

DIVIDING LINES

Asylum, the media and some reasons
for (cautious) optimism

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About Asylum Aid

Asylum Aid is an independent, national charity working to secure protection for people seeking refuge in the UK from persecution and human rights abuses abroad.

In the last two decades we have provided legal advice to more than 30,000 asylum seekers and refugees, many of whom have fled persecution and torture in the most dangerous countries in the world. This frontline experience helps inform our policy work, so that we campaign effectively at the heart of government.

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PREFACE

“Do you have any asylum seekers?”

Sometimes, a single phone call focuses the mind.

At the end of 2011, I spoke with a BBC researcher, who explained that she had some questions to ask about asylum seekers coming to the UK.

This is about as broad an inquiry as I can be faced with, but it soon became clear that her query was in fact about border control. The BBC had obtained some internal Home Office memos about the so-called ‘Lille loophole’, via which someone who wants to avoid passport control can travel by train through the Schengen area to Lille and then on into the UK without any checks. Radio 4 was interested in running something. Did we “have any asylum seekers” who had come into the country this way? Did we want to comment?

Well, I explained, yes and no. Asylum Aid is a charity which gives legal advice to asylum seekers and refugees every day. We might have clients who could speak with her, and we’re always happy to talk about asylum. The current system is an adversarial, undignified and inefficient mess for many of the people flung into it, and some of their stories would articulate that. It would be great to air some ideas. But, I continued, it didn’t sound as if the BBC was actually planning a piece about asylum, but rather something about border control and European relations, with asylum seekers plonked in the middle as a symbol of the problem. Nothing wrong with talking about border control, but I couldn’t in good faith put up clients and experts on asylum if that was the line they were taking.

There was a longish silence (partly, I admit, because my answer may have been a bit wordy). The researcher eventually replied that asylum was an aspect of illegal migration in which listeners were extremely interested. But there is nothing illegal about claiming asylum, I insisted, getting a bit shrill. This is precisely the sort of misapprehension I spend my days trying to dispel.

Another silence. I can’t remember how the call ended, except that it was without much further discussion and with both of us rather grumpier than we had been five minutes earlier.

It may not have been communications work at its best, but it was illustrative. She wanted ‘asylum’ to mean borders, government screw-ups, and the threat of illegal migration. I wanted it to mean people fleeing torture and violence, and getting a fair hearing in the UK if they asked for help. If there was common ground, we didn’t find it. (The programme eventually went ahead as part of Radio 4’s *The Report* series in December 2011, without featuring any asylum or immigration advocates).

It was a gloomy few minutes which gave me pause for thought. How representative had this exchange been? Have journalists generally made up their minds about asylum seekers and refugees? Is there a gulf of understanding between us?

Or maybe these questions under-estimate the potential of both asylum charities and journalists. Are opinions really so fixed that we can’t get a fair hearing, or is the media perfectly amenable to positive asylum stories provided they are packaged up in a way that best suits journalists and editors? And if the latter: what does that ‘package’ look like?

What is *Dividing Lines* trying to achieve?

I want to look properly at these questions. And in so doing, I wanted to introduce some cautious optimism back into the world of asylum and media work.

Yes, the media onslaught against asylum seekers at the turn of the 1990s and 2000s was sustained and brutal. We have a particularly grim array of headlines to look back on. Asylum seekers were “AIDS-infected ... overwhelming our hospitals” according to the *Telegraph* in 2003; “the asylum shambles is the sea in which terror most easily swims” warned the *Daily Mail* the same year.

During this period, roughly a decade ago now, media and politicians engaged not so much in a race to the bottom as a crash to the basement. I analyse what happened and why in Chapters One and Two, and consider some of the implications of this.

Some parts of this story are relatively well known. My assessment of this period draws on new articles and reports from the time, and is complemented by

two recent academic studies, the book *Bad News for Refugees* and the Migration Observatory's report *Migration in the News*. Both track the trends and language-use in media coverage of asylum issues.

Nonetheless, something is missing from such analysis, something I try to capture in Chapter Three.

While media coverage today on immigration remains extremely tough, things have changed in subtle but important ways. There are still terrible asylum stories. But it simply isn't 2003 anymore. There are fewer anti-asylum stories than there were ten years ago. In the samples used by *Bad News for Refugees*, the number of asylum stories in the mainstream press dropped from 1,961 in 2006 to 1,351 in 2011, and down to 821 for the first eight months of 2012. In six years, the number of asylum stories has dropped by half.¹

There is far less heat in the issue than there once was. Asylum is the moral panic of a different time, one done to death ten years ago. Like salmonella scares or tales of catching AIDS from drinking water, no editor wants to trot out something which feels like old news.

I have heard it argued that our experience now is just the low point of a wave natural to media production: the peak of 2002 or so has led to a relative trough today, but we should expect the wave to climb upwards again shortly. I'm not sure that this is true, but even if we agree this seems another strong argument to act. Let's strike while negative coverage is in that trough. It might slow the upward turn, squeeze out space for anti-asylum stories. It might arrest the upward turn altogether. I'm not sure what we have to gain from shrugging our shoulders and just waiting for the media narrative to take its course.

Chapter Three argues that, with the worst of the media coverage behind us, we are in danger of missing some important facts. Firstly, public support for refugees and for the principle of asylum has endured, despite the whole concept getting a pounding for the last decade. This is remarkable in itself. But secondly, the media environment has changed in a way which can help us. We are in a position to exploit new opportunities to promote a more optimistic and progressive discussion of refugees and asylum rights, and to do so for the large audiences commanded by the mainstream media. It will be tough, but it can be done.

My conclusion considers the barriers to making this happen, and how new and existing resources might be directed to help.

Audiences large and small

We shouldn't overlook the contribution of liberal-leaning (and lower-circulation) publications which have hosted detailed asylum rights stories for many years. The excellent, provocative *Red Pepper* magazine springs to mind. The *London Review of Books* has published excellent long-form essays on the perils of migration into Europe. Among the broadsheets, the *Guardian* and *Independent* have long been more willing to take a progressive line on immigration and asylum (something which has helped preserve their standing on the liberal left). I take it as self-evident, though, that we could and should be aiming to reach this traditional audience and far beyond, targeting precisely the mass audience that only the mainstream press can command. This includes those titles which have long served-up anti-asylum stories.

