research to investigate general public perceptions of immigration and asylum, opinion polls on immigration and asylum conducted over the last two years tend to support the views expressed by the interviewees, namely that the media has had a direct and overwhelmingly negative impact on public perception of asylum seekers and refugees. Furthermore, readers' letters from the print media monitoring sample show how readers respond to specific asylum themes flagged up by persistent coverage in the tabloid press.

Part of the audience

Refugees and asylum seekers interviewed in the research were familiar with British newspapers and television and therefore had direct experience of the negative reporting in some sections of the media. Questions about their media habits revealed that they relied much more heavily upon newspapers for information in Britain than they had in their home countries, and that those who had difficulty in understanding English said they found it easier to read than to listen to the radio or watch television. A large number of the interviewees regularly read the free newspaper *Metro* that is distributed in London and Glasgow, although only a couple explicitly said that they found national newspapers too expensive to buy frequently. The most popular national newspaper amongst the interviewees was *The Guardian*, followed by *The Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, *The Independent*, *The Daily Mirror* and *The Times*. The vast majority of the interviewees read more than one newspaper and approximately half read a newspaper everyday. Curiously, many of the interviewees reported regularly buying both *The Guardian*, which traditionally adopts a more liberal line on asylum and immigration, and the *Daily Mail*, which has run many anti-asylum campaigns, including the campaign against the lottery grant to the National Coalition of Anti - Deportation Campaigns (NCADC). Interestingly,

Headline published
in *Daily Express*
on 17 December 2002



journalists interviewed on both the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun*, cited their significant immigrant readership in defence of their aggressive coverage of the asylum issue. How could they be accused of racism when many of their readers were immigrants themselves?

A large number of the interviewees also cited local newspapers, such as *The Examiner* (Bradford), *The Evening Standard* (London), and local London borough newspapers such as the *Camden Journal*, *Islington Journal* and *Tottenham Journal*. When following national news, the majority of the interviewees said they were most interested in immigration and asylum issues, items related to crime, and analyses of economic trends in Britain. Many interviewees also chose to read feature articles and the opinion and letters pages. One woman from Sudan who spoke at length about the attitude of her neighbours towards her and her family was particularly keen to read the letters pages: *"I am so keen to read it... to know people's thinking or what's going on in people's minds."*

Reflecting on the stereotypes

Refugees and asylum seekers feel overwhelmed by a culture in public life that they experience as decidedly against them. Many of the interviewees interpreted the media coverage, particularly in the tabloid press, as a deliberate construction of gross generalisations and unfounded assumptions. There was a sense of frustration amongst the interviewees that the media treats refugees as one organic, undifferentiated group. None of the interviewees coming from so many different parts of the world with so many different histories and attachments felt there was a single homogeneous 'refugee community' in Britain. They were puzzled as to why the media refers to refugees and asylum seekers as though they did belong to such a community and they viewed this as an indication of ignorance about refugees and where they come from which is passed on to the public by the media. One woman, who arrived from Bosnia over five years ago, said the situation has deteriorated to such an extent that even positive articles contain negative labelling and stereotypical images, and that even the liberal press does not provide an informed picture of the asylum issue.

One of the more offensive generalisations, noted by several interviewees, was the representation of refugees and asylum seekers as poor economic migrants, particularly evident in photographs where they felt refugees and asylum seekers were always shown as *"miserable"* *"pathetic"* and *"shabbily dressed"*. The lack of exploration of the humanitarian factors that force people to flee to Britain leaves such stereotypes unchallenged. As a former journalist, interviewed in Kent, points out *"they always focus on what's happening and how to deal with them, not about what happened to them and why they are here"*. Asylum seekers and refugees come from a diverse range of backgrounds and flee to this country for a number of reasons, but assumptions that they are all fleeing from poverty, belies the fact that many were middle-class, educated professionals in their countries of origin. Instead of investigating the situations in refugee producing countries, the focus of much of the media coverage in the monitoring periods was on the allegedly luxurious lifestyles of refugees and asylum seekers compared to those of members of the British public. Apparently it did not occur to any journalists to chart the decline in the standard of living experienced in Britain by many refugees and asylum seekers in comparison with their previous lives. As one woman from Sudan explained:

"...I have got my own position in the central bank of Sudan. My husband used to be the governor of a state there, so coming to their country is not a privilege to us. It is just to protect ourselves from different things..."

A Bosnian woman who has been living in the UK for less than two years expressed also her disquiet that:

"...some newspapers seem to focus on that narrow-minded view, (as) if people come here just for the sake of improving themselves and I wonder what kind of improvement (people think they can achieve)."

Opinion polls certainly indicate that such stereotypes, rather than genuine understanding of the issues, prevail in the public mind. In an opinion poll conducted by *The Guardian* newspaper and ICM in May 2001, 58% of the public believed that asylum seekers come to Britain because they want a better life for themselves and their families. In the same poll 17% of people thought the government considered only between 1% and 5% of asylum seekers to be genuine.

The interviewees were also sensitive to the fact that the media and by extension, the British public, 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".

An interviewee who is a former journalist, now working for Kent Refugee Support Group, felt 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 boyfriends and girlfriends. This was also reflected in the issues of concern to readers, whose letters were published during the monitoring periods. As would be expected the greatest number of letters appeared in the newspapers with the most coverage of the asylum issue: 21 out of 58 appeared in *The Sun*, 15 out of 58 in the *Daily Mail* and 10 out of 58 in the *Daily Express*. Other than Sangatte, which generated the most letters (12), the issue of most concern to readers was the compensation won by the Palestinian asylum seeker (8 letters) and general expressions of anger at the perceived favourable treatment of refugees and asylum seekers in comparison to British people (6 letters).

As we have seen in previous chapters, the preoccupation with numbers of asylum seekers arriving in Britain and the fact that refugee women are rarely visible in the media creates the impression that Britain is being swamped by single men, who enter the country illegally and are thereafter labelled as 'illegal'. References to both of these aspects to media coverage came through strongly in the interviews. Many referred to the tendency of the media to describe the UK as being 'flooded' by refugees. One interviewee felt that this is a conscious tactic on behalf of the media to dehumanise refugees and asylum seekers and to encourage the British public to protect themselves from them, as if from a natural disaster. This was underscored by comments made in relation to the images that appear in the media, which, as the former journalist in Kent explained, convey the message:

"...look how dirty he is, look at how bad he is, look how awful he is, he is going to come to England so be careful".

Some interviewees cited articles about asylum seekers stealing and stopping the Eurotunnel train as obvious examples of their portrayal as criminals. One woman from Sudan who had been in Britain for five years explained that the portrayal of the refugees coming from France gave her a feeling that they were not refugees but a gang and she started to feel even that she was not a refugee herself:

"..their main aim is to come here by any way, illegal people, legal and people are..me, I start to feel as if I was not a refugee myself, start to [think] that all these people they are bad, they are , just.. they are a gang."

