



## **Runnymede Trust**

**Submission to the Leveson Inquiry: Culture, Practice and Ethics of the Press  
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Authors: Kate Smart and Dr. Roger Grimshaw, the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies

### **About the Runnymede Trust**

Runnymede is a social policy research organisation focused on race equality and race relations. We work by identifying barriers to race equality and good race relations; enabling effective action for social change and influencing policy at all levels through providing thought leadership and robust evidence.

[www.runnymedetrust.org](http://www.runnymedetrust.org)

### **Introduction**

In 2003 the Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (ICAR) was commissioned by the Greater London Authority to carry out research about the impact on community relations in London of press reporting of asylum. This was carried out in partnership with the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (CCJS). In 2004 a further research study was carried out by ICAR, again in partnership with CCJS. This study, which was funded by the Home Office, surveyed a wider cross-section of the UK press to assess the effectiveness of the Press Complaints Commission Guidance Note on Reporting Asylum Seekers and Refugees.

In 2011 ICAR became part of the Runnymede Trust.

The Leveson Inquiry has expressed an interest in receiving submissions on the impact of newspaper practices. We believe that the reports of these two research studies are relevant to this Inquiry. The reports are:

ICAR (2004) *Media Image, Community Impact*, London, ICAR  
<http://www.icar.org.uk/micifullreport.pdf>

Smart, K., Grimshaw, R., McDowell, C. and Crosland, B., (2007) **Reporting Asylum: The UK Press and the Effectiveness of PCC Guidelines**, London, ICAR  
[http://www.icar.org.uk/reporting\\_asylum.pdf](http://www.icar.org.uk/reporting_asylum.pdf)  
<http://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/opus704/ReportingAsylum.pdf>

A brief summary of these reports is given below. Further details about how the studies were conducted, their findings, conclusions and recommendations are contained in the full reports.

### **Media Image Community Impact – summary of findings**

The *Media Image Community Impact* report found that unbalanced and inaccurate media images of asylum seekers and refugees were frequent and powerful.

It found that most of the Londoners who were interviewed had sceptical view of press reports, and preferred to base their opinions on everyday contact with a diverse population. However scepticism cannot correct factual inaccuracies.

It found that hostile attitudes to asylum seekers and refugees were more likely among uncritical readers and harassment was most likely when hostile media images coincide with local experiences of deprivation and competition for services in short supply. Hostile reporting legitimises the prejudices of those involved in the harassment of asylum seekers and refugees.

The cumulative effect of frequent reports of questionable accuracy, plus repeated commentary that uses hostile epithets, creates the impetus for the legitimization of violence and harassment.

It found that harassment of refugees and asylum seekers was occurring on a daily basis, and it was largely unrecorded and rarely reported to the authorities. Police and local government were alert to the likelihood of, and anxious about, community unrest and harassment of asylum seekers and refugees following negative, hostile and inflammatory press coverage. Refugees and asylum seekers who have been victims of harassment and representatives of refugee communities felt strongly that the press presented hostile images of asylum seekers and refugees, that this was in itself a form of harassment and that it increased the likelihood of local harassment of individual asylum seekers and refugees.

### **Reporting Asylum – summary of findings**

The *Reporting Asylum* report found that the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) Guidance Note on Reporting Asylum and Refugees has been helpful in identifying and proscribing erroneous terms but has failed to eradicate their use and because of its limited scope has not tackled other problems in the way that asylum is reported.

It found a range of inaccuracies in the sample of newspaper articles, including misuse of statistics, groundless claims, misrepresentation and confusion of comment, conjecture and fact. Inaccuracies uncovered often relate to fear inducing subjects and/or hostile views. Some instances of hostile reporting are sufficiently extreme to be considered inflammatory and raise concerns under the Public Order Act.

The Editor's Code makes clear that reporting which is 'unduly hostile' i.e. makes hostile remarks based on inaccuracy, is proscribed. This study concluded that it is not clear how far hostile reporting is permissible when it is based on accurate information or when hostile allegations are contained in opinion pieces which present little or no factual information, accurate or otherwise.

It found that the vast majority of the newspaper articles in the sample were reported from a national perspective, lacking international context – despite the clear relevance of the international dimension to understanding asylum. The vast majority of the articles provided little or no legal context. Articles generally failed to seek the views or present the experiences of those most affected by the events reported – the individual asylum seekers and refugees.

It found that in the majority of ‘political’ articles (for example, articles about the asylum system, asylum policies and the political debate) reporting was tired, repetitive and unquestioning. It perpetuated the dominant theme of political and media images of asylum in recent years – of a system in chaos requiring further control – without investigating fully contextual information to uphold or dispel this view.

The study raised concerns that the PPC’s procedures preventing third party complaints limit the effectiveness of the Guidance Note, particularly where the subject of a newspaper article speaks limited English and is uncertain of their rights. This also makes complaints difficult when articles relate to anonymous groups of people rather than individual asylum seekers or refugees.

