

'The challenge of reporting refugees and asylum seekers'

ICAR Report on regional media events organised by the PressWise Refugees, Asylum-seekers and the Media (RAM) Project

Executive Summary

The Refugees, Asylum-Seekers and the Media (RAM) Project regional media events aimed to bring together representatives of the refugee and asylum seeker support sector, the media, refugees and asylum seekers and other interested parties to explore the difficulties of reporting refugee and asylum issues at a local level and to recommend how these could be overcome for the benefit of all. They particularly considered how to raise the profile of refugee and asylum seeker voices in media coverage.

The Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK (ICAR) at King's College London was invited by the RAM Project to write an independent report of the events. This report draws on five regional events organized by the project between January and April 2003 in Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool, Bristol and Dover, and on meetings discussing similar issues in Newcastle, Cardiff and by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) Ethics Council.

The following key points emerged from the debates:

- **Concern about media coverage of refugee and asylum issues** – There is widespread concern about coverage of refugee and asylum issues in the UK among refugees and asylum seekers, those who work on their behalf in refugee agencies, and the many representatives of the media who attended the events. In particular there is concern about the effect of this coverage on the lives of refugees and asylum seekers themselves and on community relations in the areas in which they live. While each of these groups of participants have their own particular interests and concerns, all perceived the coverage as predominantly unbalanced, poorly researched and hostile.
- **Ineffective working relations between the media and refugee and asylum seeker support sectors** – With some notable exceptions the events revealed how little each sector understood the others' work culture, needs and expectations. Members of the refugee and asylum seeker support sector tended to be suspicious of the media and failed to differentiate sufficiently between the well-intentioned and the hostile, while most journalists showed little understanding of the pressures under which refugee agencies operate and the difficulties involved in producing media friendly material to tight deadlines.
- **Conflicting roles and responsibilities of local media** – The particular pressures and role of the local media was identified as an issue. Local media are closely connected with the communities they serve and are

therefore in a powerful position to influence public opinion while also to some extent reflecting and representing it. Their coverage of refugee and asylum issues depends on how they interpret their role in relation to this community, their responsibilities to report accurately, fairly and ethically and their need to balance commercial and other interests.

- **Weaknesses of media regulatory mechanisms** – Codes of Practice, for example of the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and other journalist associations, do not deal specifically with refugee and asylum issues and this reduces their ability to contest unprofessional coverage. The mechanisms that are available, including complaints to editors and producers as well as more informal methods of persuasion, are not utilized as much as they could be.
- **Inadequate information on refugee and asylum issues** – The media is struggling to access the information they need in order to produce comprehensive and accurate reporting of refugee and asylum issues. They find it difficult to get rapid access to official information from both national and local government, as well as to human interest stories from refugees and asylum seekers themselves or organisations operating on their behalf.
- **Raising the profile of refugee and asylum seeker voices in media coverage** – While some refugees and asylum seekers appeared happy to talk to the media and others very reluctant and wary, all needed support from people who understood their situation and were experienced in how the media works. More refugees and asylum seekers would be prepared to talk to journalists if they showed greater understanding and awareness of refugee and asylum issues.
- **Examples of good communication do exist** – The events recognized the value of BBC Radio Kent’s dedicated Immigration and Asylum Correspondent; the use of communications strategies and the appointment of media officers by dispersal consortia (e.g. Yorkshire and Humberside and the West Midlands) and refugee organisations (e.g. Refugee Council and Migrant Helpline); and partnership projects like the Refugees Media Group in Wales and Bristol Defend Asylum Seekers Campaign’s work with the local media (particularly the *Bristol Evening Post*).

Impact of the events

Analysis of questionnaires distributed by ICAR to all those who attended the regional events showed that they were successful in initiating dialogue and contacts between the media and the refugee and asylum seeker support sector; in improving understanding and raising awareness of the issues which at present hinder good coverage; and in suggesting action to be taken to improve reporting. Following the Birmingham regional media event the Birmingham Post and Mail Group are considering setting up a three-month placement for a refugee journalist.

ICAR's recommendations

To overcome existing obstacles to accurate and balanced reporting of refugee and asylum issues for the benefit of useful public debate, ICAR recommends that:

- **The Press Complaints Commission** publish guidelines on terminology and use of language in reporting refugee and asylum issues, along the lines of their guidelines on mental health issues, and collate existing applicable sections of their Code of Practice, including the provisions for complaints about inaccurate coverage and recent adjudications made on reporting of refugee and asylum matters.
- **The media** be more informed and aware of refugee and asylum issues and the potentially damaging and dangerous effects of negative coverage; be more proactive in investigating and sourcing stories; develop more specialist refugee and asylum reporting; and employ more refugee journalists.
- **The refugee and asylum seeker support sector** be more aware of media needs; resist suspicious attitudes and media stereotypes; employ media officers; compile information needed by the media and be more active in approaching the media and contesting or praising reporting where appropriate. Support agencies need to prepare individuals for media interviews and to trust the media to treat refugee and asylum seeker interviewees fairly.
- **PressWise** develop further their exiled journalist network and secure jobs in the mainstream media for its members.
- **Media and refugee and asylum seeker support agencies** establish and maintain communication locally; improve and sustain understanding and information sharing, for example through regular meetings and email groups; and develop human interest and feature articles on refugee and asylum issues.
- **The National Union of Journalists** provide regional contact lists of refugee and asylum seeker support organisations and distribute accurate factual information which challenges myths to all members.
- **The Home Office** make useful and relevant information more freely available and equip their Press Office to deal with refugee and asylum issues in order to help both the refugee and asylum seeker support and media sectors to improve the content of coverage.

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A copy of the full report is available from Presswise and at www.icar.org.uk