Some of the interviewees felt that the notion of them as a threat to British society had gathered pace since September 11th. For example, a Kurdish man from Iraq stated *"anyone with a brown skin is considered to be a terrorist"*. However, such views were far more prevalent among interviewees of Islamic or Middle Eastern origin than among those from other parts of the world.

Refugees and asylum seekers are not alone in their interpretation of the negative messages about their allegedly criminal characters. In a MORI SRI survey conducted in June 2002, 64% of respondents said that the media most use the term 'illegal immigrant' when referring to refugees and asylum seekers. The poll further found that 85% of respondents associated negative words with media reporting. Words commonly associated with media coverage were 'desperate', 'foreigners', 'bogus' and 'scroungers'. At the other end of the spectrum, words not commonly associated with media coverage were 'skilled', 'talented', 'intelligent', 'hardworking' and 'welcome'.

Dealing with the consequences

The majority of the interviewees were convinced that negative media coverage contributes directly to the negative attitudes they experienced in their everyday lives. Interestingly, opinion polls also suggest that negative opinions about asylum seekers and refugees seem to be based on the general anxiety that has been generated by media coverage, rather than on personal experience. For example, London and the Southeast are frequently referred to as the most under strain due to the numbers of asylum seekers living in this area but are shown to be consistently the most tolerant. In areas where there are fewer asylum seekers the public are reported to be more critical of government policy and more hostile to asylum seekers.⁵²

Such public hostility to asylum seekers and refugees certainly gets fed back to the media and on occasion to refugee organisation press officers. For example, a journalist from *The Daily Mirror*, involved in the series of articles in February 2003 which sought to challenge some of the myths about asylum seekers, reported that she had received several phone calls and emails in response to the articles, some merely challenging the facts, but others containing offensive language. She said this was not unexpected as she generally receives more feedback - overwhelmingly negative - to articles about asylum seekers and refugees than to any other issue on which she reports. Press officers also reported receiving hate mail following broadcast or print interviews they had carried out. One organisation had received such vile hate mail that they had had to report it to their internet service provider. Personal attacks against a press officer in another organisation had led to an investigation by the police.

But how, and to what extent, do these kind of reactions affect asylum seekers and refugees? A refugee from Eritrea, who has been in the UK for over five years, expressed his belief that the media's failure to pay attention to the real reasons for the arrival of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK, resulted in racism towards refugees and asylum seekers:

“Most of the British media were emphasising the negative side, thus they should be responsible for the hatred and racial discrimination facing the refugees.”

A Bosnian woman working for a refugee organisation in Leeds referred to a typical incident in the local doctor’s surgery when she had been trying to register another asylum seeker:

“...at the reception, this woman says ‘oohhh, one of those! Oh, no we can’t have them.’ And I am sure it is the media that painted this picture in their heads, that these people are bad or something, because she obviously never met one of them. Otherwise, she wouldn’t say that, would she?”

The prevalence of negative attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees undoubtedly impacts upon their sense of self-esteem and worth. The testimony of a 17-year-old girl from Kosovo, who was interviewed in Glasgow, revealed how she had internalised the media message of being an unwelcome burden on the local community. Interestingly, in the same breath she also hinted at the efforts made by the media to portray a more positive picture of asylum seekers in the aftermath of the stabbing of an asylum seeker on the Sighthill estate. She explained how she had been interviewed in the past by BBC radio, BBC1 and Channel 4 and reported being quite happy with the way the interviews had gone. However, when asked if she knew why she had been approached to do a media interview, she said:

“Mainly [because], I was a refugee and at school there are too many of them, and the recent interview was in the church about Christianity and how helpful we find living in Sighthill.”

Others were more explicit in revealing a loss of confidence as a result of exposure to negative media coverage. A community activist from Bhutan, interviewed in Leeds, stated,

“When you go out, you see, you think about the media, how is shown to people...when you go out you are not confident about what you want to do, or want to face those people...and it creates a ... sense of insecurity within you.”

He went on to say that he believes those who cannot speak English are particularly susceptible to these attitudes because they find it difficult to defend themselves or to be assertive in everyday situations where they are treated badly. The refugee from Eritrea, mentioned above, claimed that he had suffered from psychological difficulties shortly after his arrival as a direct result of the negative attitudes held by people he encountered. An Afghan interviewee even went so far as to say that the media is actively trying to turn the public against refugees and asylum seekers, and to some extent, he believes it is successful in accomplishing this.

Suffering in silence

Despite the extent to which refugees and asylum seekers feel offended, attacked and distressed by the media coverage, many expressed reluctance at the idea of writing to the newspapers to express their views or to actively complain about inaccurate or offensive coverage. This was particularly the case for those who had expressed anxiety or reservation about being interviewed by a journalist. Even some who appeared comfortable with the notion of talking to the media thought the idea of complaining was ridiculous, and fear of the consequences was a significant factor. A Syrian woman who said she would be happy to be interviewed by a journalist and would be willing to be photographed, simply said: *“I would be silent”*. She explained that she would complain to nobody because she does not trust the establishment and reiterated, *“I would not complain.”* A Sudanese woman interviewed in Leeds, felt strongly about the need to respond but was held back by a lack of confidence that her views would be published or accurately represented:

“I have not [complained]. And the reason is ...although I really sometimes think there is a burning issue, I feel like sometimes I do take pen to paper...put my anger down, my response...No, I have never sent it. And that is also for the reason I don’t feel comfortable or I don’t feel confident that they would put it exactly as I wish.”

An Iraqi Kurd who had been in Britain for over five years expressed his frustration and sense of helplessness in the face of accusations against refugees, and in particular misrepresentation of Islam:

“I told you about my difficulties and one of them [is] I do not know how, what to do and where to go. Sometimes I feel the urge to take the initiative to respond but I did not know what to do.”

Expressions of scepticism about the worth of writing letters to counter negative coverage were also common. A Sudanese refugee, who has been in the UK for more than five years and seemed confident in handling the media, was dismissive of the idea of complaining. Even if she was upset or offended she says she would just discuss it with her husband and/or her friends. When asked whether she would make an official complaint she says,

“I don’t do that because I really do feel that there is a lobby, lot of lobbies in media against us as a Muslim and against us as a refugee. That’s the way I feel, so I think it’s a waste of time you know.”

She added that she knew she should write to *“that page which is express your views and what you want to say, but I don’t.”*

However, a few did report that they had written to newspapers to express their views in response to articles that they had read. A Kurdish woman - a community activist interviewed in Edinburgh - reported that the *Sunday Mail* had printed a letter she wrote complaining about an inaccurate article about an Islamic prophet. A prominent political activist from Pakistan explained that he had written an article for *The Independent* several years ago when refugees were being called ‘scum bags’. In the article, he expressed his opinion that refugees are humans after all and *“if we talk about human rights, then they should be treated equally just as the British people in this country”*. However, it is not clear whether he was invited to submit the article by the newspaper or whether he himself initiated the idea. Certainly there was a sense of frustration in many of the interviews with asylum seekers and refugees that they had few channels through which they felt they could express themselves. A few spoke about ideas they had to set up their own newspapers or radio stations to give a voice to their communities. However, none had managed to realise their aims due to lack of funding, time or know-how.