If that sounds controversial, I would refer people to Chapter Three for evidence that those papers and their readers already happily engage with positive coverage of asylum matters where a great story piques the editors' interest. That door is already ajar. Our most pressing task is not to bemoan anti-asylum fare. It is to understand why horror stories have enjoyed such coverage in the past, and serve up alternative, progressive ideas which might enjoy traction with the same editors.

And this, I now realise, is how, in a perfect world, that conversation with the BBC researcher would have gone. No, I didn't have anyone willing to take part in the broadcast. OK, the BBC is going to run it anyway. But hold on a moment, because here is something irresistible I have worked up, something much better which you should start scheduling for next week, and which will swallow up any room for anti-asylum stories...

¹ Greg Philo, Emma Briant & Pauline Donald, *Bad News for Refugees* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), p. 50.

A very short note on terms

This paper is not riddled with technical terms or complex words. I promise. But there are key distinctions between some of the categories discussed in the pages which follow.

An **asylum seeker** is a foreign national who has applied for protection as a refugee in the UK. Their application is considered by the Home Office, and they usually have a chance to appeal to an independent judge if their application is refused.

A **refugee** is someone whose asylum application has been successful – in other words, who the government recognises would be at risk of persecution in their home country, where they could not rely on their own authorities to protect them. A refugee is given the right to stay in the UK for five years, and to apply for further leave to stay in the UK when that expires.

A **failed asylum seeker** is a foreign national whose asylum application has been refused by the Home Office and the appeal courts. Once refused asylum, someone is expected to return home voluntarily or face enforced removal from the UK.

This paper refers in several places to the **UK Border Agency** or **UKBA**. Until March 2013, this was the executive agency with responsibility for decisions in asylum and other in-country immigration cases. The UKBA was then abolished, and its duties folded back into the work of the Home Office.

Chapter One

Asylum & the media in the 2000s: Shock and awe

In 2012, a man called Morgan Odhiambo gave an interview to the *Guardian*. Odhiambo had fled for his life from Kenya in 2003. He applied for asylum and, having proved that his life was in danger, was granted refugee status in the UK.

But he found that people treated him with suspicion, and were largely hostile towards asylum seekers. Why? Odhiambo told his interviewer: “People get their views from the newspapers. People look at you like you’re a scrounger. They think you’re just ‘one of them’. They think you’re just here to take their money or their job”.²

Sadly, Morgan Odhiambo was right. He had asked for protection in the UK at the moment when media hostility, public antipathy and political panic over asylum were all at their height. The assumption that most asylum seekers were exploiting British generosity had become conventional wisdom in many parts of the tabloid press.³ Odhiambo was a victim of this heady mix, asking for help in an environment which painted him not as someone to be afforded sympathy and a fair hearing but as some sort of pariah.

Obscure origins

That environment was all the more unsettling because the contributing factors – of deepening public suspicion, media aggression and punitive public policy – so broadly overlapped. It might be tempting to try and unpick which came first, and find some ultimate culprit. But this process is both impossible and unhelpful.

Impossible because the roots are just too tangled. It could be that papers in the late 1990s and early 2000s

² Roy Greenslade, ‘How negative reporting on asylum seekers made Morgan’s life a misery’ in the *Guardian*, 1st November 2012. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/greenslade/2012/nov/01/refugees-national-newspapers>

³ It is informative that Peter Hill, interviewed when he stepped down as editor of the *Daily Express* in 2011, dismissed accusations that he had “turned ‘asylum seekers’ into a dirty phrase” by arguing “many of them were faking it, and still are. Most of them are economic migrants”. He does not refer to any evidence in support of this. See Roy Greenslade, ‘Peter Hill: “I did too much on the Madeleine McCann story”’ in the *Guardian*, 21st February 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/feb/21/peter-hill-daily-express-madeleine-mccann>

started to push more anti-asylum stories because its readers were already concerned; but it equally could be that these sorts of stories startled people into buying the paper, thereby ensuring greater prominence to even more such headlines. Certainly, the BBC played an important role: as coverage grew elsewhere, the national broadcaster evidently felt that it couldn’t ignore asylum as a story. Its involvement helped seal the media consensus that this was a pressing issue of the day. Tabloids would no doubt have been emboldened at the sight of the BBC taking up their call.

At the same time, the government was responding to public anxiety about asylum (or was it public anxiety about media stories about asylum?) with ever-tougher promises to address the issue, and with increasingly restrictive legislation. The press could quote their sales as evidence that the public were worried, and readers could quote from newspapers to show why they were right to worry. Both could see new legislation as confirmation that things were indeed getting out of control, so the government managed at one and the same time to address asylum worries and to fan the flames of public opinion even more. As the process fed itself, so its origins became obscured.

It’s also unclear what the benefit would be if we could unpack the chain of cause and effect. The cause probably doesn’t lie in one place, and the fault certainly doesn’t. It makes more sense to accept that a swirl of inter-connected events contributed to a climate of hostility around asylum which quickly grew unchecked.

There was plenty for the media to turn to for stories. Asylum numbers *were* exceptionally high in this period by modern standards: 80,000 applications were made in 2000, then around 70,000 the next year, and 84,000 the year after (they have subsequently dropped to well under a quarter of this).⁴ Equally undeniably, the government’s initial response was an utter shambles. The bureaucratic machinery wasn’t in place at all. Barbara Roche, Labour’s Immigration Minister in 1999, has described how she took office to find fewer than 50 civil servants in place who were trained and qualified to assess the tens of thousands

⁴ All asylum statistics from Oxford University’s Migration Observatory, updated February 2013, unless otherwise stated. See <http://migration-observatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/migration-uk-asylum>

of asylum applications being made each year.⁵ The author Robert Wilder describes the newly-opened asylum offices in Croydon creaking under “almost fifteen miles of unshelved paperwork waiting to be investigated”. Asylum seekers were entering a “morass of queues, lost files, hesitant decisions and unenforceable rulings. ... The system, if that is the right word for something so disorderly, was failing”.⁶

But this didn't make the resulting furore inevitable. Some stories of government mismanagement are largely ignored by journalists, while some command public attention for months. Asylum would become a headline issue for the media for several years. Journalists, politicians and public opinion all had a role, and set in motion the process which was to cause such distress to Morgan Odhiambo and thousands more like him. The purpose of this chapter is to understand how and why this happened, and how it came to damage the debate around asylum and refugees quite so effectively.

