




ICAR Seminar

The impact of the media on public attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers

Held at King's College London on Thursday 3rd June 2004

ICAR was commissioned by the Greater London Authority to conduct research: 'Assessing the impact of media and political images of asylum seekers and refugees on community safety in London'. The fieldwork for the research was conducted in Autumn 2003 and the report submitted to the GLA in December 2003. As a result of the research ICAR has made a series of recommendations to the Mayor of London. Since the research report has not yet been published, these could not be discussed at the seminar. Nonetheless, we considered that it was urgent to publicise and discuss the findings, as the situation appeared to be deteriorating. A [MORI opinion poll in April 2004](#) showed that asylum, immigration, and race relations were the second greatest issue of concern to the public, and a [poll conducted by IPSOS](#) at the end of May 2004 showed that the UK had the highest percentage of the population who believed that immigrants are a bad influence on their country, out of a group of ten countries including France, Germany and Japan. Furthermore, immigration was a key issue in the recent local government, London and European elections. The seminar thus provided a timely opportunity to discuss ICAR's findings with an audience of policy-makers, academics, journalists, and representatives of statutory and professional bodies such as the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) and the Press Complaints Commission (PCC).

ICAR's seminar was chaired by John Lloyd of the *Financial Times*. He explained that the role of the media should be to *report, reflect, and investigate* public opinion and prejudices. However, what it often does is rather to *distort, misrepresent, amplify*, and sometimes flatly to *lie*, either wittingly or unwittingly. This is of concern to those who work in the media, particularly as the effect of what the media does is to a large extent unknown and under-researched. ICAR concluded that freedom of the press to discuss issues which concern their readers is not in question. But it has to be balanced with freedom from harassment for refugees and asylum seekers, and people thought to be asylum seekers who may in fact be members of ethnic minority communities who have been living in the UK for some time. While media monitoring has already been undertaken by Article 19 in its recent report: '[What's the Story: results from research into media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK](#)', ICAR's research explores the *effects* of this reporting on attitudes and behaviour - both of which are extremely challenging and complex issues.




The seminar was not intended to simply present a list of criticisms of the media, but also to consider which other actors might be involved in forming public attitudes. ICAR's research was intended to be a pilot for further studies. It dealt only with the press, not the broadcast media, and was unable to adequately deal with the political impact aspect due to time and resource constraints. However, ICAR believes that further research into this area might be useful. Not all the research findings were presented during the seminar. For example, the evidence from the racial incident monitoring found a massive under-reporting of racial incidents. What the research has identified is a 'whirling circle of communication' in which the press sought the view of politicians, politicians were quoted in the press, and letters were sent to newspapers as a result. We found that people working in the refuge field did think that there was a clear link between reporting and public attitudes; what the ICAR research concluded was that there *is* a link, but that it is not a straightforward one. Although the research was quite localised, the evidence points to an increased risk of community tension in the areas studied for which much of the 'groundwork' has been done by media reporting. ICAR's research also found that there wasn't anything in place to counter media coverage that has a negative impact. Although some of the negative language is used unintentionally, there is also a relentless use of hostile and negative epithets in coverage of refugee and asylum issues.

The ICAR project team summarised the findings of the research: The arrival of asylum seekers affects the lives of many people, especially those in deprived areas. ICAR has collected anecdotal evidence (from the police and other bodies) of threats towards refugees and asylum seekers which were linked to hostile media reporting: "a negative article one day leads to a fist in the face another day". A community liaison officer in South London told us that some attacks have occurred on the same day as hostile articles appeared in the press.

The issue of migration touches on sensitive issues of social boundaries and identity. Migrants are often targets of suspicion and moral panics may be created when the state, the judiciary and the media portray a situation as uncontrollable, and an 'accumulation of representations' promotes calls for severe and exceptional remedies. This results in a 'spiral of communication' in which different communicators - large and powerful newspapers, officials, local audiences, and political groups - respond to one another interactively. Migrants are often referred to in coded terms that suggest a threat, references to conspiracies, criminality, and welfare systems under pressure being quite common.