A few of the interviewees mentioned the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) and a couple had direct experience of addressing a complaint to the PCC, one on his own initiative (to which he said he received no response) and another as part of a collective complaint led by the NUJ in Scotland. A female journalist from Bosnia who has worked in the media in the UK articulated the key obstacle to the PCC acting as an effective regulation of the inaccurate and prejudicial coverage of the asylum issue as the self-imposed refusal to hear third party complaints in respect of alleged group discrimination.

However, few refugees and asylum seekers have specific knowledge of complaint mechanisms such as the PCC and many do not come from cultures where it is the norm to complain. The majority (at least two-thirds) of the refugees and asylum seekers interviewed as part of our research were selected because they had had some experience of or contact with the British media. However, as one of the participants at the seminar: ‘INSIGHT OR INCITE?’ pointed out, many refugees and asylum seekers do not know or understand what is being written about them until they face public abuse or physical attacks. Furthermore, individuals who are the subject of negative reporting are, more often than not, too afraid to agree to pursue a formal complaint. Some are even advised by their lawyers that it is not in their best interest to complain directly to the media. One case highlighted by another participant at the seminar revealed the repercussions of irresponsible media coverage beyond Britain’s borders for those, whose vulnerable position in this country, renders them helpless to do anything about it. The story of a Czech asylum seeker who was originally held in connection with the fire at the Yarlwood detention centre was picked up from the British media by the Czech State news agency. Despite the fact that charges were never brought against him, his assumed guilt was widely reported in his home country and the public backlash was such that it would now be even more dangerous for him to return.

Conclusion

The testimonies of those interviewed during our research confirmed that the provocative and inaccurate coverage of the asylum issue has direct and at times distressing consequences for asylum seekers and refugees living in this country. This is particularly concerning as there was a strong impression among the journalists interviewed that asylum and immigration will continue to be the focus of media attention for some time to come. The views ranged from a sense of despondency that the situation will never change, as long as particular events such as the murder of PC Stephen Oakley and terrorist alerts confirm the public’s worst fears about ‘immigrants’, to a more hopeful belief that the negative media coverage will die down when the government implements and sustains an efficient and fair asylum policy. It is an unfortunate characteristic of the public debate that, particularly, although not exclusively, in the tabloid press, legitimate criticism of government policy is so frequently dressed up in sensationalised and unfounded claims against asylum seekers; consequently it is the people not the policy that become the target of public resentment.

A worrying indication of the extent to which some sections of the media inhibit people from expressing themselves freely is that it is not just individual refugees who are anxious about the consequences of speaking out. Refugee organisation press officers also spoke of the perceived risks to their own organisations of being singled out by the tabloids if they pursued a complaint with the PCC, and would be happier to consider a collective response with other organisations to avoid becoming the sole target of a possible tabloid hate-campaign. The Director of the PCC stated emphatically that if there was even a hint of retribution by

newspapers in response to any complaints, the PCC would rapidly issue a statement to the editor and if necessary, the proprietor of the newspaper. However, if organisations feel intimidated by the press in this way, it is not surprising that individual refugees and asylum seekers tend to feel even more powerless. Even though there are some stories of successful complaint and self-representation, the overwhelming impression is that, refugees and asylum seekers in Britain, through fear or powerlessness, feel they have no effective alternative to suffering in silence.



the way forward

In May 2003, the seminar 'INSIGHT OR INCITE' was organised to present the initial findings of the research and to further the dialogue between the refugee sector and the media. Participants included the Editor of *The Independent*, Simon Kelner, newspaper columnist, David Aaronovitch, BBC controller of editorial policy, Stephen Whittle, *The Guardian's* Home Affairs Editor, Alan Travis, Director of the Press Complaints Commission, Guy Black, and the Director of Communications at the Refugee Council, Fazil Kawani. In total, 124 people attended the seminar. Unfortunately despite sending out several invitations, no journalist or editor from the tabloid press was prepared to participate in the debate.

The seminar raised many interesting points which supported the analysis of the common failures which are discussed in this report across all sectors of the national media; in particular the elements missing in coverage of asylum - the human interest stories and the human rights context.

Representatives of the refugee sector and the media agreed that those in positions of authority and influence must take the lead - 'journalists get it wrong because politicians get it wrong' - although this was no excuse for jumping on the bandwagon in the use of inflammatory and inaccurate language, a tendency acknowledged by representatives of the media. The upper and lower ends of the media market were criticised by participants and the BBC, as the public service broadcaster, was urged to set a better example. Since the seminar, the BBC Controller of Editorial Policy has taken the positive step of putting the issue on the agenda of a BBC editorial policy meeting. We suggest that updating existing BBC editorial guidelines that advise BBC journalists on how to report on sensitive social issues and vulnerable groups, to include asylum seekers and refugees, would be a further step in the right direction.

Participants spoke of rewarding and publicising good practice in reporting on refugee and asylum issues in order to show that things can and should improve. The efforts of local refugee groups and consortiums, such as the Wales Refugee Media Group in building contacts with journalists from the provincial media which had resulted in real change, were held up as examples which should be followed elsewhere.⁵³ The local media was described as 'an open door'. The value of devising multi-agency strategies - involving local authorities, the police and the NGO sector, to communicate a consistent and authoritative message in support of asylum seekers and refugees to local communities was also highlighted. On a national level, *The Daily Mirror* has published some commendable articles as part of a myth-busting exercise to make sure its readership is presented with clear facts in order to inform their opinions. It is hoped that the cumulative effect of more progressive reporting across the country may chip away at the dominant media culture we have described in this report.

A particularly promising outcome of the seminar was a constructive discussion about the difficulties of using the Press Complaints Commission as an effective mechanism for redress when newspapers published inaccurate or prejudicial articles. A key concern raised by participants was that the Code of Practice did not allow for complaints on behalf of groups under Clause 13 of the Code which deals with discrimination. The reluctance of individuals and even the wariness of organisations to pursue complaints was highlighted. Frustration was also expressed that the PCC has not taken a more proactive role to pre-empt commonplace prejudice and myth-making around asylum in the way that it addressed the treatment of the mental health issue in the media in the 1990s.

