

RAM BULLETIN

Refugees, Asylum-seekers and the Mass media Project

advice
information
research
& training
on media ethics



Promoting best practice in media representation of refugee and asylum issues

26 February 2001

RAM FORUM Special Report

On 1 February the media ethics body PressWise brought together refugees, academics, politicians, press officers, journalists and media regulators to discuss the representation of refugees and asylum seekers in the media. These initial observations about the event will be followed by a full report later this year.

MAKING SPACE FOR THE VOICES OF REFUGEES

The greatest success of the RAM Forum was to create a space in which the voices of refugees and asylum seekers could be heard. Columnist Yasmin Alibhai Brown led the first session of the Forum which was devoted entirely to allowing asylum seekers and refugees to speak for themselves. Most had experience in the media or had been journalists in their countries of origin. They told of their harrowing experiences in places as varied as Ethiopia, Iraq, Sudan and former Yugoslavia. These were stories without happy endings - where persecution at home was followed by dehumanising mistreatment in Europe at the hand of officialdom, the media and people on the streets.

RAM Bulletin Editor **Nazand Begikhani**, was exasperated by the current debate on asylum-seekers which makes her 'want to scream and shout and beg for some truth'.

Many were moved to tears when spoke publicly for the first time about the execution of two of her brothers at the hands of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, and subsequent murder of the third by neo-Nazis in Germany, where he had sought sanctuary.

Think global – act local

Throughout the day the message seemed to be that establishing communication with local and regional media is more productive than targeting nationals, a time-consuming exercise that seldom yields the hoped-for results.

Andy Gregg, Director of Refugee Education and Training Advisory Service (RETAS) called for refugee organisations to set their sights on local newspapers which are more likely to pick up on press releases from small but local organisations.

Cathy Aitchison of Refugees On-line also warned against underestimating the power of local media, adding that if local radio and TV stations are invited to events and launches of projects set up by or for asylum seekers, there is more chance that these stories may eventually get national exposure: 'Local radio is an extremely good way of explaining these things, particularly as BBC Newsroom South East now has a central pool of regional material from which comments get picked up - an item that begins on local radio can be picked up and end up getting national coverage.'

PressWise patron **George Alagiah** of the BBC confirmed this, and added that at 10.00 every morning a conference call links the whole of the BBC to the regions, so that events in around twenty places are monitored for at least one story: 'Although usually an 'end item', there's no reason it can't be a human story about asylum seekers,' he said.

Alam Gebrehiwot, founder of an Ethiopian asylum seekers organisation in Haringey, concurred: 'I tried the national press repeatedly in 1997, and asked them why they were calling everybody bogus. Nobody came

back to me and I was disappointed so I left it'.

Yet when she targeted BBC Newsroom South East a series of positive stories were picked up that made a real difference to the lives of a family of asylum seekers being racially abused in Glasgow following their 'dispersal' at the insistence of the local council. The story made such an impact that they were allowed back to London to stay permanently.

Get personal

She emphasised the importance of personal communication between press officers and journalists: 'You have to establish contact with someone on the inside to have a proper voice'.

Her view was echoed by **Tammy Speers**, a researcher at Cardiff University, who has been working with the Welsh media about asylum issues: 'One of the things people need to think about - and this is quite a radical thing to say - is that we actually like the journalists we work with in S.Wales.'

She said that in Wales there was less vitriol towards asylum seekers in the local press than in the nationals, suggesting that in some areas local journalists may be less hostile than those who write for the nationals.

Peter Marsden, a Refugee Council expert on the political situation in Afghanistan, who has dealt with a wide array of local and national radio and television stations, described Radio Scotland and Scottish TV as among the most sophisticated in Britain in their approach to understanding and explaining the causes of refugee movements.

Double standards

Forum participants wanted to know why papers that seldom miss an opportunity to exploit 'human interest' stories about heroic

survival in the face of injustice seem incapable of representing the flesh and blood accounts of refugees, preferring to reduce their existence to facts and statistics that constitute a 'burden' to the British tax-payer?