A series of opinion polls have drawn attention to the impact of media portrayals on public attitudes towards asylum seekers. A MORI poll in 2000 highlighted a link between hostile views towards asylum seekers and mistaken beliefs about how many are in the UK and how much welfare support they receive. Another MORI poll for the CRE in 2002 suggested that media coverage of the issues, rather than direct contact with individuals, has a key role to play in informing views of asylum. The MORI poll



commissioned for [Stonewall's Citizenship 21 project](#) in 2001 showed that the media strongly influenced people who feel less positive towards refugees and asylum seekers - over 40% of them were influenced by newspapers, and this was a greater influence than on any other issue. During the course of ICAR's research it became clear that media influence extended to the level of individual expectations. Thus a shop worker we spoke to claimed to fear refugees, surmising that they would always want more than they were given and supporting this view by referring to the allegation made in a news report (and later disproved) that asylum seekers had been killing swans for food, saying that: '[t]hey're given money for food, but they're still stealing swans'.

The research project began with the hypothesis that:

Inaccurate and unbalanced media images of refugees and asylum seekers cause misinformed and hostile views among members of the public and by doing so create tension within the communities of London boroughs which makes racial attacks on refugees and asylum seekers more likely.

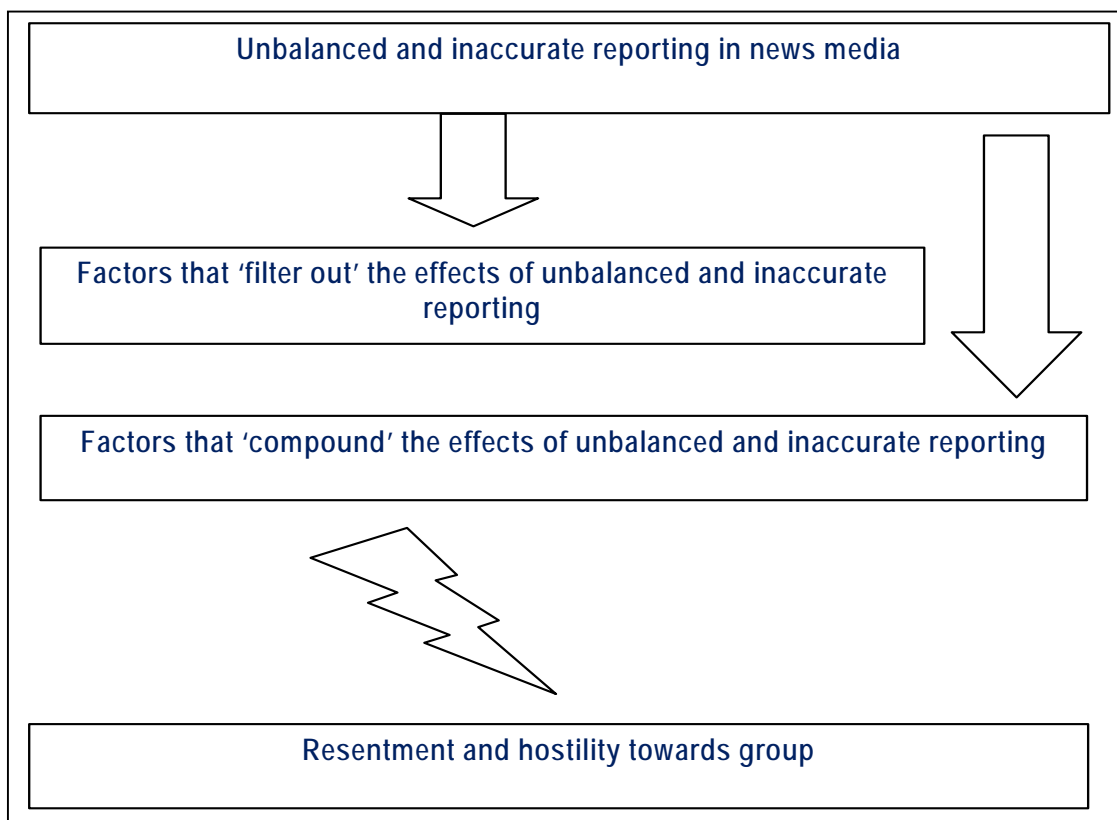
A number of methods were used to explore the validity of this hypothesis:

- Analysing coverage of refugees and asylum seekers over a two-month period in a representative sample of national and London newspapers
- Seeking evidence about the impact of the media on community relations in two London boroughs with significant refugee and asylum seeker populations
- Investigating the extent of racial harassment in the two London boroughs
- Reviewing knowledge about the possible link between political and media statements, community tension, and incidence of racial harassment.

