

Reporting asylum

The UK Press and the Effectiveness of PCC Guidelines

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report, based on intensive research by the ICAR public images partnership, shows there has been an overall improvement in press coverage of asylum since the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) introduced new guidance for journalists. The investigation found inaccurate terminology in just one per cent of articles surveyed and only a small number potentially breached existing guidelines. However, coverage in all papers suggests journalists are preoccupied with a system in 'chaos' rather than (potentially more enlightening) discussion about the context of asylum - though this may be attributable to the priorities of politicians rather than intentional media bias.

The authors suggest a number of improvements to the regulatory framework, editorial approach and Home Office operation.

Aims of the research

The research which led to the publication of this report is the first systematic monitoring of UK newspaper reporting of asylum seekers and refugees since the introduction of the Press Complaints Commission Guidance Note on Reporting Refugees and Asylum Seekers in October 2003. The primary aim of the research is to assess the impact and adequacy of the Guidance Note in ensuring an acceptable minimum standard of journalism.

Further, the project aims to assess how far reporting of asylum meets an acceptable minimum standard because it a) meets current regulatory requirements and b) meets additional professional journalistic standards which ICAR believes should form part of the regulatory framework.

In addition, the research examines the extent to which reporting of asylum meets ICAR's best practice standard for responsible reporting of asylum, and how far such reporting is balanced and unlikely to undermine refugee integration

The sample

The study monitored 50 newspapers: all 20 nationals and their Sunday equivalents, 22 regionals chosen for highest circulation and geographical cover, and eight faith/minority papers again reflecting circulation. They were collected during the ten weeks between January 10th and March 20th 2005. The sample produced an average of just over 200 articles a week relating to asylum and refugees.

Context of research

The period of research came soon after the Asian Tsunami and ended six weeks before the much-heralded 2005 general election in the UK. Consequently, speculation about the issues affecting the outcome of the general election dominated the news with new policy proposals being announced by the two main parties. The anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz prompted Holocaust memorials during the monitoring period. That and the tsunami both put the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees into an international context.

Methodology

The news event timeline collated from BBC, Government and Refugee Council sources shows the main national and international events during the research period from which news might have been extracted. The newspaper articles formed the main source of data for the research and were subjected to content analysis. A selection of articles was singled out for further investigation, including reference to the primary sources of information cited - for example research reports, political speeches and Home Office statistics. Additional information was gained through interviews with newspaper editors.

Content analysis was used to identify sources, words, phrases, and images used in the text of articles. The coding of the data was based on an analysis of what particular statements signified in the context of a public discourse. In addition to presenting results for all the newspapers in the sample and by the type of paper - faith/minority, regional and national - the report also subdivided the data in two other ways.

First, it examined the content of articles in the highest circulation national daily newspapers (ie those likely to have greatest impact on public opinion) to explore whether they followed the trends for the national newspapers as a whole.

Second, it examined the content of articles which dealt with asylum seekers or refugees as individuals or small groups of individuals, rather than as a large anonymous group of people. The aim was to explore whether presenting news on asylum seekers and refugees in terms of individuals was associated with other differences in the style of reporting, when compared to the whole sample of articles.

Where it was suspected that there might be inaccuracies in the articles these were tested in further detailed investigations by the Refugees, Asylum seekers and Media (RAM) Project.

The researchers also conducted interviews with editors to discover how they perceived their own coverage of the issues, their knowledge of and views about the adequacy of the PCC Guidance Note and Editors' Code of Practice, and scope for improving newspaper coverage.

Research questions

The research sought to explore the adequacy of the PCC Guidance Note by determining how far the nature of reporting of asylum seekers and refugees was still a cause for concern, particularly whether such matters fell outside the issues covered in the Guidance Note. The Guidance Note represents a significant step forward by the PCC in tackling inaccurate, unbalanced and inflammatory reporting of refugees and asylum seekers by UK newspapers, but there are concerns amongst those who work with refugees and asylum seekers that they are not consistently applied and do not go far enough. The scope of the requirements that the Guidance Note places on newspapers is narrow and therefore its ability to have an impact on hostile and inaccurate reporting is likely to be limited. However by promoting standards in one aspect of coverage it may influence reporting more widely.

The analysis

a) in the context of a regulated minimum standard:

During the period of this study, asylum was perceived to be highly newsworthy by the UK press. This was particularly true for the highest circulation national dailies. Articles about asylum from these papers made up a third of all those found in the national papers (34%) and a quarter of those found in the sample as a whole (24%). This is the equivalent of about one per day for the nationals, two or three a week for the regionals and fewer than one a week for the minority/faith papers.

