

Refugees feature: Negative media coverage -- the same old story

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Whether you are a newspaper editor, columnist, broadcaster, or politician; if you choose to descend to the level of the gutter in what you publish or say in public, you should expect the worst kind of reaction from your readers or from your listeners. On no subject is this more true at this time than on that of asylum seekers.

Xenophobia and racism are based on the age-old desire of man to find a ready scapegoat and the dislike of anyone who does not readily conform, whether in behaviour, colour or religion. To perpetuate racism and xenophobia through our media is not only antisocial and grossly irresponsible, it is well nigh criminal.

The attitude of our newspapers and broadcasters is a crucial element in race relations and opinion-forming on asylum seekers. Immigration or colour prejudice can be materially affected by the way these media handle stories concerning them. This observation is not new and, sadly, neither are racist and xenophobic articles and news reports new to our newspapers.

Nearly 33 years ago, it was possible to find headlines such as "Threat to Survival - Increasing Flood of New Immigrants" above an inflammatory letter to the **Daily Telegraph** from the late Tory MP, Sir Cyril Osborne (18/10/67).

The **Daily Express** of February, 1971, merged fact with fantasy: "*There are 200,000 Asians in East Africa*", it announced in a leader on 12 February, "*all possessing British passports, who may come here soon.*" This falsification launched a series of "floods", "tides", "stampedes", and other connotations of a deluge into the Express's treatment. This culminated on 1 March, 1971, with a headline: "A million Chinese can arrive here next week if they want to."

The **Daily Telegraph**, later that same month, announced on page 1: "*Kenyan Asian Exodus Numbers Double -100,000 may enter Britain by end of the year.*" This was not based on any projections or even on the estimate of the paper's correspondent in Nairobi, where the story originated. Low down in the report it emerged that the origin of the menacing headline was the calculation of anonymous "airline officials".

The reports of the "4-star Malawi Asians", now notorious for their part in the months of racial tension during the summer of 1976, did not, as popular opinion would have it, explode at a time of complete calm on the race relations scene. The Race Relations Bill's passage through the House of Commons had received steady news coverage during February, which included accounts of opposition to the Bill. Concern over mistakes in immigration statistics during January and February led to a steady reporting of news about illegal immigrants, features on immigration officers and reports on numbers of immigrants arriving in UK during 1975. Enoch Powell's accusations that the figures were being concealed featured regularly during February.

On the 4th April, the **News of the World** carried a picture of "*[t]he £150,000 mansion that a refugee family are refusing to quit*"; "*We won't get out, say Uganda family of 14*". This heading contained several vital elements: conflict, immigration, black people, and large families using the welfare state. These elements had already been in the forefront in press reporting during the earlier months, but the Ugandan family -- and, immediately afterwards, the Malawian refugees -- provided the spark that would unite all four elements and eventually concentrate on them. Most of the Press did not attempt to analyse or interpret the many different issues involved in these events, but, in the main, they took advantage of their potential for sensationalism and whetted their readers' appetites.

The newspapers of 5 April took up the **News of World's** cry, but not just with the £150,000 mansion reported in the **Sun**, **The Daily Express** and **Daily Telegraph**: the **Daily Mail** also

carried a feature on Asians jumping the housing queue -- "A Kenyan Asian has fixed himself a council house ahead of 17,000 people on the local housing list within a week of arriving in Britain."

It was, to use the newspapers' own terminology, as if the floodgates had burst. General reporting on refugees, immigrants, black people and race relations increased considerably over the next few weeks and the majority of newspapers had a field day with Asians' "exploitation" of the social services and Asians "pouring into the country". The following are examples of headlines to major news stories or features at that time:

"Storm Over the Two-Wife Migrants" -- **The Sun** 6/5/76

"Invasion of Asians Forces Borough to Call for Help" -- **Telegraph** 6/5/76

"New Flood of Asians to Britain" -- **Mirror** 6/5/76

"Another 20,000 Asians are on the Way" -- **The Sun** 6/5/76

"Asians 'trick BR to enter'" -- **Mail** 8/5/76

"Scandal of Day-Tripper Immigrants" -- **Mirror** 8/5/76

"Queue Jumping' Rumpus" -- **Express** 8/5/76

"Banda's Asians Fly In" -- **News of the World** 9/5/76

"Refused Welfare -- but 'I'll settle for council house'" -- **Express** 10/5/76

"Asians fly out of 'New Uganda'" -- **The Sun** 17/5/76

"Mellish cries 'Enough' on Asian influx" -- **Telegraph** 18/5/76

For two weeks, readers were subjected to almost constant news coverage on Asian immigration and asylum seekers from all the newspapers -- and those two weeks turned out to be only the precursor of a long summer in which immigration, race relations and black people provided a major portion of news coverage.

