



What's the story?

Sangatte: a case study of media coverage of asylum and refugee issues

“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 all frontiers.”

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights



ARTICLE 19 is an international organisation named after Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, guaranteeing everyone the right to freedom of opinion and expression. ARTICLE 19 works around the world to achieve and protect media freedoms and to safeguard every person's right to freedom of expression and freedom of information. We apply a free speech analysis to all aspects of peoples' lives, including public health, the environment, and issues of social exclusion.

introduction

The immigration and asylum issue has been the focus of intense media interest in the UK for some time and it shows little sign of abating. ARTICLE 19 initiated this research in 2001 in order to assess the ways in which refugees and asylum seekers are represented in the national press and on television; the opportunities they have to communicate their stories, ideas and opinions to the media; the difficulties journalists may face in reporting on the issue and; the role of refugee organisations in facilitating contact between the media and the refugee community. It is intended to help inform a public debate that we believe has become confused. The research included qualitative interviews with refugees and asylum seekers about their experience and perception of the British media, media monitoring of print and broadcast coverage of issues relating to asylum seekers and refugees, and interviews with journalists and refugee organisation press officers.

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 have 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.

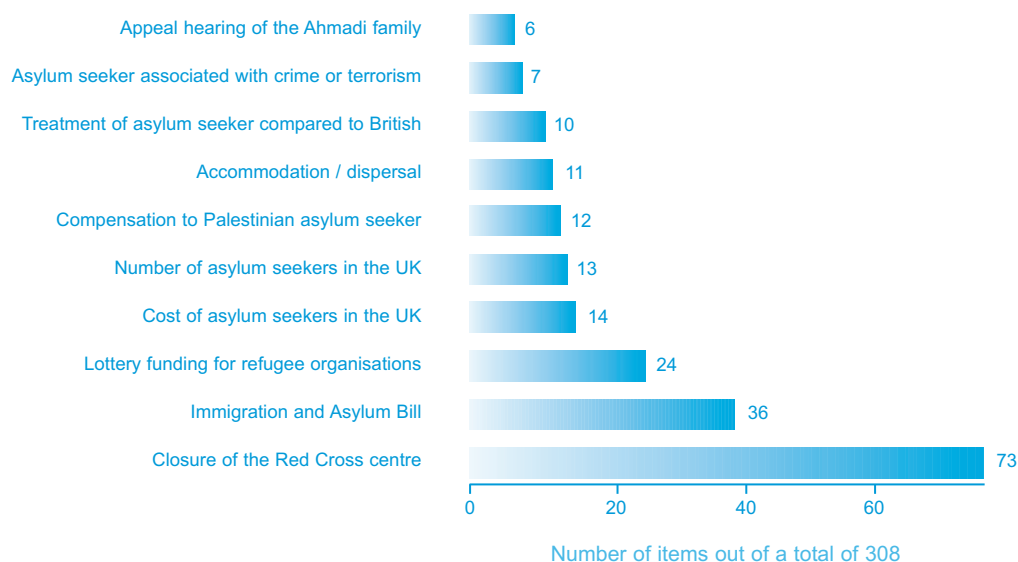
The story of Sangatte has been selected due to its dominance of the print and broadcast media for the past two years. It also epitomises issues which - rightly or wrongly - have become central to the asylum and immigration debate: the number of asylum seekers and the manner in which they arrive in Britain, 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 which appear throughout the report have been taken from the interviews conducted with refugees and asylum seekers. A full analysis of the interviews, media monitoring results and the outcome of the debate at this seminar will be presented in the final research report, to be published in June 2003.

methodology

The interviews with asylum seekers and refugees were based on a qualitative research questionnaire and conducted by researchers, who were themselves refugees or asylum seekers. Forty-five refugees and asylum seekers in London, Kent, Leeds, Glasgow and Edinburgh were interviewed about their experience and perception of the British media. The sample included men and women of different ages, who had been in the UK for varying lengths of time and who were from a range of countries. Some of the interviewees had direct experience of working in the media in their own countries or had been in contact with the British media, some were active in their community as spokespeople or working for refugee community organisations and some were classified as having no media experience. Interviews based on a different questionnaire were also conducted with asylum

seekers in several detention centres in the UK. The print media monitoring included the following newspapers which were monitored daily (excluding weekends) between the beginning of October and the third week of December, 2002: The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, The Daily Express, The Daily Mail, The Mirror, The Sun. These newspapers were chosen on the basis of circulation figures and their representation of different editorial lines. 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 and late February to late March 2003. The monitoring included news bulletins on BBC1 and ITV, Channel 4 and (for the last period only), Channel 5.