#### **An example of the newspaper articles from this period**

We would like to bring to the attention of the Inquiry an example of the newspaper reports examined during the research period, to illustrate some of the concerns.

*Article from the News of the World, August 17, 2003. The headline is: Asylum Seekers’ Free £220 Taxi. The sub heading is: And guess what...YOURE paying the fare.*

Asylum seekers without other means of support are provided with temporary accommodation by the Home Office. Sometimes this requires them to be moved between locations. This article questions why taxis are used when public transport would be cheaper. The subject of the article is not a cause for concern. Concerns with this article are as follows:

- (1) It includes photographs of a family of asylum seekers getting into and out of a vehicle, including children, their faces clearly visible. It appears to be a photograph taken without permission from a parent or guardian. Showing the faces of children without such permission is in breach of the Editor’s Code of Practice.
- (2) In a further photograph, the family are entering a building, which the article says is in Birmingham. The caption to the photograph is: ‘Final destination: a flat above an estate agent’s office’. The name of the estate agents is given. The street name is not shown but the building number is visible as is the telephone number for the business. All of this information would make the accommodation easy to locate. Given that asylum seekers are fleeing persecution from regimes that may have agents operating in the UK and given that asylum seekers are often

victims of harassment, publicising their address without their permission is irresponsible.

- (3) At the bottom of the article are highlighted the questions: 'WHAT DO YOU THINK? Does it make you angry...?' The newspaper seems to be encouraging readers to feel angry in response to the article. Given that asylum seekers are frequently victims of harassment, encouraging readers to feel angry while showing the faces and identifying the accommodation of a family of asylum seekers is irresponsible.

### **Key issues for the Leveson Inquiry**

Reflecting on the evidence and conclusions of these reports, we would ask the Inquiry to consider these key issues:

#### **1. Accuracy**

The statement in the Editor's Code of Practice that

*"the Commission – in previous adjudications under Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Code – has underlined the danger that inaccurate, misleading or distorted reporting may generate an atmosphere of fear and hostility that is not borne out by the facts"*

should be referenced in any new guidance on reporting asylum. Newspapers should be mindful of the cumulative effects of inaccurate and stereotypical reporting of refugees and asylum seekers on their sense of safety and well being as well as on public trust and community relations. The PCC, or an alternative regulatory body, should offer an interpretation of the term 'significant inaccuracy' contained in the Editor's Code.

#### **2. Hostility**

The Press Complaints Commission, or an alternative regulatory body, should advise editors that relentless repetition of hostile epithets amounts to unbalanced reporting and is likely to generate hostile views among local communities. Certain words and phrases risk being considered inflammatory, taking into account other aspects of reporting, and this is especially true for headlines. Reports referring to numbers of asylum seekers that use expressions which are vague, generalised and emotive without reference to verifiable sources are likely to produce or reinforce misinformed and hostile attitudes. The PCC, or an alternative regulatory body, should offer an interpretation of how far hostile reporting is permissible when it is based on accurate information or when hostile allegations are contained in opinion pieces which present little or no factual information.

The PCC regulatory framework offers some redress to individuals. It fails to address systematic bias and prejudice that amounts to propaganda against groups that fall outside the guidelines on discrimination. The PCC, or an alternative regulatory body, should offer the opportunity for concerns to be investigated on behalf of such groups of people. The PCC, or an alternative

regulatory body, should offer the opportunity for concerns to be investigated about reporting trends as well as one-off reports.

### **3. Vulnerability**

In recognition of the special vulnerabilities of people who are seeking protection from persecution, newspapers should avoid publishing identifiable photographs of asylum seekers or refugees or their accommodation without first seeking their permission, unless there is a demonstrable public interest (in accordance with the PCC Code of Practice as it relates to privacy and special measures for vulnerable groups). The PCC, or an alternative regulatory body, should offer the opportunity for third parties to raise concerns on behalf of vulnerable individuals and to have those complaints investigated.

### **4. Standards**

The Press Complaints Commission, or an alternative regulatory body, should advise editors that they should adhere to the spirit as much as the letter of the Code of Practice and strive for consistently high standards. Editors should be encouraged to promote the ICAR@Runnymede best practice standard for reporting asylum. This is reporting which:

- Is informative
- Provides appropriate context
- Draws on a range of identifiable sources of information and viewpoints
- Includes fair representation of the opinions and experiences of those people affected
- Avoids generalised, unspecific allegations likely to inspire hostility

### **5. Internships**

To assist with improvements in the way asylum is reported, newspapers should be encouraged to offer internships to refugees who are qualified journalists, especially those who have sought asylum in the U.K. as a result of their journalistic activities in their country of origin.

***For further information, please contact Kate Smart on [kate.smart@live.co.uk](mailto:kate.smart@live.co.uk)***