

Media Image, Community Impact

Roger Grimshaw, Kate Smart, Kirsteen Tait and Beth Crosland summarise a pilot research study assessing the impact of media and political images of refugees and asylum seekers on community relations in London.

London has for centuries been a city of immigration. The most striking feature of this in recent years has been the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees from all parts of the world. Asylum seekers have a legal right to seek asylum in the UK guaranteed by the UK government through its signing of the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. The GLA (Greater London Authority) became increasingly aware that asylum seekers and refugees in London are suffering harassment, although information on the scale of the problem is sketchy, and this caused concern about the context in which harassment was taking place.

A number of groups raised their concerns with the GLA that media coverage was adding to community tensions. Although some reporting is sympathetic to the plight of asylum seekers and refugees, newspaper stories continue to highlight incidence of asylum seekers and refugees involved in criminal activity, benefit fraud, illegal working, forged documents etc. Inaccurate and unbalanced reporting is commonly suspected by refugee supporting agencies, community groups, local authorities, the police and researchers to contribute to racist attacks on asylum seekers and refugees, to engender feelings of insecurity and isolation, and to be a barrier to integration. The culmination of this concern was seen when UNHCR expressed criticism of the British media in meetings with the Home Secretary (UNHCR, 2003).

In response, the GLA commissioned the Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (ICAR), an independent information centre at King's College London, to conduct a three month research project to explore the possible link between media reports and community tension including harassment. Under the guidance of an Academic Director based at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, the project drew on a wide range of expertise, including MediaWise, a GLA-sponsored advisory group and a number of other project advisers and volunteers.

The research set out to see how far media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers, and political commentary about them represented in the media, contributed to: racist attitudes and activity in London; crime against refugee and asylum-seeker communities living in London, and fear of crime amongst them; and other risks (if any) to community relations in London.

The research aimed to do this by:

- analysing press coverage of refugees and asylum

seekers over a two-month period in a representative sample of the national and local London press; stories on asylum and refugees were collected and analysed between August and September 2003;

- using focus group sessions to explore the impact of the media on community relations in two London boroughs with significant refugee and asylum seeker populations;
- interviewing local refugee groups and officials in the two boroughs;
- reviewing knowledge about the possible link between political and media statements, community tension, and incidence of racial harassment through a literature survey, in the UK and beyond;
- interviewing the editors of regional and local newspapers to shed light on editorial policies and current community relations;
- investigating the extent of harassment in two London boroughs with significant refugee and asylum seeker populations, by means of interviews and incident monitoring. A number of refugee community organisations were asked to monitor any incidents of harassment of refugees and asylum seekers during this period. Incident monitoring forms were developed for this purpose to give an indication of unreported harassment.

Summary

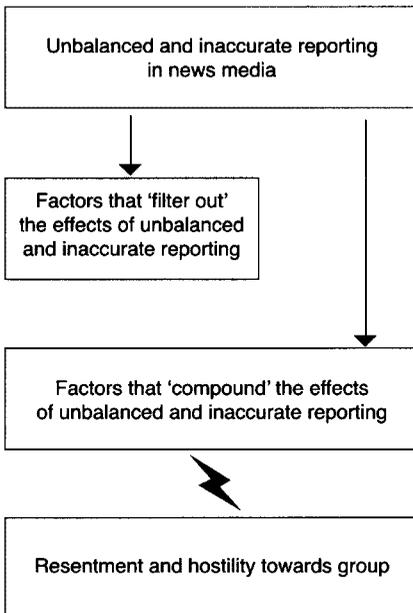
The findings show that unbalanced and inaccurate media images are frequent and powerful, with the potential to increase community tension. Some press coverage is unbalanced and lacking in accuracy in ways likely to increase tension, and in some circumstances tension does exist between members of established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

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

Media monitoring

- The study found clear evidence of negative, unbalanced and inaccurate reporting likely to promote fear and tension within communities across London. There was most evidence of this in the national press that reported on asylum and refugee issues far more frequently than either the local or black and ethnic minority press.
- The main parties dominated the political sources quoted in news stories. In contrast, there was little reference to legal instruments or to organisations working on behalf of asylum-seekers and refugees.
- The portrayal of allegedly overwhelming but unspecified influxes from abroad was likely to bring apprehension to readers' minds while the frequent reporting of criminality among asylum-seekers and refugees was likely to induce fear.
- The language of sections of the press was found to be largely unbalanced, negative, and in some respects potentially alarming. In some feature articles it appeared that disparate information was welded together in a manner likely to alarm readers. The survey of coverage showed that emotive language is frequently used when reporting asylum and refugee issues. In focus groups, readers reported their belief that much of the more contentious coverage may be inaccurate and unbalanced, but in less extreme cases it can be difficult for them to determine

A diagrammatic model of the influence of unbalanced and inaccurate reporting



when coverage is based on reliable facts and figures. Scepticism alone is not enough to correct factual inaccuracies or the impressions given about particular events, statistics or individuals.

- Newspapers differ widely in their presentation of news and information about asylum and refugee issues but some appear willing to print articles without thorough investigation of the reliability of information or sources. Media impact is most powerful when national and local newspaper images coincide. Further research is also needed into the impact of political images on television and radio, none of which could be satisfactorily explored within the limits of this research.

Community Impact

Although public conflict has not emerged in the boroughs concerned, low-level harassment and abuse remains a persistent problem of significant but unmeasured dimensions. There is evidence that refugees and asylum seekers are directly affected by the predominantly unbalanced and inaccurate newspaper reports – they feel unwelcome and fearful. It is commonly believed by many who provided information for this research that media reporting which is hostile to asylum seekers and refugees has a greater effect on those who are involved in harassment, because it reinforces and legitimises their prejudices. Hostile attitudes to asylum seekers and refugees are most likely when hostile media images coincide with local experiences of deprivation and competition for services in short supply locally, e.g. health and housing.

Harassment

Harassment of refugees and asylum seekers is occurring on a daily basis, according to refugee community leaders. This harassment is largely unrecorded and rarely reported to the authorities, and therefore unrecognised and unreported in the press. There is anecdotal information to suggest that the incidence is increasing.

The police and local government are alert and anxious about possible community unrest and harassment of asylum seekers and refugees following negative, hostile and inflammatory press coverage and there is evidence that their policies have adapted to minimise the impact. Evidence from one of the boroughs which has a specialist monitoring unit suggests that it may be that refugees and asylum seekers are being targeted. Refugees and asylum seekers who have been victims of harassment and representatives of refugee communities feel strongly that the press presents hostile images of asylum seekers and refugees, that this in itself is a form of harassment and that it increases the likelihood of local physical harassment of individual asylum seekers and refugees.

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