

## Introduction: the Mayor's perspective

### Background

London is a city built on immigration: people fleeing persecution are among the newcomers from abroad whose skills and energies help to fuel its economic and social life. The Mayor aims to prevent harassment of asylum seekers and refugees in London by discouraging a context of unbalanced and inaccurate asylum coverage in the press; indeed his aim is to welcome and include them fully in London's life. This independent report *Reflecting Asylum in London's Communities* adds to our understanding of the context for refugees and asylum seekers living in London. It follows previous work commissioned by the Mayor on national press coverage of asylum issues.

In 2003 the Mayor, concerned to hear reports of increased harassment of asylum seekers and refugees across London, commissioned the independent study *Media Image, Community Impact*<sup>1</sup> to investigate the influence of the press on racist attitudes and activity, crime against asylum seeking and refugee communities, and other risks to community relations in London. It found clear evidence of unbalanced and inaccurate reporting likely to promote fear and tension within communities across London. It also found that when community tensions are high, harassment of asylum seekers and refugees is more likely to occur. There was most evidence of negative reporting in parts of the national press, which reported frequently on asylum issues. The study however suggested that the local press and black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) press reported on asylum issues more accurately and positively.

The Mayor decided to find out more about the asylum coverage specifically of London's press by commissioning another study monitoring the newspapers read by most Londoners. This used a wider sample of the local and BAME press, and also the regional and faith press. These are the subject of the current study carried out over four weeks of January and February 2005 and resulting in the report: *Reflecting asylum in London's communities*.

Both studies were carried out by a team led by the Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (ICAR), an independent information and academic research centre on asylum and refugees in the UK based formerly at King's College London and now at City University, London.

### Reflecting asylum in London's communities

This report confirms that London's local, regional, faith and BAME press present stories about refugees and asylum seekers in a generally balanced and sympathetic way. The London press in this sample gives more supportive coverage to asylum seekers and refugees than the national press in the *Media Image, Community Impact* report.

The report shows different approaches across the sample of London's press: the London minority ethnic/faith and regional newspapers focus more on national news and policy issues than the local press. Local newspapers tend to concentrate on local community views and contacts with asylum seekers and refugees. Overall coverage is balanced, accurate and likely to encourage informed discussion. The summary below outlines the results of this monitoring of asylum coverage in London's press<sup>2</sup> and a good practice model of press reporting of asylum that follows from them.

Following the publication of the *Media Image, Community Impact* report, and to show his commitment to a positive context for the lives of London's asylum seekers and refugees, the Mayor set up in 2005 his *London press awards scheme* in order to recognise and encourage the more balanced press coverage of asylum issues found in London than at national level. This will in successive years add practical experience to our knowledge of the extent and variety of asylum coverage in London's press, clearly outlined here for the first time in *Reflecting Asylum in London's Communities*.

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<sup>1</sup> Published in 2004 by ICAR for Mayor of London: *Media Image, Community Impact*

<sup>2</sup> A study of the UK's national and regional press is also currently being undertaken using a similar method and timeframe to *Reflecting asylum in London's communities* which will allow for results to be compared. Due for publication 2006.

## Aims and context of the research

This report examines the London press for its accuracy and balance in reporting asylum and the types of stories it chooses to cover. It assesses whether there is evidence of inaccurate, unbalanced and inflammatory reporting that is likely to generate unfounded fear of and hostility towards refugees and asylum seekers. It also monitors reporting against the Editors' Code of Practice and Press Complaints Commission (PCC) guidance notes<sup>3</sup> and identifies components of good practice. It addresses the following key questions:

- How far does London's press promote informed debate through accurate and balanced reporting of asylum?
- How community-sensitive is reporting of asylum in London's press? Does coverage take into account London's diversity; does it promote or hinder good community relations; is it likely that reporting brings about unfounded fear or hostility of refugees and asylum seekers?
- How accountable is London's press to the communities it represents, eg through publishing letters with opposing views, correcting errors in reporting and adhering to the PCC framework?
- How does reporting on asylum in London differ from reporting nationally?
- How adequate is the PCC framework in the context of reporting asylum in London?
- What might be the impact of this sample of reporting?
- How far does London's press represent good practice in reporting asylum and what good practice models does it offer?