Press officers claimed their efforts to draw attention to the plight of asylum seekers had been met with indifference.

One relatively small grass roots organisation which has had particular difficulty in getting stories told is BWRAP which offers support to the 50% of female asylum seekers that arrive in Britain having been raped.

BWRAP's **Cristel Amiss** pointed out that *"To the limited extent that the press does contact organisations, it calls on those that are well funded."*

She wanted to know why journalists do not look critically at organisations claiming to offer services to asylum seekers and yet implementing the Asylum and Immigration Act. *"To go to them for comment is often to ignore the widespread anger in the grass roots against such organisations."*

Journalists fought their corner by highlighting the problems that tie their hands.

Peter Victor, Assistant Editor of *The Express* said that newspapers are commercial operations which do not allow time for investigation of non-mainstream sources of information. "Our problem is that on any given day we have millions of stories competing for a limited amount of space... We get hundreds and thousands of press releases. Unless stories are literally brought to us and rammed down our throats... they lose out to the Spice Girls, or Posh and Becks".

Others present bemoaned the lack of information in the media about the causes of refugee movements. How is it that the very newspapers which applaud the bombing of Iraq to counter the wicked menace of Saddam Hussein have no sympathy for the people displaced or victimised by political turbulence and repression, they asked?

UNHCR press officer **Lyndall Sachs** highlighted the lack of co-ordination between home and foreign affairs editors.

Refugees, whilst they are safely over "there", in the Third World, are "good", helpless victims with whom we can sympathise. The moment they come "here", they are transformed into "bad", "scroungers" after our jobs and livelihoods.

What is to be done?

She called for greater co-ordination between home affairs and international editors to produce a more complex analysis of the causes of refugee movements: *'If we co-ordinate, if we speak with one voice, our voice is that much more powerful.'*

One of the most productive ways of portraying the causes of refugee movements - by emphasising the western and specifically British contribution - would foster a sense of responsibility for asylum seekers than simply demonising 'tyrannical' regimes and 'evil dictators' does not.

Peter Marsden pointed out that the number of people leaving Afghanistan doubled after the August 1998 US air-strikes supported by Britain, and have remained the same ever since. The British government was also a significant if junior contributor to the US cold war strategy of arming the Mujahideen, and undoubtedly helped to sow the seeds for the emergence of the Taliban.

However, getting the British media to emphasise these connections, is not easy.

As **Justin Lewis**, a media analyst from Cardiff University pointed out, the myths about asylum seekers are very much connected to the myth that British foreign policy is by and large, benign: *"The problem that exists in getting different stories told about asylum seekers, is that the stakes are very high. Once you start telling different stories about asylum seekers, then those other powerful stories about British colonialism and British foreign policy begin to unravel."*

Keep complaining

The Forum offered insights into both media methods and potential solutions to the problems caused by media coverage of the issue.

Somewhere along the line, ethics and individual action must play a role, however, in the face of enormous commercial pressures, some journalists and editors appeared pessimistic about trying to change media perceptions.

Media regulators present encouraged everyone to complain whenever they feel that the guidelines for journalists have been breached.

RAM Project continues

The Forum was a ringing endorsement of the work carried out by the RAM Project over the past eighteen months.

There was perhaps an unrealistic expectation among some who attended the Forum that the media could be persuaded to end negative coverage of asylum seekers.

It really doesn't happen that way

We need to continue to train and support people who want to work with journalists. In this way people will be able to understand what the media needs and deliver positive stories and confident spokespeople.

The second important message was for people to remember that the media is more than the *Daily Mail*. There is a wide range of local media with which we should be working in order to deliver a balanced message to local communities.