What the papers said

Previous projects have done a thorough job collating front-page splashes on asylum from the turn of the twenty-first century. They are a miserable sight, and the sheer weight and heft of negative news stories about asylum seekers and refugees published at the time is a reminder of just how far things went wrong.

The Refugees, Asylum-seekers and the Media (RAM) Project reproduces dozens of them. Their report is as depressing as it is important: ‘Asylum tide costs Britain £2bn a year’ in the *Sunday Times* in 1998; ‘Asylum seekers are revolting’ in the *Star* in 2000; ‘Widow, 88, told by GP: make way for asylum seekers’ in the *Mail* in 2003; ‘Asylum killer on the loose’ in the *Express* in 2003; and so forth. These stories appeared unrelentingly, served up day after day, often on front pages. As quickly as newspapers could come up with social ills, asylum seekers were invoked as the cause.

Asylum seekers were associated with stealing the identities of dead children, pushing up Council Tax, making a mockery of British justice, creating water shortages, even stealing and eating donkeys. They

5 Barbara Roche, ‘Making the best of immense challenges’ in ed. Tim Finch & David Goodhart, *Immigration under Labour* (IPPR & Prospect, 2010), p. 17.

6 Robert Wilder, *Bloody Foreigners: the story of immigration to Britain* (London: Little, Brown, 2004), pp. 329, 328.

were a ‘time bomb’, ‘scroungers’, ‘parasites’ and – a word which would come to dominate media discourse on asylum – ‘bogus’.⁷

The award-winning journalist Nick Davies dedicates several pages of his book *Flat Earth News* to the coverage of asylum and immigration issues in the *Daily Mail* in particular. Throughout the early 2000s, he argues, these stories were characterised by “a pattern of distortion”. He shows how official reports and research into asylum were shorn of inconvenient alternative views and stripped of context to be repackaged as successive scare stories about (in the words of one 2003 *Mail* headline) “bogus asylum seekers and fanatics”.

In one case (subsequently a *cause celebre* for many frustrated by inaccurate journalism), a parliamentary report which went out of its way not to implicate asylum seekers in rising HIV rates in the UK was covered in a story which opened “Asylum-seekers infected with the Aids virus are putting public health at risk ...” Many articles were equally as pernicious and misleading. Even in those which weren't, questions about why people had fled for the UK, the strength of their refugee claims or their needs while here were seldom if ever raised.

Davies points out that, as well as its effect on vulnerable people,⁸ such routine distortion of the truth undermines the essential function of journalism to seek out the facts as a basis for reporting. The *Mail* was more interested in churning out “bad news about the usual enemy” whenever possible than the veracity of the way they used information to achieve this. In common with other papers mentioned above, the *Mail* had become a noisy mouthpiece for anger about asylum, rather than an investigative body looking at all sides of a given area of public policy. This is a widespread pattern which Davies dissects with skill, and of which he despairs. “Nothing excuses this kind of journalism”, he concludes.⁹ I will return to the role of “this kind of journalism” in a moment.

7 See ed. Rich Cookson & Mike Jempson, *The RAM Report: A review of the MediaWise Refugees, Asylum-seekers and the Media (RAM) Project, 1999-2005* (London: MediaWise Trust, 2005); and Article 19, *What's the Story? Results from research into media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK* (August 2003).

8 The distinct vulnerability of asylum seekers when scapegoated in media campaigns, a group particularly ill-equipped to respond, is covered in my conclusion. See also, for example, the recent work by the British Red Cross Dispatches programme: <http://www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/News/2012/October/Call-to-set-record-straight-on-refugees-and-asylum-seekers>

9 Nick Davies, *Flat Earth News* (London: Vintage, 2009), pp. 274-279.

But it has to be acknowledged that Davies's compelling dissection carries far less impact than those original stories. No matter how important it is to see the machinery of these stories exposed, it does nothing to mitigate the damage done when the pieces appeared many years before. Similarly, the journalist Nick Medic did extraordinary work pulling apart *The Sun's* notorious 2003 story 'Swan bake: asylum-seekers steal the Queen's birds for barbecues' – he fulsomely proves the story was "a work of fiction" – but the exposé did not appear until more than twelve months after the original *Sun* piece and for a markedly smaller reading audience.¹⁰ By the time these and other stories had been taken apart, 'asylum' had appeared week-in week-out in every newsagent in the country as a proxy for foreign brutality and alien values impinging on British life. By one contemporary estimate from the veteran journalist and media commentator Roy Greenslade, "the four popular papers which have run the most critical copy about asylum-seekers are read by more than 22 million people, more than a third of the British population".¹¹ Davies's analysis is withering; but by the time it appeared the damage had long since been done.

A number of theories have been put forward as to how and why this damage ran so deep and was inflicted for so long. Greenslade's paper argues that negative asylum coverage was simply the present-day example of the popular press turning on stereotyped outsiders – 'A xenophobic press for a xenophobic people'¹² – and it might well be that implicit racism offered a path of least resistance to some papers and their readers. But I think there are other, historically-specific forces at work here.

Media at the turn of the century: 'a kind of madness'

One such force is the large-scale replacement of well-funded investigative journalism by a focus on delivering more copy more quickly. 24-hour news took over the airwaves (led by BBC News 24 in 1997 and followed by Sky News Active three years later), fuelling demand for a much swifter supply of stories. These outlets were of course competing over audience-share, as were

¹⁰ Cookson & Jempson, *The RAM Report*, pp. 55-58. Medic's piece originally appeared in the *Daily Telegraph*.

¹¹ Roy Greenslade, *Seeking Scapegoats: the coverage of asylum in the UK press* (IPPR: Asylum and migration working paper 5, 2005), p. 6. Greenslade derives this figure from circulation figures and a working assumption that three people read every newspaper purchased.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

the hundreds of (often low-cost) websites which were soon looking to break news online. The market was quickly saturated by providers, all fighting for attention and trying to carry the stories which would allow them to win that fight.

