

Seeking Scapegoats

*The coverage of asylum
in the UK press*

Roy Greenslade

SEEKING SCAPEGOATS

The coverage of asylum in the UK press

Roy Greenslade

Asylum and Migration Working Paper 5

May 2005



Institute for Public Policy Research
30-32 Southampton Street, London WC2E 7RA, United Kingdom
Registered Charity No 800065

About ippr

Established in 1988, the Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) is the UK's leading progressive think tank. Its role is to bridge the political divide between the social democratic and liberal traditions, the intellectual divide between academia and the policy making establishment, and the cultural divide between government and civil society. It is first and foremost a research institute, aiming to provide innovative and credible policy solutions. Its work, the questions its research poses and the methods it uses are driven by the belief that the journey to a good society is one that places social justice, democratic participation and economic and environmental sustainability at its core.

About the series

Asylum and migration issues have never been higher on the political and policy agendas. The unprecedented scale of movement of people for reasons of protection, employment and family reunion to both the UK and Europe as a whole poses economic, social and political opportunities and challenges. This is an area of policy making that is fast moving and involves many different stakeholders at the international, national and local levels. ippr's *Asylum and Migration Working Paper Series* has been established to provide a vehicle for examining the evidence in relation to specific aspects of policy and practice in this area. Authored by academics, experts and policy specialists from across the public policy arena, the working papers provide an overview of key policy issues in a timely and easily accessible format. The aim is to encourage the exchange of ideas about asylum and migration issues and ensure that policy making is underpinned by empirical evidence about the nature and causes of migration, the impacts on different countries and communities and the effects - both intended and unintended - of policies which might be introduced in response. An important objective of the series is to get the findings out quickly, even if the presentations are less than fully polished.

The *Asylum and Migration Working Paper Series* has been very generously funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. The papers carry the name of authors and should be used and cited accordingly. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions are the authors' own and do not necessarily represent the views of the staff, Directors or Trustees of either the Institute for Public Policy Research or the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

Electronic versions of all working papers are available free of charge on the ippr website. A limited number of working papers are printed for distribution. Please contact ippr by the following means to order hard copies or for further information. Please allow four to six weeks for 'printed matter' delivery.

website: <http://www.ippr.org>
email: f.hopwood@ippr.org
post: 30-32 Southampton Street, London WC2E 7RA, United Kingdom
telephone: +44 (0)20 7470 6100
fax: +44 (0)20 7470 6111

Contents

Preface.....	3
About the author	4
Introduction	5
A xenophobic press for a xenophobic people	9
How the popular press justifies its racist agenda (while denying it exists).....	11
Case 1: Post-war newspaper portrayal of Jews	15
Case 2: ‘Race riots’ in the 1950s	17
Case 3: Press reaction to Enoch Powell’s ‘rivers of blood’ speech	19
21st century newspaper hostility	21
What the columnists say	23
Donkeys, swans, hot cross buns, assassination: the baking of fake stories.....	25
Conclusion: what, if anything, can be done?	29
Using the Press Complaints Commission (PCC)	31
Putting pressure on editors and journalists	33
Seminar Participants.....	35
Bibliography	36
Endnotes	38

Preface

Asylum issues have increasingly formed the basis of negative stories in the national press, particularly among 'red tops' such as the *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail* and *The Sun*. Whilst some of this increased coverage may simply reflect the actual increase in numbers of immigrants and asylum seekers entering the UK since the mid-1990s, the sheer acreage of newspaper print is grossly disproportionate. More importantly, the tone of this coverage has become increasingly hostile. It has done little, if anything, to inform the public about the complexity of asylum and immigration issues or to engender any sense of compassion towards those who have been persecuted elsewhere and find themselves in the UK.

This working paper very clearly shows that negative media coverage of immigration issues is nothing new. Through an analysis of post-war newspaper portrayal of Jews in the late 1940s, coverage of West Indian immigration in the 1950s and press reaction to Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech in the 1960s, it becomes clear that the language of the media (particularly of the popular press) has served to reinforce and justify existing racism and prejudices. It also seems to create new feelings of hostility towards those in society who are from ethnic minority backgrounds, regardless of their immigration status.

This is simultaneously reassuring and depressing. Reassuring because the current barrage of highly misleading and deliberately ill-informed stories about asylum outlined in the working paper may not be more than a continuation of the negative approaches to immigration of the past. Depressing because the terminology and tone have not changed, despite the great strides made in promoting integration and cultural diversity.

Assessing the precise impact of the media on people's understanding of the world and on their actions is very difficult, not least because people may choose a newspaper to fit their views and not the other way around. Moreover, in this age of mass media it is clear that newspapers are not the only, or even the main, source of information with which people are in contact. What is also clear from the evidence presented in this working paper and elsewhere is that the language and ideas of the popular press are quickly and readily recycled elsewhere. They are digested and repeated even by those who never read a newspaper. As a result they come to influence public opinion and, in turn, public policy.

Understanding this relationship between the media, public opinion, and public policy in this area is critical. We hope that this Working Paper (together with research into public attitudes to asylum that ippr will publish in mid-2005) will go some way in showing how the media reflects, reinforces, influences and shapes the agenda on asylum.

Heaven Crawley & Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah
Editors, Asylum & Migration Working Paper Series
May 2005

About the author

Roy Greenslade has been a journalist for 40 years and has worked at a senior level on both tabloid and broadsheet newspapers. He was assistant editor of *The Sun* (1981-86), managing editor (news) at the *Sunday Times* (1987-1990) and editor of the *Daily Mirror* (1990-91). For the past 14 years he has been a freelance writer and broadcaster on media matters, notably as a columnist on *The Guardian*. In 2003 he became Professor of Journalism at London's City University. He is the author of three books, most recently a modern history of British newspapers, *Press Gang: How Newspapers make Profits from Propaganda* (Macmillan, 2003).

Introduction

It is apparent from even the most cursory study of the way in which asylum-seekers have been represented in many newspapers in recent years that the hostile tone and negative coverage echo the editorial treatment meted out to all immigrants into Britain in past decades. As I will attempt to illustrate, there are obvious continuities in the content. However, as I shall also make clear, these are counter-pointed by subtle differences because papers have portrayed asylum-seekers as a separate minority group. They have been made into scapegoats for a variety of society's current ills, or alleged ills, such as the level of crime, the liberalism of the welfare state, the housing shortage and an apparently overcrowded island. To this end, editors have sought to forge a unity of viewpoint between the indigenous white population and second and third generation Afro-Caribbean and Asian immigrants by treating asylum-seekers, of whatever race or creed, as somehow different. They have been cast as interlopers who have little or nothing in common with settled migrant communities. But, despite editors' success in having demonised the concept and practice of asylum-seeking, and turning the very phrase into a term of abuse, the casual misuse of terminology reveals an underlying anti-immigrant mindset. The frequent swapping of the terms asylum-seeker, refugee and illegal immigrant betrays the real agenda: in reality, popular newspapers remain opposed to all immigration. Moreover, they continue to appeal to a notion of a British cultural identity rooted in the 1950s (that is, before black and Asian immigration).

However, we cannot divorce the content of newspapers from the opinions of their readerships. Popular papers rarely, if ever, publish material that is diametrically opposed to the views of their readers. There is a reciprocal relationship between newspaper and audience. In general, papers reflect what people think or, to be more specific, they reflect what they think people think. But the press is not a simple mirror when it seeks to reflect existing public attitudes. Publication endorses and reinforces those attitudes, lending them credibility. At the same time, papers select material which underpins their editorial viewpoint and reject material which undermines it, providing their readers with only a partial (and usually simplistic) view of events. The reflecting mirror is therefore distorted, and only by analysing this process is it possible to understand the true meaning of newspaper power in terms of its relationship with readers.

I fully endorse the conclusions of recent research undertaken by the Information Centre about Asylum-seekers and Refugees: 'The impact of the media is not straightforward: it is not possible to assume that a media report will lead to immediate consequences in terms of behaviour. Before examining impact, the readership's standpoint has to be understood' (ICAR 2004: 19). I therefore accept that newspapers had understood before launching their campaigns against asylum-seekers that there was public disquiet about them. There was widespread concern in various areas about the arrival of groups of foreigners. As so often, prejudice bred mythical stories and/or mythical stories bred prejudice. That's the first vicious circle. Anecdotal evidence - based on the author's lengthy conversations with people as far apart as Barking, Essex and Glasgow - revealed that similar stories were being told about asylum-seekers.¹ (They were jumping housing queues, were workshy, were receiving disproportionate amounts of welfare payments and were guilty of criminality.) Newspapers amplified these kinds of stories, making them credible, and so began the second vicious circle with the public quoting papers as their sources for

such stories. That process, in which the press both reflects and enhances public attitudes and thereby sets off a chain reaction in which the reflection and enhancement go on escalating until reality is buried under layers of myth and prejudice, is at the heart of this paper. The issue of asylum-seekers has been particularly prone to this process with each side - press and public - contributing to the myth-making.

The influence of the popular press should never be underestimated. Among the most raucous and propagandistic elements there are two daily titles that stand out because of the potent combination of their large circulations and their journalistic artfulness (*The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*). They are backed up by two equally strident papers (the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Star*). All four titles have been responsible for running scurrilous stories about asylum-seekers. Between them, the four sell an average of 7,502,504 copies a day.² The other red-top (the *Daily Mirror*: sale 1,719,743) often takes up alternative political and social positions to the other four, and has certainly not published as many stories critical of asylum-seekers. However, it has done little to combat the negative stories of its rivals, preferring to ignore the topic rather than presenting coherent positive images. A similar situation occurs at two of the broadsheet titles that could also challenge the popular papers (*The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* with a combined sale of 1,586,529). Some idea of the *Daily Telegraph's* position can be gleaned from a statement by its erstwhile editor, Charles Moore: 'Britain is basically English speaking, Christian and white, and if one starts to think it might become basically Urdu speaking and Muslim and brown one gets frightened'.³ There is one portion of the press which has tried to act as a counterweight to the popular press perception of asylum-seekers but *The Guardian* and *The Independent* have smaller circulations than their rivals, together selling just 630,240, and have therefore been marginalised in terms of the majority national conversation. The circulation statistics are even more significant when seen in the light of the generally agreed estimate that three people read every purchased copy of a newspaper. It means that the four popular papers which have run the most critical copy about asylum-seekers are read by more than 22 million people, more than a third of the British population.

But sales and readership figures can be deceptive. Though people generally do read papers which reflect their political views, there is no simple correlation between buyer and a paper's political line (for example, the *Daily Mail* did not support the Labour party in the past two general elections but 29 per cent of its readers voted Labour in 1997 and 24 per cent in 2001. By contrast, *The Sun* urged its readers to vote Labour, yet 30 per cent in 1997 and 29 per cent in 2001 voted Conservative).⁴ However, partisan politics is probably less influential in peoples' choice of paper than its overall political and social ethos. It might be significant that, according to recent polling data, 48 per cent of *Express* readers, 46 per cent of *Mail* readers and 40 per cent of *Sun* readers believe that race relations and immigration are the most important issues facing Britain (Duffy and Rowden 2005: 15). But it has to be understood that, for many people, the reason for reading a given paper may have nothing at all to do with politics: they may prefer its crossword, astrology column or sports coverage. That is not to say that in reading the other editorial content they are not influenced by it. Analysing the effect of that influence on readers is very difficult indeed but is, of course, crucial to this exercise. Similarly, it is of paramount importance to illustrate to journalists their own (often hidden or unconscious) agendas.