The research employed the concept of the filter to explore the ways that different audiences respond to media coverage. Filters may prevent messages from being read in a certain way, or work to exacerbate their impact. Media reports do not trigger immediate responses; they are more like 'conversational items' than 'marching orders' and individuals have different ways of reading information.



A diagrammatic model of the impact of unbalanced and inaccurate reporting



The researchers developed a 'model of impact' to summarise the influence of unbalanced and inaccurate reporting of asylum and refugee issues. They sought to identify the positive and negative filters which affected people's reception of reporting. To do this, they used the well-established model of media amplification. This shows the links between media representations and their impact on receptive or vulnerable groups which are enhanced by failures in local and national communications about the issue, leading to the spread of rumours, political agitation and an increase in incidents of harassment or attacks. This model provided the intellectual framework for the research. Evidence was collected by interviewing a variety of local stakeholders including the police, refugee community groups, and the local press. Focus groups were also conducted in the two boroughs studied: one with an adult group who were predominately white British to represent the 'settled communities', two with youth groups, and one with a black and ethnic minority community group.

Media monitoring was conducted for a 2-month period in August and September 2003. This included a total of 17 newspapers: 5 daily nationals, 2 daily London papers, 2 weekly ethnic minority papers, and 8 weekly local papers. The largest number of articles on asylum found in a one-week period was 56. The Sun and the News of the World ran stories on asylum up to seven days per week, and the Daily Mail and the Mail on Sunday ran stories on asylum up to six days per week. Some papers ran several stories




on asylum in a single day. Overall, the issue gained less coverage in the local papers and the black and minority ethnic press. During the three-week sample period, a total of 137 articles on asylum were identified. The most frequent sources cited were Labour or Conservative politicians, or government officials, judges, court reports and adult male refugees. However there were far fewer references made to Liberal Democrat politicians, refugee agencies, refugee law, or the 1951 United Nations' Refugee Convention. None of the articles quoted the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the main international refugee agency.

Categories of words and phrases used for analysis of language of three-month sample of articles, with number of occurrences

Words and phrases	Headline	Text
Genuine, real, successful (in terms of application), accepted	0	8
Bogus, false, illegal, failed, rejected	5	103
Scrounger, sponger, fraudster, robbing the system	5	30
Criminal (unspecified or non-violent)	10	28
Criminal violent	2	25
Arrested, jailed, guilty	14	35
A threat, a worry, to be feared (terror, but not terrorism)	4	23
System is collapsing, chaotic, out of control, in crisis	5	22
Refugee community organisations meeting community needs	1	1
Experiencing harassment/attacks/racism	0	2

ICAR's research examined the frequency with which certain phrases and themes appeared in the sample. 103 references to 'bogus', 'false', 'illegal', 'failed' and 'rejected' were identified, as compared to only two references to asylum seekers and refugees experiencing harassment, attacks and racism. The most commonly used words were those connected with criminal activity. A few examples of articles from the sample illustrate the general tone and some of the predominant themes. One used a 'Dad's Army' graphic with arrows pointing towards the UK to suggest that the country was under attack from immigrants. Another reported that asylum seekers had benefited from a 'free' £220 taxi ride when transported to their dispersal accommodation. In the case of the latter article, accompanying photographs showed asylum seekers, including children, looking concerned at having their photographs taken, and showed the address where they were living, with a caption 'Does this make you angry?' In




another article a rural villager was quoted as expressing concern that the presence of asylum seekers would cause psychological damage to the local community, even though the village has no previous experience of asylum seekers. It could be inferred from this that fear was generated by what the villagers had read. Another reported that a group of migrants, including asylum seekers, who had been accused of illegal working was jeered at by locals. Research conducted in Germany suggests that when there was no condemnation of local action against asylum seekers, this resulted in a 'copy-cat' effect whereby similar incidents were perpetrated elsewhere.

The focus group members were all regular newspaper readers and TV and newspapers formed their main sources of information about asylum seekers and refugees; they had very few alternative sources of written information about this issue. All groups reported that they consider the word 'asylum' to be associated with 'scroungers', either in their own opinion or that of the press. The focus group members were shown three newspaper articles and one film. After each they were asked a series of questions, such as whether they thought that the portrayal of asylum seekers and refugees was believable, and how it made them feel. The main views that emerged were that the reporting of asylum is inaccurate and unbalanced, and that it both reflects and exaggerates public views; participants recognised that over-generalisations and scapegoating are commonly used.