If you would like details of the Media Support Group set up by RAM around the UK or need help in setting up your own local group, then call Terry Williams on 0121 588 6341 or Email ram@presswise.org.uk

RAM is working in partnership with CSV Media to arrange training or refugees in London. If you would like details please call Anna on 0117 941 5889 or email: ram@presswise.org.uk

VISIT THE RAM WEBSITE
www.ramproject.org.uk

Cut-out-and-keep COMMUNICATOR

These PressWise Guides are designed to assist people wishing to play an active role in improving media coverage of refugee and asylum issues

Ten Top Tips

Sara Wajid shares the lessons of trying to turn the RAM FORUM into a news story

Part of my role as Forum Co-ordinator I was to publicise the event and get coverage of the day in the media. As I am not a professional press officer it was a steep learning curve.

1. A publicity drive is a process of selling. You are the salesperson; your product is your **story** and your customers are journalists. The better you understand their needs the more chance you have of 'making a sale'.
2. The only way to get journalists to cover your story is to communicate with them directly, by press releases **and** talking.
3. The press release is important but it's only a beginning. Talking to the right person is everything.
4. Trying to get the right publicity can be very daunting if you don't have an intimate knowledge of the media industry, but it is actually quite easy to understand the basics once you get started.
5. Identifying and reaching the right journalists is 75% of the work. I was scared of risking rejection by cold-calling busy 'important' strangers on national papers, radio and television stations, so I made sure I knew in advance who was most likely to be interested in my story. I read all the papers and noted which journalists had written sympathetic stories on refugees, then called the paper's switchboard to get their telephone and fax number and e-mail addresses. Switchboards didn't always give all the details, so I also asked everyone I knew in the 'refugee sector' for recommendations. I read the *GUARDIAN MEDIA GUIDE* closely and noted all the specialist publications which might be interested.
6. I also asked a friend who is a press officer for advice. She got the names and numbers at all the important newsrooms for me. I had most success with London Live, the BBC radio station covering the capital where the event took place. As a public

service broadcaster it has a duty to reflect the interests of its listeners and London has the UK's highest refugee population. As Lee Jasper (advisor to London's Mayor) was speaking on the day, and they wanted to interview him. **DON'T IGNORE LOCAL MEDIA.**

7. I concentrated on about 30 to 40 key media outlets but sent press releases to over 300.
8. When contacting the media your attitude is very important. Have confidence in your product, and expect people to be interested. Journalists have to find stories – that is their job. They need to listen to you to decide if yours could be a story for them. It may not be, but they are likely to know a colleague who will want to cover it...
9. The most common question asked of me was "It's interesting, but what's the peg for me?" The better you know the news of the day the better you can answer that question. I had to think about other stories that were 'breaking' on which journalists could 'hang' a reference to the Forum. I was lucky – the House of Commons was debating asylum policy on the same day as the Forum, and I knew Shelter had just released a report of refugee housing, and that OXFAM also had two new reports on the issue coming out.
10. The best kept secret about PR is that if you have a good story to sell it's good fun and very rewarding. On the day BBC TV's *Newsnight* came along because the event provided them with an unusual angle for their coverage of the parliamentary debate. They interviewed two of our specialists and a refugee journalist as part of their package' that evening - but they didn't mention the RAM Forum by name. Next time I'll make sure they do!

To sum up

- **be confident** (once you have made the first call adrenalin kicks in and you're away);
- **be prepared** (pick your targets carefully and know what is on the news agenda);
- **be positive** (communicate your interest and knowledge and you can hook the journalists);
- **be patient** (it all takes time and perseverance, but it is worth it in the end); and -
- **be helpful** (if you want journalists to cover your event you have to try and accommodate their demands – they are under pressure too, so respond to calls quickly, fax them information, meet them if necessary, and make sure they can get the interviews they want). Good luck!

COMING SOON
More on radio interviews

'PEG' BOARD

Keep your ears and eyes open for which can provide you, and the media with a 'peg' on which to hang positive stories about refugees or asylum seekers.

Help to set the media agenda by generating stories rather than having to react to theirs.