Davies identifies this transformation at the turn of the twenty-first century as the moment when it became impossible to ignore that there was something seriously wrong with journalism. Quality control has gone out of the window, he argues, to the point where the media constantly and wilfully produces 'news' which it knows to be untrue. There is "a kind of madness" to so much misreporting, he declares, and he walks us through the steps which led to that situation.

The rush to profit means that nearly all local and national newspapers demand more stories from shrinking teams of reporters who spend more time in the office and less time 'in the field'; to meet this demand, reporters and editors rely increasingly on recycling stories already in the public domain; these are often published in haste without conducting even basic checks for accuracy; and public relations professionals have seen the opportunity to feed hand-crafted stories, constructed for propaganda rather than news value, straight to journalists for publication, confident that little work will be done to verify the details or explore an alternative angle to the story.¹³

In short, the early 2000s heralded a time when most popular journalism changed irrevocably. It no longer worked primarily to unearth hidden truths, because investigative reporting was too expensive and (crucially) too slow to deliver a splash. Instead, it turned to what Davies and others call 'churnalism', the quick reproduction of one of two things: either stories which were already being peddled by press agencies and other media outlets; or stories sent pre-packaged by professional spinners interested in peddling a particular line on a chosen issue. These two categories accounted for a staggering 80% of the stories sampled by Davies's team when he was writing his book.

It is easy to see from this how malicious, poorly-checked stories about 'asylum scandals' suddenly multiplied in quantity. As Davies describes it, the system for collecting and publishing news has become a panicked scramble for anything that meets

¹³ Davies, *Flat Earth News*. Quote from p. 45. Anyone who works with the press will have a favourite illustration of the absurd pressures under which most journalists work. My favourite comes from a journalist at an international wire service who emailed me on a Sunday in late 2013: "Many thanks for your help on this yesterday and apologies it took a while to get this [article] out but I was on my own in the office and had to write 5 stories".

demand: “starved of time, desperate for material, a system which should be protecting itself with rigorous checks instead starts to suck in anything which looks like a story”, he writes, a distortion “now built into the structure of news gathering”.¹⁴ And with ever-increasing competition for readers, no outlet can afford to let an opportunity pass by. So an ‘asylum scandal’ story prominent in the Sunday papers, say, will be picked up and amplified on the Monday, spurring others to find new angles on the same issue in time for Tuesday – and so it rolls on. As Malcom Dean writes, by the end of 2002 “the *Express* had become even more obsessive, running 22 front-page splashes in one 31-day period about asylum seekers. They had discovered that it sold papers”.¹⁵

This is the sort of frenzy in which a story like *The Sun*’s ‘Swan bake’ piece gets published. As Nick Medic’s exhaustive analysis shows, it became clear that the paper had splashed on an event for which it had no evidence, misquoted its only source, reported arrests which never took place, and cited a ‘report’ into foreigners eating swans which turned out to be an internal memo with no reference to anyone of any nationality eating anything at all. The story would never have met even a passing editorial test for decent journalism. But the headline was too dramatic and the competition too fierce to ignore it. Against a background of asylum scares all over the media, *The Sun* invented a story in order to capture public attention for its front page. Davies is right to point out that this doesn’t much resemble journalism as most of us understand it, but he is clear that this trend nonetheless covers all mainstream media to a greater or lesser degree.

The implications for reporting on asylum were huge.

Reporting the news and making the news

This helps explain how easy it became to pack the front pages with asylum scare stories. But why was asylum particularly ripe for this treatment? One largely-overlooked 2005 report by the think-tank Demos provides a neat suggestion.

Kirsty Milne, the author of *Manufacturing Dissent*, starts by asking herself a simple question. If civic life is falling away – as measured by a lasting downturn in the number of people voting, or engaging in local

politics, or turning up to meetings – how come the 2000s saw such exerted, organised action over issues like the Iraq war, fuel prices, fox hunting, and Section 28 legislation? What was the driving force?

She places the media at the centre of this new era of effective campaigning, and takes the same starting point as Nick Davies. Old media outlets found themselves in crisis, under threat from the reach and low costs of new media, and had responded by cutting resources, rushing through more online content, and scrambling desperately for the most scandalous headlines. But Milne argues that all this took place against a unique political backdrop which gave newspapers a new sense of purpose and impact:

newspapers, faced with falling circulation and competition from the internet, are joining the twenty-first century version of the picket line. This press activism has helped foster a new kind of social movement: dramatic surges of single-issue sentiment that occur outside party politics and which can be activated by surprisingly small groups of people.¹⁶

In other words, newspapers found that they could become the mouthpiece of a given campaign, normally in opposition to perceived government failings. It was what Milne calls “a partisan press in search of a cause”.¹⁷

This was in the absence of more conventional political opposition. New Labour had trounced the Conservatives in 1997 (with an unprecedented majority of 179 seats), and the right-wing press despaired of weak showings by the next two leaders of the Conservative Party (William Hague from 1997 until 2001, and then Iain Duncan Smith from 2001 to 2003 – Duncan Smith was the subject of particularly brutal briefings from within his own party almost from the moment he took office).¹⁸ The press had always echoed and amplified existing campaigns against government policy, but newspapers evidently recognised that they could now fill the vacuum left where an effective political opposition would normally

¹⁶ Kirsty Milne, *Manufacturing Dissent: Single-issue protest, the public and the press* (London: Demos, 2005), p. 10. <http://www.demos.co.uk/files/manufacturingdissent.pdf?1240939425>

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁸ The *Guardian* has an excellent time-line of these events, which included attacks on his leadership from high-profile colleagues, open dissent over policy from his shadow cabinet, and ultimately attacks on his wife and personal finances. <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/conservatives/page/0,,902161,00.html>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁵ Malcom Dean, *Democracy Under Attack: How the media distort policy and politics* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2012), p. 213.

do this work. In Milne's words in 2005: "Instead of reporting dissent, the media is shaping and making it".¹⁹

The 2000s saw relatively small campaigns and threats of direct action essentially being jointly staged *with* influential parts of the press, giving voice to the original campaigners but also assuring the media a flow of good stories and a claim to represent public opinion.

