

RAM BULLETIN

Refugees, Asylum-seekers and the Media Project

advice
information
research
& training
on media ethics



No 36, January 2004

Promoting best practice in media representation of refugee and asylum issues

BBC opens its doors to exiled journalists

Up to 10 members of the RAM Exiled Journalists Network are to spend a week within the BBC to get a feel for British broadcasting.

In a ground-breaking scheme set up in conjunction with the RAM Project, BBC Radio Five Live and BBC World Service are to offer a unique two-way work-experience scheme for exiled journalists in the UK.

The scheme will best suit those looking to pursue a career in broadcasting. Delegates will shadow reporters and producers on Radio 5 Live and World Service newsrooms, learn how packages and programmes are made, and meet the editors. Afterwards participants will be expected to provide feedback on their experience at the BBC and in their own countries.

Selection of successful applicants will be made by the BBC, which can also help with expenses and accommodation for those living outside London. The scheme is expected to take place during the week beginning 23 Feb.

Members of the Exiled Journalists Network who wish to be considered should first contact
anna@presswise.org.uk

Stink on the news-stands

The spectre of the *Daily Mail's* pro-fascist past returned with a vengeance on 13 Dec. A spread by Ross Benson headlined 'Welfare Britain here we come!' suggested that lifting visa restrictions for Slovaks will mean that 'ten thousand, perhaps hundreds of thousands' of Roma will soon be on their way to the UK.

The article presented them, yet again, as feckless, work-shy drunkards who cannot look after their own homes and families. According to Benson, 'When I had stopped a well-dressed Slovakian woman to ask the way to the (Roma) camp she told me: 'Just follow the smell''. Benson's tone wouldn't be out of place in a paper published by Radovan Karadzic or Nazi propagandist Julius Streicher.

It was sensationally inaccurate headlines in the UK media on Mon 20 Oct 1997, when about 180 Roma refugees from Slovakia arrived in Dover, that panicked Jack Straw into imposing visa restrictions in the first place. The *Mail's* contribution then was: 'The Dover Deluge: Pleas for action as port is flooded by gipsy asylum seekers'.

Benson is writing about people who have neither claimed asylum, nor even come to Britain. But he quotes the British Ambassador saying, "People who try and abuse our asylum system will be sent home," and then adds, 'But the practical reality is likely to be very different.' He neglects to inform his readers that the ending of visa regulations does not guarantee a right of settlement nor even of admission to the UK.

Indeed, Slovakia, soon to be part of the European Union, is one of 24 countries on the Home Office's White List, from which anyone applying for asylum will be turned down automatically, detained and sent back.

Benson also ignores the fact that the abject poverty he describes with such zeal is one of the consequences of prejudice and oppression that have driven so many Roma to find a more conducive environment.

Sun roasted over 'buried' Swan Bake apology

Controversy over the *Sun's* notorious 'Swan Bake' story continues to grow. Both the *Guardian* and industry magazine *Press Gazette* have commented on the PCC's backing for the *Sun*.

Under the title 'No PCC probe into 'swan eating' story' the *Guardian* noted that the *Sun* "buried" its clarification on page 41 of its 6 Dec edition. Mike Jempson of the PressWise Trust was quoted, saying: "This decision is disgraceful – especially when viewed in the context of the PCC's recent statement urging editors to be more accurate when covering asylum issues."

www.guardian.co.uk

EDITORIAL

Why seeking-asylum is the new black

Now that sexism, homophobia and overt racism are no longer acceptable in the UK's media, certain journalists and editors are working hard to demonise another group of people.

Asylum seekers are the new targets, and these journalists constantly repeat the same tired, negative stereotypes when they write about us, as Article 19's report revealed last month.

Language has always played a central role in oppression. Every bigot, bully and despot has adopted a specific term for the group they despise, and used it to suggest a set of characteristics that everyone in that group supposedly shares.

But asylum seekers must be one of the most diverse groups of people ever lumped together and demonised in this way. We are of all ages and beliefs. We come from countries across the world. The problems that lead us to flee our homes have no respect for gender, sexuality or wealth. We are old and young, educated and illiterate, fat and thin...

