

Portrayal and participation of minorities in the media

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By way of introduction – MediaWise is a registered charity set up in 1993 by ‘victims of media abuse’ which helps people who face problems with the media. Our core work has been helping people to compose and present complaints about inaccurate, intrusive or unfair media coverage. We then develop training and guidance for non governmental organisations on how to engage with the media, and for journalists – in the UK and internationally, to improve their coverage of problematic issues such as diversity reporting, coverage of health and human rights issues including suicide and child abuse. (For more information visit www.mediawise.org.uk)

The founders appointed me, a journalist, to run the organisation - presumably on the principle the ‘Physician heal thyself’. In fact the most impressive thing about those who founded the organisation was that, despite their negative experience at the hands of journalists, they still believed in the importance of press freedom and the value of good journalism. Indeed the MediaWise ‘credo’ is: *Press freedom is a responsibility exercised by journalists on behalf of the public.*

In looking at the issue of ‘portrayal and participation’ I want to consider two groups who get a rough deal from the media - refugees and asylum-seekers, and Gypsies and Travellers. Why have the human rights of these two groups, perhaps more than with any other, been trampled over - too often with the complicity of media professionals?

I would offer a number of linked explanations which may appear to be both blindingly obvious and especially objectionable.

First of all they are the ‘strangers in our midst’. They are evident – we can see and hear that they are ‘different’; but few of us know them as individuals or much about them as social entities. They represent a ‘problem’ because they do not fit the criteria expected of those who we recognise as part of our society.

And they are statistically insignificant – by which I really mean that they do not pose a threat to politicians because they are disparate, relatively thinly spread and they do not or cannot vote. In short they ‘do not matter’. Acknowledging their rights is seen by a significant number of those who do vote as merely ‘pandering to their needs’ at the expense of the wider community.

Their agenda is not seen as politically significant, except in so far as they impinge upon the interests of those who do not know, like or understand them. The real agenda setters are those who oppose their presence – they are the one who know how to press the buttons of both the media and the politicians.

Add to this the fact that, as a general rule, asylum-seekers and gypsies (itself a racist term) do not read newspapers or engage with the media in the same way that the settled community does. Put another way, the mainstream print and broadcast media – driven by ratings, circulation and profit - do not belong to them.

As individuals, refugees, asylum-seekers, gypsies and travellers are unfamiliar with and to the mass media and to individual journalists. They haven't even got a door in which to stick their foot and make a difference. And their lack of representation is most significant where it matters most – in the newsroom. I believe all this undermines our claim to be a liberal democracy.

PANEL 1 - UK NATIONAL NEWSPAPER FRONT PAGES, Monday 20 Oct 1997

TABLOIDS

The Sun

**3,000 GIPSIES
HEAD FOR ENGLAND:**

We have best handouts

Daily Mirror

**CRISIS TALKS
ON GIPSIES**

Daily Mail

THE DOVER DELUGE:

Pleas for action as port is flooded by gipsy asylum seekers

Daily Express

Gipsy scam grows:

Thousands on the way seeking benefits cash

BROADSHEETS

The Independent

**Gypsies invade Dover,
hoping for a handout**

The Times

**Dover overwhelmed by
Gypsy asylum-seekers**

Daily Telegraph

**Resentment as
'invasion' continues**

The Guardian

**Tide of Gypsy
asylum ebbs**

Panel 1 demonstrates how thoughtless and inaccurate reporting can have (possibly unforeseen) consequences which make matters worse, rather than, as most journalists would prefer, contributing to positive solutions.

These headlines, all on one day – and probably inspired by a leak from the sources within the immigration service – would lead to British National Party taking to the streets of Dover and elsewhere, police raids on asylum hostels, attacks on asylum seekers, more negative

stories about Roma immigrants, and eventually to the imposition of visa restrictions on all people travelling from Slovakia to the UK. All of which made things worse for Roma in Slovakia – they got the blame at both ends.

Over the last 10 years we have been monitoring media coverage for refugee and asylum issues. Throughout the UK press we have seen a steady flow of sensational and often inaccurate stories conforming to a series of simple themes. (Panel 2).

PANEL 2 - EXAMPLES OF HEADLINES FROM THE UK PRESS

The numbers game:

ASYLUM ARMY

The Sun 1/3/03

MASSIVE RISE IN ASYLUM SEEKERS

Western Daily Press 1/3/03

Benefit 'scams':

ASYLUM SEEKERS GET FREE HOLIDAYS

Daily Express 19/4/03

EMPTY ASYLUM HOMES SCANDAL

Daily Express 2/7/04

REVEALED:

How asylum-seekers use your taxes to smuggle in relatives

Daily Express 17/5/06

Fear and prejudice:

YOU IN BRITAIN WON'T STOP US

Western Daily Press 1/2/03

ASYLUM KILLER ON THE LOOSE

Daily Express 19/2/03

Britain is warned over migrants with HIV

Daily Mail 18/2/04

ASYLUM SCANDAL OF BABY KILLER

Daily Express 29/7/04

Some of the best known stories have turned out to be just plain wrong (PANEL 3). Often, to a journalist's eye, it is clear when stories are fabrications – or at least of dubious provenance. We began investigating such stories and challenging them either directly or through the Press Complaints Commission. It took us only two days to disprove the infamous 'Swan Bake' story, but it was six months before The Sun admitted to its error, on page 41 of a Saturday edition. The PCC allowed them to use their own wording rather than

the ones we had proposed, which the PCC admitted were more accurate and comprehensive...