Thus the *Daily Mail* (and to a lesser extent *The Sun*) published high-profile stories throughout August and September 2000 over rising fuel duties. The copy was fantastic for any tabloid editor: populist anti-French feeling was combined with attacking government incompetence and scare stories about nurses unable to get to work. The whole thing culminated in farmers blockading oil refineries for a week, with no fuel available for private individuals or businesses.²⁰

And thus the campaign in Scotland to maintain the anti-gay legislation Section 28, a campaign bankrolled and promoted by a single Scottish businessman, Brian Souter. Souter and his PR team had the access to lobby editors directly, and Milne tells how the editors of the *Daily Mail* and the *Scottish Record* were shortly "speaking almost every day" to coordinate Souter's campaign in their papers. Souter generated acres of easy copy for his editor-friends, and transformed himself into a "protagonist of DIY democracy".²¹ His campaign enjoyed an extraordinary spell of media coverage, even if his goals were ultimately thwarted by the Scottish Parliament.

Milne astutely recognises that this new way of doing businesses also gave space to small but well-organised anti-asylum voices. In a world where individuals and correspondents could now work-up a story together, with no need for any outside influence, we can find

a self-referential universe where politicians have at best a walk-on part, and where small groups can have their voices hugely amplified. Sir Andrew Green, a retired diplomat who runs Migration Watch, has been quoted at least once a week on the issue of asylum in the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Star* since the start of 2003.²²

¹⁹ Milne, *Manufacturing Dissent*, p. 20.

²⁰ "We were twenty-four hours away from meltdown, at best forty-eight hours away," confided one Minister. Quoted anonymously in Andrew Rawnsley, *Servants of the People: The inside story of New Labour* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 410.

²¹ Milne, *Manufacturing Dissent*, pp. 38, 39.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Often, Green's quotes were less inflammatory than the stories to which they added ballast.²³ But Milne is right that Green became the chosen voice for taking up public concern on this topic: dismissive of asylum seekers, scornful of government policy, and deeply wary of the effects of immigration in general. As a flavour of those quotes, here he is in the *Daily Express* in August 2005: "There is clear evidence of the abuse of the asylum system by potential terrorists. This is a surprisingly high number [of asylum seekers who were also on a government watch-list] which shows quite clearly that people who have come under suspicion of terrorism have been using the asylum system as a means of staying in Britain".²⁴

By Milne's numbers, then, Green had at least one anti-asylum quote published each week, every single week for two years, across two separate mass-selling tabloids. At an absolute minimum, that is 104 statements attacking asylum seekers and government asylum policy – all as a result of strong contacts and an eye for a good quote. Migration Watch is cunning rather than cutting-edge (its website still uses 'migrationwatchuk@hotmail.com' as its main contact address), but it has become very good at promoting its agenda.

In the new media climate, small pressure groups with limited resources can tap into the political agenda, supply journalists with a steady flow of attractive quotes, and effectively take control of the mainstream debate. Migration Watch saw its chance over a decade ago, and has occupied a privileged position in the mainstream media ever since. Asylum campaigners haven't yet found a way to shift them.

What the public saw

The public response to this media climate was predictably negative.

This is best measured through polling, although one has to be cautious with information drawn from the data. Polls are commissioned for different reasons (including, as Nick Davies points out, as a 'peg' for pre-existing stories) and to different methodologies.

²³ See, for example, Nick Fagge, 'Luxury life of asylum seekers' in the *Daily Express*, December 11th 2002, in which Green is quoted despite sounding a little hesitant to endorse the paper's claims that asylum seekers in the UK were granted access to 24-hour room service, 15-channel cable TV, pornography, computer games, jacuzzis and a "fully air-conditioned gym".

²⁴ Tom Whitehead, '1 in 4 terror suspects are asylum seekers' in the *Daily Express*, August 22nd 2005.

Respondents will react to the way questions are put to them: leading questions might well nudge particular answers from people who had otherwise given little thought to the issue, for example. While most pollsters might strive for as much objective information as possible, at the extreme end of the spectrum polls can be used as crudely effective devices which seek only to shift public opinion rather than measure it.²⁵

Despite all this, we know that perceived public opinion was a crucial component of the cycle which made asylum coverage more and more combative during this period. No matter how the public reached its conclusions on asylum, its conclusions were relatively clear. Specific asylum polling in the 1990s and early 2000s (as distinct from questions about immigration as a whole) was relatively scarce, but one way to avoid too much confusion is to look at a series of polls on the topic commissioned from a single highly-respected polling company, Ipsos MORI.²⁶

In 2002, Ipsos MORI published five years of polling on asylum, which allows comparisons on certain questions. The belief that asylum seekers came to the UK not as people in danger but as economic migrants had nearly quadrupled between 1997 and 2002, from 11% to 43%. Asked to pick out three words that the media used most often in relation to asylum seekers, the 2002 respondents plumped for 'illegal migrant' (64%), 'bogus' (22%) and 'soft touch' (16%). Only 2% chose the word 'welcoming'. And they were right, of course: by 2002 the association of asylum with illegality and falsity certainly was entrenched in the media.

Deeply negative public opinion on asylum is recorded throughout the period. In 2000, 80% of respondents agreed that "refugees come to Britain because they think Britain is a 'soft touch'", and more than a quarter admitted they would be 'upset' if "a family of asylum seekers moved into my street".

A poll of young adults in 2003 found that almost half believed "few asylum seekers in the UK are genuine"; 58% thought they made no positive contribution to British life (only 2 in 10 thought they did). In 2004, 74% of adults polled agreed with the statement that "government asylum policy was not successful".

In the Yougov poll commissioned by *The Sun* to accompany its 2003 'asylum week' (of which much more in Chapter Two), an overwhelming 82% thought the government response to asylum was "not tough enough". Two thirds of respondents believed that only "a small minority" of asylum seekers were "genuinely fleeing persecution in their own country".²⁷ The asylum system was perceived, in short, to be full of chancers, and the government wasn't doing enough to deal with it.

So what was the government doing?

²⁷ The original Yougov fieldwork results can be found at <http://iis.yougov.co.uk/extranets/ygarchives/content/pdf/TSU030101001.pdf>

²⁵ A useful recent guide to the opportunities and pitfalls of reading polls is offered in Nate Silver's *The Signal and the Noise: The art and science of prediction* (London: Penguin, 2012). On commissioning polls purely as a peg for news stories, see Davies, *Flat Earth News*, pp. 172-173.