Of course, there are some bad people among us – as there are in any section of society – and the papers have revelled this month in reporting on court cases against asylum seekers for everything from dangerous driving to rape. But to imply, as these journalists do, that we all share the characteristics of these criminals is simply ridiculous.

Next time you read a story about asylum seekers, replace the term with 'Jews', 'women', 'gays' or 'blacks'. That will make clear what the nature of this coverage is – and how vigorously we should continue to campaign against it.

Jahangir Hajipour
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Guest Editor

Study exposes myths peddled by UK journalists

Early results from the UK's contribution to a massive project looking at how the European media covers refugees and asylum seekers reveal interesting trends.

They show that almost half of the stories in the UK press over one week in November portrayed asylum seekers as a burden on UK society.

One in four articles suggested that asylum seekers were criminals, and one in five suggested they were a danger to the UK.

Full results will be published in a report released on a Day Of Action during March 2004 and will highlight the need for Europe's media to put balance into its coverage.

If you want to find out more email williams.t@blueyonder.co.uk

Diatribes Dawn's views make her a rising star

What punishment do you get if you're a tabloid columnist writing sinister articles blaming asylum seekers – without any evidence – for stealing your wallet, jumping the queue for council houses, and even smashing your mother-in-laws' foot?

The answer is you get promoted to Editor. Dawn Neesom of the *Daily Star* became editor of Britain's fastest-growing tabloid in December.

Asked in a *Guardian* interview about the paper's view on immigration she said: "Both the *Express* and the *Star* reflect what we are getting back from our readers." Vox-pops in the paper have included gems such as: "Why don't we put all asylum seekers in a boat and bomb it for target practice?"

And what's happened to her ex-boss, Peter Hill? He's become editor of the *Express* – and was appointed to the Press Complaints Commission in mid-September.

Mirror sting exposes abuse at Yarl's Wood

Last January a now-notorious *Sun* front page proclaimed: 'Round 'em up, kick them out'. But a *Daily Mirror* exposé, published on 8 Dec, shows that it's more a case of 'Lock 'em up and kick them.'

Mirror journalist Nick Sommerland spent seven weeks working as a guard

at the Yarl's Wood detention centre, where he was privy to the treatment meted-out to immigration detainees.

His front-page report revealed that some staff boasted about using violence against detainees, and were looking forward to new restraining powers that will allegedly enable them to kick, punch and head-butt detainees. In training sessions and conversations with other guards, Sommerland was routinely told not to show any empathy towards female inmates, who were referred to as 'useless scrubbers' and 'bitches'.

www.mirror.co.uk

MPs slam government for kow-towing to Daily Mail

The government was accused by MPs of pandering to the *Daily Mail* during the parliamentary debate about the Asylum Bill, on Dec 17.

Plaid Cymru MP Elfyn Llwyd said that the Bill "might look good in the *Daily Mail*" but was, in fact, "awful".

Labour MP Dianne Abbot added: "If we can get away with removing proper appeals and proper legal redress from asylum seekers, what other group that is not popular with the *Daily Mail* will we move on tomorrow and the day after?"

The Bill includes provisions to take the children of asylum-seekers into care if their parents refuse to leave the country, shortened appeals procedures and the so-called 'threat of destitution' clause which would remove benefits from failed asylum claimants. It was voted through with 287 votes for and 78 against.

RAM branches out

RAM Project National Co-ordinator Terry Williams will be launching the Norfolk Asylum Media Group on 13 Jan, and running a training day for the Dover Group on 15 Jan.

Comic Relief recently notified us of new funding over the next two years to develop the networks further. The new programme will involve more members of the exiled journalists network writing for the *Bulletin* and shadowing Terry during training sessions. It will also fund a conference bringing together all the regional groups.

For more information email Terry at williams.t@blueyonder.co.uk

Listen to refugees

Like political asylum seekers, economic and environmental refugees face threats to their lives and livelihoods, writes Pearl Thevanayagam. But the UK Government disbelieves this and imposes restrictions on such people.