To that end, there are various ways of trying to illustrate both the underlying messages and their possible effect. It would be possible, for example, to emulate other media theorists by subjecting the various newspaper texts about asylum-seekers to discourse analysis (Anderson and Weymouth 1999). I believe such an exacting exercise would help to expose the political, social and cultural agenda of editors and journalists. Alternatively, I could have adopted the methodology used by the authors of the report for Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK, mentioned above, in which media bias was analysed in terms of communications spirals (ICAR 2004: 19-26). Despite the temptation to take such paths, I wanted to avoid what might be seen as an overly academic approach. I want this report to be accessible to as many people as possible because it is of vital and urgent importance that media attitudes towards asylum-seekers are understood and, hopefully, confronted. What follows therefore is an empirical account of newspaper coverage. But it is not based on a systematic monitoring of a sample of newspapers within a given time period, nor even is it confined to recent coverage in the manner adopted by Article 19 (Article 19 2003: 45-6) in its report on the media representation of refugees and asylum-seekers. Instead, I have selected *snapshots* of coverage in order to illustrate the continuities of the newspaper representation of all incomers to Britain. However, I have monitored Britain's national newspapers on a daily basis as a commentator for 12 years and as a working journalist for the previous 11 years. I also spent three years going through the files of national titles from 1945 onwards (Greenslade 2003). I am therefore convinced that my snapshots epitomise newspaper output and form a truthful account of newspaper coverage. My view is echoed in a recent report about the links between the papers people choose to read and their opinions which found that, on the issue of race and immigration, there are 'strong indications... that newspapers have the greatest impact' (Duffy and Rowden 2005:6). My study also enables readers to view the treatment of asylum-seekers within an historical context.

So I begin by highlighting historical examples which illustrate how the popular press, sometimes tacitly assisted by the broadsheet press, has *always* adopted a negative stance towards immigrants and refugees. I argue this is the result of the relationship between the commercial press and its audience. I then relate more up-to-date cases of false or distorted press stories about asylum-seekers. I will deal with the persistent terminological confusion. My own definitions are as follows: an asylum-seeker is a person who is in the process of applying for asylum. A refugee is someone who fears returning to his or her country of origin because of likely persecution.⁵ Immigrants are people who come to Britain after having voluntarily left their own country (Article 19 2003: 6). I will also touch on the questionable use of statistics. In further sections I address the way in which the press, by setting the agenda, influences the rest of the media and also affects government policy-making. Finally, I discuss strategies which might just conceivably help to change the situation for the better.

Along the way I hope to deal with several questions. How do papers generate so many false stories which cast asylum-seekers in a bad light? What part does the press play in reinforcing stereotypes? How does the media influence the government's policies in relation to asylum and refugee issues? Is it possible to overturn the press's negative agenda? If so, what practical steps can be taken to force the press to behave better by covering the issues in a more positive way? Is the press's self-regulation strong enough to stifle inaccurate reporting? What can be

done by the bodies representing migrant and minority groups to generate more positive media coverage? Or should they, and we, adopt a laissez-faire policy, ignoring the media altogether in anticipation of better times ahead by recalling that immigrants who suffered from persistent press calumny in the past - such as the Irish and the Jews - were gradually integrated into society and are no longer subjected to biased press coverage?

One further point should be noted, a subtlety which must not escape us: the term asylum-seeker is, at face value, racially impartial. This means that press and public can speak of asylum-seekers in ways they would now never dare to speak of immigrants, say, or black people. It is 'safe' to talk of 'fucking asylum-seekers', though not to use the same description for immigrants or blacks. The press has endorsed and legitimised this abuse.

A xenophobic press for a xenophobic people

The reaction of the indigenous British people to immigrants has, in almost all cases, been initially hostile. In this, they may be no different from people elsewhere in the world who exhibit a fear of the alien, though there may be specific reasons for the antagonism of the British, whether psychological, political, economic, religious, racial or cultural. It might also be argued that Britain's imperialist role, and, more pertinently, subsequent loss of it, has been of overriding significance in building xenophobic attitudes.

Geography surely played a part in building defensive attitudes towards incomers. Unlike many of the peoples of Europe's continental mainland, the British (more specifically, the English) were, for many hundreds of years after the Norman invasion in the 11th century, relatively free from large-scale incursions of foreigners. The fact that Britain was an island ensured that there was less racial mixing in Britain and that may have contributed to an insular ideology. Certainly, in the 16th century, the Elizabethan English were less than welcoming to those seeking asylum, including the Protestants of Holland, Belgium and France (the Huguenots). The anti-immigrant demonstrations of 1593 were led by apprentices who, devoid of a printing press to air their grievances, daubed slogans on walls employing racist epithets - such as 'beastly brutes the Belgians' (Styrye 1824: 234-6), 'faint-hearted Flemings' (Stow 1603: 208) and 'fraudulent Father Frenchmen' (Nicholl 2002: 45-49 358-9) - which showed that their central concerns were economic. Claiming that the 'strangers... live here in better case and more freedom' than the Queen's own subjects, one placard threatened 'violence on the strangers' and another warned that 'apprentices and journeymen will down with the Flemings and strangers' unless they were expelled 'out of the realm'. They were worried that the newcomers would threaten their job prospects. How often have we heard that complaint about migrants throughout the centuries since?

By the time of the next significant waves of immigrants - the Irish and the Jews throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries - not only did newspapers exist, they had already developed into mass-market organs. These papers were full of overtly racist remarks about both Jews and the Irish, who were cast in the worst possible light. It is clear from the casual nature of the comments that the papers were articulating views widely held by their readers. Editors obviously felt they had no need to be propagandistic, plugging away at convincing people of the immigrants' vices, because they were convinced they were echoing the prejudices of their audiences. A xenophobic people and a xenophobic press were in harmony.

The press itself had been largely transformed from its politically-motivated origins (when papers enjoyed overt or covert links to political parties) into a supposedly independent commercially-based industry. Individual owners had previously used their papers as propaganda tools to proselytise their own political and social views, but most of them began to bow to the economic need to maximise circulations. These owners, the founders of what would become known as the popular press, were prepared to provide less cerebral editorial content which appealed to a wide number of readers. They were less interested in educating the public than in deriving profit from them.

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards there was a noticeable split between 'serious' or 'quality' papers, which stuck to their traditional public interest agenda, and the 'popular' or 'mass market' papers which rapidly built large audiences by publishing human interest stories. Gradually, this divide widened as the owners and editors of popular papers, bolstered by increasing sales, grew more confident about appealing to the desires of their readers. They were also influenced by the vigorous competition for sales, quickly noting that a sensationalist editorial policy paid dividends by winning a larger circulation. It also meant, inevitably, a downplaying of public policy-related material accompanied by a compromise of the press's supposed public service ethic.

Both editorial content and the journalistic culture changed. Information gave way to entertainment or a subtle combination of the two: infotainment. An already partisan political coverage became yet more combative, often cloaked in the guise of campaigning journalism. There was little attempt to separate facts from comment. Much of the content was both trivial and titillating. Reporters, aware of their editors' demands, grew more cavalier, cutting corners, eschewing any sense of truth-telling ethics. All of this, and sometimes much worse, was justified by the sales. Editors were, to use the age-old excuse/reason, giving the people what they wanted. The market was judge and jury. In the view of owners espousing a free market ideology, papers - and broadcasters - who failed to follow suit were guilty of elitism, prescribing what the public wanted rather than allowing the people themselves to decide. Modern popular journalism was therefore born out of commercial cynicism.

From the Second World War onwards the potent popular journalistic form can be seen to have contained the seeds of an intolerance, and even recklessness, which became more marked year by year. Though it is difficult to date the exact moment at which it tipped over into an aggressive and unpalatable nastiness, there is considerable evidence to show that the early 1980s marked a recognisable period of transition. From that point it is possible to trace a gradual deterioration of standards which culminated, by the end of the decade, in a crisis. Pressure from a combination of politicians and concerned editors and journalists from the serious press forced the owners and editors of popular papers to clean up their act. After fifty years of resistance to the concept, they were forced to agree to the drawing up of an ethical code of conduct and to the substantial revision of the self-regulatory machinery.

However, a code does not change a culture, at least in the short term. It can restrain and it can inhibit, but it cannot transform the mindset of editors and journalists committed to a form of journalism dependent on playing to the prejudices of the majority. It cannot turn infotainment newspapers into informational newspapers. It cannot compel editors to adopt a more congenial, less adversarial agenda. In the extremely unlikely event that the code's police department, the Press Complaints Commission (PCC), were to try seriously to reform newspapers, it would be accused of interfering with freedom of the press which means, of course, the freedom of the market. In other words, a code alone cannot change the ruthless logic of the market.

How the popular press justifies its racist agenda (while denying it exists)

The popular press's history is littered with racist news coverage. To understand why this occurs we have to deal with the complex relationship between journalists and the people they 'serve'. Journalists do not emerge from another planet. They are born into, and often live within, the societies which they report on. Even if they do not share the deep-seated prejudices and motivations of their peers, they know what they are and understand how they affect what those people think, say and do. Popular newspapers, which are largely bought by working class readers, are unsurprisingly staffed, in the main, by journalists from very similar backgrounds. This is particularly true of the older, and therefore more senior, staff (Delano and Henningham 1995; Delano 2001).⁶ These men and women are therefore thoroughly imbued with the political, social and cultural ideology of their readers. They can be very certain what does and does not interest them, what moves them to tears, what frustrates or angers them, what pleases them. In other words, popular paper editors and journalists know instinctively what editorial content will sell.

It is the instinctual nature of news values which conceals the underlying ideology, even from those who put them into practice. Most of the editors and journalists responsible for publishing material which is racist in tone genuinely believe that they are reflecting the views of society and therefore mirroring reality. Historically, they were largely unaware of the racist nature of their editorial decisions. However, modern race relations legislation, the acknowledgement of the UK as a multicultural society and wider educational sensitivity to racial matters generally has made the current generation of journalists (as with the majority of British people) much more aware of overtly racist language, attitudes and actions. Yet this awareness has not necessarily changed an underlying bias against immigrants, whether or not they are 'people of colour'. East European migrants, especially the Roma, have suffered from a bad press in recent years.

Within national paper newsrooms there are very few non-white journalists, certainly fewer than is representative of the overall non-white population (Ainley 1998; Ainley 1998a; Delano 2001). With the exception of the *News of the World*, where there are two people of Asian background in senior roles, no other popular newspaper contains a senior executive from an Asian or Afro-Caribbean background. Therefore, it is very likely that the values of indigenous white Britons continue to hold sway in the popular press. According to a National Union of Journalists survey in 1998, only 1.8 per cent of its members were non-white, and the Campaign for Racial Equality believes this proportion has hardly risen, if at all, since.⁷

Another important factor, especially since the 1990 Gulf War and still more since 11 September 2001, has been the growth of Islamophobia. This is, arguably, more overt among the general population rather than among journalists. But, to repeat the point: journalists are not divorced from the feelings of the people within their own communities. Hostility towards radical Islamic preachers has been common editorial fodder in recent years, but there have been numerous examples of stories which are calculated to belittle orthodox ('strict', 'fervent', fanatic) Islamic practices (such as arranged marriages, forms of female dress, dietary customs etc). Positive stories about British Muslims are virtually unknown. Negative stories about Muslims are noticeably more common than those about Hindus, Sikhs and Christian Afro-

Caribbeans. Many of the negative stories about asylum-seekers refer to Muslims (for example, as a 'terrorist threat').