²⁶ All the Ipsos MORI figures and fieldwork quoted below and available at <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive.aspx?keyword=Asylum>

Chapter Two

Politicians, public opinion & asylum in the 2000s: Panic stations

Tony Blair called more meetings to discuss asylum than on any other issue apart from Iraq.²⁸ This could show that the Prime Minister had a focus and grip on public concerns – but it also rather suggests panic.

As the twentieth century turned into the twenty-first, and New Labour's time in government got underway, its chief pollster Philip Gould began to report rising levels of resentment and bewilderment among voters over asylum policy.²⁹ The government's spin-doctors quickly realised that this was an issue on which they would be politically vulnerable. For the Labour press machine, the fear was that in asylum the Tory opposition and their friends in the right-wing press had found an issue with which to damage the government. Public confidence in the government's handling of asylum tumbled. The government's Director of Communications, Alastair Campbell, recorded in his diary the repeated calls inside Downing Street for officials to face down Conservative gains by getting the issue 'under control'.

"At Cabinet", he wrote in April 2000, one month before local elections "Jack S[traw] went through what was being done re asylum. It was beginning to pick up as a political issue and Jack was setting out how many of our current problems were a direct result of how the Tories ran it". Three days later: "Asylum was really picking up and the Tories had briefed on the back of the local elections launch that they were going to make asylum the issue. This was going to be really difficult for us". And on Blair a year later, this time two months before a General Election: "TB's concern was that if we were not careful, [asylum] would become the main thing. Asylum still had the potential to give the Tories traction and a way back in".³⁰

Campbell and his colleagues carved out a solution, of sorts. Finding itself in a deep hole over asylum, the government reached a settlement with the media. The

28 See Sarah Spencer's chapter on immigration in Anthony Seldon (ed.), *Blair's Britain 1997-2007* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 359.

29 See Anthony Seldon, *Blair* (London: Free Press, 2005): "Philip Gould's research during the first term had repeatedly warned that asylum and illegal migration was a major issue for voters", p. 635.

30 Alastair Campbell, *The Blair Years* (London: Arrow, 2008), pp. 447, 448, 527.

approach would have a ruinous effect on thousands of lives during that period, and its impact still hangs over asylum work now.

Spinning asylum

Under Campbell, the control freakery of New Labour's media operation was legendary. The government's day-by-day media plans were plotted and monitored on 'The Grid', a chart of upcoming media opportunities which covered not just major policy announcements and official business but also celebrity events and gossip to which talk of government progress could be pegged. If there was a chance to spin New Labour's work, The Grid had it covered.

This process enjoyed mythical status partly because no one outside the inner circles of government really knew how it worked. So when several weeks of The Grid were leaked, covering a large part of August 2003, its insight into how New Labour operated was pored over with some excitement.

The leaked section included the week of 18th to 24th August 2003, which had seen some particularly brutal stories about asylum in *The Sun*. Even by the standards of the early 2000s, it was horrendous stuff: opening with the Monday headline 'Stop the asylum tide NOW', a series of prominent articles warned that asylum seekers were destroying both British heritage (through the imposition of strange and threatening values from overseas) and British health (by bringing tuberculosis with them). Traditional British images like a Butlin's holiday were juxtaposed with 'marauding' gangs of asylum-seeking young men. The pieces were ill-informed, often built on scant evidence, and were highly aggressive. Nick Davies would have recognised it immediately. This was *The Sun* at its worst.

But more shocking in a way was the fact that Downing Street evidently knew all about this in advance. *The Sun's* coverage was not a nasty surprise foisted on Ministers. Rather, The Grid noted that 18th to 24th was set to be 'Sun asylum week'. Evidently tipped-off in advance, the government had planned accordingly.³¹ After the last of *The Sun's* pieces, the

31 This section of the leaked Grid is reproduced in Peter Osborne and Simon Walters, *Alastair Campbell* (London: Aurum, 2004), p. 362.

Home Secretary David Blunkett gave an exclusive interview to the paper on the 23rd, “breaking into his summer holiday” to empathise with the concerns of *Sun* readers and promise a ‘draconian’ clampdown on asylum.³² With prior notice of the editorial line to be taken by the country’s best-selling newspaper, the Downing Street media operation acted not to correct the more inflammatory claims being made but to line-up its Ministers alongside the coverage, expressing disgust at what the paper had ‘uncovered’ and sympathy with equally appalled readers.

The most generous interpretation is that *The Sun* set a virulently anti-asylum agenda to which the government contributed to limit immediate damage.³³ This was 2003: the government could probably still have taken credit for rebutting some of the more outlandish claims being made. But they chose instead to cover before the coverage. *The Sun* used a stock of shocking stories for its front pages as leverage for an exclusive with the Minister, while the Minister allowed the paper to set the terms of a right-of-reply.

Somewhere caught up in all this, of course, were asylum seekers, smeared as much by the government as by the press. The government to whom they had turned for help weren’t just making a bureaucratic mess of handling their claims;³⁴ they were actively attacking them on the front pages of the papers.

The control which isn’t

Except that the government now had another problem. Their media strategy didn’t work. In fact, it made things much worse, and further undermined the government’s reputation for competence on asylum.

Media headlines in *The Sun* and elsewhere were taken as evidence that the public wanted tougher action on asylum. So Ministers jumped into the press to promise exactly that (Blunkett’s ‘draconian measures’ is exemplary) and then introduced a tranche of new legislation. The Immigration and Asylum Act in 1999 allowed officials to disperse asylum seekers all over the country, and access to mainstream benefits was replaced with vouchers. The Nationality, Immigration

32 Trevor Kavanagh, ‘I can’t argue over asylum’, *The Sun*, 23rd August 2003.

33 Other campaigners have taken the less generous view that this attack on asylum seekers was co-designed by the media and the government’s top press advisers, working together to ‘lance the boil’ of tabloid asylum coverage.

34 See Robert Wilder on the “morass of queues” in which thousands of asylum applications were lost, quoted in Chapter One.

and Asylum Act in 2002 strengthened government power to remove failed asylum seekers from the UK. The Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc) Act in 2004 restricted appeal rights for asylum seekers.