Listen to the Refugee's Story, a three-part collection of articles, explores how Britain's investment, trade and foreign policies are creating these refugees in the first place.

It shows, for instance, how the UK subsidized £760 million in arms sales abroad in 2002.

Oil companies, construction firm Balfour Beatty, the Anglo-American consortium BHP/Billiton/Glencore, and British-based mining multinationals are causing environmental disasters in many developing-world countries.

In Nigeria, for example, all land containing oil and gas is automatically declared to be government property, and land required for 'public purposes' is acquired with minimal compensation.

Hydro-electric dams in Sri Lanka built with British investment are causing serious conflicts among majority Sinhala and minority Tamil communities through forced settlement of one group into the other's area.

Similarly, India has constructed 54 large dams, displacing 40million people, with another 10 million evacuated for 'development projects'. 60% of depressed tribes in India have lost their lands. Author Arundathi Roy says that India's poorest people are subsidising the lifestyles of the world's richest.

This book contains poignant poetry and powerful personal testimonies from different countries, emphasising Britain's complicity in the creation of economic and environmental refugees. It also emphasises that asylum seekers and refugees make valuable contributions to Britain's culture and economy.

Listen to the Refugee's Story: How UK Foreign Investment Creates Refugees and Asylum Seekers, is co-published by Ilisu Dam Campaign Refugees Project, The Corner House & Peace in Kurdistan. It's available from cornerhouse@gn.apc.org
Tel: 01258 473795

EXILED JOURNALISTS SPEAK OUT**THE LONG, HARD ROAD
FROM DAMASCUS**

In Syria, journalists face arrest, torture and imprisonment simply for doing their job. When GHIAS ALJUNDI wrote an article on human rights, his life changed forever.

My exile started even when I was in my own country. I was 19 years old when I became aware of human rights issues and it soon became my main interest.

In Syria, the whole media was strictly controlled by the state. You were not allowed to publish whatever you wanted to - articles had to be hidden away because your house could be searched at a moment's notice, without any warning.

As a student I wrote an article under an assumed name in an unofficial publication, describing the dire human rights situation in Syria. When the police found out that I had written it, I was arrested, tortured and imprisoned in awful circumstances. I was held in a very tiny room, holding forty men, for five years.

After I was released I carried on my struggle for better human rights, and that brought a lot of harassment from the government. I was arrested many times. In 1998 I learned that the secret police were after me, and there was a danger that I might go to prison for many years, so I had to flee.

I left with just a handful of possessions – a few pictures, letters, cassettes, a book that I always carried, and a photograph of my mother. I was very sad to leave my writings behind, but it was too dangerous to take them with me.

My first step was Moscow. Arriving at the airport, I knew nobody and had just US\$5 to my name. Life there was the other face of torture: always feeling insecure, without a passport and facing the brutality and racism of the Russian police. Having black hair, I was stopped whenever I went. The police harassed me constantly. They always asked for money and you risked serious trouble – such as being accused of having drugs – if you refused to pay them. I had so little money that I had to spend most of my time inside my miserable room. The people I worked for also exploited me as much as they could.

As a result of torture in Syria, and the awful pressure in Moscow, I became ill and was taken to hospital. The treatment I received was great because the health system was still free for all people.

But the problems I was facing in Moscow were too much and I decided to leave. At that time, I didn't know about asylum and had no intention of staying in Europe. Just two days before leaving Moscow, I contacted Amnesty International and was told that they knew about my previous imprisonment. That encouraged me to seek safety in the UK.

Leaving Moscow airport was nastier and more difficult than leaving Damascus. The British Airways staff kept me waiting until the very last minute. At Gatwick I was handed over to officials and fingerprinted. In Syria only criminals have their fingerprints taken, and it seemed ridiculous that I was being treated in that way.

But by entering the UK, the land of Lord Byron and Shelly, there was a glimpse of hope. Waiting for the Home Office's decision about my claim for asylum was very destructive. I had no idea whether I'd be allowed to stay, or be forced to seek safety in another country. After 20 months, I was granted indefinite leave to remain.