More than 2,000 articles were assessed for inaccurate terminology through the content analysis exercise. Thirty-seven were selected for further investigation for possible breaches of the Editors' Code. 22 articles, or one percent of the total contained inaccurate terminology, such as 'illegal asylum seekers'.

The 37 articles singled out for further investigation were analysed for possible mixing of fact, comment and conjecture. Examples were found of misuse of statistics, stories whose main claims were misleading and misrepresentation of quotes or facts.

The researchers also questioned whether articles breached the Editors' Code regarding discrimination - as in unnecessary reference to a person's immigration status - or in the use of inflammatory language. There was no evidence that a particular nationality, ethnic group or religion was the focus for hostile coverage. However the researchers did find some gender imbalance, and evidence of unnecessary reference to a person's immigration status. None of the news, comment or feature articles in the sample were found to be inflammatory, though some letters and headlines gave cause for concern.

Eighteen (out of a possible 50) editors agreed to be interviewed for the research. Some of those questioned were unclear about the distinctions between asylum and immigration and felt the Guidance needed clarification.

b) in the context of best practice, balance and refugee integration

In addition to the specific analysis described above, the researchers took a more general look at asylum reporting in the context of ICAR's criteria for best practice. For example they considered whether coverage was informative, contextualised and well sourced; whether it fairly represented the experiences and views of the subjects; whether it avoided generalised, unspecific allegations likely to inspire hostility; and how far it reflected Home Office concerns about balanced reporting that does not undermine refugee integration.

This part of the research found that the most common theme of asylum-related stories was policy, and these articles showed a preoccupation with removal rather than humanitarian or integration issues. What was missing was much investigative reporting to search out other sides or depths of the story.

The Conservative leader Michael Howard's proposals to restrict asylum were widely reported, as was the Government's new five-year plan for immigration. Coverage of the latter focused on plans to increase removals of failed asylum seekers.

In terms of balance, the sample included a range of partisan opinion, but with more attention

being paid to anti-immigration and anti-asylum views than supportive ones. This trend was seen most clearly in the top six national dailies, which in contrast to the overall sample of national, regional and faith/minority newspapers placed the emphasis on describing asylum as 'in chaos' or 'out of control'. The faith/minority papers did not report about 'lax' border controls or 'excessive' control by the European Union. The regional papers were least critical of the government's proposals and most often raised concerns about the 'wretched, squalid' etc. tone of the political debate.

Crime and community safety stories featured in 17% of the articles. Crime alone received little coverage in the faith/minority press, while the regionals paid more attention to the harassment of refugees and asylum seekers than the nationals. The highest circulation nationals were more interested in terrorism than the other groups.

One new aspect of the coverage was the significant contribution of refugees to the arts. Stories about this formed more than 10% of the entire sample, a larger proportion than those about Michael Howard's proposals for changing the asylum system. The perception of asylum seekers and refugees as 'educated, professional, skilled contributors to economy/society - or preparing to contribute' was also a dominant theme in all types of newspapers and far outweighed the most commonly expressed hostile views.

Only a minority of articles (22%) focused on individual asylum seekers or refugees. ICAR regards this as an important means of increasing understanding of how policies and attitudes affect real people. The regional papers featured slightly more of this type of story than the sample as a whole.

New themes emerging from this investigation, apart from the artistic voices mentioned above, were the use of jokes - which were usually found to be hostile towards refugees and asylum seekers. Another was letters, which again revealed predominantly uninformed or hostile attitudes. A fourth was the examination by some papers of their own or rival press coverage. The Daily Mail and The Daily Express were the most criticised papers, while the The Daily Mirror, The Financial Times and three regionals each received praise.

Findings and recommendations

The Guidance Note & ICAR's minimum standards

The report concludes that the Guidance Note has been helpful in identifying and proscribing terms that are erroneous. However such terms were only found infrequently before the Note was introduced, and they have not been eradicated completely.

In giving only one specific example the Guidance Note has missed an opportunity to prevent a range of alternative erroneous terms being used, suggesting a residue of lazy journalism and poor understanding of the legal framework governing asylum applications. Inaccuracy was more frequent in the top six papers (three per cent as opposed to one per cent in the sample as a whole), which would suggest PCC Guidance is having least impact on the widely circulating papers.

During interviews, Editors said there was a need for more clarification of asylum terms, and on how to handle readers' letters that might breach the Editors' Code and Guidance. The report concludes that the issue of further guidance on publication of letters is important. The Editors

also felt there was less understanding of the Code amongst minority/faith papers and questioned whether it had been adequately publicised in that sector.