Keep your media contacts informed about what is happening and why it is relevant for them.

*Saturday 24 February
9.30am-5pm*

Two Years on from the Lawrence Report- Time to Stamp Out Institutional Racism

Organised by the National Assembly Against Racism with SERTUC & UNISON. Speakers include Atma Singh (NBA), Gloria Millis (TUC), Dr Richard Stone (Lawrence Inquiry Team), & many others.

Venue: TUC Conference centre, Congress House, Gt Russel St, London WC1. Contact: Sabby Dhalu on 020 7247 9907. Email: contactsaar@hotmail.com

Tuesday 27 February
Training Day for Exiled Journalists,
Organised by The PressWise Trust in conjunction with NUJ Black Members and Ethics Councils

Venue: Easton Business Centre, Felix Road, Bristol BS5 0HE
Book your place NOW
Call Anna or Elly on 0117 941 5889 or email ram@presswise.org.uk

*Saturday 24 March,
1.00pm*

Hands off Asylum Seekers, Keep Racism Out of the General Election

Rally with speakers, music, dance, poetry and prose. Organised by the National Assembly Against Racism.

Venue: Trafalgar Square, London WC2.
Contact: Sabby Dhalu on 020 7247 9907.
Email: contactsaar@hotmail.com

Tuesday, 27 March

Halabja, The Forgotten Genocide

Organised by Exiled Writes Ink. Speakers include: Rebwar Fatah (Director of Kurdishmedia), Nazand Begikhani (RAM bulletin editor), Choman Hardi (Exiled Writes Inc), Rebwar Said (artist) & others.

Venue: Freedom Forum, Stanhope House, Stanhope Place, London W2 2HH.

Contact: Jennifer Langer on 020 8458 1910, email:

Jennifer@exiledwrites.fsnet.co.uk

Wednesday, 25 April **Refugee Mental Well-being Awareness Training**

Venue: to be confirmed. In partnership between, the Refugee Council, the Medial Foundation & Camelot Foundation. Contact: Dr. Dieu Donne Hack-Polary on 0207 840 4352/4351

Wednesday 20 June
World Refugee Day
Loads of activities will take place – what are YOU organising locally?

For information call Karen Jennings on 02920666250

Sunday 24 June
Cultural Festival: Celebrating Sanctuary.
As part of the Refugee Week.

Organised by UNHCR, Refugee Council, Refaed, Save the Children, London Art. Venue: South Bank, Coin Street London SE1 9NR. Contact: Joanne Harvey on 020 7820 3105.

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.ramproject.org.uk

Visit the RAM Project website for information, contacts, news and views.

Journalists should always check their sources – and so should you. When quoting facts and figures always indicate your source.
Authoritative information is vital if you want to be taken seriously by the media. Here are some websites you might like to check out.

Please note that the information of these sites are not controlled by RAM and may not represent our views

European Research Documentation Centre on Migration & Ethnic relations (ERCOMER)
www.ercomer.org/

Evelyn Oldfield Unit
www.evelynoldfield.co.uk

Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants
www.jcwi.org.uk

International Federation of Iranian Refugees
www.hambastegi.org/

Minority Rights Group International
www.minorityrights.org/

National Civil Rights Movement
www.ncrm.org.uk

UNHCR's 50th anniversary:
www.caja.org.uk

Plus:

Body Shop Human Rights & Social Affairs Campaigns:
www.think-act-change.com/

Campaign Against Female Genital Mutilation
www.forward.dirco.co.uk

Carf: Campaign Against Racism & Fascism:
www.carf.demon.co.uk

Crosspoint Anti Racism: largest collection of anti-racism links on internet:
www.magenta.nl/crosspoint

Global Fund for Women:
www.globalfundforwomen.org

Internet Centre Anti-Racism Europe
www.icare.tr

Please keep me informed with details of your media successes and disappointments.
Nazand Begikhani
www.oneworld.org/guides/migration/