

'The outsider': communication, diversity, and communities



Roger Grimshaw explores media reporting of and attitudes to people seeking asylum.

No one has to go very far to see headlines about 'communities' or to read that governments and politicians across Europe profess concern about relationships among groups distinguished by faith or country of origin. The number of votes cast for right-wing groups with policies clearly antagonistic to migrant groups suggests that at the very least something is going wrong in relationships between established residents and specific groups, with a number of controversial manifestations. For several years we saw how 'asylum' became the subject of highly critical scrutiny in press and media reporting: instead of having genuine fears of persecution, asylum claimants were being accused of having dubious motives, such as coveting access to welfare or jobs, for seeking entry to European countries. In various countries 'Islam' is now being cast as a challenge not simply to other faiths but to the dominance of 'Western' values. An association of Islam with forms of terrorism also pinpoints risks that are perceived to flow from international movements linked to migration. What each of these manifestations shares is a concern about the intrusion of 'outsiders' who are seen not just as different but as threatening to an existing order. An intensification of immigration controls and sanctions is an outcome of such concerns.

This article briefly outlines how analysis of communications can shed more light on the concept and practice of community relations by indicating the important role of dominant communications media in the context of variable and differentiated assumptions among readers in a range of social groups and communities. These assumptions shape the reception of messages in ways that filter the impact of negative description of 'outsiders', with divergent results. While some media consumers have a poor opinion of media coverage, others rely on media messages to reinforce negative opinions and take inspiration from them. We should now begin to ask: where are these processes leading?

Asylum in the press

In the last ten years 'asylum' has been a staple of political reporting, features and commentary. A MORI poll, 'Are we an intolerant nation?', identified a link between hostile views of asylum seekers and erroneous beliefs about how many immigrants were in the UK

and how much support asylum seekers received (Ipsos/MORI, 2000). The inference was that publicly available information sources were failing to convey the realities of life for asylum seekers.

In a survey of prejudice, it was found that 50 per cent indicated that asylum seekers and refugees are the people most likely to experience prejudice and discrimination in England. When regions were compared, Londoners were the least prejudiced. The poll found that 'the media are a strong influence on people who feel less positive towards refugees/asylum seekers'. Forty per cent of them were influenced by newspapers. No other prejudice was similarly influenced by newspapers as this one (Stonewall, 2003).

In 2003 a study, supported by the Mayor of London, tried to investigate the impact of press coverage on Londoners (ICAR, 2004).

Content

Coverage of refugees and asylum seekers in a representative sample of the national and local London press between August and September 2003 was collated (ICAR, 2004). In a sample of 137 articles the most frequent sources were Labour or Conservative politicians, government officials, court reports, judges, and adult male refugees. Refugee agencies, Liberal Democrats, and women refugees were less in evidence.

There was clearly more coverage of negative themes such as criminality, 'scrounging', and inappropriate asylum claims than of positive themes such as refugee community agencies meeting community needs.

In a follow-up study of a much larger press sample in 2005, some of the most inaccurate and unbalanced reporting seemed less salient but the impression of 'chaos' in the asylum system loomed large in the coverage of high circulation papers (Smart et al., 2007).

Reception

As part of the 2003 study (ICAR, 2004), focus group research was conducted with a range of groups in London. A number of factors were found to affect reception of inaccurate and unbalanced reporting. Less impact was found when these factors were present:

- Exposure to a diversity of information including different press material (for example local press).

- Critical attitudes towards press representation.
- Awareness of diversity in context of racism.
- Understanding the extent to which asylum seekers and refugees can access basic resources.

Greater impact was found when other factors were present:

- Concerns about 'injustices' connected with local problems in access to services and resources.
- Uncritical attitudes to the press.
- Awareness of local rumour.
- Limited information about asylum.

In the focus group research the black and minority ethnic adults were the most exercised by the impact of hostile reporting and felt that they were threatened by it. The young people's groups were more likely to hold misinformed views and be unsympathetic to asylum seekers and refugees.