The report concludes that adding 'immigration status' to the Editors' Code's definition of discrimination would allow such irrelevant and hostile references to be challenged. Since a relatively small number of articles produced such a wide range of inaccuracies the report also suggests the PCC should provide more information about how papers could comply with Clause 1 of the Code (on Accuracy).

ICAR believes clarification is needed to explain the significance of hostile reporting - for example that in some cases it could raise concerns under the Public Order Act - whether it contains accurate information or not. Similar action would be helpful in relation to the use of inflammatory headlines, whose potential impact can be equally harmful.

ICAR's best practice standard

The research found that while some stories from the events timeline received a lot of coverage others were given almost none, suggesting that reporting asylum is not wide-ranging enough to be properly informative. Further, most stories were reported only in the national context, not reflecting the international or local dimension, providing insufficient contextual information.

On subject selection, reporting failed to meet ICAR's standards for a number of reasons. Almost two-thirds of the articles focused on policy but generally following the same themes that had been dominant in previous surveys. There was little evidence of an investigative or innovative approach and most political reporting was found to be 'tired, repetitive and unquestioning'. Stories reflected the obsession with chaos and failed to offer alternative perspectives. This was reinforced by the choice of sources, which were mostly political with very few legal references. Political reporting generally failed to refer to individuals, which may help to give a fairer representation of the issues.

Statistics were used to strengthen dominant themes and drawn from easily accessed sources. They were usually presented in unspecific, generalised terms such as 'hundreds' or 'thousands'. However there has been a welcome reduction in the use of such widely criticised terms as 'flood'.

In other areas reporting was more likely to conform to ICAR's standards. For example in coverage of less frequently occurring subjects like economic impact, crime and detention, perceptions were more contextualised. Although some criticism of economic impacts focused on preferential treatment, most was about the beneficial impacts of refugees. Also crime was less frequently reported, and harassment (of refugees and asylum seekers) more, than in previous media monitoring. This may be due to the inclusion of regional papers in the sample.

In the category of perceptions and interactions, the most common issue was concern about the background countries of refugees and their reasons for flight. 'Bogus' was the most common hostile epithet but was far outweighed by reports saying refugees should be welcomed.

The sympathetic responses from local communities, particularly as reported in regional papers, were in marked contrast to the issues dominating the political debate. In particular, it is interesting that local concern about asylum seekers facing deportation featured highly - given the political focus on increasing deportations.

The wide range of ‘civil society’ sources used in the sample complies with ICAR’s position on best practice, though national papers could include more local sources and regional more national ones, to present a more informative picture. Two per cent of stories gave no or unspecific sources (eg. ‘experts’) meaning the reader had no way of checking their accuracy.

Only 22% of the articles provided an individual focus - falling short of ICAR’s standards for giving a fair representation of how individuals are affected by policies and events. Using an individual focus was found to be conducive to investigative journalism, giving a more complex understanding of policy issues and their implications, and highlighting issues not previously covered. The report concludes that if greater effort was made to include individual examples in reporting it would help journalists meet the PCC requirement for accuracy.

Reporting of the arts in this sample was found to be highly informative, bringing new perspectives to the public understanding of asylum and drawing on a range of contextual information. Reporting of jokes, depicting asylum seekers in a stereotypical way, had the opposite effect and was far from achieving ICAR’s standards of best practice.

The report suggests that journalists should question the usefulness of printing letters containing generalised misinformation, and/or include corrections alongside such publications. Greater context and information is also needed when publishing opinion polls, to provide context and avoid inflaming public opinion.

The media’s discussion of its own reporting is regarded as a positive development - although it was generalised and failed to suggest ways of improving coverage. Also the debate was mainly restricted to the nationals and could be more effective if more regional papers participated.

The research shows striking similarities in the content of national and regional papers, though the regionals came closer to ICAR’s best practice standard in carrying stories with a local and individual focus more often than the nationals. While this may be attributable to their different role, the nationals could provide more balance by highlighting the heterogeneous nature of refugees and the skills and experiences they bring. The minority/faith papers, though a smaller proportion of the sample, generally did report from a more original and informed perspective, concentrating more on the potential contribution and skills of refugees.

Overall, the sample indicated that minimum standards were usually achieved and many articles met some of the elements of ICAR’s best practice suggestions, particularly when not reporting national political debates. In addition, despite the narrow focus of the Guidance Note it is possible to conclude that it has had a beneficial effect, and one that extends to aspects of reporting not explicitly mentioned in it. In other words, the existence of the Guidance Note in itself appears to encourage greater vigilance in reporting asylum and refugees.