PANEL 3 - MYTHMAKING STORIES EXPOSED BY THE RAM PROJECT

SWAN BAKE

Asylum seekers steal the queen's birds for barbecues
ASYLUM GANG HAD 2 SWANS FOR ROASTING

The Sun 4/7/03

ASYLUM SEEKERS EAT OUR DONKEYS

Daily Star 31/8/03

PLOT TO KILL BLAIR

Asylum-seekers with hi-tech equipment and
maps caught half a mile from PM's home

Daily Express 16/8/04

Sensational stories may sell newspapers yet they have also managed to conflate issues the seeking of refuge from war and persecution, with economic migration and international terrorism. In the popular imagination Britain is now crawling with illegal immigrants falsely claiming to be persecuted minorities; and in their midst are criminal elements and people secretly conspiring to put everyone's life or way of life at risk.

Inaccurate coverage breaches the human rights of asylum-seekers and refugees, poisons public discourse, encourages xenophobia, racism and inappropriate political responses.

Yet when we went public about the errors in the 'Plot to kill Blair' story, and got the police to denounce it as 'rubbish', the *Daily Express* solicitors accused us of 'publicity seeking'. They also threatened another newspaper with legal action if they published details of another of our exposés of an erroneous story of a Slovakian Roma family.

There have been thousands of headlines like these – and many appeared in the *Daily Express*, acquired by a porn baron who discovered that its flagging sales improved when it ran anti-asylum headlines. Its own journalists – led by Michele Stanistreet, now president of the NUJ – took the paper to the PCC complaining that their copy was being skewed merely to make for such headlines. The regulator refused to take up the issue – not least because complaints have to be made by individuals directly affected by a story – and since few asylum seekers are named and fewer still complain, there is nothing they can do.

This loophole, which I hope the new Irish Press Council will rectify, means that attacks on generic social groups – whether it's the Irish or Gypsies – are not covered by the discrimination clauses in the editors' Code of Conduct.

And that highlights one of the most important aspects of media coverage – until fairly recently there was an almost complete absence of the voices of refugee and asylum-seekers

themselves. That is the abnegation of a fundamental human right – to speak freely and be heard.

THE RAM PROJECT

So what did we do about all this in our Refugees, Asylum-seekers and the Media (RAM) Project? The full story is told in *The RAM Report* (available from ram@mediawise.org.uk) including details of how things were done and what it cost, to help others emulate our experience.

- First of all we looked at the communications strategies of their main supporting organisations – and identified shortcomings for them to address. Their big problem was constantly being on the back foot – reacting to incidents rather than being able to set the agenda, and challenge media myths. We encouraged them to produce myth-busting information and reliable statistics, for example.

Eventually the Information Centre on Asylum and Refugees (www.icar.org.uk) was set up to provide a reliable alternative source for facts and figures to MigrationWatch whose anti-immigration polemics have influenced so much media coverage.

- We linked up all those people willing to take up cudgels on behalf of refugees and asylum-seekers – individuals, church groups and others – in different parts of the country, and we supplied them with advice and training so that they felt more confident about challenging inaccurate or unfair coverage.
- Then we began a series of events designed to bring journalists into direct contact with refugees and asylum-seekers – from discreet meetings with editors to more public events, all of which have resulted in more positive stories appearing, especially in the local press.
- We also produced (with the UNHCR, the NUJ and the IFJ) a leaflet containing guidelines and contacts to help journalists get things right. It was distributed to newsrooms throughout the UK and is currently being updated.
- And we took up the issue with the media regulators – eventually persuading the Press Complaints Commission to issue warnings and guidelines to newspaper editors about the use of accurate language.
- We held all this together with a website (www.ramproject.org.uk) and a monthly RAM Bulletin, electronically distributed to some 2,000 individuals, groups and journalists. It contained:
 - analysis of negative stories;
 - facts and figures;
 - positive story ideas;
 - testimony from refugees and asylum-seekers;
 - use of the media training materials; and
 - a monthly diary of events which might attract positive coverage.
- Most important of all we identified almost 200 exiled journalists in the UK, linked them up with the National Union of Journalists, and assisted them to develop the project. They are the best people to tell stories and engage with their journalistic colleagues, and their interventions have made a big difference, especially at the local level. We trained them up in UK media techniques and got them work placements in newspapers, magazines and the BBC.

Now the work of RAM has been taken over by their own organisation. The Exiled Journalists' Network promotes press freedom and fair and accurate coverage of the causes and effects of forced migration. More information about the EJN, their Press Freedom Forum series and plans for Press Freedom House can be found at www.exiledjournalists.net.

For our troubles we were labelled 'Spin doctors for Asylum-seekers', by the *Daily Mail* – yet a couple of years later that same newspaper is backing the efforts of the EJN to create Press Freedom House, as temporary shelter for journalists who seek asylum in the UK after suffering persecution for doing their jobs back home...

