

Refugee Council



Leveson Inquiry: submission of evidence

February 2012

1. About this submission

This submission was written on behalf of the Refugee Council in October 2011. The evidence is based on the Refugee Council's regular and close monitoring of the daily and Sunday national newspapers and online news coverage, including national and regional news websites. It is also based on our extensive experience over the years in working closely with the media on asylum and refugee issues.

Due to time constraints and lack of funds it has not been possible to run substantive research or a detailed analysis of portrayals of asylum seekers and refugees in the media for the purposes of this submission.

This is instead an outline of the context in which we find ourselves, and our view into how the media portrays asylum seekers and refugees, using a selection of current examples to illustrate this. It also looks at whether the role of the Press Complaints Commission has been useful in combating inaccurate or imbalanced reporting on this subject.

The submission also incorporates information offered by Still Human Still Here, a coalition of 49 organisations which are campaigning to end the destitution of refused asylum seekers in the UK.

The Refugee Council is the leading organisation supporting and advocating for refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. The Refugee Council is committed to working towards creating a fair, humane and effective asylum system that provides protection and enables refugees to rebuild their lives in safety.

2. Context over last 10 years

Over the last decade, there have been a number of studies into the portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK media, largely because this group has consistently been high on the political and media agenda. Asylum seekers and refugees have been seen to be portrayed unfairly by certain sections of the media, often in breach of the Press Complaints Commission's Code of Practice.

This can be attributed to the sharp rise in asylum applications at the start of the 2000s, reaching a record number in 2002, causing a steady rise in media coverage on the issue of asylum. Other events, such as the closure of Sangatte refugee camp in Calais in 2003 and crises at the Home Office around constant and controversial changes in policy around this time caused peaks of intense media coverage – and the majority of coverage, particularly in tabloid and right-wing press, was notably hostile.

For example, a petition in The Sun in January 2003 urging Tony Blair to 'stop Britain becoming a soft touch for illegal asylum seekers'¹ demonstrates this hostility (The Sun, 28th January 2003). Over 300,000

¹ The Sun, 28 January 2003, "Read this, and get angry", <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article154504.ece>

people signed the petition, making it the largest response to a newspaper petition at that time, according to The Sun.

During this time, the Refugee Council and other refugee support organisations made a concerted effort to combat hostile coverage by writing to editors to and making complaints to the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) in response to inaccurate and unbalanced reporting. The use of the term 'bogus asylum seeker' and 'illegal asylum seeker' was consistently used in reports – despite the fact being an illegal or bogus asylum seeker is not possible in legal terms.

After a sustained campaign led by the Refugee Council, in October 2003 the Press Complaints Commission published a Guidance Note on Refugees and Asylum Seekers² for newspaper editors on media reporting of asylum issues, in particular to address inaccurate reporting, to be used in conjunction with their Code of Practice.

In 2005 the Refugee Council also launched an awareness raising campaign entitled 'Don't Believe the Type' at Glastonbury Festival to combat negative reporting in the press, which gained support from celebrities including comedian Russell Brand.

An ICAR report in 2007³ found that since the publication of the PCC guidance note, there was an overall improvement in press coverage of asylum issues, particularly inaccurate terminology and only a small number of articles breached the guidelines. The report did find, however, that coverage in all papers was preoccupied with a system in 'chaos', but also noted this may be attributable to the priorities of politicians rather than intentional media bias.

In evidence to the UK Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights, the Commission for Racial Equality in 2007 noted that "in certain high circulation newspapers coverage of asylum in recent years has often been disproportionate, inaccurate and hostile". It also highlighted the repetitive use of derogatory or negative words like 'flood', 'wave', 'bogus' and 'fraudulent' in association with asylum seekers.⁴

The UK Independent Race Monitor also stressed that "Repeated references to abuse and reducing the numbers of asylum applicants tend to reinforce popular misconceptions that abuse is enormous in scale when in fact it is a small proportion of people who enter the UK."⁵

3. The situation today:

Through our regular monitoring of the media to date, our view is that the situation appears to have remained much the same since 2007. The focus has changed: with wider immigration numbers soaring, this has become the key concern for the right-wing press, while number of asylum seekers has dropped dramatically since 2002. But despite this, asylum issues are still very often covered in an unbalanced and hostile manner, regularly attacking individuals who allegedly abuse the asylum system to illustrate the Home Office's failures to control the system.