There is no doubt that many newspaper readers - including those who live in communities with high concentrations of Muslims - believe that scores of factually inaccurate and/or distorted stories reflect reality. Indeed, people living near to Muslims are often the sources for such stories, which generally appear first in local and regional evening newspapers before they are picked up and published in national titles. Naturally enough, those people who have little or no contact with Muslims rely for their information about them on what they read, see and hear in the media. Their 'knowledge' of the situation is gleaned almost wholly from media representations. Negative misinformation has undoubtedly secured a hold on the public imagination, a factor which tends to give journalists misplaced confidence that they are both telling the truth and acting on the public's behalf (in these instances, the public is never defined, but the unsaid, unwritten, always unacknowledged, implication is that the term refers to the white, Christian/atheist majority). Yet the national media is often itself the victim of misinformation because of both the ideology and the commercial imperative that underlies the news-gathering process.

There is a news food chain which works in two ways, from the top down and the bottom up. At the bottom are a range of nationwide freelance agencies or individual 'stringers', many of them linked to local weekly or regional evening papers, who provide national titles with news of events. These freelancers depend for their income on successfully selling stories and, in the normal, everyday run of affairs, it is a straightforward matter of passing on informative stories. But they also understand that certain papers are more likely than others to publish specific stories - due to their political prejudice, possibly, or their penchant for human interest or humorous tales - and therefore, in order to secure an income, try to satisfy that appetite. Now it is a case of the agenda at the top influencing the bottom. This top-down process is even clearer when national paper editors launch topical campaigns (such as dogs attacking babies). Freelancers are generally quick to latch on to the money-making possibilities by seeking out relevant stories. In those circumstances, when hundreds of freelancers around Britain are chasing the same kind of story, there are two overlapping dangers: first, that there will be a deluge of stories about the same subject, reinforcing the impression of editors that they have put their finger on a widespread problem; second, that the competitive nature of the exercise will inevitably lead to stories being exaggerated, sometimes by accident and sometimes by design. Of course, stories filed by freelancers or picked up from local papers should be thoroughly checked by national paper reporters before publication but there are two quite separate reasons hampering best practice. First, staff cuts in national paper newsrooms mean reporters are stretched for time. Second, there is considerable internal pressure from executives aiming to please the editor to 'stand up' stories that fit the required agenda. Indeed, stories can be further distorted by an extra dose of embellishment and/or removal of context. When papers are later challenged about such stories they often reply that they have received them from 'usually reliable sources' and therefore published them 'in good faith'. But this is often an unacceptable excuse. It is also ideologically loaded because, in almost every instance, the stories happen to fit their political and social agenda.

The classic case that highlights the dangers of a newspaper ‘feeding frenzy’ occurred in 1989 with the sudden upsurge in newspaper reports of dogs biting children following the death of an 11-year-old girl attacked by a Rottweiler. For months, popular papers ran stories about babies and children being attacked by ‘savage’ dogs, creating a climate of hysteria. But many of the stories filed by freelancers from around Britain were overblown, often relying on anecdotal accounts from members of the public rather than official police or hospital reports. Papers campaigned vigorously for government action and several politicians from all parties joined in the clamour. The result was the 1991 Dangerous Dogs Act - rushed through Parliament under a guillotine motion - which placed strict controls on four breeds of dog. It was soon generally conceded by the police, dog owners and senior politicians that the Act was unworkable because of cross-breeding. Nor did it noticeably reduce the level of dog-biting incidents which, as before, were largely attributed to irresponsible owners rather than specific breeds of dog. However, the press had moved on with the passage of the law and national newspaper reports of dog savagery virtually vanished. The papers had achieved their object by stoking up public concern to the point at which the then Home Secretary, Kenneth Baker, felt he had to legislate.

Of course, newspaper editors would counter that they were merely acting as a medium through which genuine public concern about dog attacks could be expressed. This is a reminder that, despite the largely trivial nature of most tabloid newspaper content, their editors and journalists are eager to point to their maintenance of a public service ethic. Popular paper editors see the virtue of publishing ‘serious’ material, no matter how slight it is in relation to the lighter content, because it justifies their claim to be acting in the public interest. It enables them to maintain a tenuous hold on being part of the so-called ‘fourth estate’ in which they cast themselves as tribunes of the people. Yet their concept of public service is rarely prescriptive and certainly never confrontational: they prefer to echo their readers’ views rather than try to change them. Editors do not seek (or, maybe, do not dare to seek) to adopt editorial positions which might be at odds with the views of their readers. Their greatest fear is losing sales. Indeed, they invariably point to their high circulations as proof that their readers want what they are providing.

When accused of being racist, chauvinist or xenophobic (and, therefore, acting *against* the public interest) editors justify what they publish by claiming that their sales demonstrate that they are *representing* the public interest. Thus, when reinforcing their audience’s opinions, no matter how wrong-headed, they consistently argue that by giving their readers what they want they are serving the public interest. This is, of course, to confuse the meaning of ‘public interest’, another central problem in trying to confront journalists with the error of their ways.

Immigration aside, it is sobering to note that most popular newspapers, and some serious ones, have been forthright opponents of Britain’s membership of the European Union. I mention it because there is a clear parallel between the coverage of asylum-seekers and of the EU in terms of xenophobia and chauvinism. The tone and content of the tabloids’ stories about Europe shows that they see equivalence between the threat to British values caused by incomers and the threat caused by

greater integration in Europe. They use similar language when writing about these twin perils (Anderson and Weymouth 1999).

It is also noticeable that, in pursuit of their anti-European agenda, popular papers are regular purveyors of far-fetched, and sometimes wholly inaccurate, stories about absurd 'laws' passed in Brussels.⁸ Even though these Euro-myths are officially rebutted by accredited spokespeople for the European Commission, papers largely ignore the truth and persist in repeating them. If a well-funded, well-organised, professional bureaucracy cannot successfully correct false stories, what chance have the poorly-funded, voluntary organisations representing refugees and asylum-seekers to stop the spreading of myths?

Case 1: Post-war newspaper portrayal of Jews

This first historical study shows how some, but not all, newspapers carried anti-Jewish material, reflecting a public prejudice which at least one press proprietor of the late 1940s did not seem to realise existed. Among every class in Britain in the early 20th century there was a deep-seated resentment against Jewish people. A thinly-veiled anti-Semitism had long had a hold in the upper echelons of British society and among some newspaper proprietors, most notably in the Harmsworth family which, through Lords Northcliffe and Rothermere, owned and controlled several national titles. As one of their biographers pointed out: 'The middle class prejudice against Jews, strong in pre-1914 England, often stirs under the surface of the Harmsworths' (Ferris 1971).

During the First World War, Rothermere had blamed the delay in supplying troops with army uniforms on the cowardice of East End Jewish tailors who, he alleged, were running away from Zeppelins (Bourne 1990). In the 1930s Rothermere supported Oswald Mosley's fascist party, writing articles in two of his papers, the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror*, the first headlined 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts' and the second, 'Give the Blackshirts a helping hand'.⁹ Four years later, in August 1938, a *Daily Mail* commentary about refugee Jews fleeing Nazi Germany began: 'The way stateless Jews from Germany are pouring in from every port of this country is becoming an outrage' (Morrison 2004). In 1940, Rothermere's papers fanned hostility to Jewish refugees who had sought asylum from Germany and Austria. His *Sunday Dispatch* continually heaped scorn on 'enemy aliens', describing them variously as fascists, communists and pacifists. For example, one report claimed that foreign internees in Holloway jail were living in luxury: 'The alien women, Germans, Austrians, some of them Jewesses... march round the exercise yard singing German songs'.¹⁰ The *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph* made similar allegations, insinuating that all internees and, by implication, all foreigners, including Jews, were likely to be traitors. It should be noted that *The Times* and the *Daily Express* took the opposite view. At the end of the second world war, when the Buchenwald concentration camp was discovered, almost every paper carried compassionate leaders, though one recalled that during the years of appeasement 'most of the British Press was fawning around Hitler's feet' and had been willing to overlook German attitudes towards the Jews.¹¹

In 1946, there was some evidence of a gradual thaw in working class racism towards Jews, as a *News Chronicle* poll recorded.¹² By that time the second Lord Rothermere, Esmond Harmsworth, was running the *Daily Mail* and he held very different views from his father. He appointed a liberal editor who published a number of measured articles on the problems facing Jews.¹³ Despite that, one of Rothermere's closest friends later revealed that *Mail* executives needed a lot of convincing: 'Esmond... tells me that he had great difficulty in getting his *Daily Mail* people to write an article in support of the Jews... They say that any such line would harm the paper, because of the strength of anti-semitism in the country' (Nicolson 1968).

The anti-Jewish feeling in post-war Britain was undoubtedly fuelled by the activities of Zionist militants in Palestine who attacked British soldiers, and a rash of racist incidents flared across Britain, but the national press was not only generally restrained in its comment, it eschewed the opportunity to dwell on the British

victims by carrying pictures and profiles of the dead. Nor were there any interviews with the bereaved. By the following year a *Daily Express* leader was pleading for an end to ‘the hounding’ of British Jews. ‘No more of this! It disgraces and humiliates the whole nation that even a microscopic minority should seek to penalise innocent citizens for their birth or their religion’.¹⁴

Concerned Labour MPs proposed that anti-Semitism be made illegal, leading to a 1948 government inquiry into the possibility of framing laws against attacks on any racial or religious group. Most of the evidence was about attacks on Jews, but it was decided that there were no special circumstances which could not be covered by the existing laws on seditious libel. This may be viewed as a strange decision, given the outcome the year before of the most notorious case of press anti-Semitism. In August 1947, the 17,800-circulation *Morecambe & Heysham Visitor* carried a leading article by its owner-editor James Caunt in which he demanded that the local Jewish community be ostracised until its members took practical steps to dissuade Jewry from supporting terrorism. In an intemperate and overtly racist piece, he wrote:

‘There is very little about which to rejoice greatly except the present fact that only a handful of Jews despoil the population of our borough. The foregoing sentence may be regarded as an outburst of anti-Semitism. It is intended to be, and we make no apology, neither do we shirk any responsibilities or repercussions... It is not sufficient for British Jews, who have proved to be the worst black market offenders, to rush into print with howls of horror and sudden wreaths at cenotaphs... There is a growing feeling that Britain is in the grip of the Jews... The Jews are a plague on Britain.’¹⁵

Caunt was charged with seditious libel, under an act of 1888, and denied in court that his editorial advocated violence against Jews, while his counsel pointed out that there had not been a prosecution of an editor under the charge for more than 100 years. The judge told the jury: ‘It is in the highest degree essential... that nothing should be done to destroy or weaken the liberty of the press.’ He then pointed out that sedition meant public disorder or insurrection; the jury retired for just 13 minutes and acquitted Caunt. Only one paper, the *Manchester Guardian*, saw fit to criticise Caunt: ‘All of us are for the freedom of the press, but we should prefer to be represented by any champion but Mr Caunt. Freedom carries with it responsibilities as well as rights... Mr Caunt used it to attack the Jews... It was a discreditable piece of work... and the last thing we should wish to see held up as a sample of a free press.’¹⁶

The case was indicative of what one historian has referred to as ‘a deeper anti-Semitic malaise’ (Morgan 1999). There was little newspaper sympathy for the plight of Jews trying to come to terms with the holocaust. When Jews complained about anti-Semitism some of the comment was hostile and unpleasant, with particularly bad examples in the provincial press: one referred to ‘aggressive and cock-a-hoop post-war Jewry’ while another urged Jews to acquire ‘thicker skins’ (Sharf 1964).