Figure 1: Top ten stories which appeared in print media coverage of refugee and asylum issues



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 forward 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 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.

Sangatte: how the story was reported

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 (Daily Telegraph, Mirror) to intense focus (Daily Mail, Daily Express); and from neutral (Guardian) to extreme prejudice (Daily Mail, Daily Express, Sun).

The print media coverage of the story can be divided into two distinct phases:

1. Reports of the events leading up to and around the agreement between the British and French governments;
2. 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 was limited to a couple of short reports on the closure of the camp to new arrivals in November and 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. 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.

“ 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...”

Sudanese asylum seeker, living in the UK for 2-5 years, interviewed in London.

“ I don’t think they [women] are reflected at all. I think usually it’s either in a context of some latest war or disaster and usually you could probably see a lot of pictures of women and children but their concerns as such .. I mean I’ve never actually seen a woman refugee being interviewed or if she is she is usually crying..”

A woman from Bosnia, formerly a journalist, living in the UK for over 5 years.

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 Sangatte refugees, 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

to go to Sangatte or die, w
seekers sheltering in Calais



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 suggest 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.

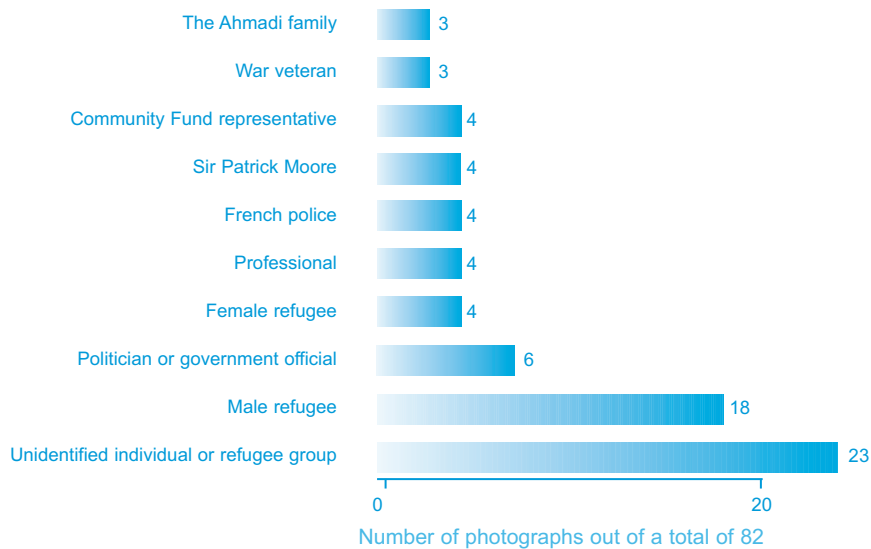
“I just do not like to be at the forefront, on the picture, because there have been many incidents, attacks on people like us and you never know who the next door person is.. “

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

“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.”

A Kurdish man from Iraq interviewed in Kent.

Figure 2: Top ten photographs used to illustrate articles on refugee and asylum issues



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 given the chance to speak, but we did hear from some of the men staying at the centre. 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

"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.

"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 2-5 years, interviewed in London.

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."

This section raises pertinent questions in relation to the images of refugees and asylum seekers that appear in the press and the opportunities they have to contribute to the coverage and to shape public debate. There is an obvious dilemma for the media: how can it avoid stereotyping refugees and asylum seekers when few are prepared to be photographed or filmed? How can refugees and asylum seekers feed their experience, knowledge and opinions into the stories that are told in the media?

labels and language: stereotype or insight?

One of the most striking features of the media coverage of the asylum issue is the confusion 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 ('UK Borders 'extended', 02/12/02) which announced the Anglo-French agreement 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?

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.

"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'.

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

"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.

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 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, the 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'.

With this analysis in mind, is it possible that accurate reporting on asylum and immigration issues has been sacrificed for journalistic style? What can refugees and refugee organisations do to better inform the public? How can the media challenge government policy on asylum, without stoking public fear and provoking resentment towards asylum seekers and refugees?

"In the news there is nothing positive to support or help the refugees. They usually mention the way they arrived in the UK, how they are abusing the system and taking benefits. Such coverage affects the public. There is a lot of negative coverage on refugees, but there is nothing positive. This is my personal opinion."

A Kurdish man from Iraq, interviewed in Kent..

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 refugees 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, 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 refugees 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 Express speculated that 'half of the 5,000 asylum seekers' from Sangatte could be coming to Britain. Later 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 was repeated six times throughout the article. None of these figures were 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.'