An indicator of the influence this negative portrayal of asylum issues in the media has on public attitudes to asylum is shown in a number of opinion polls. Although numbers of asylum applications are at their lowest since 1989⁶ (17,000 applications last year), according to opinion polls, the British public still wildly overestimate the numbers of asylum seekers in the UK and are confused about who asylum seekers are:

² Press Complaints Commission: *Guidance Note on Refugees and Asylum Seekers*, <http://www.pcc.org.uk/advice/editorials-detail.html?article=OTE>

³ ICAR (2007): *Reporting asylum. The UK Press and the Effectiveness of PCC Guidelines*, London: ICAR.

⁴ Joint Committee on Human Rights, *The Treatment of Asylum Seekers*, 10th Report of the Session 2006-07, paragraph 344.

⁵ Joint Committee on Human Rights, *op. cit.*, paragraph 348.

⁶ Home Office, Control of Immigration quarterly statistical summary, fourth quarter, 2010. <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/science-research/research-statistics/immigration/>

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A Migration Observatory poll⁷ showed that when respondents were asked to think about who immigrants are, respondents were most likely to think of asylum seekers (62%), and a majority supported the reduction of asylum seekers (56%). A Refugee Council poll⁸ in April 2011 showed that 44% of the population believe over 100,000 people were granted refugee status in 2009, when the figure was actually closer to 4000. Most people also thought asylum seekers were from Eastern European countries.

In contrast with the situation in the late 1990's and early 2000's, asylum seekers represent less than 5% of annual immigration according to 2009 ONS estimates. Therefore it appears the attitude that asylum seekers are 'flooding' into Britain still prevails.

Politicians do little to thwart this myth through their rhetoric of 'tightening our borders', ensuring only those with 'genuine' claims can stay, and criticising immigrants for not making an effort to integrate – and it is these lines that get media coverage. But aside from this, the media has been and still is responsible for perpetuating the ideas that there too many asylum seekers here, that there are few genuine asylum seekers, and the majority are allowed to stay and take advantage of our 'soft-touch welfare system'.

4. Examples of portrayals of refugees – national print media

For the purpose of this submission, we have mainly focused on the newspapers that we monitor most closely and that we feel cover the issue of asylum and immigration most consistently, whether positively or negatively: The Guardian, the Independent, The Daily Mail, The Daily Telegraph, and the Daily Express.

The Guardian and Independent newspapers (and their Sunday equivalents, the Independent on Sunday and the Observer) consistently report in a balanced and fair way about asylum policy, and include positive stories about the contributions of refugees and asylum seekers using refugee voices to illustrate the issues where possible.

However, coverage of this issue in other sections of the media, in particular the Daily Mail, the Daily Express and the Daily Telegraph is often cause for alarm. The way the issue is framed, through terminology, misinformation, and unbalanced reporting means coverage of this issue is consistently derogatory and inflammatory.

We have included a few examples below to illustrate this:

4.1 Misleading or false information

Some sections of the press are prone to misleading readers through sensational headlines using false information – while it could be said some newspapers sensationalise news on many topics as is their style, these headlines enhance the negative stereotype of asylum seekers.

For example, the Daily Mail published an article headlined: "*Failed asylum seeker who has dodged deportation for a decade told he can stay...because he goes to the GYM*"⁹. Similar stories were also in the Metro and Daily Star. We and other refugee agencies highlighted a response from www.FullFact.org¹⁰ via our social media outlets, stating that this is false information, and while the Mail

⁷ Migration Observatory, *Thinking behind the numbers: Understanding Public Opinion on Immigration in Britain*, October 2011, <http://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/understanding-uk-public-opinion/executive-summary>

⁸ Opinium research carried out an online survey for the Refugee Council of 2,017 GB adults aged 18+ from 1st to 3rd March 2011, http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/news/archive/press/2011/april/20110418_refugeepoll

⁹ *Daily Mail*, 24 October 2011, "*Failed asylum seeker who has dodged deportation for a decade told he can stay...because he goes to the GYM*", <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2052714/Failed-asylum-seeker-Amir-Beheshti-stay-goes-GYM.html>

¹⁰ www.Fullfact.org, Was an asylum seeker allowed to stay because he goes to the gym?, <http://fullfact.org/factcheck/did-an-immigrant-win-residence-by-going-to-gym-3057>

article does qualify this statement with details of the case within the article, the vast majority of readers will understandably raise concerns about why refused asylum seekers are being allowed to stay in the UK for gym membership, and adds to the feeling of chaos within the asylum system.