Each was accompanied by a high-profile commitment to ‘getting a grip’ on asylum: Ministers would have been delighted by some (much more low-key) headlines heralding a drop in asylum applications and an increase in removals.³⁵ Robust rhetoric abounded, rhetoric which reached its peak (or, if you prefer, its depths) at successive Labour conferences in 2003 and 2004. At the first, Blair committed to “derail the gravy train of legal aid”; at the second, to make sure that more asylum seekers were removed from the UK each month than arrived.³⁶

The message couldn’t have been clearer: the government knew the public was worried, and wanted to make a public show that it was acting on these concerns. The asylum system would be brought back under control. But it was a mistake. As so often under New Labour, short-term headlines were won at the expense of long-term trust.

The government’s focus on ‘gripping’ this and ‘derailing’ that simply confirmed to a sceptical public that they had been right about asylum all along. Here was a problem in need of a firm hand. In feeding this media narrative, Ministers now had a perception problem that they couldn’t control.

Asylum numbers started to fall dramatically after 2002. From 84,000 claims a year, numbers cratered off to 49,000 in 2003 and dropped further to 31,000 in 2004. By 2005 it was barely 20,000, then lower still. Over the same period, asylum seekers as a proportion of net migration to the UK tumbled all the way from 49% to 4%.

It is unclear how much this was a direct or indirect result of government policy. This question could fill another research paper.³⁷ But either way, it would have seemed

35 See for example ‘Blair Welcomes Asylum Fall’, *the Daily Mail*, 22nd May 2003.

36 The two speeches can be found at <http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=184> and <http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=183>

37 It has for some time been taken as gospel among campaigners that asylum flows are unresponsive to restrictive asylum policies. This was the conclusion of a recent parliamentary inquiry into asylum support rates – see *Report of the Parliamentary Inquiry into Asylum Support for Children and Young People* (January 2013), p. 9 – and has long been the underlying message of much work by influential charities: see, for example, Refugee Action’s *The Destitution Trap* (2006) <http://stillhumanstillhere>.

reasonable to assume that public trust in Labour over asylum would stabilise after overseeing the drop in numbers that the government promised. Yet nothing of the sort occurred.

Looking at one of the Ipsos MORI polls mentioned in Chapter One, we can see what happened instead. 60% of those polled in 2004 estimated asylum numbers had gone up 20% in the last two years; another 18% thought asylum applications had continued at the same rate. That's a massive majority who weren't aware that numbers had dropped, let alone ready to give Ministers any credit. Even more damningly for the government, when told the true figure (that applications had dropped by almost a third) well over 70% of respondents said it made no difference to their previous answer. They trusted neither the government nor 'independent observers' to come up with a trustworthy figure. Instead, they trusted their instinct that asylum numbers were high or getting higher, and they didn't like it.

It may not be surprising that people didn't immediately feel an impact of dropping asylum numbers in their everyday lives.³⁸ But it is surprising that people so readily dismissed apparently definitive evidence that numbers were down. Plainly, people didn't trust government, or indeed anyone else, to be straight with them on this issue.

On immigration in general, trust in the government took a hit after Labour wildly under-estimated how many people would come to the UK after border controls were relaxed for eight EU countries in 2004. But damage to their credibility on asylum predates even this. The government's work to assuage tabloid anger had only encouraged ever more dramatic headlines, along with an assumption from voters that

files.wordpress.com/2009/01/ra_the_destitution_trap2.pdf. However, Timothy Hatton's recent, rigorous analysis suggests domestic policy has a small impact. In *Seeking Asylum: Trends and Policies in the OECD* (London: CEPR, 2011), Hatton argues that the reduction in asylum applications made in Europe, Australia and the United States between 2001-2006 results from three factors: limiting access to territory, tougher domestic policies on processing asylum claims, and factors outside of government control. Although domestic policy has by far the smallest impact of these, Hatton argues that tougher domestic policy in the case of the UK accounted for around 10-11% of the fall in asylum numbers for this period (pp. 74-75). Confusingly, and mistakenly, the asylum support report cites Hatton's work as evidence for the very opposite.

38 Former government director of communication James Frayne echoed a popular view when he pointed out recently: "voters form opinions primarily based on their emotional responses to what they see and hear parties saying, not through a careful process of reasoning and rational judgment. ... within reason, voters have little sense for whether things in the real world are doing a little better or a little worse". See 'Janan Ganesh is wrong – great campaigners and great staff do matter' on ConservativeHome <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/platform/2013/08/janan-ganesh-is-wrong-great-campaigns-and-great-staff-do-matter.html>

the government's constant pledges to 'get a grip' had been repeated so often they must be empty.

Maybe things would have worked differently if the government had acted swiftly to address and defuse the most destructive reporting of asylum. But even as early as 2004, it was probably already too late.

The fallout

The lack of trust hit the Labour government hard. The public loss of trust – and the risk that future governments will tumble into the same problem – is best illustrated with reference to immigration as a whole, on which far wider polling and analysis has taken place.

Between 2003 and 2010, Labour's immigration policy drew negative responses from vast majorities of the public. At *best*, just under 70% were unimpressed with Labour's approach. This peaked in 2003 at 85% disagreement with the statement that "the government has migration under control".³⁹

Evidently, there was a deep and sustained collapse in support for the Labour government's approach to immigration. They had a problem.

Interestingly, analysis after the 2010 General Election by Rob Ford and Will Somerville demonstrated that the core Labour voters who abandoned the party in 2010 over immigration did so not because they cared more about immigration than anything else, but because they were fed up that "Labour had not adequately managed the issue. Our evidence suggests that voters did not simply desert Labour because they were angry about immigration, they switched because they were angry about immigration and *they believed Labour had failed to address their concerns*".⁴⁰

There is a message to future governments here: talking tough on immigration and asylum will only be politically effective if the message also gets across that that toughness is having an effect. As Labour found, if Ministers talk about a problem until that problem expands to seem insoluble, it is the very

39 Rob Ford, *British attitudes about immigration and asylum: what do we know? Presentation to the Inter-agency working group on asylum and immigration* (December 2010) http://academia.edu/1676887/British_Immigration_Attitudes_What_do_we_know

40 Rob Ford and Will Somerville, 'Immigration and the 2010 General Election: More than meets the eye' in *Immigration Under Labour*, pp. 10-14. Emphasis in original.

people who supported the party who will feel most betrayed. They will certainly have tuned-out to any talk of progress on those policy goals.