Case 2: 'Race riots' in the 1950s

This historical case study illustrates how newspapers, either by exaggerating race disputes or covering them in such a way as to suggest that migrants were the cause of trouble, helped to set the political agenda which led to immigration legislation.

In October 1954 the *Empire News* told of race riots in London, reports which the Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill, was assured - by his Home Secretary and by senior police officers - were exaggerated. Four years later, disturbances also referred to by papers as 'race riots' occurred in London's Notting Hill and Nottingham. No-one was killed or even maimed, though there was no doubt that several black youths suffered beatings in Notting Hill. In fact, the worst struggles were between white youths (Teddy boys) and the police. The *Manchester Guardian* even reported: 'By no stretch of the imagination could the hooliganism that took place be called racial riots.'¹⁷ Yet the next day the same paper told of gangs of youths roaming the streets chanting: 'We want a nigger'. Racism (or racialism, as it was then termed) underlay the disturbances, even if poor whites were expressing a wider dissatisfaction with their place at the bottom of the heap and contempt for the authorities.

The Notting Hill incidents were due to unscrupulous landlords using black immigrants to force out white tenants protected by rent legislation. In Nottingham, the main disturbance started outside a pub and involved a small group of 'wide boys' who carried knives and organised prostitution. Six whites were stabbed, but the fighting occurred largely between mixed groups, rather than black versus white. Yet the impact created by the press coverage of these 'riots', particularly that in Notting Hill, was so great they became central to a myth about the 'threat' to indigenous white Britons by 'indigent immigrants from the Commonwealth.'¹⁸ The pejorative descriptions of 'foreigners', inaccurate claims about their reliance on National Assistance, and the exaggerated reportage of the incidents themselves imbued the disturbances with a disproportionate racial significance. A *Daily Express* editorial fanned the flames by referring to the 'flood of coloured immigrants.'¹⁹

The *Daily Mail* provided Labour MP Maurice Edelman with space to urge immigration controls.²⁰ In the *Daily Mirror*, an admirable front page cartoon by Vicky equated Teddy boy 'racialist thugs' with Hitler, but next day the paper advocated that immigrants should not be allowed into Britain unless they first had a job and a home.²¹ It also urged deporting 'no-goods' such as 'the coloured brothel-keeper'. With the mass-selling, Labour-supporting *Mirror* adopting such a stance it is no wonder the riots were 'used as examples of the dangers of unrestricted immigration' (Solomos 1989). The riots, and the way they were reported, can be seen as a defining moment in a growing national debate about the need for immigration controls. In essence, papers seemed to agree that simply by living in Britain black people threatened the rule of law. Lord Salisbury, former Secretary of the State for Commonwealth Relations and Tory leader in the Lords until 1957, saw the riots as justification for his claim that controls should be imposed on black immigration.²²

With backbench Tory MPs citing newspaper coverage and talking of criminal 'coloured' people being drawn to the 'honeypot' of the welfare state, the government felt compelled to act. Undoubtedly, the way in which the events were reported played a significant part in the passing of the 1962 Commonwealth

Immigrants Act which removed the absolute right of Commonwealth citizens to enter Britain. Some years later, William Deedes (1997: 206-224), who was Minister without Portfolio at the time (and, later, editor of the *Daily Telegraph*) admitted: 'The Bill's real purpose was to restrict the influx of coloured immigrants from the Caribbean and Indian subcontinent. We were reluctant to say as much openly.'

One of the foremost academics on the subject of immigration points to the 'widespread coverage... of stories relating to race and immigration issues... a flowering of popular debate about housing and social conditions in areas of black settlement' but also 'a resurgence of extreme right-wing groups' (Solomos 1989). It was the 'interplay between these processes [which] produced a wide variety of stereotypes and popular images about black people.' For example, *The Times* reported that in the riot areas 'there are three main charges of resentment against coloured inhabitants': they are workshy, relying on state benefits; they find houses while whites cannot; they indulge in misbehaviour, 'especially sexual'.²³ Though the paper's leading article that day attributed the problem to 'resentments harboured by ignorant [white] folk' and 'youthful ruffianism', other papers were less scrupulous. In the years after the 'riots', blacks - not Teddy boys, who were a passing phenomenon - were identified as the real source of social instability and a continuing challenge to the rule of law.

Case 3: Press reaction to Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech

This historical case study suggests that some newspapers were starting to grow concerned at the growth of racism and were broadly supportive of measures designed to tame it. Enoch Powell's infamous speech was widely condemned in a decade, the 1960s, when it was clear that racism, fuelled by a widespread dislike of immigrants, was becoming a political problem. As a senior Labour MP, Richard Crossman, observed: 'Politically, fear of immigration is the most powerful force today'. Proof arrived in the October 1964 general election when one Tory candidate, Peter Griffiths, openly played the race card in order to win the West Midlands seat of Smethwick by allowing his supporters to use the slogan: 'If you want a nigger neighbour, vote Labour'. Griffiths beat his high-profile Labour opponent, Patrick Gordon-Walker, by securing a 7.2 per cent swing against Labour while, across the UK, Labour achieved victory with a 3.5 per cent swing against the Tories. Griffiths was heavily criticised by almost every newspaper and was largely ostracised thereafter.

The following year, both political parties agreed to tame British racism against migrants by legislation, passing the first Race Relations Act which outlawed discrimination in public places and banned the publishing and distribution of material intended to foment racial hatred. But it was soon obvious that stronger action was required, leading to the 1968 Race Relations Act which made it unlawful to discriminate on grounds of colour, race, ethnic or national origins in housing, employment and the provision of services. Some newspapers voiced concern about the stifling of free speech but offered no concerted opposition.

That year also witnessed one of the most controversial speeches ever made in post-war Britain. Enoch Powell was a member of the Conservative party's shadow cabinet who had twice been a cabinet minister. On 20 April 1968 he told his Wolverhampton constituents that there should be a cut 'to negligible proportions' of black and Commonwealth immigration, and that immigrants who had already arrived should be encouraged to return. He referred to 'wide-eyed, grinning piccaninnies' and, in a classical allusion to the River Tiber, spoke of it 'foaming with much blood... We must be mad, literally mad as a nation, to be permitting the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependants, for the most part the material of the future growth of the immigrant-descended population...'²⁴

Since the speech was made on a Saturday, the first reports appeared on the front pages of the Sunday papers. The Labour-supporting papers were appalled: the *People* called it 'a shocker' while the *Sunday Mirror* compared Powell to the racist character in the popular TV show 'Til Death Do Us Part, lampooning him as 'the Right Hon. Alf Garnett'.²⁵ The *Sunday Times* ran virtually the whole speech, along with an analysis of Powell's use, or misuse, of statistics. It viewed the speech as 'crudely inflammatory... By predicting a racial war... he does his bit towards bringing it about.'²⁶ From the other, pro-Powell perspective, the *News of the World* thought 'most people in this country will agree with him' and concluded, in capital letters: 'WE CAN TAKE NO MORE COLOURED PEOPLE. TO DO SO, AS MR POWELL SAYS, IS MADNESS.'²⁷ The *Sunday Telegraph* columnist, and associate editor, Peregrine Worsthorne argued that voluntary repatriation was 'the only honest course.'²⁸

Perhaps the most significant reaction came the following day, from *The Times*. An editorial written by editor William Rees-Mogg condemned the speech as ‘shameful’ and ‘evil’ because it was ‘calculated to inflame hatred between races’ and made ‘a deliberate appeal to racial prejudice.’²⁹ The *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Express* were sympathetic to Powell, questioning his language rather than his substantive argument, and grumbling about the fact that Conservative leader Edward Heath dismissed him from the shadow cabinet. The *Telegraph* felt that ‘whatever the deficiencies of his statistics and the exaggerations of his language... he was expressing anxieties felt by millions of people...’³⁰ The *Express* adopted a similar position: ‘However unwise and intemperate Mr Powell’s speech may have been... [he] reflected the feelings of a vast number of people...’³¹

All editors of whatever persuasion were soon apprised of the public’s feelings in support of Powell which, it was noted by a historian, had ‘struck a popular chord’ (Childs 1997: 150). Powell was backed by groups of dockers and meat porters who marched through the East End while letters of support for his views poured in, especially from working class people living in inner cities. One opinion poll suggested that 75 per cent of the British people agreed with him, and despite his sacking he was regarded by many people as the most popular Tory for years afterwards. In a further contribution to the debate he called for the repatriation of ‘coloured’ immigrants because they could never, in his eyes, be Englishmen. Again, he won huge support.

Bob Edwards, editor of *The People*, who had called on Powell to be sacked, received 127 letters opposing his view and just three in support. But hostility from his readers didn’t stop him pursuing Powell. He published a picture which showed 50 hospital workers of varying hues and of 47 different nationalities under the headline: ‘Dear Enoch Powell, if you ever have to go into hospital, you’ll be glad of people like these...’ (Edwards 1988).

21st century newspaper hostility

Looking back at these historical cases reminds us that we are not confronting a new phenomenon, but the key question is whether we are witnessing something different in some way from what went before. I contend that there are similarities - which is the very reason for setting the historical context - but also important differences: the tone has become more hysterical, the repetitious nature of the stories is more prevalent, and the power of newspapers to set the agenda - both for other media and within the political arena - is more potent, in spite of their declining sales. It is a fact that Britain's racial mix is greater than during the periods covered by the above case histories and it might be thought that this demographic change would have had a calming effect on newspaper coverage: the reverse, however, seems to be true.

Note, first, my deliberate use of the three terms in the above sub-heading. For popular newspapers, the tabloids, there is no difference between them. There have been numerous stories in which they have been used as interchangeable descriptions. The misuse of terminology is not merely sloppy, it underlines the way in which these papers - and, quite probably, their readers - view all incomers, of whatever status, as unwanted aliens. For many people there is no difference between the grandchild of a 1950s West Indian immigrant, a refugee granted permission two years ago to stay under the terms of the 1951 UN Convention or a person newly arrived and in the process of applying for asylum. All are deemed to be aliens and underpinning this viewpoint is, of course, racism. Newspapers are aware of this and tap into it, wishing, like their readers, to turn back the clock. Note how, of late, populist right-wing columnists (such as *The Sun's* Richard Littlejohn, the *Daily Mail's* Simon Heffer and Stephen Glover, the *Daily Express's* Mitchell Symons, the *Mail on Sunday's* Peter Hitchens) have begun to argue against both the concept and practice of a multicultural society at the same time as they pour scorn on asylum-seekers and demand rigid controls to halt immigration of any kind.