The Director of the PCC urged participants to continue complaining as this is the only way to raise the standard of reporting, and stated that the PCC could receive complaints presented by coalitions of organisations. It was noted that once complaints have been resolved, they should be broadly publicised and refugee organisations should write specifically to all newspaper editors to draw their attention to the adjudication. He also said that the PCC would be open to representations to redraft clause 13 and to the idea of introducing soft guidelines in a dialogue that involves refugee groups and journalists. It was felt that these guidelines are needed to encourage the media to catch up with the consensus that has already been reached by politicians in their discussion of the asylum issue in the public arena.

appendix 1

research methodology

Our research project was conducted over an 18-month period, beginning in January 2002. Fundamental to it was ongoing consultation with a steering committee,⁵⁴ which included representatives of refugee organisations and refugee community organisations who helped to guide the direction of the research and provided valuable feedback on initial findings.

Media-monitoring

We conducted systematic monitoring of the way in which asylum issues were reported and asylum seekers and refugees represented in both the print and broadcast media. Previous and relatively recent research has monitored the representation of refugees and asylum seekers in the regional and local press,⁵⁵ but this was the first attempt to monitor both national print and broadcast coverage of the asylum issue. Monitoring both mediums was considered important in view of the changing attitudes of readers and viewers in recent years and the way in which one medium influences the other. Recent research tells us that ‘total national newspaper circulation has fallen by about 25% in the last forty years’ and only 24% of people in Britain say they ‘trust the newspapers’.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, ‘television is now the supreme news medium, in the sense that it is used and respected by almost everyone’, with 91% of people saying that they ‘find television a useful source of news’ compared with ‘73% for newspapers’.⁵⁷ The same research points to the ‘enormous quantitative expansion of news’ at a time when ‘a growing number of people appear to skim the surface of headline news, which is all around them.’⁵⁸ Although readers may place little faith in the headlines they skim on a daily basis, this ambient diet of newspaper news forms the context in which they watch television news and absorb information.

Print monitoring

The print monitoring was conducted over a twelve week period from the beginning of October to the end of December 2002. The monitoring included weekday editions of The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, The Sun, The Daily Mirror, Daily Mail and Daily Express. These newspapers were selected on the basis of circulation levels and contrasting editorial approaches to asylum.⁵⁹ The free local London newspaper, Metro, was also included in the sample, specifically because many of the asylum seekers and refugees who were interviewed in the research reported regularly reading this publication. Monitors coding the newspapers were instructed to code any item - news report, feature, opinion piece, editorial or letter - which included the word ‘asylum’, ‘asylum seeker’ or ‘refugee’. Items which only referred to ‘immigrants’, ‘migrants’ or ‘immigration’ were not coded. Items were coded for the asylum story or theme which was the subject of the piece, labels used to refer to asylum seekers and/ or refugees, the tone of language used throughout the article, the sources cited directly and indirectly, the subjects of any photographs and how they were portrayed, reference to numbers and official statistics and literal descriptions of numbers of asylum seekers.⁶⁰

Broadcast monitoring

The broadcast monitoring took a more longitudinal approach by monitoring the following periods: a month from late May to late June 2002, the month of December 2002, late February-late March 2003. Figures on news viewing patterns were used to determine what news channels would be monitored. Sky news which continues to attract only 1.2% of UK viewers was monitored in the

first and last periods only, for just one hour each evening (9-10pm). Both BBC and both ITV evening bulletins and channel 4 at 7pm were monitored across all three periods. Channel 5 was added in the final period because of the more 'tabloid' character of its news bulletins.⁶¹

The same coding scheme was used for the content analysis of the broadcast material as for the print, with some slight changes necessitated by the differences in the televisual medium and print reporting. Because of the comparative rarity of broadcast news items on asylum, the procedure to identify items for coding, began with recording the running orders (determined by news item and including items in headlines and trailers) of each news broadcast for both BBC and ITV evening news programmes. When an item on asylum occurred on one or other of these channels, all other programmes being monitored within the specific time period were looked at in detail and coded for two days on either side of the item found. Because of the remarkable similarity in choice of news items across channels in the periods monitored, this both picks up all asylum stories and provides a 'news context' within which to analyse them.

Interviews with asylum seekers and refugees

To investigate the perceptions and media experiences of asylum seekers and refugees living in Britain, a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with asylum seekers and refugees in different parts of the country. Ten asylum seekers/refugees - four of whom had worked, or continue to work, as journalists - were recruited to undertake the interviews using a questionnaire, which consisted mainly of open questions. Interviews were conducted with asylum seekers and refugees in four cities/regions of the UK. These were: London - which remains the home to the majority of asylum seekers/refugees living in Britain; Glasgow - a key dispersal area which initially experienced tension between the local community and newly arrived asylum seekers resulting in the fatal stabbing of an asylum seeker in 2001; Dover - the first 'media flashpoint' as the point of entry for asylum seekers arriving via continental Europe; and Leeds where a pro-active media strategy by local refugee organisations is generally perceived to have resulted in positive contributions by the local press towards promoting understanding.

The researchers were asked to identify and interview a broad range of individuals in terms of age, nationality, gender, length of time in the UK and media experience. The latter category was divided into the following broad definitions: 'media experienced' - individuals who had been interviewed by print or broadcast media since arriving in the UK; 'community active' - individuals working for refugee community organisations, voluntary support groups, or acting as spokespeople for their communities, 'ordinary' - individuals who had no media experience other than that of casual consumers. The resulting sample of 45 interviewees included asylum seekers and refugees from 22 different countries; 23 men and 22 women. All the interviews were anonymous and interviewees were not obliged to give any details about their personal situation other than their nationality, age and length of time they had been in Britain.

Consultation with journalists and refugee organisations

Interviews were conducted with journalists working on all the newspapers included in the sample and some others, to ask for feedback on some provisional findings and to gain an insight into the editorial and reporting choices that are made when constructing news reports on asylum. Interviews were also conducted with press officers from four non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in support of asylum seekers and refugees. Following the request by one tabloid journalist who was interviewed to remain anonymous, and in order to encourage journalists and press officers to speak openly about the editorial policies and practices they knew about, it was decided that no journalists or press officers would be named in the report.

appendix 2

A case study of the media coverage of the closure of Sangatte

The following case study focuses on one story, the closure of the Red Cross centre at Sangatte, that appeared in the media during the lifetime of the project. The purpose of this case study is to illustrate the key issues that emerged throughout the course of the research in a concrete and meaningful way. These key findings, which have been primarily taken from the media monitoring element of the project, include: the way in which labels and language are used to describe asylum seekers and refugees, the representation of refugees in photographs and imagery, the use of sources, and the presentation and interpretation of statistics. The story of Sangatte has been selected due to its prominence in the print and broadcast media for the past two years. It also epitomises issues which - rightly or wrongly - have become central to the asylum and immigration debate: the number of asylum seekers and the manner in which they arrive in Britain, the alleged loss of control of Britain's borders, the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees in comparison to British citizens, and the charge that the asylum system is an open door for uncontrolled illegal immigration. Quotations that appear throughout the report have been taken from the interviews conducted with refugees and asylum seekers.

