

To what extent do
media
representations of
refugees and asylum
seekers limit thei...



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As the number of asylum seekers and refugees entering the United Kingdom continues to rise, one of the pressing concerns of the European Union and the UK government is ensuring their integration within society. However, at present asylum seekers and refugees are not integrating well within society, reports have suggested that this is partly due to community tensions (ICAR, 2004). It has been argued that media coverage is adding to these tensions.

As the number of asylum seekers and refugees in the UK has risen, so too has media interest in asylum issues. This is particularly evident in the national newspapers. The majority of reporting shows asylum seekers in a negative way, questioning their genuineness, rather than recognising the plight they have endured. Asylum seekers are commonly presented as 'bogus' or as 'economic migrants', with the media implying that they are not fleeing persecution but are merely seeking a better life in the UK with greater economic stability.

Reporters often ignore the real reason why asylum seekers and refugees are in fact often risking life and limb to seek asylum in the UK. Other media coverage involving asylum issues often details incidents of asylum seekers and refugees' involvement in criminal activity, or criticises government for failing to deal with asylum issues effectively. Much reporting concentrates on the cost of asylum procedures. It is difficult to assess the precise impact of the media on its' audience, it is even more challenging to assess how media coverage affects behaviour.

Nevertheless, inaccurate and unbalanced reporting is commonly suspected by refugee supporting agencies, community groups, local authorities, the

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police and researchers to contribute to racist attacks on asylum seekers and refugees and to be a barrier to integration”(ICAR, 2004). This was also identified as a concern by the UNHCR when they expressed criticism of the British media in meetings with the Home Secretary (UNHCR, 2003). This essay aims to explore this concern, examining the extent to which the media are responsible for limiting the integration of refugees and asylum seekers within society.

The essay will firstly examine the official definitions of the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’, it will then explore the role of the media in influencing thoughts and behaviour, before examining, in terms of their official definitions, whether the media represent refugees and asylum seekers favourably or unfavourably. This examination will draw upon examples of positive and negative reporting in the press. The essay will then attempt to link negative reporting of asylum issues with racism and xenophobia within society, before showing how this in turn limits the integration of asylum seekers and refugees into mainstream society.

It is important to recognise the official definitions of the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ because these terms are often employed in an incorrect and contradictory way. For example, a reporter may make reference to an ‘illegal asylum seeker’, since everybody has the fundamental right to request asylum under international law, this term is contradictory and does not really make sense (RAM, 2004). The term ‘economic migrant’ is also commonly used by the media to refer to an asylum seeker or refugee (Kaye, 1998).

Whereas an economic migrant is a person who leaves their home country to seek work and opportunities unavailable there, an asylum seeker is somebody who has applied for asylum against persecution under the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees, and is awaiting a decision. According to the UN Convention a refugee is a person who, “owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality and either unable or, owing to fear, is unwilling to return” (Johnston et al, 2000).

When examining the role of the media in inciting racism and xenophobia within society it is important to look at previous work theorising the effects of the media on its audience. Kaye (1998) postulates that media analysts views on the role of media in influencing public opinion has gone through four identifiable stages. In the first stage of thinking the media are regarded as highly influential. This model of media effects is often referred to as the ‘hypodermic needle’ (Macionis & Plummer, 1997).

This is the idea that the mass media are so powerful that they can ‘inject’ their messages into the audience. Makers of media messages can get their audience to think or do whatever they want them to. Uncertainty that the audience could be this passive led to the second stage of thinking. This is referred to as the ‘empiricist tradition’. As the name suggests media analysts in the 1920s and 30s undertook much systematic research into the effects of media (Kaye, 1998). This led to what Kaye (1998) terms theories of minimal

consequence, which de-emphasized the significance of the media's influence.

Whereas in the first stage the role of the media was overplayed, in the second stage the role of the media was underplayed. The third stage, beginning in the early 1960s, saw the reluctance of media analysts to dismiss the possibility that the media might have important social effects, and might be a vehicle through which social and political powers are exercised (Kaye, 1998). By the 1970s interest was growing in how media organizations processed and shaped information before delivering it to audiences.

For example, Baudrillard (1991) argues that because people are coming to live in such a media-mediated world, that reality gets bypassed, we are merely left with exploding signs and simulacra (worlds of media generated signs and images). Baudrillard (1991) uses the example of the Gulf War to illustrate this. He argues that it was a hyperreal representation on our television screens, the real battles were now replaced by media saturation. The only reality we know is that which media messages convey to us.

Kaye (1998) identifies two important concepts formulated in this fourth stage; agenda-setting and news-framing. Agenda-setting refers to the specific effects of the media in determining which issues are seen as priorities for policy development and political action. Whereas some media analysts argue that media is a driving power in agenda-setting, others argue that policy makers set the agenda and the media then publicise the issue.

News-framing refers to the way in which the media construct social
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formations and history themselves by framing images of reality in a predictable and patterned way (Kaye, 1998).