For the last four years there has been an identifiable competition between certain papers to see which can attract the greatest number of readers by publishing the most hostile stories, features and opinions about asylum-seekers and refugees. This distasteful contest has been most obvious at the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* and *The Sun*. A survey of seven national daily papers over a 12-week period at the end of 2002 revealed that the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* carried more articles on asylum than any other (Article 19 2003:12). At one point in 2003 the *Daily Express* ran 22 'splashes' (front page lead stories) about asylum-seekers and refugees in a 31-day period. Throughout 2003 and into 2004, the *Daily Express* became fixated on the 'crisis' of asylum-seekers, often devoting its front page to alarmist stories which were sometimes wholly false or otherwise negative 'spins' on genuine news. Examples: 'SURRENDER TO ASYLUM: Outrage as Blair gives up our veto on immigration to Brussels bureaucrats'; 'ASYLUM FIDDLE EXPOSED: Refugee claims fall as work permits soar'; 'ASYLUM WAR CRIMINALS ON OUR STREETS' and 'ASYLUM: Tidal wave of crime'.³² Perhaps the most venal of all was 'PLOT TO KILL BLAIR: Asylum seekers with hi-tech equipment and maps caught half a mile from PM's home'.³³

One persistent *Express* theme was about a supposed 'influx' of Roma (always referred to as gypsies or gypsies). The most obvious instance was a front page headlined '1.6 million gypsies set to flood in' with a map of Europe headed 'The Great Invasion 2004' with several red arrows pointing out from central Europe straight into Britain, a copy of the opening sequence from the TV series *Dad's Army* in which the arrows represented Hitler's army.³⁴ The irony, in its blackest form, is that the Roma were persecuted by Hitler. An accompanying leader predicted the gypsies would 'leech' on 'us' and readers were asked in a telephone poll: 'Should we let gypsies invade Britain?' The campaign was ceaseless with other examples such as, 'WE CAN'T COPE WITH HUGE GIPSY INVASION' and 'A massive invasion of poverty-stricken gypsies from Eastern Europe could lead to economic disaster, ministers fear'.³⁵ These stories led to *Express* journalists taking the unprecedented step of writing to the Press Complaints Commission to complain about being put under pressure by their senior executives to write slanted articles. The paper's union members had previously complained, in August 2001, about their paper's 'sustained campaign against asylum-seekers in pursuit of circulation'.³⁶ After some consideration, the PCC said it could not intervene, citing its role as a body dealing with complaints from members of the public not from journalists.

The *Daily Mail's* asylum obsession has centred on crime, taking every opportunity to make allegations about asylum-seekers being criminals. As early as 1998, the *Mail* ran a story headlined, 'Brutal crimes of the asylum seekers', which claimed that asylum-seekers were having a 'devastating impact' on crime in London and that the government should therefore end its 'open door' policy.³⁷ A couple of months later, a story headlined 'Suburbia's little Somalia' told of Somali asylum-seekers in 'affluent, middle-class Ealing... thousands of miles away from the dusty plains of East Africa' who were bringing down the neighbourhood with drugs and crime.³⁸ This theme continued into 2003: 'Asylum gangs 'are to blame for a new era of crime'', a story based on quotes from the head of the Association of Chief Police Officers.³⁹

Britain's largest-selling paper, the *News of the World*, has also managed to squeeze in a surprising amount of material about asylum-seekers and refugees among its usual diet of salacious kiss-and-tell stories. One piece, 'Handout UK: how many refugees are living in YOUR town?' was illustrated by a map of Britain, listing by council the number, and supposed costs, of asylum-seekers in each area.⁴⁰ This was tantamount to an incitement to racial hatred, as was a letter to the *News of the World* - which it published, unchecked - claiming that 'luxury pads' were being prepared for asylum seekers on an estate in Leicester. The result, according to a regional evening paper report, was that local gangs broke into homes to damage them before refugees had moved in.⁴¹ A *News of the World* article headlined 'Britain's £1bn asylum bill' alleged that the housing of asylum-seekers will cost the British taxpayer more than £1 billion in a year. 'That's £33 for every one of the nation's 30 million taxpayers... enough to build up to TEN 450-bed new hospitals or pay off the combined £200 million debt of the NHS five times over. It could also pay for 50,000 new teachers, 40,000 beat police officers or 80 secondary schools'.⁴²

What the columnists say

Newspaper columns are, arguably, read more regularly and in greater detail than news stories. Columnists receive more letters from readers than any other member of staff and their popularity is borne out by focus group discussions - in which their names are often mentioned without prompting. The same research shows that many more people read columnists in popular papers than the leading articles. Columnists therefore carry weight with readers, a fact recognised by newspaper owners and editors who are often prepared to pay them enormous sums, sometimes even higher than their own salaries (Richard Littlejohn is an example). Columnists, especially in the popular, right-wing newspapers, are hired specifically because they tend to provoke. Their editors encourage them to be outrageous, to use colourful language, to be 'politically incorrect', to push at the boundaries of free speech. Though a newspaper leader writer would not be expected to advocate pulling up the drawbridge and deporting all asylum-seekers, columnists have done so.

Many of them consistently point to racist incidents as 'proof' that refugees and asylum-seekers 'cause trouble' while seeking to forment such trouble themselves by giving credence to those who espouse racism. They choose to lay the blame on the government for its supposed liberalism. Simon Heffer's columns in the *Daily Mail* are typical of this approach. In February 2001, he argued that Blair should be voted out because, if not, Britain would become home to '14 million illegal immigrants, few of whom speak a word of English'.⁴³ It would be far-fetched to suggest that a single article had a significant political effect but it was noticeable that a month after publication the then Tory leader, William Hague, echoed Heffer's viewpoint in saying that Blair's Britain would become a 'foreign land'. Hague may have lost the election but the government appeared to have got the message because the day after Hague's defeat, the Home Secretary, David Blunkett, told *The Sun* of his plans to 'blitz asylum cheats'.

Littlejohn is probably the most read, and most popular, newspaper columnist in Britain. He has devoted endless pieces in his columns to the subject of asylum-seekers, all of them wholly unsympathetic. In the period from 1 January 2002 to 31 January 2005, he made 88 disparaging references to asylum-seekers. He also wrote a novel, serialised in *The Sun*, which centred on the travails of a policeman who had killed a Romanian asylum-seeker during the course of a burglary at his home (Littlejohn 2001). It is no exaggeration to say that Littlejohn appears to be more exercised by asylum-seekers, refugees and immigrants (seeing no difference between them) than his newspaper. Interestingly, the paper has been somewhat less ferocious on migrants than the other three right-wing tabloids because of the belief of its owner, Rupert Murdoch, in the benefits of economic migration.⁴⁴ But Littlejohn's opinions do not appear to have been softened by his editor (if they have been subject to discrete restraint it is hardly evident). One of his peculiar skills as a polemicist is to write week after week about a relatively small range of topics without boring his readers. Just the reverse: his repetition, use of heavy irony and catchphrases - such as, 'you couldn't make it up' - are devices which have both engaged his audience and ensured that his relentless message has hammered home effectively. He is a past master at the stereotyping of minority groups, often exploiting illogical links to devastating effect. For example, in an article ostensibly about the futility of erecting signs in Punjabi and Urdu in Glasgow he managed to twist it into a scathing attack on Albanian asylum-seekers.⁴⁵ In a more conventional, but equally pejorative, link he argued that it was 'a false distinction' to distinguish

between asylum-seekers and immigrants ‘because many of the hundreds of thousands of people who have come to Britain in recent years claiming they were politically persecuted in their homelands have turned out to be economic migrants seeking work.’⁴⁶

According to Littlejohn there should be no entry to Britain by foreigners: ‘I don't suppose it has occurred to anyone to pull up the drawbridge’.⁴⁷ He has claimed that ‘Britain now effectively has an open borders policy... Why don't we just put up a sign at the mouth of the Chunnel and every airport?’⁴⁸ He has also suggested that there should be a television game show to decide on the claims of asylum-seekers.⁴⁹ Drawing together two apparently disconnected matters, he cited the European Convention on Human Rights as ‘one of the most wicked pieces of legislation ever brought into British law... little more than a charter for terrorists, gangsters, illegal immigrants, drugs dealers, nonces, assorted troublemakers and chancers’.⁵⁰ He has regularly described asylum-seekers as criminals, referring to ‘Albanian mobsters, Kosovan knife gangs, Romanian shoplifters and assorted riff-raff’ as if they are typical of all incomers.⁵¹ It would be possible to dip into scores of columns and find similar stuff. There are two other key themes in his columns: firstly, he perceives a threat to ‘British culture and traditions’ due to incomers,⁵² and secondly, he directs much of his venom towards the Labour government, which he blames for allowing in asylum-seekers either due to ‘incompetence’ or ‘indifference’.⁵³ Most notably, it is clear that his influence reaches beyond *The Sun*'s readership into parliament.⁵⁴

Yet Littlejohn, and Heffer, stress that they are not racist. Littlejohn often cites his friendship with Trevor Phillips, chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, as proof of the fact. Instead, both columnists justify what they write by pointing to the concern about asylum-seekers among all their readers, including first and second generation migrants. What they find harder to deny is a xenophobic outlook. One author confronted by a firm rebuttal of racism by *The Sun*'s political editor, Trevor Kavanagh, defined the difference between racism and xenophobia by claiming that the former suggests hostility to people because of their colour, culture or, perhaps, religion (Kundnani 2001: 50). But xenophobia suggests a kind of natural psychological reaction towards all aliens. The former is an indictment of a social system while the second can be taken to be a normal part of human nature. If we accept that argument, it suggests that Heffer and Littlejohn (and Kavanagh) are articulating the understandable psychological reactions of their readers. But it is equally possible, indeed more plausible, to argue that xenophobia is merely an alibi for racism.

It should be understood that columnists, even if they do not work regularly within an office (or even visit it), live within a newspaper environment in the sense that they rely for their subject matter on stories published by papers and on discussions with senior newspaper executives. So they are bound to respond to the frequency and tone of stories when deciding what to write about. In this regard they are no different from ordinary readers who are influenced by the drip-drip-drip of negative articles and headlines. The difference, of course, is that they are ideologues and deliberately set out to sway the minds - and, perhaps as importantly, emotions - of their readers. Their polemics have to be seen also within the context of papers in which, on any given day, there might be a splash and/or two-page spread with a negative story about asylum-seekers and, possibly, a leading article too. They are therefore particularly prey to the distortions and inaccuracies of their own papers, as Littlejohn's follow-up to the ‘swanbake’ story proved (see following section).

Donkeys, swans, hot cross buns, assassination: the baking of fake stories

On 4 July 2003, *The Sun* devoted almost its entire front page to an exclusive story headlined 'SWAN BAKE: Asylum seekers steal the Queen's bird for barbecues'. The opening sentence stated: 'Callous asylum seekers are barbecuing the Queen's swans, *The Sun* can reveal. East European poachers lure the protected royal birds into baited traps, an official Metropolitan Police report says'. Unidentified people were cited as supposed witnesses to this phenomenon. There was more on page 7, under the headline 'Asylum gang had 2 swans for roasting', with some graphic details: 'Police swooped on a gang of East Europeans and caught them red-handed about to cook a pair of royal swans. The asylum seekers were barbecuing a duck in a park in Beckton, East London. But two dead swans were also found concealed in bags and ready to be roasted. The discovery last weekend confirmed fears that immigrants are regularly scoffing the Queen's birds'. The story had ingredients sure to arouse anger from a range of groups: animal lovers, fans of the royal family, and those prejudiced against asylum seekers.