Article published in Daily Mail on 3 December 2002

Sangatte: the actual story

The Red Cross centre at Sangatte, was opened in September 1999 as a humanitarian shelter for asylum seekers who had been sleeping rough in and around Calais. In the summer of 2001, asylum seekers were filmed trying to jump aboard Eurotunnel trains, and from this point, British media interest in Sangatte became relentless. The events leading up to the closure of Sangatte unfolded over a four-week period in November and December last year. On Tuesday 5th November, Sangatte closed its doors to new arrivals. Thereafter, asylum seekers arriving in Calais had nowhere to go. Some sought refuge in a church in the town on 9th November, but left peacefully after six days of negotiations with French police. On 2nd December, David Blunkett met with his French counterpart Nicolas Sarkozy to strike a deal over the final closure of the camp and to decide the fate of its residents, who were thought to number 1,600. The terms of the deal were announced by the Home Office in a press release on 2nd December which declared the extension of UK borders across the Channel and the intention to close Sangatte by December 30th. The details of the deal made clear the government's commitment to take responsibility for 1,000 Iraqi Kurds who would be brought to the UK, not as asylum seekers, but on work visas and 200 Afghans, identified by the United Nations High Commissioner for refugees (UNHCR) as having strong family links to the UK. Prior to this press release there were no reliable figures of how many asylum seekers were the subject of the Anglo-French negotiations. The French shouldered the responsibility for three times as many people as the British - taking care of the 3,600 asylum seekers who had registered at the centre before its doors shut to new arrivals in November. On 5th December, the first coach carrying about 40 Iraqis and Afghans arrived in Britain with a police escort.



The closure of Sangatte began filling column inches as early as 18th October with a small piece in the *Daily Mail* reporting that only five refugees at Sangatte had taken up an offer by the French authorities of £1,200 to fly back to Afghanistan. Reports of the consequences of the closure of the centre were still appearing in the week before Christmas.

In the newspapers included in the monitoring, coverage of Sangatte ranged from relative silence (*The Daily Telegraph*, *The Daily Mirror*) to intense focus (*Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*); and from neutral (*The Guardian*) to extreme prejudice (*Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *The Sun*). The print media coverage of the story can be divided into two distinct phases:

- Reports of the events leading up to and around the agreement between the British and French governments;
- Accounts of the arrival of the first group of Iraqis and Afghans and investigation into their new lives in Britain.

Between the beginning of October and the end of December, the closure of Sangatte was the most frequently reported story relating to asylum and immigration. Out of a total of 308 articles and readers' letters during this period, 73 were devoted to Sangatte. The story generated 50 news reports, eight editorials, two opinion pieces, one feature and 12 letters to the editor. On three occasions, Sangatte made front page headline news, once in the *Daily Mail* and twice in the *Daily Express*. These two newspapers matched each other in coverage of the story producing 21 articles each on the events unfolding across the Channel. *The Sun's* coverage of the story included a couple of short reports on the closure of the camp to new arrivals in November, two reports and two commentary pieces on the Blunkett deal at the beginning of December. *The Daily Mirror* and *The Daily Telegraph* showed the least interest in the issue printing just four articles each. *The Guardian* consistently reported each new development in the story, and was the only newspaper to publish a background piece which traced the history of the Red Cross centre from its opening as a humanitarian shelter three years previously, to its final weeks.

"I think that the British media they need to highlight the roots behind the issues of asylum seekers in the UK because I am quite sure that most of the refugee and asylum seekers each one of them has a human rights problem behind his coming to this country. But if you just concentrate on the impact of the refugee issue on the social, economic and cultural life of this country and you forget the roots of the problem which has driven these people out of their countries, absolutely you are not going to tell the truth ..."

A male Sudanese asylum seeker, living in the UK for between 2 and 5 years, interviewed in London.

The newspapers which produced most articles on Sangatte - the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and *The Sun* - also developed very similar themes in their reports: 'thousands of asylum seekers or illegal immigrants are heading to Britain', 'the government has lost control of our borders', 'those who have been granted free entry to Britain are undeserving', 'the lucky group of Iraqis and Afghans are living in luxury at taxpayers' expense'.

The most intense period of print media coverage was in the first week of December, when the deal was struck between Blunkett and Sarkozy. In this week, 37 articles concerned Sangatte, out of a total of 57 on the subject of asylum. Other stories on asylum which grabbed the headlines in the same week

reinforced the themes which dominated reporting on Sangatte:

- the rising number of asylum seekers arriving in the UK,
- asylum policy and the immigration debate in general,
- an alleged "loss of government control" of Britain's borders,
- the award of £9000 compensation to an asylum seeker in an unfair dismissal case,
- the ongoing appeal hearing in Germany of the Ahmadi family who were deported from Britain.

Only one article in this week addressed the issue of why asylum seekers from different parts of the world come to the UK.

Headlines, photographs and sources: is what you see what you get?

A reader's attention is drawn to a story by headlines, photographs and their captions. These tools are used powerfully in the articles documenting the unfolding events at Sangatte to build up a picture of the people staying there, more often than not in the absence of any personal details about or expressed by the individuals themselves. To construct their articles, journalists rely primarily on official sources and when refugees do get to speak, their words are carefully framed. This is particularly the case in the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mail* which carried by far the greatest number of articles and the most sensational headlines.



Fear of the unknown

In the lead up to the Anglo-French agreement, the overwhelming message was that the inhabitants of the Sangatte camp were not to be trusted and that the impending arrival of an unknown, and allegedly ‘massive’ number of them in the UK was a cause for concern. At best they were described as ‘bogus asylum seekers’ who have no right to come to the UK, at worst they were described as being a threat to Britain’s security. The *Daily Express* headline above a report about the closure of the camp to new arrivals heralded:

“NEW ASYLUM FEAR AS CAMP CLOSES”

Other headlines spoke of ‘crisis’, ‘exodus’ and ‘deluge’. On 29th November, in a *Daily Mail* article speculating on upcoming negotiations with the French, the main sources of information were given as British police chiefs who were supposed to have been “put on alert to receive a mass exodus of refugees”. One senior police officer, who was not named, was quoted as describing the imminent arrival of “so many refugees” at a time of heightened security as a ‘doomsday scenario’. No other agencies or non-governmental organisations that could have been expected to be making preparations for the arrival of the refugees, were mentioned or quoted in this particular article.

Of the 29 photographs that accompanied articles about Sangatte, just over half were of unidentified male refugees, pictured in gangs, in confrontation with the French police or outside the gates of the camp holding up numbered badges. Four of the photographs were of men with their faces covered by scarves or coats wrapped round their heads, staring directly at the camera. There were no photographs of women or children, even though women and children were both present at the camp and among the 1,200 brought to the UK.