The research was carried out by analysing 116 articles in 41 papers, representing London's local, regional, faith and BAME press. The method is outlined below after the summary.

Any media monitoring exercise reflects the unpredictable news of a given time period. In this case key events occurring during the monitoring period (10.1.05 until 6.2.05) are: new and proposed restrictions to the asylum system, Conservative policy announcements, Holocaust Memorial Day, the release of terror suspects and voting in Iraq. A pro-asylum demonstration also took place in London, a research report on discrimination against asylum seekers/refugees with HIV was published and a court case was heard about a man who posed as a London doctor, including writing false medical reports on asylum seekers. Major events occurring outside the period but having an impact on news coverage during it are: the Boxing Day tsunami, and the General Election expected in May.

In the monitoring period reports on asylum appear in the London papers everyday. However, Conservative Party proposals for changing the asylum system and reactions to them, Holocaust Memorial Day and the case of the 'bogus' doctor, dominate the coverage, particularly in the regional papers. This sample does not cover all publishers of London newspapers as including a paper from every borough was the most important criterion. Another time-frame with a different mix of events or a different sample of newspapers might have provoked a different distribution and treatment of the news.

### ***The ICAR public images partnership***

The Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK (ICAR) at King's College London is an independent information and academic research centre that exists to promote understanding of asylum and refugees in the UK and to encourage information-based debate and policy-making. The ICAR public images partnership is a partnership of agencies and individuals with expertise in understanding the impact of images of asylum seekers and refugees on public attitudes and community relations. The research is conducted by Kate Smart, academic direction provided by Dr. Roger Grimshaw, Centre for Crime and Justice Studies at King's College, London, the project coordinated by Beth Crosland and Dr Christopher McDowell at ICAR and research assistance provided by Laura Quick and Sonja Zivak.

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<sup>3</sup> See Editors' Code of Practice <http://www.pcc.org.uk/cop/cop.asp> particularly clauses relating to the need for accuracy, respect for privacy, and references to an individual's race, colour or religion. In 2003 the PCC issued 'Guidance Notes' on reporting refugees and asylum available at [http://www.pcc.org.uk/reports/edit\\_detail.asp?id=20](http://www.pcc.org.uk/reports/edit_detail.asp?id=20)

## Summary of findings

The findings show that the London print media in this sample produce coverage of refugees and asylum seekers that is generally balanced, accurate, wide-ranging and likely to promote an informed debate about the people and issues involved. This is in marked contrast to the results of the analysis of the mainly national sample featured in the earlier *Media Image, Community Impact* report, which concluded that 'unbalanced and inaccurate media images of refugees and asylum seekers are frequent and powerful, with the potential to increase community tension.'<sup>4</sup> The findings also show that the London press in this sample demonstrates a greater willingness to make supportive statements about asylum seekers and refugees than the national sample featured in *Media Image, Community Impact*.

The London-regional and minority ethnic/faith newspapers in the sample concentrate on national news and pay more attention to policy issues than the local press. Local papers tend to focus on the host community's views of and contact with refugees and asylum seekers. Generally, coverage avoids reporting controversial political debates or other issues in ways that might inflame or unduly alarm the public.

### What type of topics are covered by the papers and how?

The articles were analysed for the general topics they cover and how they cover them, for example asylum policy, including immigration detention; welfare issues such as housing, health and education; crime; and public attitudes towards and involvement with refugees and asylum seekers.

Of the general topics covered the local papers feature mostly stories involving views of and contact with refugees and asylum seekers, while most articles in London regional and minority ethnic/faith papers focus on policy. The minority ethnic/faith papers make no reference to crime in reports on asylum and only the London regional papers mention the separate issue of immigration detention. Apart from detention, crime is the least mentioned of the general topics looked at in this research.