I have tried hard to re-build my career. I've learned IT skills, developed my English and decided to integrate as much as possible with local people. I am receiving lots of support and giving others as much help as possible. I'm working with asylum seekers and refugees, offering my experiences and trying to help them with integration and language. I am also making use of my freedom to fight for a better world, free of hatred and wars.

I have tried to understand how the media works here. I have tried to make as many connections as possible with journalists in this country and in the Arab world. I write for a number of papers in London and the Middle East, and also participate in the worldwide campaign to stamp out torture.

Hearing about awful news from my ever-troubled region, and learning about what's happening back home when I am so far away, have been difficult. That sometimes brings despair. But I am committed to fighting for a world where, one day, all dictatorships and occupations will come to an end.

Ghias Aljundi wrote for student newspapers in Syria and has freelanced for **al-Safir** in Beirut and **al-Quds al-Arabi** in London. Email: aljundighias@hotmail.com

MAPPING THE REFUGEE SECTOR

4: STUDENT ACTION FOR REFUGEES Practical support for asylum seekers and refugees

Nela Milic looks at the help offered by this student group

Student Action for Refugees (STAR) is proud of its humble beginnings. The organisation started when Andy Davies was a student at Nottingham University in 1994. Looking through a magazine published by UNHCR called *Refugees*, he was surprised at how little he knew about asylum seekers. He wrote to UNHCR in Geneva suggesting that it should set up an international network of student groups. One of their officers wrote back and said that Davies should do it.

He called a meeting at the university, which over 100 people attended. The organization started from there, encouraging students to volunteer in local refugee projects. That involved everything from helping run English classes to waiting for gas engineers to arrive at refugees' houses. Even today, STAR is still focussed on providing practical aid for refugees and asylum seekers, while providing students with opportunities to learn more about the issues and campaign on them.

One of the STAR's original members, Elly Hargrave, moved to Edinburgh University and started a branch there. When she moved to London after Edinburgh, she thought STAR should be developed as an organization in its own right. Members wrote a proposal and approached the Refugee Council and UNHCR for help. Both organizations refused to take the idea on, but they offered support. The Refugee Council gave STAR office space in

its building in Vauxhall, where it has stayed to this day.

Hargrave remained unpaid for next eight months. She was about to give up in 1997 when the first grant came through. That enabled her to start up a company and then a charity – STAR is now run by a management committee of nine people who act as trustees.

STAR FACT SHEET

Number of paid staff: 4
Income (2002): £107,334

Head Office

Student Action For Refugees
3 Bondway, Vauxhall
London SW8 1SJ

Website

www.star-network.org.uk

National Coordinator

Ruth Pryce
020 7840 4442

Student Outreach Officer

Gill Venables
020 7820 3006

Youth Outreach Officer

Viv Jackson
020 7840 4425

Communications and Events

Anna Musgrave
020 7840 4443

In 1999, when nationwide dispersal of asylum seekers was introduced, the STAR network grew within months from six branches to 16 as interest in refugees spread. Now a truly nationwide organisation, STAR received money from the Community Fund in 2001, which is still its principal backer. Other funders include the Leigh Trust, the Sainsbury Fund, the Refugee Council and several smaller trusts.

Currently, 27 university groups across England, Scotland and Wales are affiliated to STAR, and the organisation's contacts extend to Northern Ireland and even Washington, USA. It also produces a quarterly newsletter

that is distributed to almost 300 addresses around the world.

"STAR is unique in the refugee sector, because it is about the involvement, rather than raising awareness," says STAR's national coordinator, Ruth Price. "In the refugee sector no other organizations work with young people like we do."

Ruth is the project's manager, media spokesperson, strategist and networker. The media work is very important, she explains. "Young asylum seekers and refugees give positive stories to the media and then we ask the journalists who used them to give something back – at least the article they wrote, if not a day of shadowing at their company. We are also encouraging students to talk to student and local newspapers." STAR also works hard to recruit new students. "In September and October we are at Freshers' Fairs, recruiting new members," she explains. "And at conferences, we ask the public to write to their MPs."