This is similar to the story originally published in the Daily Telegraph: "Immigrant allowed to stay because of pet cat", 17 Oct 2009¹¹. Theresa May quoted this in her infamous immigration speech at Conservative party conference in October 2011, provoking further media furore.

We have also had direct experience of newspapers fabricating quotes in order to support their own messaging. For example, we responded to a request from a journalist working for the Sun in November 2009, who was looking to speak to immigrants or refugees who had settled in the UK. One of our refugee clients was interviewed and photographed for the paper. The journalist sent her the copy to approve before filing the story. The piece was published in the paper on 27 November 2009, "*UK faces crisis over foreigner tide - Migrate Britain*", but was different to that approved, and they had fabricated parts of her quote. e.g the title of the piece said: "I will never go back" when the agreed copy had said she would return as soon as Zimbabwe was safe for her family. The story could potentially have endangered her family, and her reputation within the Zimbabwean community. We immediately complained to the journalist, who blamed the sub-editors. The Sun agreed to publish a letter to the editor with a correction, and sent our client flowers. But to further rectify the situation, she was forced to speak to various Zimbabwean news outlets about the experience to ensure it was clear to her community that the Sun newspaper had fabricated her quote. This is an example of the newspaper fabricating a quote to fit in with the message of the story – that huge amounts of immigrants are here to stay.

4.2 Terminology

While accurate terminology has improved since the publication of the PCC guidelines, there are still occasional instances when the words 'bogus' or 'illegal asylum seeker' are used in articles about refused asylum seekers. The term asylum seeker has also been used to refer to people who are clearly immigrants, and there is no way of knowing if they have sought asylum or not. Again, this reinforces the stereotype that asylum seekers are immigrants using the 'soft touch' asylum system to gain entry to Britain, rather than people seeking protection here.

A more recent concern is the frequent use of the term 'former asylum seeker' by newspapers including the Daily Telegraph, the Daily Mail, Daily Express, to refer to people who have been granted refugee status. The term is used in negative stories to associate that person with what is now a derogatory term, despite them being accepted as a 'genuine' refugee. These papers do use the term refugee, but only in stories when they are sympathetic to that person, as explained in section 4.4.

For example, the term 'former asylum seeker' was used in a number of negative stories about refugees being housed in 'luxury council housing'. See the Daily Mail, 10 July 2010: "Somali asylum seeker family given £2m house... after complaining 5-bed London home was 'in poor area'"¹². The first line refers to the family as 'former asylum seekers'. They fail to note that the family now have refugee status and are therefore entitled to council housing as any British citizen. In doing this they reinforce the myth that asylum seekers are given special treatment and are taking advantage of our welfare system. This is both misleading about the rights of refugees when they are given status, and further demonises asylum seekers.

¹¹ Daily Telegraph, 17 Oct 2009.: "Immigrant allowed to stay because of pet cat", <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/6360116/Immigrant-allowed-to-stay-because-of-pet-cat.html>

¹² Daily Mail, 10 July 2010: "Somali asylum seeker family given £2m house... after complaining 5-bed London home was 'in poor area'"'. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1293730/Somali-asylum-seeker-family-given-2m-house--complaining-5-bed-London-home-poor-area.html>

Similar stories include:

- "Former asylum seeker faces jail over £30,000 benefits fraud", Telegraph, 16 Mar 2011¹³.
- "We must be rental", the Sun, 30 November 2009¹⁴

4.3 Balance:

While at the Refugee Council we consistently receive requests from the Guardian, Independent, and BBC for comment on government announcements or reports relating to asylum, we are rarely contacted by the Daily Telegraph, Daily Mail, or Daily Express or the other tabloids for comment. They will consistently include statements from right-wing, anti-migration organisations such as Migration Watch or the Tax Payers' Alliance, but rarely include comments from NGOs or left-wing think tanks to balance the story.

In terms of proactive press work, these sections of the press are rarely receptive. When we send out general statements to the press in reaction to the new Home Office asylum statistics for example, the Telegraph will usually not pick up and publish our statements or those from other refugee organisations, while the Guardian, Independent and BBC will.

It is also rare for these papers to include refugee voices in their coverage, while the Guardian and Independent would regularly interview refugees at length for opinion on the issues that affect them directly.