One of the most striking findings was the widespread disrespect for the media expressed by the participants. They felt that the coverage did not reflect reality, but at the same time they appeared to be influenced by it. For example, the views expressed by people in rural areas seemed to have been shaped by media reports due to the lack of direct contact with refugees and asylum seekers. People from the focus groups also referred to the media coverage which had alleged that asylum seekers had eaten donkeys and swans. The research found that misinformed views about refugees and asylum seekers were common, particularly among the young people who participated in the focus groups. Many people expressed a belief in the influence of the media *on other people*, and were quick to suggest what others might feel, but they were more sceptical about its influence on their own views. It was found that respondents' views also varied in relation to the level of deprivation in their local area. Some people in the focus groups explained that they would be more sympathetic if people did not enter the country illegally. This suggested they didn't have sufficient information about what claiming asylum was about (i.e. they didn't realise that there was no way to enter the UK legally for the purpose of claiming asylum).

The group made up predominately of people from black and minority ethnic communities was offended by the suggestion in one article that they should 'stand up' against asylum seekers in order to prove that they were truly British. This group was very concerned about the hostile reporting and members saw connections between their own experiences and those of refugees and asylum seekers. They were also concerned about the under-representation of the *causes* of refugee flight, and were the group that felt



most threatened by the media coverage. Members of refugee community organisations reported feeling uncomfortable overhearing people discussing refugees and asylum seekers when they were in public places such as doctors' waiting rooms, or on buses.

From the focus group research, a number of factors were identified which affect the impact of media images on peoples' views. These were:

- Whether media images are perceived to reflect local experience.
- Disrespect and scepticism of media reporting of asylum by critical readers.
- How far local people feel deprived of key services and blame asylum seekers for these shortages.

The main conclusions from the media monitoring are that:

- Newspapers often present images of asylum seekers and refugees that contain language, photographs and graphics likely to give rise to feelings of fear of and hostility towards asylum seekers and refugees among their readers. This effect is compounded by inaccurate and unbalanced reporting.
- Images of criminality and of war - suggesting that the UK is under attack - may lead people to believe that they should take matters into their own hands, to 'retaliate' against the perceived threat.

The conclusions from the focus groups and other elements of the research were that media messages are filtered by exposure to:

- a wide range of information;
- critical attitudes towards the press;
- diversity awareness;
- a restrained local press; and
- an understanding of the extent to which asylum seekers and refugees can access basic services.

The research also found that:

- The existence of filters reduced the effect on, but not the potential to affect, public attitudes. If the filters weaken, then media impact is more fully felt - and this may be most true for those most inclined to participate in the harassment.
- Community resilience to media images should not lead to the conclusion that reporting of asylum does not need to meet higher standards.



Discussion

The seminar audience included high profile representatives of key government agencies, regulatory bodies, refugee agencies, journalists, and academics. Several key issues were highlighted in the discussion which followed ICAR's presentation of the research findings. These are summarised below.

What the research shows

- One participant questioned whether the research findings amounted to a very strong indictment of the media. The presentation of crime in the newspapers doesn't reflect real crime and reporting is often disproportionate; reporting of asylum might be similar to this. Further, the research messages about the role of filters seem to suggest that those disinclined to hold hostile views of refugees and asylum seekers read even hostile reports through this filter, resulting in the reports having little impact on them.
- The research showed both that reporting of asylum issues was overwhelmingly negative, and the presence of pretty solid filters among readers. Both these had come out strongly, particularly from the focus group research. Press views are known to be not that important in framing public attitudes to a number of issues; their influence is highly filtered. However, politicians could act as a major filter, if only they would be more positive about the issues. Thus, to mitigate the effects of hostile reporting, it is necessary to target politicians, particularly those in government.
- There was some debate as to whether the research hypothesis had been borne out and a query as to whether the people who perpetrate racial attacks are newspaper readers, or rather an underclass of people who are not sophisticated in their use of the media. This view was disputed by some other participants.
- Many of the refugees interviewed during the course of the research felt that there was institutional racism in many organisations that they had to deal with, due to the newspapers read by front-line staff.