In relation to the ‘top six’ dailies, these were found to be less informative and less contextualised in their reporting of asylum. They had a narrower focus; the journalism was more repetitive and tired, less investigative, more generalised and featured unspecific allegations likely to cause hostility and fear. Many but not all of the articles found to be furthest from ICAR’s best practice came from this group.

Although these papers generally conformed to PCC minimum standards there were examples of reporting that were often close to crossing this line and would draw attention of the Guidance Note if it were extended as suggested.

The report offers a 'toolkit' to assist journalists in achieving good practice in reporting asylum.

Balanced reporting, unlikely to undermine integration

In terms of balance, the researchers found most cause for concern in the reporting of asylum policy. Integration was rarely featured, nor were reports about the steps already taken to tighten immigration controls. Instead there was a focus on failure, which could have a powerful impact on public perceptions. Also the disproportionate reference to the views of minor right wing parties is likely to promote undue fear. And the failure to include information about the international situation represented a missed opportunity to dispel concerns that the UK takes 'more than its share' of refugees.

Despite the finding of generally balanced reporting of non-political topics, it is possible to argue that political reporting has most impact on public opinion. The report suggests that further research into this would be helpful.

In relation to statistics the report suggests there is scope for the Home Office to make more information available and accessible. More consideration should also be given to the relationship between the press and public opinion in the context of readers' letters, and the Home Office should monitor the use of opinion polls and how they are drawn up.

The contribution of arts coverage in promoting individual focus is likely to increase understanding amongst people who read those pages and more research would be useful into how the experience of refugees and asylum seekers could be introduced as voices in other fields, especially political.

The emerging internal media debate is a window of opportunity for the Home Office to build partnerships and engage the many stakeholders to promote a more balanced view of asylum. This would also help balance the currently one-sided use of sources that tend to reflect immigration control rather than integration. However there may be a problem in that the tone of political debate has been criticised for being 'wretched, squalid and shameful'.

With poor standards and strong views being concentrated in the most popular papers this means the highest standards of reporting are not reaching the widest audience. However, given that this group are often out of step with the rest of the press there may be opportunities for the Home Office and partners to exert pressure on them to act more responsibly.

Overview

The research found that whilst asylum continues to receive a lot of coverage in the press most of it is not hostile to asylum seekers and refugees. There were only a small number of articles that might be of concern to the PCC under terms of the Editors' Code and the PCC Guidance Note. National, regional and minority/faith newspapers all portrayed refugees and asylum seekers as actual or potentially 'educated, professional, skilled contributors to society' far more often than they expressed the most commonly hostile views.

However there are some reasons for concern. Overall, the political coverage appears unbalanced, and while this may reflect the nature of the political debate rather than media bias, the emphasis on asylum chaos rather than protection is likely to have an impact on public perceptions.

Some articles were found to contain hostile, potentially inflammatory language, inaccuracies and confusion of comment and fact. Given that most people read only one or two newspapers, if hostile reporting is concentrated in those publications it could have a significant impact, especially if the readers fail to question what is written.

The analysis shows a marked difference in reporting between the different categories of papers. For example, it found that poor standards of reporting, combined with strongly held views, were concentrated in the most popular newspapers, and that reporting which met the highest standard was not reaching the widest audience. The authors suggest there may be opportunities for other papers, professional bodies, civil partnerships and the Home Office to exert pressure on this minority of papers to report more responsibly.

The report also identifies new themes and types of information in the way asylum and refugee issues are covered. A significant number of stories highlighted refugees' contribution to the arts, while there were less favourable references to asylum in jokes and readers' letters. The press itself showed evidence of some self-criticism, analysing its own or rivals' coverage of these issues.

Whilst the study contains generally less hostile reporting than previous samples, the legacy of earlier hostile reporting shows its influence on the current political concern with chaos and control.

Overall, the findings indicate further improvements could be made to the way asylum is reported, and recommends extending the PCC and Editors' Codes and promoting ICAR's model of best practice. The report also suggests that encouraging refugees to integrate into political life would lead to the media being better informed about asylum issues.

The authors highlight the potential harm that can result from inaccurate or hostile press reporting and question the effectiveness of the current system of self-regulation.

They also suggest more could be done to report issues that fail to make it into some of the more contentious newspapers. Falling back on stereotypes can blind readers to the realities of living as a refugee or asylum seeker. Reliance on government news releases has a similar effect. A more fulsome and balanced picture could be achieved through a more innovative and proactive approach to reporting.