It is clear that numbers are a problem in the coverage of immigration and asylum issues. In order to address this, it is vital to identify what statistical information is missing from the debate and why. It is only by doing this that the information available to the public can be supplemented and made more accurate. It is also important to ask how can the government, refugee organisations and the media make better sense of statistics?

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. For a full and detailed analysis of the running order, content, and narrative of the Sangatte story, readers are urged to refer to the final research report. No attempt has been made to draw comparisons between the print and broadcast monitoring as the two mediums are very different. The brief summary below simply highlights the key issues which resonated with the print monitoring.

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 and 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' are 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.

conclusion

The way in which the closure of Sangatte was reported raises a number of questions for the media, refugee organisations, and the government. This particular story about refugees and asylum seekers seemed to pose specific difficulties for journalists: how to describe the people in Sangatte in terms of their legal status? How to report accurately on the numbers of people who were in the camp and the number who would be coming to Britain?

Problems in the use of labels are prevalent throughout the print media sample and have been analysed in more detail for the full report. From this analysis, and from speaking to journalists who report on asylum issues, as well as press officers in refugee organisations, it is clear that the blurring of distinctions between economic immigrants and asylum seekers/refugees is not only present in media reporting, but has become part of the public policy debate. In fact, the asylum and immigration debate has become so confused that terms which do not exist in law, such as 'illegal asylum seeker' and 'would-be refugee' have become common currency – used by journalists and politicians alike.

It is also not unusual for numbers to appear in the media that are unsourced, at times exaggerated and in many cases, conflicting. This can undermine the credibility of the reporting and be misleading for readers. A variety of reasons, that will be explained in the final research report, help us understand why this occurs but a key factor is undoubtedly the presentation of official statistics that can be perplexing and open to broad interpretation by journalists.

In addition to the problems of establishing basic facts in reports of the closure of Sangatte, the choice of contextual information to support the narrative of events did not always add to our understanding of the situation. Apparently there were refugees, as well as refugee and other voluntary organisations, available to speak to the media in Sangatte, but somehow, the reports failed to reveal much about those staying at the centre, beyond the usual stereotypes that gangs of thousands of desperate men were on their way to Britain.

Factors in the asylum and immigration debate which could improve our understanding of the issues, but which are consistently underplayed in the media coverage include: the 'push' factors for migration; the difficult dilemmas for, and pressure on, those who arrive in Britain and the non-menacing, non-impooverished visual representation of refugees and asylum seekers as ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances.

All of these issues will be addressed in depth in the final research report which will also take into consideration discussions at the seminar. In the meantime, we offer some practical recommendations for debate, prior to their inclusion in the final report.

notes

acknowledgements

This case study was written by **Sara Buchanan** and edited by **Bethan Grillo** and **Tom Wengraf**. The research for the project was conducted by Sara Buchanan and Bethan Grillo at ARTICLE XIX and Professor **Terry Threadgold** at Cardiff University School of Journalism.

We would like to thank the following people for their work and involvement with the project: **Zafir Behlic, Ghias Aljundi, Aliya Elagib Mahmoud, Besim Gerguri, Dorothy Effuah Awoonor-Gordon, Murtaza Ali Shah, Abdi Dahir, Gabriel Nkwelle, Amadu Khan, Mahdi Fathi, Pauline Donaldson, Katherine Haywood** and **Nick Mosdell**.

Design by Zafir Behlic.

ARTICLE XIX is grateful to **Oxfam**, the **Barrow Cadbury Trust**, the **BBC** and the **Body Shop Foundation** for funding to carry out the research project. In addition we would like to thank the following organisations for their support and advice throughout the project: **Refugee Action**, the **Refugee Council**, Oxfam, the **PressWise Trust**, **Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Media project (RAM)** and the **Ethiopian Community Centre**.

How far have the media fuelled the public fear of asylum and immigration?
How accurate and fair is what we read, see and hear every day about asylum seekers and refugees?
Do refugees and asylum seekers really get a chance to be heard speaking for themselves?
How can the media challenge the government's asylum policy without demonising asylum seekers and refugees?
Why do the general public believe that 23% of the world's refugees are living in the UK, when the true figure is less than 2%?

The immigration and asylum issue has been the focus of intense media interest in the UK for some time and it shows little sign of abating. ARTICLE 19 initiated this research in 2001 in order to assess the ways in which refugees and asylum seekers are represented in the national press and on television; the opportunities they have to communicate their stories, ideas and opinions to the media; the difficulties journalists may face in reporting on the issue and; the role of refugee organisations in facilitating contact between the media and the refugee community.

This case study illustrates key findings from the research. These findings will be explored in greater depth in a full research report to be published in June 2003.