The local papers are owned by five separate companies, and differences between the coverage of these publishers is evident. The main differences are in how often publishers run stories on asylum, how far they report on asylum policy, how far they give information on the situation in the country of origin and how far they report on community efforts to help asylum seekers and refugees to integrate.

Coverage of refugees and asylum seekers is mainly through 'inside news' articles as opposed to front page stories, or features, editorials or letters. The local papers are least likely to write an editorial or comment column on asylum, tending to concentrate on news stories about asylum. Almost all the articles sampled conform to the Editors' Code of Practice and the PCC Guidance Notes.

- **policy issues**

Conservative Party proposals to reform the asylum system dominate the policy discussions in the articles, particularly in the London regional and minority ethnic/faith press; the local papers give them almost no coverage. Apart from this issue, detention, deportation and treatment of terror suspects are the main reported policy concerns. An emerging theme is the perceived need for measures to deter asylum seekers and remove failed asylum seekers i.e. tougher border controls and removals policies, sometimes placed in the context of the perceived threat of terrorism. In the London local papers, the rules preventing asylum seekers traveling outside the UK (in the context of the tsunami disaster) is the most commonly mentioned policy topic.

The most common view expressed on asylum policy by the papers is that asylum is an important election issue – with debate centering on whether Conservative Party proposals are 'fair, sensible' etc. or 'shameful, obscene, putting lives at risk'. The London regional papers tend to report the first viewpoint while the minority ethnic/faith papers tend towards the latter, although when their coverage of

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<sup>4</sup> See ICAR (2004): *Media Image, Community Impact*

other asylum policy related issues is taken into account the overall impression given is that the Conservative leader's views may win votes but are extreme and are not supported by the papers sampled.

The papers largely resist the opportunity, presented by politicians' announcements of tough new proposals, to inflame public opinion by using emotive and fear-inducing language.

- **use of statistics**

The *Media Image, Community Impact* report found that its mainly national sample of newspapers frequently used numbers when reporting asylum, - for example, numbers of people claiming asylum, numbers of failed asylum seekers who are not being deported, the cost of asylum etc. However it found that these were often vague generalised terms such as hundreds, millions, rising, falling. By contrast this sample of London's papers tends to give precise figures or estimates. Numbers relating to crimes are the most commonly cited. Numbers of asylum seekers/refugees and other migrants, and costs, are regularly mentioned but only the London regional papers are concerned with the national cost of asylum.

- **effects on services, economy and other welfare issues**

A broad range of issues and viewpoints are discussed within this category – both critical and supportive of the impact of asylum seekers and refugees. A mixture of views is reflected in all three groups of newspapers. The most common view is that asylum seekers and refugees are skilled contributors to the economy, in many fields and especially in the creative arts. Illegal working in the informal economy is the most common concern.

- **crime**

A range of crimes is mentioned by the papers but not repeatedly. Most are one-off reports of, for example, money laundering or 'sham' marriages. Harassment of asylum seekers and refugees does not feature as a topic in the sample.

- **views of and contact with asylum seekers and refugees**

Local community views of and contact with asylum seekers/refugees presented in this sample are overwhelmingly sympathetic. The most common messages are:

- community helping asylum seekers/refugees to integrate/ get involved in the community
- sympathy for experiences in country of origin/ information given on international context
- having legal right to seek asylum/ their human rights should be safeguarded.

The sample contains no mentions of protests against asylum seekers and refugees by the local community or right wing groups. The reporting presents London as a city where asylum seekers and refugees are part of their local communities.

### **What are the sources of these stories?**

Most stories in the sample come from political sources, with the Conservative leader quoted during these particular four weeks far more often than any other source. Local London papers tend to quote local rather than national politicians. Court reports form a significant source of information. The minority ethnic/faith press is most likely to quote an organisation whose remit includes promoting rights of asylum seekers, refugees and/or ethnic minorities. The local press is most likely to quote individual refugees/asylum seekers suggesting a greater interest in individual stories. There are fewer examples of information presented without a source than in the *Media Image, Community Impact* sample.