Then, as with the Kenyan Asian story, and as with many other racist and xenophobic stories, newspapers sensed that large choices were open to them under the general umbrella of "news". They revelled in their power to affect public opinion and political action on racist and xenophobic matters.

The point about the press handling of the coverage of the Kenya Asians in the late 1960s and early 1970s is its remarkable and prophetic similarity to the coverage first of the Jewish refugee problem in the period 1938-39: "Aliens Pouring into Britain" was the headline of the **Daily Mail**, while the **Sunday Express** (June 1938) wrote: "*In Britain, half a million Jews find their home. They are never persecuted and, indeed, in many respects the Jews are given favoured treatment here.*"

"But just now there is a big influx of foreign Jews in Britain. They are overrunning the country. They are trying to enter the medical profession in great numbers. Worst of all, many of them are holding themselves out to the public as psychoanalysts.

"Intolerance is loathed and hated by almost everybody in this country. And, by keeping a close watch on the causes which fed the intolerance of the Jews in other European countries,

we shall be able to continue to treat well those Jews who have made their homes among us, many of them for generations."

In 1900, the **Daily Mail** described the flight from Tsarist pogroms: *"There were Russian Jews, Polish Jews, German Jews, Peruvian Jews: all kinds of Jews, all manner of Jews. They fought and jostled for the foremost places at the gangways; they rushed and pushed and struggled into the troops shed, where the Mayor of Southampton [...] had provided free refreshments.*

"They had breakfasted well on board, but they rushed as though starving at the food. They brushed the attendant to one side, they cursed if they were not quickly served, they helped themselves at will, they thrust the children to the background, they pushed the women [...] they jostled and upset the weak, they spilled coffee on the ground in wanton waste."

And then, in August 1938, the **Daily Mail** described the refugee Jews fleeing from Nazi Germany: *"The way stateless Jews from Germany are pouring in from every port of this country is becoming an outrage."*

It is remarkable how the press coverage of the latest asylum refugees' plight is uncannily similar and prefigured. Nearly 70 years later, the old double-talk is still being employed without embarrassment or question. The problem, it seems, always lies with the asylum seekers, and not in white racism. The respectability of white prejudice is sanctified in the claims that certain cities can take no more asylum seekers, for reasons that scarcely trouble to disguise outward hostility.

Theoretically, the existing Race Relations Amendment Act already places some constraints on editors, columnists and journalists. It is unlawful to incite racial hatred, though, because of the difficulty of defining "incitement", this particular piece of law has not, in fact, proved to be an effectual restraint. If you visit the Media HateWatch UK section of [diversity-onLine](#), you can read page after page of poisonous "coverage", and how these stories show that "asylum seeker" once meant "scrounger" and now means "terrorist".

The imagery of threat, of floods of asylum seekers, terrorism, crime, and of dirty and infected hordes of aliens, which was apparent in 1938 and was developed to the state of art by journalists, politicians and cabinet ministers in the late 1960s and '70s and is now used so brutally and eloquently, is once more brought forth. The presence of the alien, asylum seeker, foreigner, the black, Asian, Muslim and Jew have, time and again, been the vicious target of the prejudices of the lowest common denominator, especially when articulated and fostered by the so-called "Respectable Press".

In this rollercoaster of hysteria, **The Sun**, **The Express** and **Daily Mail**, especially, are still now conveying a "paranoid" definition of events through their unquestioning acceptance of the belief that the entry of asylum seekers constitutes a life-threat to our social fabric, social services, housing, health, education, security, and of course, good race relations. Today's tabloid newspapers are a volcanic landslide that strangles any explanation, reason and simply rushes on, headlong into glaring headline.

Utterances of politicians and others reverberate into a great tumult with news stories and speeches piling up on each other with increasing frequency, so that, before the row from one dies away, it is followed by the impact of another, until the details merge into a mounting clamour that excites the senses and drowns the still small voice of reason.

And so, understandably, there is a belief that there is a conspiracy by some tabloid newspapers to incite their readers against asylum seekers, black people, Muslims or aliens. The media have failed dismally to uphold and defend their own Code of Practice -- whose ethical precepts are minimal to those of the National Union of Journalists Code and Guidelines on Race Reporting -- and traditional editorial standards.