To an experienced eye, the story smelled. It was very light on provable facts: no culprits were named; indeed, no arrests were mentioned; despite the geography, no police station, let alone any single policeman, was identified or quoted. A person named towards the end of the articles, from a swan sanctuary, was obviously reacting to a call from a *Sun* reporter, accepting that what he had been told was true. In fact, there was not a scintilla of truth in the story, as a Serbian journalist, Nick Medic, who had previously sought asylum in Britain, was to discover. Like his colleagues in the Refugees, Asylum and the Media project (RAM), he was suspicious and upset at what he suspected was a fabrication in which asylum seekers were both scapegoated and stereotyped as barbarians. So he set out to test the allegations (Medic 2004a). The Metropolitan Police press office was unable to confirm that any police report, official or unofficial, existed. Medic then contacted four east London police stations adjacent to the Thames to ask whether there had been any reports or complaints about swans being captured and eaten by anyone, regardless of their ethnicity. He drew a blank until he found out that there had been an internal memo circulated by the Wildlife Protection Squad. Had that memo been the basis of *The Sun's* story?

On 10 July, Medic and his RAM colleagues made a formal complaint to the Press Complaints Commission and were soon informed that another person had also complained. Five weeks later, the PCC sent them a copy of a letter from *The Sun's* ombudsman, Bill Newman, which revealingly included a summary of the Metropolitan Police's Wildlife Crime Unit memo and asserted: 'We stand by our story'. By now the paper had published a follow-up to the swans story headlined, 'Now they're after our fish!', claiming - again without a shred of proof - that fish stocks in lakes and rivers were down because asylum seekers were guilty of poaching.

In a further letter from *The Sun*, which included the reporter's notes, Medic spotted a police press office number and he subsequently asked for information. In reply, Detective Chief Superintendent Tristram Hicks wrote that the report referred to by *The Sun* 'may have meant an internal intelligence note that was sent to... police stations by our Wildlife Crime Unit earlier this year. This one-page note was prompted by numerous reports from the public that swans were being killed and

eaten by people they believed to be Eastern Europeans. Nobody has been arrested or charged in relation to offences against swans. *The Sun*... referred to asylum seekers being responsible. We have no information at all that supports this contention and indeed when we spoke to [the reporter], he agreed that this was a mistake’.

Medic sent the letter on to the PCC and *The Sun* then offered to publish a ‘clarification’ but Medic and his colleagues were disappointed because it failed to make clear that there was no evidence that asylum seekers were responsible for the alleged disappearance of swans. After composing their own, which *The Sun* refused to publish, the PCC was asked to adjudicate. Eventually, in November, four and a half months after *The Sun* article appeared, the PCC sent a letter to Medic which ‘noted’ that *The Sun* was ‘unable to provide any evidence for the story’, and that what was presented as a ‘factual account’ was in reality conjecture. Nevertheless, it had decided that *The Sun*’s proposed clarification ‘constituted sufficient remedial action’. So *The Sun*, on 6 December, finally published its unsatisfactory one-paragraph ‘clarification’. It appeared on page 41.

On 21 August 2003, the *Daily Star* ran a front page story headlined ‘Asylum seekers ate our donkeys’. It reported that nine donkeys had been stolen from Greenwich royal park (note the royal again) in south London and quoted an unnamed police ‘insider’ as saying: ‘One of our main lines of inquiry is that they may have been taken by immigrants who like eating donkey meat as a delicacy’. The story went on to claim that donkey meat is a speciality in some East African countries, including Somalia, and that there were ‘large numbers of Somalian asylum-seekers’ in the area. On that slight evidence, a community was blamed for a crime despite the local police openly admitting that they had no idea about the identity of the perpetrators.

The *Daily Star* reporter garnered quotes from outraged citizens, one of whom was quoted as saying: ‘It makes my blood boil when I hear that asylum seekers have stolen them to eat.’ But who told that person that asylum seekers were responsible if it wasn’t the journalist? A Somalian complained to the PCC, arguing that the story was inaccurate because, far from being a delicacy, improperly raised and prepared meat of any description is forbidden by the country’s Islamic law. Another six people, including the Scottish Refugee Council and concerned citizens who were neither asylum seekers nor refugees, complained that the article discriminated against asylum seekers. These complaints were rejected on the grounds that the allegation was clearly presented as comment, in spite of the headline itself being based on an unsubstantiated comment. In an intriguing judgment, the PCC argued that ‘readers would not necessarily have been misled into thinking this [theft by asylum seekers] was the only possible explanation of the matter’. It added that clause 13 of the editors’ code of practice, which deals with discrimination, only exists to protect individuals and not groups. No individuals were named in the *Star* story.

There was an interesting postscript to the PCC’s decisions, announced in November 2003. On 8 January 2004, the *Daily Star* carried what amounted to partial apology for its story, a single paragraph which read in its entirety: ‘Our 21 August 2003 article ‘Asylum-seekers ate our donkeys’ implied that Somalis had stolen donkeys from Greenwich Royal Park for food. We accept that the suggestion may have been offensive to the Somali community, and have been asked to make clear that the Muslim religion prohibits such activity. We apologise for any offence caused’.

The next case was surprising because it involved a broadsheet newspaper that had not previously been noted for publishing untrue stories. It did not mention asylum-seekers or refugees, but it serves to illustrate that the overall attitude to all migrants within a wide range of newspapers is, if not hostile, then suspicious. Furthermore, it suggests that papers are aware of similar feelings among their audience because of the assumptions in the article's sub-text. It was on 27 March 2003 that the *Sunday Telegraph*, normally regarded as an unsensationalist, somewhat straight-laced paper, ran a story across the top of a page headlined 'Hot cross banned: councils decree buns could be 'offensive' to non-Christians'. A sub-heading stated: 'For some children, naan breads will replace the traditional Easter treat as town halls try to avoid complaints'. It was illustrated by a picture of three girls at a West London school eating hot cross buns.

The story alleged that six councils had ordered schools in their areas not to serve hot cross buns at Easter lest they offend Jewish, Hindu and Muslim people. To support this allegation, three spokespeople for the councils were quoted but, significantly, none were named. After eight paragraphs, the bulk of the story dealt with the very predictable reactions of individuals and organisations who were responding to the reporters telling them that such bans had been imposed. After publication, several papers at national and regional level (and some broadcasting outlets) repeated the story. Among the follow-ups were stories in *The Times*, the *Daily Express* and the *London Evening Standard* (all 17 March) which accepted the truth of the *Sunday Telegraph* story at face value, as did columnists in the *Manchester Evening News*, the *Sunday Times* and *The Sun* (Richard Littlejohn). The leading Roman Catholic newspaper, the *Catholic Herald*, joined the chorus of disapproval and the tale also appeared on several internet sites. So the audience for the story expanded from the couple of million *Sunday Telegraph* readers into an audience of at least 21 million people across Britain.

Yet the *Sunday Telegraph* story was wholly untrue. As the official spokespeople for all six councils made clear, there had never been a question of banning hot cross buns because their schools do not serve them anyway. Even the photograph was stunted: the *Telegraph* photographer had provided schoolgirls with buns in order to take his picture. Liverpool City Council later made a formal complaint to the Press Complaints Commission about four newspapers: the *Sunday Telegraph*, *The Sun*, the *Daily Express* and the *Blackpool Evening Gazette*. The *Sunday Telegraph* published an apology four weeks after its offending article (13 April) which conceded that its story was fictitious. It stated that none of the councils 'has an official policy of banning hot cross buns and that their councillors have never discussed banning hot cross buns, nor have they ever instructed council caterers not to serve hot cross buns in schools'. It did not apologise for the falsity of the story, only for the 'confusion' it caused. Later, the *Sunday Times* ran a correction (27 April), as did the *Daily Express* (23 April) and the *Blackpool Evening Gazette*. Not until 8 May did *The Sun* run an apology though not within Littlejohn's column.

The *Sunday Telegraph* story did not mention asylum-seekers or refugees but its timing and the nature of its largely anti-Muslim content added to the anti-migrant media climate. The fact that the *Sunday Telegraph* is also viewed as an unsensationalist, responsible broadsheet was also important. It gave its story enough credibility to ensure that other media outlets would repeat the story. This phenomenon of 'following up' also illustrates a recurring problem in damping down

false stories which spread like a bushfire. The overall importance of all three cases, with their simple plots and memorable tag-lines (baked swans, slaughtered donkeys and banned buns) is their potential for becoming urban myths, apocryphal stories spread by word of mouth. None of the apologies or clarifications were published with sufficient prominence to be noticed, and two did not appear for months afterwards. Meanwhile, the prejudice against asylum-seekers (or migrants) was allowed to fester.

The fourth, and final, example is of a slightly different order, but it illustrates the growing habit of newspapers to taint all asylum-seekers by linking them with Islamic fundamentalist terrorists. The fact that the police were willing to issue a swift, on-the-record denial is also significant. On 6 August 2004, the *Daily Express* front page headline was 'PLOT TO KILL BLAIR: Asylum seekers with hi-tech equipment and maps caught half a mile from PM's home'. The story alleged that 'a suspected Al Qaeda plot to target Tony Blair's home' had been foiled. It went on: 'Armed police arrested two asylum seekers on what was feared to be a reconnaissance mission half a mile from the house'. There was a lot of detail about the two Lithuanian men's supposed activities, the camcorders they were using, their stolen car, the fact that they had a map showing the route to the Durham village where Blair has a home. But the last paragraph gave the tale an entirely different slant. A spokesman from Durham police 'confirmed that two foreign nationals had been arrested acting suspiciously, but after they had been thoroughly interviewed the force was satisfied no security issues were involved and the pair were ultimately deported'.

The reaction of the police to this story was damning. A Durham police spokesman said: 'Let me say in the clearest possible language that this story is rubbish and the *Daily Express* was told this in unequivocal language when it first asked us about it'. He went on to point out that two Lithuanians were indeed arrested in a stolen car but they 'had no known connection with the Prime Minister's home... It is believed their presence was drugs related. No security issues were raised by their arrest.' It was also uncertain whether the men were seeking asylum. They were also described by the *Express* as 'illegal immigrants' and that matter has itself resulted in a complaint to the PCC by a Bristol-based refugees' group. A spokesman said: 'It is stories like these which give a bad name to genuine asylum seekers'.

Conclusion: what, if anything, can be done?

The sad reality, which is clear from the historical sections and from the four modern case histories, is that newspapers appeal to deep-seated racist and/or xenophobic views among their readerships. Therefore, however well-intentioned and committed we might be to doing something positive towards asylum-seekers and refugees, we have to recognise the immensity of the task. To put the problem in perspective, we have to see it in terms of not only trying to change the media's agenda but also trying to change the mindset of their audience. That unsavoury reality is the very reason I have selected instances of prejudicial reporting over a lengthy period and widened the case histories beyond stories relating specifically to asylum-seekers (indeed, it would be possible to make out a case for having included recent coverage of gypsies and travellers as a further example of the scapegoating and stereotyping of a minority group by popular papers). It is also a warning that treating the problems facing asylum-seekers as separate from the problems facing all migrants and ethnic minorities may prove misguided. However, the opposite may also be true: acting on behalf of asylum-seekers may be a way of highlighting the deeper, covert malaise.

There is one overarching point that must be grasped: negative, inaccurate, distorted reporting on a large and frequent scale is bound to awaken feelings among readers that may otherwise have lain dormant. Prejudices amongst some sections of the public towards all incomers to Britain, normally held discretely, have been aroused. As this paper has demonstrated, there was no widespread public outcry against asylum-seekers prior to a press campaign of vilification which had the effect of legitimising public hostility. In response, editors can argue that they were acting on behalf of their readers by providing a forum in which their concerns could be expressed. Even if we give that argument credence by accepting that papers were persuaded by their readers (and politicians) to act, the problem then needs to be viewed in terms of the tone of the editorial content in expressing those concerns. Was it balanced? Was it accurate? Was it responsible? On these three criteria the popular press has failed. Much of what has been published has been calculated to inflame a sensitive situation. There has been very little balancing material to explain the plight of asylum-seekers. Worse still, many of the stories have been inaccurate.