Similar to Baudrillard's theory, news-framing refers to the way in which the news acts as a frame through which reality is socially constructed. Frames don't just convey the news, but they influence the audience by transmitting positive and negative cues, which help shape the way the public think. The concept of news-framing is particularly relevant in illustrating how media representations of asylum seekers influence the public's attitudes. Through the use of language and images the media can bring into question the status of refugees and asylum seekers, and cast doubt upon their 'genuineness'.

Research undertaken by the Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees (ICAR), examining local and national newspapers over a period of time, found that the most common headline words used when reporting asylum issues were: arrested, jailed, guilty, bogus, false, illegal, failed and rejected (Casciani, 2004). All of these words have negative connotations. The first three words present refugees and asylum seekers as deviant and criminal, whereas the next three words imply that the individuals referred to aren't really seeking asylum due to persecution in their homeland, but have come to the UK to improve their economic status.

The final two words also imply that the individual referred to is not a legitimate asylum seeker as they have not met the criteria to be granted asylum. All of these terms together build a stereotype of the 'typical' asylum seeker or refugee, he or she is insincere, mercenary, untrustworthy, and has criminal tendencies. Kaye (1998) also argues that the frequent use of such

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terms as above socialises the reader to believe that the use of such terms is normal political discourse.

Furthermore such language gives credibility to the notion that 'bogus' refugees represent a huge problem, without even questioning the suppositions upon which such assertions are based. This notion that refugees and asylum seekers represent a huge problem is worsened by the media portrayal of allegedly overwhelming (but unspecified) influxes of asylum seekers from abroad. Terms such as 'floods' and 'swamp' are used to imply that there are huge numbers of asylum seekers inundating the country, when in fact the EU accepts only 3 per cent of the world's refugees annually, of which Britain takes a very modest share (RAM, 2004)

The article claims that this figure was taken from Government statistics, and is equivalent to what a teacher with three years' experience, or a nurse with 'five years of hard work and rapid promotion' will take home. Implications in this article that asylum seekers are getting a better deal than nurses or teachers are backed up by a quotation from a Tory MP saying, "Lower paid workers doing important jobs will be pretty cross to hear of families getting this kind of support just for turning up and claiming asylum"(Daily Mail, 2003).

So although "Bogus asylum seekers are draining millions from the NHS" (Daily Express, 26. 11. 2002) they are giving much more back to the economy than they are 'draining'. So far this essay has examined the extent to which the media influence their audience, and has explored the ways in

which the media negatively reports asylum issues, this essay will now
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attempt to link negative reporting with racist attitudes, before exploring how such racist attitudes limit the integration of asylum seekers and refugees within society.

Previously the essay focussed on different aspects of negative reporting, including the use of derogatory language, the portrayal of overwhelming influxes of asylum seekers, unbalanced and inaccurate reporting, including the 'spinning' of figures, and the criticism of government asylum policies. It is argued that the use of derogatory language plays an important role in inciting racist attitudes because such language potentially alarms people (ICAR, 2004). A study undertaken by ICAR (2004) revealed that some feature articles welded disparate information together in a manner likely to alarm readers.

The use of emotive language can also make it difficult to determine whether the assertion is based on reliable facts and figures. The portrayal of overwhelming influxes of asylum seekers also makes readers apprehensive. Unknowing that terms such as 'floods' are used merely to exaggerate the actual numbers of asylum seekers entering the country, people fear that the country is being 'swamped', and this can cause panic and distress. The reader may fear that their country; their territory is under threat, a common response is that they want the problem to go away; to disappear.

These feelings of apprehension and threat may lead to a racist attitude.

Unbalanced and inaccurate reporting can also promote tension within the community. Articles such as the one published by the Daily Mail (16. 12.

2003) intended to anger British citizens who may be in low paid but hard
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working jobs, the Tory MP quoted made this point himself. Articles such as this are deliberately stirring up tension within the community, faced with facts and figures “ Journalists always try to find an ‘ angle’ to fit the editorial prism through which their paper sees the news” (Medic, 2004).

This stirs up feelings of racism because members of the British public will feel that they have the raw deal, whereas people entering their country will just be given free accommodation and the same amount of money they have to work hard to earn. Asylum seekers come to be viewed as ‘ scroungers’ who are draining the British welfare system. Criticism of government asylum policies reinforces this stereotypical view.

Combined together all of these strategies that the media employ to present a negative view of refugees and asylum seekers reinforce the stereotype of the ‘ typical’ refugee or asylum seeker as insincere, mercenary and untrustworthy with criminal tendencies. They are someone to be feared, frightened and apprehensive of. Asylum seekers are constructed as the ‘ dangerous other’, who threaten your territory and your national identity (Valentine, 2001). Such racist attitudes and tensions within the community, it is argued, limit the interaction of asylum seekers and refugees within society.