Other actors

- There is a tendency to always blame the media. But the role of other 'mediating institutions' should also be recognised. Corrosion of these institutions has left the media with a disproportionate role in shaping public attitudes and filtering the messages people receive. This is exemplified by the decline in political debate, membership and engagement among the general public. Debate was not previously framed in such a purely subjective way. There is a




danger in parodying the media's role which might lead to calls for censorship rather than an effort to 'win the argument'.

- The influence of politicians in framing public attitudes is sometimes downplayed. Research carried out in Germany showed a correlation between hostile statements by members of the German political elite and the incidence of racially-motivated attacks. The language used by the media was not invented by journalists, but also comes from political leaders: the baseline for what is normatively acceptable in terms of language is set by the politicians of the day. Often, it is far easier for politicians to say what they oppose than what they support.
- It was argued that there is no distinction between politicians and the media at some level; there is a 'political conversation' going on between the media, politicians and others, and there is a projection onto asylum seekers of a wider political disappointment.
- Whilst it was acknowledged that the political class have an immense responsibility for setting the terms of public debate, it was felt that mainstream politicians have generally abandoned the use of terms such as 'bogus' and 'scrounger'. The recent establishment of a resettlement scheme to provide an entry mechanism for people who would not otherwise be able to reach the UK is part of attempts by the Home Office to counter the misapprehension that it is not possible to enter the UK legally in order to seek refuge. This had been successful in gaining positive media coverage of individual stories at a local level.
- It was felt that there was of a 'latent xenophobia' within society which people in positions of power (politicians and the media) have to handle extremely carefully. For example, whilst the media played a part, the campaign against the proposed accommodation centre in Lee on Solent was supported by several key local officials without much question.
- Hostile attitudes towards asylum seekers were felt to have the greatest impact when they become translated into National Asylum Support Service (NASS) policies. The quality of decision-making on asylum claims was also criticised and described as 'repugnant' in certain cases, and considered to be linked to the assumption that application numbers should be reduced.
- It was suggested that the Today Programme's coverage reflects the Daily Mail's reporting and interest was expressed into the way that press coverage influences the electronic media.

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- Concern was also expressed about the results of the BBC Asylum Day in 2003 in which 70% of people who phoned in voted to reject asylum seekers' claims, even those who had fled a situation in which all their family members had been killed.


Challenging hostile reporting and using the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) Code of Practice

- Many people do not know about the mechanisms that they could use to challenge the daily racial abuse they experience. And there is also significant reluctance among black and minority ethnic communities to report racial harassment.
- It was argued that politicians are reluctant to speak out against negative reporting because they don't want to be seen to be 'soft' on asylum seekers; and the press know that they can get away with it. When a group of journalists recently objected to the negative coverage of asylum and related issues in their own newspaper, their complaint was thrown out by the Press Complaints Commission.
- Concern was expressed about the effectiveness of the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) Code of Practice. The Code is partly self-regulatory. It doesn't set out to prescribe particular words or prohibit discrimination, but it seeks to protect individuals from prejudice. Clause 13 relates to discrimination of various kinds, but few complaints can be addressed under this; it is often easier to address complaints on the grounds of inaccuracy. The PCC issued a guidance note about the phrase 'illegal asylum seekers' but they haven't received a single complaint about it.
- The difficulty of lodging effective complaints with the PCC was highlighted. Complaints must be brought by those personally affected; other people or organisations cannot make complaints on behalf of asylum seekers or refugees, but this may not always be possible.
- Also, Clause 13 doesn't prevent generalised slurs being made about a group of people, unless a direct effect on an *individual* can be shown. Thus, any remark that appears to draw opprobrium on refugees and asylum seekers in general is permissible. References to refugees and asylum seekers are often used as codes to talk about race issues and those who are different, 'the other' – it was considered that this was evinced by the BNP election material.
- Since the PCC Code was introduced, another organisation had recorded around 38 examples of expressions used in headlines that contravened it.

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- There was also reluctance on the part of certain high profile politicians to observe the PCC Code. When confronted with the fact that he had used terms 'outlawed' by the PCC, Michael Howard had argued that these terms reflected both reality and public opinion. It was suggested that this showed that both formal and political filters were not sufficient.
 - With regard to filters, accuracy was identified to be a major issue. For example, the 'Swan bake' story was later proved to be completely false, but this process took a long time and the disclaimed published by The Sun was hidden away on page 41 and did not amount to a robust rebuttal of the original story. The symbolism of the swan was also highlighted: it is a Royal bird, and thus reports of attacks on it are suggestive of a larger threat which a purely empirical disavowal doesn't address.
 - The effectiveness of formal filters was also queried. Local newspaper editors tended to feel that they had a positive impact overall, but in general they failed to see a link between media reporting and public attitudes.