STAR also employs student- and youth-outreach officers and a communications and events officer. The student outreach officer works with student groups, made up of six to eight people. Each group is registered independently at their university. The officer provides resources and is a point of contact for training and conferences. The communications and events officer concentrates on networking with the media, and runs the Friends Of STAR scheme.

For those of us who are already involved – and often disillusioned with the policies and politics of organizations that deal with refugees and asylum seekers – STAR serves as a valuable reminder of where we all started.

It also helps us remember how we should be: hopeful and enthusiastic, as we deal with people facing particularly difficult and challenging times.

Cut-out-and keep COMMUNICATOR

PressWise use-of-the-media Guide

Figuring out how papers spin asylum statistics

Faced with figures, journalists always try to find an 'angle' to fit the editorial prism through which their paper sees the news. Nick Medic says that readers should double-check journalists' conclusions.

Protecting human lives and offering refuge to asylum-seekers is not a question of maths. It is our humanitarian duty. We have signed up to the Geneva Convention. And we can afford to.

Conveying facts from figures is always a problem, and some UK papers take exceptional liberties when 'playing the numbers game'. The *Daily Mail* excels at creative accounting when writing about asylum seekers and refugees.

Under the stark headline '**£16,000**', its 16 Dec front page ran the legend '**That's what the average asylum seeker's family gets a year in handouts (and its all tax free!)**' The article claimed that this figure, extrapolated from Government statistics, is equivalent to the take home pay of a teacher with three years' experience, or a nurse after 'five years of hard work and rapid promotion'.

THE MESSAGE NOT THE MATHS

The message is clear – asylum-seekers get a better deal than teachers and nurses. And to back that up, a Tory MP is quoted as 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."

'Just turning up'? What about the circumstances they might have fled from?

The headline figure included 'cash benefits and housing (for) an asylum-seeking couple with 2.13 children', so to compare like with like I

checked official figures for family benefits, average rents and council tax.

A UK family of 4.13 with a single breadwinner taking home £16,000 a year gets child benefit and tax credits worth £2,500. Based on average rents and council tax, they spend £7,600 a year to keep a roof over their heads, leaving them with £214 a week, or £7.40 per person per day.

An asylum-seeking family of 4.13, by contrast, receives cash benefits of £158.52 per week, or £5.48 per head per day. Unlike the UK family, they are forbidden to earn a living while their claims are being assessed and have no choice about where they live.

From their point of view the UK family is 35% better off. From the UK family's standpoint the asylum-seeking family is 26% worse off. Yet the difference between them in purely cash terms is merely £55.48 per week.

This may be an indictment of wages levels among key public service workers, but on the other hand 'Surviving on a fiver a day' does not have the right ring for a *Mail* headline, even if it offers a more telling picture of the true situation for asylum seekers.

Instead *Mail* readers are reminded that 'extremist Muslim cleric' Abu Hamza's family of eight is doing well out of the system. Few readers will retain the complexities involved in the *Mail's* story, but they are sure to remember, and talk to other people about, that and the headline.

DO YOUR OWN SUMS

The *Mail* quotes a government estimate of £2 billion a year to run the asylum system. Income support and housing costs for asylum seekers make up only 16% of this. The rest goes on the costs of detention and dispersal, Home Office and NASS staff, and (the now much reduced access to) legal aid.

In 2002 that amounted to 0.55% of government spending - £1 billion less than the government's plan to bail out British Energy, a private limited company generating nuclear power.

Next time you see statistics being quoted – check the sources, and do the maths yourself.

'PEG' BOARD

Help to set the media agenda by generating stories rather than having to react to theirs. Keep your ears and eyes open for events which can provide you, and the media with a 'peg' on which to hang positive stories about refugees or asylum seekers.