Community relations, media, and the escalation of threat

In policy terms, migration and community relations are not usually regarded as issues for criminal justice, though the imposition of immigration controls carries with it a host of enforcement activities, sanctions, and penalties, including detention and deportation (see, for example, Aynsley-Green 2010). The construction of ever more complex and extensive regimes of control is therefore more than enough to direct our attention to the rationale for their proliferation: how far do the regimes prevent or promote harm and injustice?

More urgently the development of a system of control on the basis of 'threats' to social order implies a more serious change: the nurturing and growth of a specifically 'penal' system, in which sanctions are meant to have punitive effects, including deterrence (Weber and Bowling 2008). Equally important is the sense in which punitiveness may be intended to address community relations by providing some 'reassurance' to established communities that postulated risks are being reduced by firm action: does 'toughness' help to assuage fears?

In this article communication about asylum has been the focus of discussion, but the findings have clear implications for understanding coverage of similar issues. For example, the suggestion that the 'problem' behind the rise of the 'far right' lies simply in day to day relations among parts of the population is only a starting point for an understanding of hostility to migrants; attention must turn to the role of dominant communications media in portraying a range of migrant 'outsiders' whose 'strangeness' is amplified by reporting.

This article has sought to make clear that large scale communication processes, specifically via the press, mediate a particular definition of social issues, shared among many in the political class, in ways that have definite but selective impacts.

What is clear is how the definitions of the press have articulated a sense of threat, and crucially have tended to

suggest how weak and disorganised systems of control have become. It is therefore possible to imagine a never-ending escalation of action responding to a permanent 'threat alert!' message. No matter how 'tough' the action, the press can suggest that it needs to be made 'tougher' still. Is it very surprising that people who are sensitive to these messages remain unsatisfied? It is clearly possible to envisage ever more 'super toughness' that never succeeds in assuaging discontent in some quarters. And of course we can say that 'we have been here before', with the prison population continuing to rise, and little sign of relenting public messages about the threat from crime.

We may have said goodbye forever to 'papers of record', the imperturbable and authoritative press of legend; in its place a more complex and turbulent communication web is being weaved. In a world of social media numerous signs of public opinion may be visible in far-flung corners of the internet but large, well-financed providers still colonise communications, both off- and on-line.

Is, therefore, any respite on the horizon? It is possible to argue that the greatest impact of negative messages is indeed selective and particular, and that any switches in the focus of widely consumed media could have impacts on quite different groups. In other words, if there were certain kinds of reporting changes, quite a few press readers might possibly become a bit more angry about something other than crime or immigration. Whether that change would be welcome depends, like all response to media communication, on your point of view. ■

Roger Grimshaw is Research Director at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies.

References

- Aynsley-Green, A. (2010), *The Children's Commissioner for England's Follow Up Report to 'The Arrest and Detention of Children Subject to Immigration Control'*, 4 February 2010, London: 11 Million.
- Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (ICAR) (2004), *Media Image, Community Impact. Assessing the Impact of Media and Political Images of Refugees and Asylum Seekers on Community Relations in London*. Report of a pilot research study. Commissioned by the Mayor of London April 2004. King's College London. www.icar.org.uk/9602/about-us/publications.html
- Ipsos/MORI (2000), 'Are we an intolerant nation?', *Reader's Digest*, November. www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemId=1639
- Stonewall (2003), *Profiles of Prejudice. The Nature of Prejudice in England: In-Depth Analysis of Findings*, London: Stonewall/citizenship 21, July.
- Smart, K., Grimshaw, R., McDowell, C., and Crosland, B. (2007), *Reporting Asylum: The UK Press and the Effectiveness of the PCC Guidelines*, London: Home Office.
- Weber, L. and Bowling, B. (2008), 'Valiant beggars and global vagabonds: Select, eject, immobilise', *Theoretical Criminology*, 12, pp.355-375.