This drip-drip-drip of negative stories and alarmist headlines in papers that command the attention of a huge swathe of the adult British population cannot but have a negative impact on public opinion. If the only information provided to readers is hostile, one-sided, lacking in context and often wildly inaccurate, how can they be expected to see through the distorted media narrative? The situation is, of course, exacerbated by the fact that the people want to believe what they are reading because it confirms their prejudices. Repetition is also an important influence on the audience in two ways: it ensures that the message gets across even to the most casual of readers and, for the more regular reader, it is suggestive of the story's significance. I would argue that repetition on the scale of the popular papers' output on asylum-seekers amounts to propaganda.

That said, newspapers form only one medium among many. What about TV and radio? Their journalistic output is required by Acts of Parliament to be balanced and fair. However, this requirement relates only to the way stories are covered, not to

the choice of stories. There is overwhelming evidence that many stories selected for TV and radio bulletins are generated by what has appeared in newspapers. The press sets the news agenda for broadcasters with countless examples of 'follow-ups' to newspaper stories. Though the broadcast reporters usually interview people who take opposing views on a given subject, thus providing a greater measure of balance than in a popular paper, they often do so against the background of a story which, of itself, carries negative connotations. There are other infelicities too, as monitoring of BBC and ITV news broadcasts for the Article 19 report on the coverage of asylum-seekers and refugees revealed (Article 19 2003: 15-16). The main newspaper stories at the time of the survey concerned the existence, and later closure, of the Red Cross centre at Sangatte in France, and the numbers of asylum-seekers arriving in certain British towns. These stories were followed up by broadcast journalists who echoed the general line adopted by papers and used similar kinds of images to illustrate their segments. There were also occasions when items in TV bulletins repeated newspaper inaccuracies or were guilty of their own. There was an instance when the BBC replicated a *Daily Express* claim that Dover was being 'flooded by asylum seekers' and its reporter remarked: 'In some streets, everyone we spoke to was a newly-arrived asylum-seeker smuggled in, in the back of a lorry'. According to Article 19, this story confirmed 'two central myths': that asylum-seekers were spilling over our borders uncontrollably and that asylum-seekers were criminal by definition (Article 19 2003: 24). What was clear from the monitoring was that TV news reports did not challenge newspaper representation and thereby tended to act as a reinforcement of press stories.

There may be alternative views available on the internet but it is unlikely that people already predisposed to be hostile to asylum-seekers, and people who accept the veracity of stories in other media, will seek them out. So, even if we see the problem of representation of asylum-seekers in terms of what we might call 'the totality of the media', there is little likelihood of people having access to information which is anything other than negative. By people, of course, I also mean politicians. It is clear that politicians, including members of the government, take a close interest in an issue when 'the totality of the media' is engaged in publishing and broadcasting similar messages about that issue. In the case of asylum-seeking, it has become a matter of considerable party political debate and a central feature of the campaign for the May 2005 general election. It has also led to considerable policy activity - no fewer than four major pieces of legislation on asylum and immigration in seven years. It has been, in fact, a classic example of the press setting the political agenda.

The media-stimulated rise of a bitter debate over asylum-seeking has another far-reaching effect too: it has reawakened worries about racism in British society. Two quite separate sources provided recent evidence of increasing racism. According to one piece of academic research, overt racism, which had been on a steady decline for 14 years from 1987, rose again in 2002 and the authors thought the reason for the sudden reverse was 'probably' linked to media coverage of immigration and asylum issues (Rothon and Heath 2003). This research identified a long-term relationship between self-reported prejudice and hostile press coverage of immigration. In the second instance, opinion polling conducted in recent years suggests that race and immigration are perceived as one of the most important political issues in Britain, often outranking defence, crime and the economy (MORI 2005). Only health and education were seen as more important. Some 40 per cent of

(white) respondents did not want a black neighbour.⁵⁵ There has also been tentative evidence of attacks on asylum-seekers which were attributed to racism and which were fuelled by media stories (ICAR 2004: 68). Certainly, the terms in which asylum-seekers were abused (as ‘bogus’ and ‘milking the system’) echo newspaper allegations.

So, in such unpromising circumstances, what can be done? In spite of the overwhelming odds, doing nothing is not an option. In my view, groups representing asylum-seekers and refugees must consolidate their efforts to develop a media strategy. In effect, this means having a strategy to deal with popular newspapers. If this can be achieved in partnership with government then so much the better. What follows, therefore, is a set of suggestions that these groups might consider when drawing up their plans.

Using the Press Complaints Commission (PCC)

The PCC is the newspaper industry’s self-regulatory body that was set up to administer a code of ethics (known as the editor’s code of practice).⁵⁶ It covers all newspapers and magazines in Britain and its remit is to investigate and seek to resolve complaints made by individuals. There are several clauses in the code which might apply to people who believe they are victims of discrimination. Clause 12, which is specifically about discrimination, states:

- i.) The press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual’s race, colour, religion, sex, sexual orientation or to any physical or mental illness or disability.
- ii.) Details of an individual’s race, colour, religion, sexual orientation, physical or mental illness or disability must be avoided unless genuinely relevant to the story.

Clause 1 (accuracy) might also be applicable. The most relevant injunctions state:

- iii.) The Press must take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted material including pictures.
- iv.) The Press, whilst free to be partisan, must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact.

Other clauses refer to methods of newsgathering, protection of privacy, and protection for children, people in hospital and those suffering from grief or shock. In October 2003, after representations from concerned organisations and an increasing number of complaints about discriminatory press coverage, the PCC also issued a guidance note to editors specifically about the reporting of refugees and asylum-seekers.⁵⁷ This note, a so-called ‘soft guideline’, dealt with what it called ‘misunderstandings about terminology’ and pointed out the inappropriate use of the phrase ‘illegal asylum-seeker’. The note also warned editors about ‘the danger that inaccurate, misleading or distorted reporting may generate an atmosphere of fear and hostility that is not borne out by the facts’ while defending the right of papers to make ‘partisan comment’. The PCC guideline can be viewed as the first step on a long road, but it has been somewhat patchily observed thus far. In the three months

after it was circulated to editors there were several violations though only one paper, the Daily Express, seemed to have ignored it entirely (Hourelid 2005). The PCC's chairman has since promised to 'crack down' on abuses.⁵⁸ However, the PCC's record on complaints about discrimination have not been very encouraging. An analysis of ten years of PCC adjudications from 1991-2000, a period during which discrimination complaints rose from 1.7 per cent of all complaints received in 1993 to 10.6 per cent in 2000, none of the complaints about race or ethnicity were upheld. It was, noted the author, a 'significant and rather dramatic finding' (Frost 2004: 101-114).

The situation would not appear to have improved since. In 2003, 19.8 per cent of complaints to the PCC concerned discrimination, up from 17.9 per cent the previous year and 13.5 per cent the year before that. In its 2001 and 2002 reports, the PCC attributed the rises to the coverage of issues involving asylum-seekers and refugees (PCC 2001: 8; PCC 2002: 6). Its most recent report, in 2003, referred to discrimination complaints as 'a complicated situation' because 'a very high number of complaints' were made by people who disapproved of 'a news item that does not affect them personally' (PCC 2003: 4). The PCC will not entertain 'third party' complaints (that is, those made by anyone other than someone mentioned in an article). This rule creates three difficulties: it precludes people complaining about contentious generalisations in stories (such as 'Muslims torture women' or 'asylum-seekers are thieves'); it dissuades individual asylum-seekers or their representatives from complaining when stories contain no names; and it fails to address the underlying racist assumptions in stories and the stereotyping of groups, such as asylum-seekers. Examples of the frustrations caused by some of these problems are explored in detail in a forthcoming book (Petley 2006). In its latest publication which is designed 'to increase understanding and awareness' of the code, the PCC stresses that the clause on discrimination applies only to individuals (PCC 2005: 71-73).

Despite this track record, complaining to the PCC and, most importantly, lobbying the PCC, continues to offer the best chance of influencing newspaper coverage. Though the PCC's code committee last year rejected a suggested amendment to the code which would have widened the discrimination clause to refer to groups as well as individuals in order to aid asylum-seekers, there is no reason to believe that further sensible representations might not succeed.⁵⁹ Similarly, when dealing with complaints about discrimination, latitude should be shown towards third party complaints. These objectives might be attainable if enough pressure is mounted on the PCC. It certainly remains the case that whenever asylum-seekers believe that papers have been guilty of inaccuracy, discrimination or intrusions into their privacy they should complain. The weight and frequency of complaints should match the weight and frequency of false reporting.

Putting pressure on editors and journalists

Running in parallel with pressure on the PCC there should be a sustained attempt to convince individual editors of the error of their ways. They need to be reminded continually of what they are doing. If a paper has a readers' editor or ombudsman (as *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, the *Daily Mirror*, *The Sun*, *The Observer*, the *Independent on Sunday* and the *News of the World* do) then polite, factual, restrained letters and/or emails should be addressed to them. If not, then write direct to editors (and this includes the editors of regional evening and local weeklies). Again, the very tactics which papers use to get their message across - drip-drip-drip - should be employed. Editors need to be told as often as possible where their papers are going wrong.

If these letters are ignored then it might prove useful to copy the correspondence to a relevant MP and, possibly, the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) and also the Commission for Racial Equality. The important factor is to ensure that the widest number of concerned people know about the problems that asylum-seekers are facing from newspapers. The DCMS is keeping watch on the workings of press self-regulation and is monitoring its progress intermittently. Providing the department with material may not make much difference in the short-term but may have future benefits.

Editors can also be responsive to pressure from their own journalists. Forging alliances with individual reporters and writers may prove helpful, as might forming links with the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) at both national and local level. The NUJ's executive membership and headquarters staff is very sympathetic to the plight of minorities ill-treated by newspapers. The decision of the NUJ chapel at the *Daily Express* to complain to the PCC shows that some journalists are unhappy at being required to write prejudicial articles. In such circumstances it is sensible to get in touch with them, get to know them and then keep them regularly informed about the facts involving asylum-seekers. Indeed, these are just the kinds of journalist who might be relied upon to publish positive stories about asylum-seekers.

It is important for the groups representing asylum-seekers and refugees to form strong contacts with sympathetic journalists. When organisations are able to trust individual journalists they will then be confident enough to allow them to speak to individual asylum-seekers. And that must be the essential target: to reach a position in which asylum-seekers, especially those who wish to ensure their anonymity, can tell their stories without fear. It was heartening to read in the Article 19 report of the satisfaction among asylum-seekers who had been interviewed by Radio Leeds and the *Huddersfield Examiner* (Article 19 2003: 32). It is vital that asylum-seekers take advantage of as many opportunities as possible to explain their case to people through the media. It is all about presenting positive stories.

Of course, it is clear that the organisations face problems in trying to present that positive picture. Many asylum-seekers wish to remain anonymous or, at least, to maintain a low profile, because they fear reprisals, either against their family and friends in the countries they have left, or against themselves from the British authorities or British people. But there are many stories to be told about the reasons for their flight which are unknown to the British people and which, if they were told, might well generate a more sympathetic response. Newspapers like nothing

better than telling human interest stories and it is important to persuade those who are willing to take the risk to be interviewed.