Recommendations

The PCC is urged to:

1. Given that editors and the nature of coverage are not constants, the PCC should consider reissuing its editorial guidance notes annually, appropriately modified to take into account changing political circumstances and issues highlighted by complainants.
2. Each reissue should be accompanied by a reminder that:
 - editors should adhere to the spirit as much as the letter of the Code of Practice and the guidance notes;
 - it is important to use terms correctly, given the tendency of conflating terms within stories - for example the use of 'asylum seeker', 'immigrant', 'migrant', and 'refugee' as if they were interchangeable unless the changing status of individuals warrants such usage;
 - the use of essentially meaningless terms such as 'illegal asylum seekers' or 'illegals' should be avoided;
 - further advice and guidance on technical and legal matters are available from quangos, non-governmental organisations and academic bodies concerned with asylum and refugee issues.
3. The PCC should be prepared to consider more 'third party' complaints about the coverage of refugees and asylum seekers given that civil society is directly affected by the social and political issues raised by misinformation about refugee and immigration issues. It should accept that refugees and asylum seekers, UK citizens and advocacy groups not specifically named in a story have legitimate concerns that should be addressed when errors of fact or extreme language are published.
4. The PCC should issue guidance for editors and the public about the interpretation of the term 'significant inaccuracy' when dealing with complaints under Clause 1 (Accuracy).
5. The PCC Code Committee and the Press Standards Board of Finance, and the Editors' Code Committee should consider incorporating into Clause 12 (Discrimination) reference to a person's immigration status, just as it has recently amended the Code to include 'gender'.
6. The PPC should meet with refugee community organisations to ensure that vulnerable groups are aware of the PCC's existence and role, since similar 'self-regulatory' bodies often do not exist in their countries of origin.
7. New editions of the Editors Code Book should include:
 - an expanded explanation of technical terms relating to asylum and refugee - as exemplified by the Guidelines leaflet produced by MediaWise, the NUJ, the Refugee Council and the UNHCR;
 - reference to good practice models such as that outlined in the ICAR toolkit , The CRE Guidance for journalists on reporting race, and NUJ guidance on reporting race issues.

To Newspaper Editors

1. Newspaper editors should continue to strive for consistently high standards of fairness and accuracy in reporting asylum, refugee and race and community relations issues. In particular they should recognise the human rights of individual asylum seekers and refugees and seek to highlight the personal stories behind the public debates around social policy issues.
2. Newspaper should use their columns to examine the media industry's representation of public debate on issues of controversy, as a means of exerting peer pressure to promote best practice in terms of accuracy and fairness and the avoidance of misleading stereotypes.
3. Newspapers are encouraged to produce journalism that questions and goes beyond narrow and immediate political debate on asylum policy, in order to stimulate an informed debate on the issues raised by asylum and refugee protection and integration.
4. Newspapers should be mindful of the cumulative effects of inaccurate and stereotypical reporting of refugees and asylum seekers on their sense of safety and well being as well as on public trust and community relations.

To the Home Office

1. The Home Office should ensure that its Press Office is appropriately staffed and resourced to provide reliable facts and figures about refugee and asylum issues, policies and stories.
2. Given the powerful role the media has to play in the successful integration of refugees, the Home Office should engage in dialogue with editors, home affairs journalists and the regulatory authorities to ensure that policy is understood and specific initiatives are given appropriate context (e.g. more frequent and comprehensive media briefings).
3. The Home Office should also engage in dialogue with editors, journalists and regulatory authorities to explore the process by which hostility is generated by reporting and to better define when reporting is hostile and inflammatory.
4. The Home Office should commission (Media Monitoring) research when it becomes clear that issues of controversy are routinely being misrepresented. It should make available its findings to politicians and the public, and engage in dialogue about its findings with all interested parties (including Editors, specialist journalists, journalists' organisations, and relevant non-governmental organisations).
5. The Home Office should ensure that the role of the media is central to its integration policies, projects and structures, especially via easily accessible websites.
6. The Home Office should ensure that all politicians have access to reliable information about refugee and asylum matters, and in particular offer guidance about the correct use of terminology.
7. In fulfilling its responsibilities to refugee integration, the Home Office should seek to ensure that opportunities are provided for refugees to play an active role in domestic political life, and take a lead by ensuring that refugees and their organisations are fully consulted on policy issues, provided with access to consultative fora, and included in both the management and implementation of projects funded by the Home Office.