4.4 Topics covered

There is a clear distinction between choice of topics covered by different sections of the media:

In the Daily Telegraph, Mail, Express and some of the tabloids, we regularly see articles about individuals abusing the system, 'bogus' gay asylum seekers, asylum seekers or refugees being housed in luxury accommodation, 'ludicrous' Human Rights Act cases that allow people to stay in the UK, and chaos in the asylum system including failure to deport failed asylum seekers. This reporting perpetuates the feeling of fear that our borders are being attacked and reinforce stereotypes that asylum seekers are taking advantage of the system.

We rarely see articles about child detention, abuse of adults in detention, destitution, positive contributions of asylum seekers and refugees, integration, as often reported in the Guardian, and the Independent.

We notice that the Telegraph, Mail and Express will write about refugees or asylum seekers in a positive way, but only if they are the 'right kind'. For example in October 2011, the Daily Mail wrote supportive pieces about an 88 year old widow from Zimbabwe who was due to be deported, and took credit when she received a reprieve from the Home Office.¹⁵ This is presumably because the Daily Mail have an anti-Zimbabwe stance, and also because the woman in question was elderly and readers would therefore have sympathy.

4.6 Use of unrelated images

¹³ "Former asylum seeker faces jail over £30,000 benefits fraud", Telegraph, 16 Mar 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/8383817/Former-asylum-seeker-faces-jail-over-30000-benefits-fraud.html>

¹⁴ The Sun, 30 November 2009, "We must be rental", <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/2751333/Former-asylum-seeker-lives-in-luxurious-home-paid-for-by-housing-benefit.html>

¹⁵ Daily Mail, 25 October 2011: "Reprise for widow ordered home to face Mugabe thugs: Deportation lifted after Mail tells her story". <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2053434/Reprise-widow-ordered-home-face-Mugabe-thugs-Deportation-lifted-Mail-tells-story.html>

The consistent use of images of young men queuing for food at Calais by the Daily Express, Daily Mail, and tabloids in stories that have no relation to the situation in Calais is another area of concern. The image is often used in stories about population growth in the UK due to immigration. This again has the effect of creating a feeling that hoards of people are trying to enter the country.

5. Conclusions

Many of the examples referred to above indicate that inaccurate, discriminatory and misleading information is being printed in breach of the PCC Code of Practice.

Part of the problem may be that there is inadequate use of the PCC complaint mechanism, but this in turn may be because there is a lack of confidence in the procedure's effectiveness. For example, Daily Express journalists twice reported their own paper to the PCC, including for its "sustained campaign against asylum seekers in pursuit of circulation" in 2001, and then an article in January 2004 entitled: "1.6 million gypsies ready to flood in." But their complaints were rejected.¹⁶

Clause 12 of the Code of Practice has also failed to address inaccurate asylum reporting as it is focused on individuals and not groups. It states that "The Press must avoid prejudicial or pejorative reference to an individual's race, colour, religion, sexual orientation or to any physical or mental illness or disability." As asylum seekers are not a race or a single religion Clause 12 is not an effective tool in preventing inflammatory comments (nor are asylum seekers generally protected under the relevant race relation and non-discrimination laws).

The new Guidelines on reporting on asylum have been useful in curtailing the use of the term "bogus asylum seeker" and reducing the conflation of refugees and asylum seekers in articles. However, it has been ineffective in stopping the linking of asylum seekers with other generally negative terms such as 'flood', 'crime', 'terrorism' and 'madness'.

We would agree with the UNHCR in noting that the PCC Guidance needs strengthening. The Joint Committee on Human Rights concluded that the "evidence we received from the PCC was not reassuring. Its existing system is not sufficiently robust to protect asylum seekers and other vulnerable minorities from the adverse effects of unfair and inflammatory media stories."¹⁷

A new clause, the issuing of new and stronger guidance on immigration and asylum, and more rigorous enforcement of both the Code and guidance would help to stop the kind of prejudicial coverage that has impacted on the policy debate and the lives of asylum seekers over the last decade.

By Philippa McIntyre, Refugee Council, October 2011.

Thanks to Mike Kaye from Still Human Still Here for his assistance in developing this submission.

Statement of Truth

I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed ... 

Date 15/02/12

¹⁶ UNHCR, *Refugees*, Issue number 142, page 19, 2006.

¹⁷ Joint Committee on Human Rights, *op. cit.*, paragraph 364.

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