The pictures of men with their faces partially covered were accompanied by captions that suggested sinister motivations for their attempts to conceal their identity. No consideration or comment was given to the possibility that those photographed may have been afraid to be identified for fear of what may happen to families left behind or what may await them in a country they know little about.

“I just do not like to be at the forefront, on the picture, because there have been many incidents, attacks on people like us and you never know who the next door person is.”

A man from Bhutan living in the UK for between six months and two years, interviewed in Leeds.

Welcome to Britain

When the first group of Iraqis and Afghans set off for Britain the focus of the coverage shifted from fear of the unknown to speculation about what the ‘lucky lottery winners’ expected from life in Britain. Reporters and photographers went in search of individuals and for the first time, readers were offered pictures of men who had names and identifying characteristics, however limited. None of the women at Sangatte were interviewed, but some of the men were given the chance to speak. In fact reports on Sangatte accounted for 7 out of a total of 14 articles in the monitoring sample, when refugee males were quoted as the main source. However, as the individual refugees who were interviewed spoke of their joy at being granted entry to Britain, their apparent failure to mention the suffering they had endured in their own countries was repeatedly commented upon.

The *Daily Mail* followed the progress of the first group of 40 Iraqis and Afghans to arrive in Britain on three successive days. On the day of departure from Sangatte, the reporter focused on three of the “band of chancers” from Iraq who were pictured smiling and playing a guitar. They spoke about what they would like about England - “Anne Robinson, the lottery and fish and chips”, and the fact they expected to get work. “England is good for Iraqis”, he said. “Good people, good work”. And France? “No thank you”, he said. “No work” Twice in the course of the article the reporter commented on the absence of “harrowing tales of fleeing persecution, torture or terror”.

“No. I don’t want my photo to appear anywhere, why although I said I am ready to do anything of benefit to refugees, but to have my photo published would put my life in danger. Politically it means danger to me, thus I will not accept to have my photo published.”

Labels and language: stereotype or insight?

One of the most striking features of the media coverage of the asylum issue is the confusion

A Kurdish man from Iraq living in the UK over for 5 years, interviewed in Kent.

generated by the inaccurate use of language. In the coverage of the closure of Sangatte, journalists clearly had difficulty knowing what to call the group of people they were writing about. Were they refugees who would soon be claiming asylum in Britain or were they illegal immigrants? Undoubtedly, the government's decision to allow the 1,200 into Britain with work permits and not as asylum seekers blurred the usual distinctions between asylum seekers and economic migrants. The Home Office press release which announced the Anglo-French agreement (UK Borders Extended, 02/12/02) explained the specific terms under which the Iraqi Kurds and Afghans would be brought to the UK, "not as asylum seekers, but on work visas". The solution for this group of people was presented by the Home Office as part of an overall strategy for combating illegal immigration and the 67,000 people who had passed through Sangatte since it opened were described as 'illegal immigrants'.

To what extent did the specific situation at Sangatte create the confusion in the debate or simply provide license for careless inaccuracy?

"I think we as refugees we need to think once and again on this issue...We need to approach this press, we need to build some contacts with them and I hope that will help us to provide them with the right information regarding this issue."

A male Sudanese asylum seeker, living in the UK for between 2 and 5 years, interviewed in London.

In a *Daily Mail* article on 2nd December, anticipating the outcome of the talks between Blunkett and Sarkozy over Sangatte, the group of people whose fate was being decided were referred to variously as 'asylum seekers', 'refugees', 'illegal immigrants', 'would-be illegal immigrants' and 'migrants'. Four days later, the group of Iraqis and Afghans on the first coach to Britain were called 'asylum seekers', beneath a headline referring to the group as 'The First Migrants'.

Even two weeks after their arrival, a consistent definition to describe the Iraqis and Afghans was still proving elusive. The *Daily Express* investigation into the experience of those who had been brought to Britain was introduced by the banner headline:

"LUXURY LIFE OF ASYLUM SEEKERS:
OUTRAGE AS IMMIGRANTS ARE PUT UP IN TOP HOTELS"

In reporting the terms of the agreement with the French, *The Guardian* was the only newspaper to consistently refer to the 1,200 Iraqis and Afghans as 'migrants', and to address the issue of their status directly. In the article about the arrival of the first group in Britain, the Refugee Council is quoted as welcoming the closure of the camp, but being concerned that the decision to treat them as economic migrants rather than asylum seekers would confuse the public about their status.

During the three-month monitoring period, inconsistent references to the same group of people within one article was by no means exclusive to coverage of the Sangatte story. Nor was the confusion limited to descriptions of asylum seekers and refugees as economic immigrants. Speculation about whether asylum seekers are bogus or genuine, assumptions about their legality, and suggestions of association with criminal or terrorist activities are reflected in the frequent use of inaccurate and at times highly derogatory labels.

In the overall monitoring sample, 51 different labels were employed by journalists to refer to asylum seekers or refugees. These labels ranged from one-off insults such as 'parasites' and 'scroungers' to meaningless terms that seemed designed to draw attention to the aspirations of what were presented as hordes of people waiting their chance to enter Britain - 'would-be asylum seekers', 'would-be immigrants' and 'would-be refugees'.

In addition, there were numerous variations on the theme of illegality and cheating, including 'illegal asylum seeker' and 'illegal refugee'. The notion of illegality came across strongly in descriptions of the asylum seekers in Sangatte. *The Sun* rarely called the group anything other than 'asylum cheats' or 'illegals', even when referring to the 1,200 who would be arriving with the full knowledge and blessing of the British government. A particularly stigmatising synonym employed by the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* was 'inmates', a term usually employed to describe people who are detained as they are a danger to the public. In one article in the *Daily Express*, confusion created by artistic license is compounded by factual inaccuracy when Sangatte is referred to as a 'detention centre'.

Language used to describe the people in Sangatte was not only inaccurate and pejorative but at times had the effect of dehumanising the men, women and children who were the subject of the reports. An interesting paradox was created by the *Daily Mail* in an article published the day before the arrival of the first group. A photograph showed Iraqis singing and dancing for joy on the eve of the journey, but in the article the same group of people



were described as being ‘shipped over to Britain’, while those left behind were described as “the Great Unbadged”. In a later report, the *Daily Mail* referred to “the first consignment of immigrants” and *The Daily Telegraph* also picked up on the theme of goods being exported from France, describing the arrival of the first “batch of immigrants”.

Military references and metaphors were employed throughout the coverage of the closure of Sangatte to describe the number, position and appearance of the refugees. For example, when the camp closed to new arrivals at the beginning of November, the *Daily Express* described “legions of young men ... looking like a rag tag army of conscripts” leaving the Sangatte camp. A few days later, an article in the *Daily Express* warned of “ranks of migrants” who were still “massing at Calais,...fuelling fears that French authorities are failing to stem the flood of migrants..”