### **Complaints**

There is no evidence of complaints to newspapers in the sample about their reporting of asylum issues during the time period e.g. no letters of complaint are printed, no corrections made.

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## **Letters**

Many of the letters in the sample spring directly from the Conservative leader's announced plans for reform of the asylum system. The letters give a mixture of locally held views for and against asylum seekers and refugees and are the source of the most emotive views expressed in the sample. Where hostility towards asylum seekers and refugees is expressed it is in perceived relation to crime, health risks, preferential treatment and scepticism about the situation in the country of origin. The lessons of the Holocaust are discussed in the vein of 'never again' in letters on several occasions.

Two of the letters contain views which if used about a particular race or ethnicity would be considered discriminatory because they attach a negative label to all asylum seekers/refugees. However where such letters are published there are no instances of editorial health warnings making clear where terminology is used inaccurately or where there is other factual inaccuracy.

## **Visual images**

All of the 87 images in the sample are photographs.

Politicians feature in 16 of the photographs but more (21) are of refugees and asylum seekers. Many of these show them in a mixed group with local people in a way that is likely to foster good community relations. Four photos are of refugees/asylum seekers who have been arrested or convicted of a crime. The six photographs of individuals in their country of origin add background which helps the reader's understanding of the international context.

## **Issues covered by the PCC framework**

There is one example of inaccurate terminology proscribed by the PCC guidance notes in the sample, written by a member of the public in a published letter.

There is no evidence of invasion of privacy, harassment by journalists, inappropriate reporting about children, or discrimination - which are the issues of particular relevance to reporting asylum that are currently covered by the Editors' Code of Practice.

## **Summary of comparison between local, regional and minority ethnic and faith press**

Local papers are most likely to report stories that are purely local in scope and are the only group of papers to report stories linking international to local news - for example, stories about families seeking asylum in London but who lost relatives as a result of the tsunami. They are less interested in reporting about asylum policy and more likely to quote refugees and asylum seekers than the other types of papers. The minority ethnic/faith papers report mainly national news including policy stories. They do not have stories on crime that refer to asylum seekers and refugees and are more likely than the other papers to quote an organisation representing asylum seekers, refugees or ethnic minorities as a source of information. The regional papers are also highly responsive to national and political stories. The Conservative policy proposals are given a mixed response but inflammatory reporting is largely avoided.

## **What might be the impact on readers of this sample of reporting?**

The London press articles sampled in this study are likely to give readers a picture of asylum seekers and refugees as individuals who largely contribute to and are supported by their local community. Although unease is voiced about illegal working, crime and pressures on services, concern is expressed for the situation in countries of origin. The picture presented by the local papers is of asylum seekers and refugees as part of the local community and this might be expected to relieve community fears about them. The London regional and minority ethnic/faith press generally give balanced coverage of the political debate from a perspective that appreciates diversity, using measured language and identifiable sources.

When newspapers combine different topics within one article, the reader can receive powerful messages. The sample was examined for such combinations. Only two examples combining emotive

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responses such as 'bringing disease' and 'asylum system described as in chaos' were found. Both of these were in the regional papers, one of which was a letter. Five examples of articles combining a number of positive or supportive comments about specific asylum seekers/ refugees or the institution of asylum were found in the local and minority ethnic/faith press.

### **What was the context for this analysis of reporting?**

These findings have been drawn from a range of London papers at a time when national and to some extent international events forcefully highlighted issues of asylum. Other periods might have contained different events that could have affected the distribution of topics or the tone of reporting. However, the very visible agenda of events created a context in which London's press was challenged to engage with issues that go right to the heart of debates about refugee protection and integration. For this reason the sampling period is seen as a fair, if short, test of the way the press responds to the issues of asylum.

### **How this research was done**

The researchers monitored a sample of London media for four weeks from 10 January until 6 February 2005. This consisted of 41 papers: two regional (the Evening Standard and Metro), a cross-section of eight minority ethnic and faith publications, and 31 local papers representing all but two of the 33 London boroughs (no local papers are targeted specifically at City or Westminster). This yielded 153 articles mentioning asylum seekers/refugees or asylum policy. Of this 153, 37 were not analysed as they did not relate in some way to asylum seekers/refugees in the UK or UK asylum policy. Similarly, immigration stories that do not mention asylum or refugees were not included, though this issue received a significant amount of coverage.