According to a governmental report on Integration (2002) integration is the process that takes place when refugees are empowered to achieve their full potential as members of British society, to contribute fully to the community, and to become fully able to exercise the rights and responsibilities that they share with other residents. Integration within the community is just one

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aspect of this process. The government identify in their national strategy for refugee integration, the presence of artificial barriers between refugees and host populations, which have been created as a result of negative stereotypes.

Whilst such barriers exist it is impossible for refugees and asylum seekers to integrate within society. As the government stress in their Integration report (2002) integration is a complex two-way process. It requires adaptation on the part of the newcomer, but also by the host society. Popular attitudes often seem to be based on the assumption that integration is a one-way process. Asylum seekers and refugees are expected to integrate into the existing culture or society without any reciprocal accommodation.

Integration then has the connotation of assimilation, asylum seekers are expected to discard their culture, language, traditions, values and norms, and replace them with those of the host society. Such popular attitudes are what reinforces the divide between asylum seekers and the host society. By accepting the negative portrayal of asylum seekers and refugees without questioning the grounds upon which such negative stereotypes are formed, society is effectively reinforcing a barrier used to exclude and isolate refugees and asylum seekers from mainstream society.

They are excluded from interacting with others in the community, this hinders their integration within the wider society as it will limit their acquisition of English. Lack of interaction is not the only way in which communities can socially exclude asylum seekers and refugees, sometimes

individuals may take this much further in the form of racial discrimination
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and harassment. This is reflected in crime statistics showing that in 1999 the risk of being a victim of a racially motivated incident was considerably higher for members of minority ethnic groups than for White people (Office of National Statistics).

The highest risk was for Pakistani and Bangladeshi people at 4.2 per cent, this compared with 0.3 per cent for White people (figure 1). The government outline strategies in their Integration report (2002) to promote positive images of refugees in an attempt to balance the widespread negative perception of refugees. The strategy includes the production of media toolkits on a number of topical issues relating to asylum seekers and refugees. These include myth-busting information packs setting out some of the key facts.

Regional initiatives consist of information sheets for those working with asylum seekers and refugees across the UK, offering effective guidance for media handling and enquiries from the public. Media briefings have also been organised by the Refugee Council and Media Wise to promote media ethics, and the Home Office CF Project has organised events with representatives from the local media, to explore issues surrounding the portrayal of refugees and to ensure better understanding of the complexities of the asylum situation.

Nearly all efforts to promote the positive images of refugees have been aimed at the media, thus effectively showing who the government blame for the negative stereotyping of asylum seekers, which is limiting integration.

The study undertaken by ICAR (2004) researching the extent to which media
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coverage of asylum seekers and refugees contributed to racist attitudes and activity, and community tension, found “clear evidence” linking media coverage to hostile actions directed towards asylum seekers.

Although the report did find clear evidence to link media and hostility towards asylum seekers, it did also recognise that certain types of people and communities will be influenced differently by media coverage. For example, some people are likely to be more resilient and sceptic of what the media may be directly or indirectly saying. Resilience and scepticism is likely to be dependent upon a person’s experience of diversity in daily life. However this can work both ways, if a person has had very few encounters with people of another race or ethnicity they may be more likely to passively consume stereotypes offered by the media.

The influence of messages of the media may also be amplified by the uncritical reading of newspapers by people who feel a sense of resentment and injustice rooted in deprivation (ICAR, 2004). Such people may just be happy with using asylum seekers and refugees as their scapegoat, and will therefore not considering questioning the messages of the media. This essay has attempted to explore the extent to which media representations of asylum seekers limit their integration within society.

It has focussed primarily on negative media representations of asylum seekers and refugees, this is because the main body of literature written about this issue focuses on negative media representations. However, in his discussion of his study of UK media portrayal of asylum seekers Kaye (1998)

does state that at least two of the less conservative newspapers studied
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frequently challenged the way in which politicians and government officials used pejorative language about refugees. This essay has illustrated how negative media portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers can lead to racist attitudes and action among members of the public.

This in turn can limit the integration of refugees and asylum seekers.

However, the media alone cannot be blamed for limiting integration. Earlier on in this essay the notion of agenda-setting was explained, and it was argued that the media often set the agenda by publicising an issue which arouses public suspicion and is then addressed by policy makers. This however is not always the case. Some media analysts argue that the process is reversed and that policy makers set the agenda, and the media then publicise the issue.

This being the case, policy makers could be deemed responsible for limiting the integration of asylum seekers and refugees within society. It could be argued that the media is merely picking up on the tone of policy makers who have anti-asylum tendencies. This essay proposes that the media alone are not responsible for limiting the integration of asylum seekers and refugees. Government policies such as the 1999 Asylum and Immigration Act tend to bring out segregation rather than integration because under this act refugees and asylum seekers are confined to very restrictive rules and regulations which confine them to a passive role.

State systems such as giving asylum seekers vouchers to use instead of money also limit integration because it presents the asylum seeker as the 'other', and constructs them as someone who is not trustworthy enough to be

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given money. The media are vehicles through which the political elite convey their messages. However, the media are often responsible for putting their own 'spin' on stories and it is often this that influences their audience.