When refugees who had been turned away from Sangatte were invited to take shelter in a church by a priest, the negotiations by the French authorities to persuade them to leave were described as a ‘siege’ or ‘stand-off’ that was brought to an end by ‘a dawn-raid’.

The ‘siege’ ended with the refugees being surprised by police entering the church early one morning and being escorted out peacefully. Some reporters were clearly caught off guard by the incident-free end to the drama. The *Daily Express*, described how the “99-strong mob - who planned to seek asylum in Britain - quietly left the church near the Calais ferry terminal.”

In December, a *Daily Mail* reporter travelling with the first group of Iraqis and Afghans, drew on a wartime illustration to evoke the significance of the coach arriving within sight of the English coast: “once the German army had positioned giant guns here to lob shells across the Channel. Yesterday, the French sent us asylum seekers”.

Refugee Quotes from interviews

“Yes there are direct consequences [of media coverage of the asylum issue]...and even I tell you my personal experience...if somebody asks me what’s the status I have in this country, I personally hide the immigration status from the people. I never tell them that I came to this country as a refugee because I feel that they will not respect me...”. A Pakistani man, granted indefinite leave to remain, living in the UK for longer than 5 years and ‘doing a steady government job’.

“Of course there is freedom of speech here, by laws. But I still cannot trust it. I feel scared when I speak or criticise any policy or the war which England is part of. There is this fear inside me that speaking freely might affect my situation here and [I] might be deported or not granting British citizenship”. An Iraqi woman, granted exceptional leave to remain, living in the UK between six months and two years, interviewed in London.

Statistics: the numbers game

The concern with numbers of refugees and/or illegal immigrants arriving in the UK and the strain that these numbers placed on public services and the taxpayer accounted for 26 articles during the monitoring period - just over two articles per week.

The arrival of 1,200 men, women and children from Sangatte was treated on one level as just one more opportunity to present every alarming statistic available. Hence research predicting that by 2006, Pashtu speakers would form 55 percent of all children in Dover schools was included in an article announcing the terms of the Anglo-French agreement. Similarly, the claim by Migration Watch UK that one in 20 of the population of London are asylum seekers was reported several times during November and December. The term ‘flood’ appeared a total of nine times during the monitoring period and seven times in articles about Sangatte. Used less frequently were ‘deluge’, ‘mass exodus’ and ‘mass influx’. These terms were not exclusive to the tabloids. On 6th December, *The Daily Telegraph* reported that 40 Kurds and two Afghan families had been “chosen to lead the exodus”.

Establishing the exact number of people who remained inside the Sangatte centre after its closure in early November and how many had been registered before the doors were closed was certainly problematic for journalists. However, the absence of concrete figures did not lead journalists to question those who should have known - the UNHCR, the Home Office, the Red Cross - more closely. The UNHCR, for example, was referred to as a source in just one of the articles on Sangatte. Instead, the information deficit provided an ideal opportunity for speculation and scare-mongering, particularly by the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*.

For example, on 6th November the day after Sangatte closed its doors to new arrivals, the *Daily Express* reported that Britain and France had now to agree on the fate of the ‘1,589 residents’ at the camp. On 2nd December, the day before the terms of the deal between Blunkett and Sarkozy were announced, the *Daily Express* speculated that “half of the 5,000 asylum seekers”

“Well the journalists always they have their aims and when you are interviewed you should put down your aims as well. They were interested in people who were crossing the channel through the tunnel to get to this side by train and I wasn’t one of the people who crossed through there.”

A former journalist, with exceptional leave to remain in the UK, interviewed in Kent.

from Sangatte could be coming to Britain. Further in the article we were told that ‘*about 900 refugees*’ were still living in the Red Cross hostel, but ‘*up to 4,000 more*’ were living along the French coast. On the same day the *Daily Mail* reported that Britain and France were locked in talks over the fate of “*an estimated 1,800 people*” still living in the camp, and that French ministers were insisting “*an extra 5,000 illegal immigrants*” living in France should be included in the negotiations. The figure of 5,000 is repeated six times throughout the article. None of these figures are sourced.

On 3rd December, the terms of the agreement were announced by the Home Office, but even then not every newspaper was prepared to present them as fact. On 5th December, *The Sun* reported in the space of one article, three different interpretations: “*Britain will take 1,600 asylum cheats...Blunkett said on Tuesday that 1,200 would get a temporary ticket to freedom. But Sarkozy told reporters that the truth is that 80% are going to England.*”

What we saw on television: a brief overview

The broadcast coverage of the closure of Sangatte was monitored in December on BBC and ITV evening bulletins and Channel 4 at 7pm.

On the three days (2nd, 3rd, 5th December) on which coverage was picked up, the running orders of the television news programmes associated, by implication, asylum seekers/refugees with terror/terrorism, war, danger from foreigners or others. This was reinforced by the images used to introduce and frame the stories in individual news programmes. These made explicit links between asylum seekers/refugees and government failure to control the floods/invasion of people threatening national security and national borders, especially in a situation leading up to war.

Throughout the bulletins there was confusion about what to call the people who were the subject of the story and how to describe their status. They were referred to eight times as ‘refugees’, six as ‘asylum seekers’, three times as ‘illegal immigrants’, twice as ‘economic migrants’ and once as ‘would-be refugees’. It is clear from an analysis of the sources that the primary definers of the news were similar to those who led the debate in the print media. Other than the journalists doing the reporting, politicians, immigration officials and police led the debate and the brief interviews carried out with individual refugees were all with men.

Numbers were a constant feature of the broadcast coverage of Sangatte, but they were regularly quoted with no source provided (eleven times). Words used to indicate numbers included: “*getting through in record numbers*”, “*every person in some streets*” (is an asylum seeker), “*hundreds of thousands fleeing*”, “*Home Office says there could be more*” (than the figure given), ‘thousands’ were said to have “*lost the chance to get in legally*” but “*will keep coming anyway*”. The numbers were also realised in images in this television coverage, mainly of large numbers of men running - towards Sangatte, away from Sangatte towards the channel tunnel and in long queues inside the centre.



endnotes

¹ See Asylum Statistics in the United Kingdom 2002, Main points. <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/hosb803.pdf>

² See for example, The Directory of Exiled Journalists, set up by the PressWise Refugees, Asylum Seekers and the Media Project: <http://www.ramproject.org.uk/directory/>

³ In April 2001, ARTICLE 19 published a report 'Voices in Exile' which criticised the legal and practical restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of information of refugees living in refugee camps in Africa.

⁴ See, for example, Home Office press releases 'UK borders extended - Sangatte to close on 30 December' [02 December 2002] and 'Asylum figures - tough year ends with early signs of progress from reform [28 February 2003].

⁵ Philo, Greg, 1999, 'Conclusions on Media Audiences and Message Reception' in Philo ed., 1999, Message Received: Glasgow Media Group research 1993-1998. Essex, England: Addison Wesley Longman

⁶ 'Understanding the Stranger', Interim case study findings, by Lisa D'Onofrio and Karen Munk, commissioned and published by ICAR, July 2003.