Young people

- Concern was expressed at the comments made by the young people who participated in the research indicating that they were just as influenced by negative reporting as anyone else. ICAR's focus group research suggested that young people were likely to hold *more* hostile views than the rest of the population, and many of them questioned where they could get good information from. All ICAR's research suggests that individuals respond to other individuals, and that meetings are one of the most powerful ways of influencing local opinion.
- Other research with children found a strong correlation between attitudes and media reports: many children were able to report what had been reported in the press. The research had examined solutions which might effectively challenge these discourses and found that:
 - it was necessary to take time to explain the issues;
 - moral debates had to be used to introduce the arguments;
 - using biographies helped to explore issues of insecurity; and
 - children had to be presented with practical things that they could do to make a difference.
- It was argued that 'cartoon-like' representations, distortion and the crude humour that were often used in media representations, were particularly likely to impact on young people. Further, the theme of 'invasion' touches on the issue of social membership. Young people are



aware of the role of adults to defend their community and can be misguidedly influenced by family conversations and this issue warrants further research.

- Young people tended to be more influenced by media coverage, partly because they are likely to read the tabloids rather than other newspapers and also because they are less likely to be exposed to other information sources.

Home Office, public and press liaison


- Journalists reported the problems they had experienced trying to get information from the Home Office. They felt that either the Press Office staff were unwilling to comment, or that they lacked relevant information or would only speak to a specific agenda: that of the right-wing tabloids. One reported that on two occasions during the last 18 months Home Office press office staff used the word 'bogus' during telephone conversations about asylum - suggesting that the use of the term is widespread. The two representatives of the Immigration and Nationality Directorate who attended a public meeting in Portishead (near Bristol) to discuss the proposed asylum reporting centre there which has been the cause of much controversy, appeared to be so poorly briefed that they couldn't answer any of the basic questions posed by locals (such as the number of asylum seekers in the UK, and the numbers in the Southeast). When a grossly inflated figure of 400,000 was quoted, it was not challenged. This was seen as an example of how the debate often completely ran away.

Other research studies

- A number of other studies conducted following '9/11' showed the links between hostile reporting and attacks on the civil liberties of ethnic minorities.
- ICAR's study complements that already carried out by Article 19. The worsening situation is highlighted by contrasting the number of negative articles identified by ICAR during a three-week period (over 100) with the number identified in relation to a similar theme during a three-month period in 1997. However, the influence of media reporting on public opinion depends on who the speaker is and their position of power.

Lessons for refugee agencies

- The NGO community and campaigning organisations that support asylum seekers and refugees have not fully understood the importance of the issue of reporting and have not responded adequately. In mainland Europe and the USA there is no equivalent of the UK tabloids; they are a uniquely British phenomenon. It was suggested that refugee agencies



should take a leaf out of Alistair Campbell's book and learn from the work that he had done to counter myths about the Labour Party. Refugee agencies should come together on an advocacy basis and put out a day-in, day-out response to hostile coverage and insist on balanced reporting.

A historical perspective

- The importance of comparative research on the influence of media coverage over time was emphasised. A recently published book by Robert Winder, *Bloody Foreigners*, gives examples of similar patterns of public attitudes (towards refugees and other immigrant groups), many of which predate the advent of the mass media. For example, there had been strong anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiment at the end of the nineteenth century which was not due to the media but rather to local politicians and interest groups. The book identified a cyclical pattern of moral panics whose effect later abated. However, the advent of the mass media in the early twentieth century did have an amplifying effect on public attitudes.

Conclusion

ICAR has received communications from several members of the House of Commons, who had requested copies of the research report, emphasising its timely nature and the importance of ensuring that the findings are published soon. Further research is needed into several of the issues identified by the study. For example, many actors have been identified as having a significant impact on public opinion, not only the media. Of particular concern is the evidence of a vicious circle in which the tabloids claim they are only saying what the public wants to hear, the public is influenced by the coverage, and so on.