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

January to July FREE TRAINING FOR REFUGEE WOMEN

Organised by the Refugee Women's Association, various courses are available for refugee women living in the UK. Courses include Accelerated English, Childcare (leading to a vocational qualification), Business Start-up, Job Search, Mentoring and Capacity Building for women's groups. All courses are free, run within school hours, travel costs and contributions towards childcare paid. Venues: Various around London
For more info, contact 020 7923 2412 or rwa@refugeewomen.org.uk

Monday 5 January 7.30pm PEELING THE SKIN OF TIME

Exiled Writers Ink! present an evening of experimental theatre, exploring the internal and external landscapes and depicting the commotion of a society made up of different peoples. Writers include Mir Mahfuz Ali, Afshin Babazadeh, Fatma Durmush, Abol Froushan, Choman Hardi, Julia Kaminska and Gulgun Mustafa from

Cyprus, Iran, Kurdistan and Bangladesh. Members for 2004: £1 (join now by printing off the last page of the website www.exiledwriters.co.uk and send a cheque for £8 for annual membership to Exiled Writers Ink!)
Venue: Poetry Cafe, 22 Betterton Street, London WC2 (nearest tube is Covent Garden)
For more info, email jennifer@exiledwriters.fsnet.co.uk or visit <http://www.exiledwriters.co.uk>

Tuesday 13 January 5.30 - 7.00pm

SOUP KITCHEN PROTEST

Organised by the Coalition Against the Destitution of Asylum Seekers (CADAS) to mark the anniversary of Section 55 of the Asylum and Immigration Bill, which means asylum seekers who do not make their claim immediately on arrival are denied food and shelter. Speakers tbc
Venue: Outside the Home Office, Queen Anne's Gate, London
For more info, contact 020 7247 9907, 07879 612 234 or stopdestitution@naar.org.uk

Thursday 22 January
6.30 - 8.30pm

ACROSS THE DIVIDE

Organised by Exiled Writers Ink!, the development of the project Across the Divide: Writing Across the Jewish-Muslim Divide. Opportunities will be provided through a series of creative writing workshops to challenge stereotypes, discover common ground and gain an insight into the 'other'.
Venue: Diorama Arts Centre, Euston
For more info, contact [Jennifer Langer on jennifer@exiledwriters.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:jennifer@exiledwriters.fsnet.co.uk)

Wednesday 28 January
5.15pm

LEEDS ASYLUM MEDIA NETWORK

Launched by Amnesty with the support of the RAM Project and the National Union of Journalists, this open meeting will explore ways the network can exchange information, work with local journalists, access training and monitor media coverage. Speakers are Terry Williams (RAM Project) and Hana Fazal (Refugee Council).
Venue: Committee Meeting Room 3, Civic Hall, Calverley Street, Leeds LS1 1UR
For more info, or to confirm attendance, contact Anna Kelson on 0117 941 5889 or anna@presswise.org.uk

Wednesday 4 February to Friday 23 April HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY TRAINING PROGRAMME

Organised by Education Action International, a practical training programme for refugees and members of Middle East diaspora who want to promote human rights in the Middle East. Deadline for receipt of completed applications is 5 January 2004.
Venue: Friends House, 173 Euston Road
For more info, contact 020 7426 5824 or visit liza.figueroa-clark@education-action.org

Wednesday 11 February
9.00am - 5.00pm

THE FUTURE OF RACE RELATIONS IN THE SOUTH WEST

Organised by The Media Monitoring Group, a conference aiming to provide an opportunity for black and other ethnic minority organisations to shape a regional race relations agenda. Speakers will include: Lord Herman Ouseley, Imran Khan and Glyn Ford MEP tbc.
Venue: Plymouth Guildhall, Armada Way, Plymouth
For more info, contact Nick Cater on 01458 251727 or email

caterrefugee@yahoo.co.uk

Monday 23 - Wednesday
25 February

PRAXIS RCODEP EXCHANGE PROGRAMME

Organised by Praxis, a three-day event as part of the Refugee Community Organisation Development Project (RCODP). The project aims to arm refugee community organisations with the knowledge and experience to be more effective in meeting the needs of refugees.
Venue: London tbc
For more info, tel 020 7729 7985 or email admin@praxis.org.uk

USEFUL WEBSITES

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.

Guardian Unlimited
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/>

The Mirror
<http://www.mirror.co.uk/>

Visit the RAM Project website for information, contacts, news and views
www.ramproject.org.uk

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