The other work must be aimed at combating press myths. The most pervasive is the claim that asylum seekers are living high on the hog, receiving vast state hand-outs. Again, it is a matter of the groups who represent asylum-seekers and refugees to confront these stories at every opportunity. Indeed, there is a larger point to be made here: ALL false or prejudicial stories in newspapers, whether local weekly, regional evening or national titles, should be challenged by letters to the editor. If their letters are ignored, then complaints to the PCC should be made. And that leads me back to the need to maintain pressure on the PCC. Remember, it was consistent pressure that led to the release of the guidelines on terminology mentioned above.

Seminar Participants

The following people participated in a roundtable co-hosted by ippr and the Global Commission on International Migration to discuss the role of the media in the migration debate. The roundtable was followed by a public discussion, also co-hosted with GCIM, attended by some 100 people at which Professor Greenslade presented some of the ideas expressed in this Working Paper.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Organisation</i>
Mohammed Ben-Madani	<i>Maghreb Review</i>
Francoise Bissart	King Baudoin Foundation
Sara Buchanan	Article 19
Jean-Phillippe Chauzy	International Organisation for Migration
Heaven Crawley	AMRE Consulting
Jeff Crisp	Global Commission on International Migration
Clare Graham	UNHCR
Francesca Hopwood	ippr
Mike Jempson	MediaWise Trust
Regina Jere Malanda	<i>New African</i>
Jan O. Karlsson	Global Commission on International Migration
Rachel Kelly	ippr
Mr Komatfu	<i>Mainichi Shimbun</i>
Jean-Pierre Langellier	<i>Le Monde</i>
Heather Lima	Global Commission on International Migration
Jesse Mashate	Journalist
Walter Oppenheimer	<i>El Pais</i>
Joseph Odongkara	Journalist
Thomas Orzag-Land	Writer
Aspasia Papadopoulou	Global Commission on International Migration
Nick Pearce	ippr
Milica Pesic	Media Diversity Institute
Juliet Prager	Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust
Sue Roberts	Press Complaints Commission
Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah	ippr
Damian Tambini	University of Oxford
Terry Threadgold	University of Cardiff
Takeshi Yamashina	<i>Mainichi Shimbun</i>

Bibliography

- Ainley B (1998) 'Wanted more blacks in the media' *British Journalism Review*, 9(4)
- Ainley B (1998a) *Black Journalists, White Media*, Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books
- Alibhai-Brown Y (2000) *Who Do They Think We Are?*, London: Allen Lane
- Anderson PJ and Weymouth A (1999) *Insulting the public: The British Press and the European Union*, London: Longman
- Article 19 (2003) *What's the story?*, London: Article 19
- Bourne R (1990) *The Lords of Fleet Street: The Harmsworth Dynasty*, Boston: Unwin Hyman
- Childs D (1997) *Britain since 1945*, London: Routledge
- Deedes W F (1997) *Dear Bill*, Basingstoke: Macmillan
- Delano A (2001) *The Formation of the British Journalist, 1900-2000*, London: University of Westminster, Phd thesis
- Delano A and Henningham J (1995) *The News Breed: British Journalists in the 1990s*, London: London Institute
- Duffy B and Rowden L (2005) *You are what you read? How newspaper readership is related to views*, London: Mori Social Research Institute
- Edwards R (1988) *Goodbye Fleet Street*, London: Jonathan Cape
- Ferris P (1971) *The House of Northcliffe*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson
- Frost C (2004) 'The Press Complaints Commission: a study of ten years of adjudications of press complaints' *Journalism Studies* 5(1)
- Greenslade R (2003) *Press Gang: How Newspapers Make Profits from Propaganda*, Basingstoke: Macmillan
- Hourelid K (2005) 'Bogus is the new Black' *Lip* magazine No.3, February 2005
- ICAR (2004) *Media Image, Community Impact: Assessing the impact of media and political images of refugees and asylum-seekers on community relations in London*, London: Information Centre about Asylum-seekers and Refugees (ICAR)
- Kundnani A (2001) 'In a foreign land: the new popular racism' *Race & Class*, Vol.43, London: Sage Publications
- Littlejohn R (2001) *To Hell in a Handcart*, London: HarperCollins
- Medic N (2004) 'Making a meal of a myth' in *Satisfaction Guaranteed? Press Complaints Systems under Scrutiny*, Bristol: Media Wise

-
- Medic N (2004a) 'How I took on The Sun - and lost' *Daily Telegraph*, 15 July
- MORI (2005) *Long Term Trends: The Most Important Issues Facing Britain Today*, London: MORI <http://www.mori.com/polls/trends/issues.shtml>
- Morrison L (2004) *Negative media coverage - the same old story*, London: Amnesty International
- Morgan K O (1999) *The People's Peace*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Nicholl C (2002) *The Reckoning*, London: Vintage
- Nicolson H (1968) *Diaries and Letters, 1945-62*, London: Collins
- PCC (various years) *Annual Reports*, London: Press Complaints Commission
- PCC (2005) *The Editors' Codebook*, Cambridge: Press Standards Board of Finance
- Petley J (2006) 'Still no redress from the PCC' in Richardson J and Poole E (eds) *Muslims and the Media*, London: I.B. Tauris (forthcoming)
- Rothon C and Heath A (2003) *British Social Attitudes, 20th Annual Report*, London: National Centre for Social Research
- Sharf A (1964) *The British Press and Jews under Nazi Rule*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Solomos J (1989) *Race and Racism in Contemporary Britain*, Basingstoke: Macmillan
- Stow J (1603) *A Survey of London*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Strype J (1824) *Annals of the Reformation Volume VI*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Endnotes

¹ While all incomers were referred to as asylum-seekers, I am uncertain whether the people referred to by interviewees in Barking and Glasgow were actually asylum-seekers.

² All figures, Audit Bureau of Circulations, February 2005

³ 'Time for a More Liberal and 'Racist' Immigration Policy', *The Spectator*, 19 October 1991

⁴ <http://www.mori.com/polls/1997/ge.1997.shtml>;

<http://www.mori.com/polls/2001.election.shtml>

⁵ The 1951 United Nations Convention defines a refugee as a person who 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country...'

⁶ There is an absence of data on the social class of journalists, including the differences between those working for the tabloid and broadsheet papers. But my assertion, which is based on my own knowledge and anecdote, is tentatively supported by Delano.

⁷ *The Journalist*, December 1998. Colleen Harris, Director of Communication, CRE, lecture at City University, London, 15 March 2005

⁸ Bates S (2000) 'Brussels? You couldn't make it up...', *New Statesman*,

'Twit peaks - signs warn climbers: careful you'll fall off' *Daily Star*, 24 March 2004;

'Eurocrats have ruled that the kilt is 'womenswear'' *Daily Record*, 10 November 2003;

'No more dreaming of a white Christmas' *Sunday Express*, 21 December 2003;

'Shake 'n back - EU tells women to hand in worn-out sex toys' *The Sun*, 4 February 2004

⁹ *Daily Mail*, 15 January 1934; *Daily Mirror*, 22 January 1934

¹⁰ 'Alien women in luxury' *Sunday Dispatch*, 7 January 1940

¹¹ *Reynolds News*, 22 April 1945, p.2

¹² *News Chronicle*, 28 November 1946

¹³ cf. *Daily Mail*, 1 May 1946 p.2; 23 July 1946

¹⁴ *Daily Express*, 5 August 1947, p.2

¹⁵ *Morecambe and Heysham Visitor*, 6 August 1947

¹⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, 18 November 1947

¹⁷ *Manchester Guardian*, 2 September 1958

¹⁸ *The Times*, 1 September 1958

¹⁹ *Daily Express*, 1 September 1958

²⁰ 'Should we let them keep pouring in?', *Daily Mail*, 2 September 1958

²¹ *Daily Mirror*, 2 September 1958; 3 September 1958

²² Letter to *The Times*, 2 September 1958

²³ *The Times*, 3 September 1958, pp.7-11

²⁴ *The Times*, 22 April 1968

²⁵ *People*, 21 April 1968, p.1; *Sunday Mirror*, 21 April 1968

²⁶ *Sunday Times*, 21 April 1968

²⁷ *News of the World*, 21 April 1968

²⁸ *Sunday Telegraph*, 21 April 1968

²⁹ 'An evil speech' *The Times*, 22 April 1968

³⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 22 April 1968

³¹ *Daily Express*, 22 April 1968

³² *Daily Express*, 20 March 2004; 22 March 2004; 25 May 2003; 19 May 2003

³³ *Daily Express*, 16 August 2004

³⁴ *Daily Express*, 20 January 2004

³⁵ *Daily Express*, 19 January 2004; 22 January 2004

³⁶ *Press Gazette*, 'Express staff call in PCC over anti-gypsy articles', 29 January 2004

³⁷ *Daily Mail*, 30 November 1998

³⁸ *Daily Mail*, 12 January 1999

³⁹ *Daily Mail*, 19 May 2003

⁴⁰ *News of the World*, 21 January 2001

-
- ⁴¹ 'Asylum lunacy of soft-touch Britain' letter to *News of the World*, 13 May 2001; 'New raids on city's homes for refugees' *Leicester Mercury*, 6 June 2001
- ⁴² *News of the World*, 19 May 2002
- ⁴³ 'Welcome to Blairitania' *Daily Mail*, 9 February 2001
- ⁴⁴ 'Why the Sun is anti-Labour once again', *The Guardian*, 7 March 2005;
- ⁴⁵ *The Sun*, 15 June 2001
- ⁴⁶ *The Sun*, 2 April 2004
- ⁴⁷ *The Sun*, 22 January 2001
- ⁴⁸ *The Sun*, 24 September 2002
- ⁴⁹ *The Sun*, 8 June 2003
- ⁵⁰ *The Sun*, 20 February 2003
- ⁵¹ *The Sun*, 26 April 2005
- ⁵² *The Sun*, 10 December 2004 cf. 'The British flag is lowered in Tipton', *The Sun*, 16 July 2002.
- ⁵³ 'The road from Morecambe Bay leads to Downing Street', *The Sun*, 13 February 2004.
- ⁵⁴ *Hansard*, 15 May 2003, <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200203/cmhansrd/vo030515/halltext/30515h01.htm>
- ⁵⁵ 'Four out of 10 whites do not want black neighbour, poll shows' *The Guardian*, 19 January 2004
- ⁵⁶ <http://www.pcc.org.uk/cop/intro.html>
- ⁵⁷ http://www.pcc.org.uk/reports/edit_detail.asp?id=20
- ⁵⁸ 'Newspapers flout ruling on asylum seekers' *The Guardian*, 31 December 2004
- ⁵⁹ 'A squeak instead of a roar' *The Guardian*, 17 May 2004

➔ This working paper examines the role of the UK media in representing asylum and migration issues. The author examines historical evidence of how newcomers have been portrayed by UK newspapers and argues that sections of the press have adopted a negative stance towards immigrants and refugees, turning them into the scapegoats for society's alleged ills. The working paper sets out policy recommendations to tackle inaccurate reporting.

Roy Greenslade has been a journalist for 40 years. In 2003 he became Professor of Journalism at City University.

ippr's Asylum and Migration Working Paper Series provide an overview of key areas of policy and practice with the aim of encouraging policy making that is underpinned by empirical evidence about the causes, nature, and consequences of migration.