WHAT ABOUT GYPSIES AND TRAVELLERS?

Gypsies and Travellers hit the headlines more sporadically – usually when a local incident has national repercussions. (PANEL 4)

It is worth noting:

1. If and when they make it to the nationals, there is invariably a political consequence, when politicians deem it convenient to ride on the backs of the prejudices of their voting constituents;
2. Coverage is routinely hostile, and even when positive moves are made to support travellers' rights, the agenda is quickly turned around to their detriment – and the positive is drowned out by the negative;
3. Rarely, if ever, do the concerns of gypsies and travellers receive attention, and their voices are seldom heard.

The message about the anti-social nature of gypsies, Irish tinkers, and new age-travellers had seeped into public consciousness – like anti-Irish racism – long before the New-Age Travellers appeared upon the scene, or the recent arrival of Roma families from Eastern Europe.

The received wisdom is that they are all either thieves and vagabonds, or quaint, vaguely magical people who are good at music, horses and dancing. They are called gypsies because at least since Elizabethan times their exotic presence was associated with Egypt, although Roma peoples originate from the Indus valley of what is now Pakistan.

PANEL 4 - HEADLINES ABOUT GYPSIES & TRAVELLERS IN THE UK PRESS

1.6 million gypsies ready to flood in BRITAIN HERE WE COME

Daily Express 20/1/04

WE CAN'T COPE WITH HUGE GYPSY INVASION

Daily Express 22/1/04

TO STOP FLOOD OF GYPSIES STAMP ON THE CAMPS

The Sun 9/3/05

GYPSY MADNESS

Daily Express 17/3/05 (St Patrick's Day)

GYPSIES' £30M HANDOUT

Taxpayers are funding camps

The Sun 21/3/05

**Villagers tell of living hell
after invasion by gypsies**

Daily Express 11/6/05

**I cleared out Irish travellers...
now UK must do the same**

The Sun 2/7/05

**Gypsies:
Why is it one law for them and one for us?**

Daily Express 21/10/05

Gypsy invasion closes a town

Daily Express 21/10/05

The Sun's horridly-named 'Stamp on the Camps' campaign in 2005 played on all these stereotypes, even though the phenomenon upon which it focused was the decision by travelling families to purchase land and set up their own camps since local authorities had manifestly failed to meet their responsibilities to provide sufficient temporary and permanent accommodation in the previous 50 years.

The local hostility to gypsies generated by the campaign actually persuaded one 'English Romany' woman to call me and let off steam about how 'good gypsies' were being given a bad reputation by Irish tinkers – and if they were all sent back things would get better. What better example of the old colonial technique of divide and rule!

More to the point, I had calls from families on one official site in the Home Counties, who could not understand why suddenly:

- their kids were being given a hard time at school;
- local trades people were demanding authorisation of work through site managers and payment up front, and
- the police kept patrolling in and around the site.

One of the women on the Home Counties site wrote me a heartfelt plea asking the press to consider the site dwellers' point of view – and describing in some detail the cultural differences between the settled community and those who lived on family-based camps. But she didn't sign it – just asked me to try and get it published.

I circulated her letter to all national newspaper editors, along with the contact details of some 28 Gypsy and Traveller organisations, making the point that while I knew they could

not publish the letter, now they had no excuse for claiming that they did not know who to contact in future.

The response was interesting. Two of the mostly unlikely newspapers - *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* - actually thanked us for the list and said they it would be lodged in newsrooms for future use.

I cannot say I have noticed a great change in coverage over the last couple of years - but at least we now know that they have had the information. They can no longer claim, as some have in the past, that they don't know who to talk to.

There are many Roma media projects and Roma journalists in Eastern Europe, where discrimination and persecution have been appalling, and now they have representation in European institutions it is to be hoped that the demands of Europe's most maligned minorities for fair and accurate coverage and the defence of their human rights will get a better hearing. But there is no evidence of better attitudes in the UK or Ireland.

MediaWise is in talks with Gypsy and Traveller organisations to develop a RAM style project to persuade our colleagues in the UK media to take their human right seriously and begin to look behind the headlines and let them tell their stories.

We want to make sure that:

- the voices of Gypsies and Travellers are heard, as a matter of human rights;
- journalists know how to contact legitimate representatives of Travelling families;
- Travellers and their support groups have clear media strategies and policies, describing why they are dealing with the media, what they hope to achieve, how they are going to achieve it and who is going to handle the media;
- journalists are fed facts and other information that will improve their coverage - and that includes the next generation of journalists - so we need to communicate with journalism trainers too;
- sympathetic journalists are identified and supported;
- Gypsies and Travellers are made aware of how the media regulators operate, and are prepared to challenge inaccurate and unfair coverage.

Of course we lack the resources to take such initiatives forward - no-one seems keen to fund an organisation that is prepared to take the media on - but in the age of mobile phones, wi-fi and laptops Gypsies, Travellers and their supporters are now much better equipped to demand that the media reverse their hostility and, at last, give them a fair crack of the whip.