⁷ See Appendix II for a comprehensive case study of the media coverage during November and December 2002 of the closure of the Sangatte refugee camp.

⁸ <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html>

⁹ <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/statistics>

¹⁰ <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk>

¹¹ <http://www.migrationwatch.co.uk>

¹² <http://194.203.40.90/news.asp?NewsId=248&SectionId=1>

¹³ <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/hosb803.pdf>

¹⁴ ITV 28/02/02

¹⁵ A further compelling example is provided by a report on 13th May 2003 in the *Daily Express*. The report of government forecasts of population growth in Britain included counter-statistics produced by Migration Watch UK. The origin and context of the official and unofficial predictions, was explained clearly in the text of the article which reported that: "*the government forecasts suggest that migrants - including asylum seekers, foreigners coming here to marry, foreign workers and students - will add 4.3 million to the population by 2026. But anti-immigration campaigners Migration Watch estimate the true number will be around 1.7 million higher than officially admitted*". However, the headline was utterly misleading in stating the Migration Watch counter-figure in a way that suggested it was fact, and one already accomplished: "SHOCK AS 6M SETTLE IN THE UK."

The balance in the journalist's text of the article was carefully 'lost' in the headline provided by the *Daily Express*, a not uncommon practice.

¹⁶ See note 1, above

¹⁷ Silverstone, Roger, 1994, *Television and Everyday Life*. London and New York: Routledge.

¹⁸ BBC 23/05/02, 3/12/02; ITV 23/05/02, 3/12/02

²¹⁹ 23/05/02

²⁰ ITV 23/05/02

²¹ *Daily Express*, Friday November 15, 2002

²² *Daily Express*, Friday November 29, 2002

²³ See note 7, above

²⁴ On 2nd and 3rd December 2002

²⁵ *Daily Express*, Friday, December 6, 2002.

²⁶ *Daily Mail*, Monday, September 30, 2002

²⁷ *The Sun*, Friday, December 6, 2002

²⁸ *Daily Mail*, Friday December 6, 2002

²⁹ *Daily Mail*, Wednesday December 11, 2002

³⁰ BBC 5/12/02, 6 and 10; channel 4 5/12/02; ITV 5/12/02. The 'victory sign' is likely to be experienced by the reader as a 'victory over British resistance' (the 'tide'). A win-lose situation is taken for granted.

³¹ 67% of headlines and introductions were coded as welcoming in tone.

³² Refugees (33%); Politicians (29%); Refugee organisations spokespeople (14%)

³³ The *Daily Express*, Thursday, December 5, 2002

³⁴ *Metro*, Tuesday, December 3 2002.

³⁵ We have not interviewed broadcast journalists as part of this project so the comments offered in this section refer to interviews with print journalists only.

³⁶ www.exileimages.co.uk

³⁷ *The Sun*, Friday, December 6, 2002

³⁸ *The Sun*, Friday, December 13, 2002

³⁹ See our earlier discussion of 'imagined numbers' in Chapter 2 of this report.

⁴⁰ The *Daily Mail*, Monday, December 2, 2002

⁴¹ The *Daily Mail*, Friday, November 29, 2002

⁴² The *Daily Mail*, Date not recorded

⁴³ The *Daily Mail*, Monday, December 9, 2002

⁴⁴ See note 53, below

⁴⁵ See <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/hosb803.pdf> 'Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 2002'

⁴⁶ Home Office Statistics for 2002 show that 26% of principal asylum applicants were female, while 74% of principal applicants were male.

⁴⁷ See Appendix II

⁴⁸ *The Sun*, Friday December 6, 2002.

⁴⁹ *The Guardian*, Friday December 6, 2002

⁵⁰ The *Daily Mail*, Monday October 14, 2002

⁵¹ The *Daily Express*, Monday October 14, 2002

⁵² Conclusions from a Mori Poll conducted for Migration Watch UK in February 2003. Prejudice is often easiest to mobilise where first-hand knowledge is least and media stereotypes go unchallenged.

⁵³ The Asylum Seekers and Refugees Media Working Group in Wales brings together refugee supporting NGOs, local authority representatives and media resource people to promote contact between the Welsh media and asylum seekers and refugees. The group is facilitated by the asylum media coordinator based at Cardiff University. Contact Vanessa Bucolli: BucolliV@Cardiff.ac.uk

⁵⁴ We are grateful to the following organisations for their regular participation in the Steering Committee: Oxfam, the Refugee Council, Refugee Action, the Ethiopian Community Association, and the Press Wise 'Refugees, Asylum

Seekers and the Media' project (RAM)

⁵⁵ See for example, 'Welcome or Over Reaction? Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the Welsh Media', by Tammy Speers, Wales Media Forum.

⁵⁶ See Hargreaves, Ian and James Thomas, 2002, *New News, Old News*. An ITC and BSC Research Publication.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, Vol. 5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, Vol 18, pp. 6

⁵⁹ For example, see ABC circulation figures from October 2002: *The Sun* was the biggest selling daily tabloid, followed by the *Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror* and *Daily Express*. With the exception of *The Daily Mirror* the tabloids have adopted an aggressively hostile attitude towards asylum seekers and refugees. *The Daily Telegraph* was the biggest selling daily broadsheet and in contrast to the more sympathetic approach adopted by *The Guardian*, takes a critical view of the government's handling of asylum policy and a conservative view of desirable levels of inward migration to the UK.

⁶⁰ Coding scheme and forms for the print and broadcast monitoring can be obtained from ARTICLE 19 and will be included with other resources related to the project on a CD ROM in the near future.

⁶¹ See note 56 above



'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.'

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

ARTICLE 19

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In response to concerns over the intensification of negative media coverage of the asylum issue in the UK, ARTICLE 19, the Global Campaign for Free Expression, initiated research into the ways in which asylum seekers and refugees are represented in the media, the extent to which they are able to participate in public debate around asylum and the effects of media coverage on their everyday lives. Our research took us to four regions of the UK, where forty-five individual refugees and asylum seekers were interviewed by a team of researchers who were themselves asylum seekers, refugees or exiled journalists. We monitored the print and broadcast media and interviewed reporters from national newspapers, along with press officers from refugee organisations, in order to present as well-rounded a picture as possible of the difficulties faced by both refugees and asylum seekers, and journalists reporting on asylum in the UK today. This report presents the findings that have been gathered over the past two years and reveals a complex picture of inaccurate reporting, unfounded statistical claims, inappropriate use of labels and one-dimensional images of asylum seekers and refugees living in Britain. We hope that the recommendations to the media, refugee organisations and the refugee community, presented in this publication will help ensure that this vital area of public policy is reported with greater clarity, insight and fairness in the future.