A **news event** time-line from the research period shows key events concerning asylum and refugees that can be seen as a 'pool' of events potentially generating news stories. A **headline** time-line shows the frequency, as well as indicating the strength, of asylum and refugee stories appearing in the press.

The content of each article was analysed by recording:

- its subject and scope
- the type of issues raised and language used
- the sources of information named
- the type of visual images occurring

Most of the information presented relates to London as a whole. Where there is enough data and significant differences emerge, information is also given about the differences between regional, local and minority ethnic and faith papers and inner and outer London boroughs.

**Recommendations, Good practice model** and **Access details** for the report publications follow below.

## Recommendations

This research explores and confirms the indications of the *Media Image, Community Impact*<sup>5</sup> report that London's press shows more balanced and accurate reporting of asylum issues than much of the national press. The following recommendations are therefore supplementary to those in that report, but relate specifically to London's press.

**ICAR recommends** that the GLA continues to celebrate the contribution of the London press to supporting good community relations through its provision of balanced and accurate information about refugees and asylum seekers.

**ICAR recommends that the GLA considers** in its engagement with London stakeholders how to take forward the following proposals to address challenges identified in this research:

1. The promotion of the standards set by the London press to stakeholders in the fields of journalism and public policy at national, EU and international levels.
2. The discussion with both editors and the PCC of the central role that balanced reporting plays in promoting good community relations and how far the concept of balance can be incorporated into editorial standards.
3. The use of the good practice model (see next page) identified by this report for reporting of asylum and for ways to further improve coverage.
4. The potential extension of existing non-discrimination provisions, for example, in the Editors' Code of Practice, to cover asylum seekers.
5. To encourage the provision of accurate, balanced and referenced information to London's press on asylum issues, with particular emphasis on:
  - correct terminology
  - relevant legal and policy documents
  - individuals and organisations with expertise in asylum, especially refugee community organisations and individual refugees and asylum seekers willing to speak to the press.

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<sup>5</sup> ICAR, Media Image, Community Impact, 2004

## Good practice model

A good practice model of reporting of asylum follows from the report findings, consisting of:

- use of accurate terminology
- avoidance of discrimination, harassment, invasion of privacy or inappropriate reporting of children
- use of measured language and balanced discussion
- use of balanced, wide-ranging sources, including asylum-seekers and refugees
- provision of legal, political and international context, linking international, national and local issues while giving a London perspective
- appreciation of diversity
- reporting the local contribution of asylum seekers/refugees and community support for them
- not responding to controversial political debates by reporting in a manner likely to inflame public opinion.

The report findings also identify that coverage could be further improved by keeping to the following: use only of accurate and well-sourced statistics

- not implying that asylum seekers are involved in criminal activity without evidence to suggest this is the case; reporting evidence of asylum seekers as victims of crime eg harassment
- exercising greater caution when publishing letters which may give rise to unfounded fear and hostility of refugees and asylum seekers. Editors' notes could be added where such letters use inaccurate facts and terminology or make unsubstantiated allegations.

The report recognises the conflict of rights at the heart of this issue: the rights of a democratic society to freedom of speech, particularly those of the press, and the rights of groups, in this case asylum seekers and refugees, to live free from harassment. While supporting freedom of the press, it aims to highlight the differences between reporting which encourages rational debate about refugee and asylum issues and reporting likely to encourage public fear of and hostility towards asylum seekers and refugees.

## Reflecting Asylum in London's Communities: Accessing the full report and executive summary

The full report - with shorter summary - is published separately: ISBN 0-9547024-5-X.  
Both the full report and the executive summary can be accessed from the websites of:

Mayor of London: [www.london.gov.uk](http://www.london.gov.uk)

ICAR: [www.icar.org.uk](http://www.icar.org.uk)