Matt Cavanagh (formerly a special adviser to the Labour government, and after that an influential commentator on immigration issues) has pointed out that the coalition government has walked directly into the same trap. Writing in July 2012, Cavanagh argued that the coalition “talked up expectations of what they would achieve on immigration control” without being honest with the public about the limited scope of the UK Border Agency. The government were ignoring the bare reality that

[s]ome of the biggest challenges, however, are beyond the control of the agency – and even that of the government as a whole. Take the issue of removing those who have overstayed their visas, or had their asylum claims rejected, or were here legally but then committed a serious crime which should see them deported. ... It is becoming increasingly clear that, in government, their performance [on these issues] is no better than Labour’s – if anything slightly worse.⁴¹

The coalition’s major immigration promise emerging from the 2010 election was to impose a cap on people entering the UK and thereby bring net immigration levels down from hundreds of thousands to tens of thousands each year.⁴² Early evidence on public opinion towards this supports Cavanagh’s analysis. A YouGov poll in December 2012 showed that the promised reduction remained highly popular (supported by 80% of those polled), but confidence that it will actually be achieved is extremely low (77% think this is very or fairly unlikely).⁴³

Once more, the stakes had been raised on immigration policy by parties in government and in opposition, only for the reality to fall well short. By June 2011, the academic Alex Balch was writing: “the gap between policy aims and outcomes (or the difference between what politicians say will happen and what actually gets done) seems as large as ever when it comes to immigration and asylum policy”.⁴⁴ This is true. And to this can be added the lesson

from the New Labour years – that talking up the problem makes it even harder for a government to be *seen* to be dealing with it, even if they are.⁴⁵

It is a hopeless cycle into which successive governments have now fallen. The public are worried about immigration and asylum so the government talks tough about controlling the borders. Such tough talk confirms that the public were right to worry, but the government doesn’t necessarily have the tools to meet the promises it has made. This leads to a sense of weak government, which Ministers try and address through acting tougher. And playing a unique role in all this is asylum, where loss of control is imagined to mean hundreds of thousands of ‘scroungers’ and ‘parasites’ set loose on British streets.

So far, so much bad news. Where might we look for reasons to be optimistic?

45 See also the account of 2013 immigration focus groups, co-ordinated by British Future and Lord Ashcroft, where claims that the coalition government had cut net migration by a third drew “a collective ‘yeah, right’ ripple through the audience” even though this is true <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2013/07/from-lord-ashcrofts-research-event-an-impression-emerges-people-dont-believe-politicians-when-it-com.html>

41 Matt Cavanagh, ‘Time for a more honest debate on immigration control’ on *Labour Uncut* (July 2012) <http://labour-uncut.co.uk/2012/07/23/time-for-a-more-honest-debate-on-immigration-control/> The UK Border Agency was disbanded in March 2013 and its functions moved into direct control of the Home Office.

42 See for example <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-11816979>

43 See Peter Kellner, ‘The perilous politics of immigration’ (December 2012) http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/peter-kellner/the-perilous-politics-of-immigration_b_2314653.html

44 Alex Balch, ‘The asylum amnesty “scandal”: mind the gap’ (June 2011) <http://www.democraticaudit.com/?p=270>

Chapter Three

Asylum & the media now: the strange survival of refugee rights

I promised this paper would outline some reasons for asylum campaigners to be cheerful. So after a lengthy review of the less-than-cheerful recent past, this chapter will explain why I believe that optimism could and should prevail.

Sympathy retained

Quite simply, the British public wants to support refugees. It may not always be obvious, but this is demonstrably the case.

As in the last chapter, public opinion is a complicated business. But a good place to start is with that 2002 IPSOS Mori poll, which asked the public why someone might claim asylum in the UK. This was the poll which showed how perceptions of asylum seekers as economic migrants in disguise had jumped four-fold in five years.

But it also showed something else. Figure i) below plots three of the most popular answers: that people who claimed asylum came to the UK for 'economic reasons', 'to escape persecution' and 'to escape war'. The economic migration line has risen sharply between 1997 and 2002 (very likely influenced by the sharp increase in the number of people who did migrate to the UK for work at this time, even if these people never sought asylum). Yet the other two lines bob along without major deviations over the same period, in the early 40s and late 20s respectively.

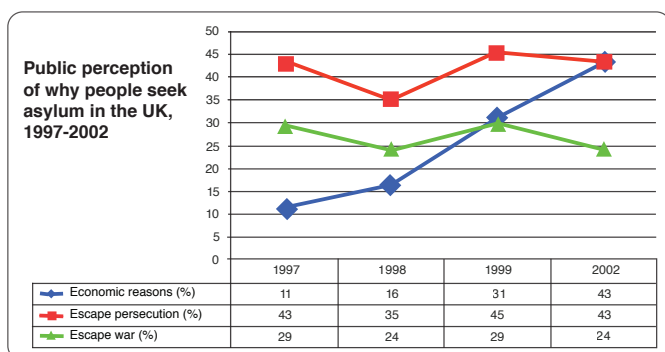


Figure i)

So even as belief grew that the asylum system was being exploited by people who actually wanted work, there was no great change to recognition that people were also escaping from conflict and abuse. The percentage figures aren't very spectacular, but what is important is that they didn't shift much. Grievance about abuse of the system didn't displace recognition that people needed it: the sense that something awful could drive people here as refugees survived intact.

This is informative. Voters retained the belief that persecuted people were coming to the UK for help even while that concept was ignored or attacked in the media between 1997 and 2002. As we saw in Chapter One, there was barely any discussion of conditions back home for asylum seekers in the tabloids, as they set their focus instead on 'bogus' claimants rampaging through the streets. Yet an understanding of persecution and conflict held firm in the public mind (most likely aided by images from the bloody Balkan conflict after 1997).

Protecting refugees – no matter how many

This data from 2002 would suggest that, despite the media onslaught, some deep-rooted ideas about looking after refugees stayed robustly in place. A tour of more recent polls shows that, in a calmer media climate, these values are even more visible.

A broad majority of the public today consistently supports the rights of refugees. 70% of respondents to the authoritative 2012 British Social Attitudes Survey agreed that the UK should continue to offer a safe haven to those fleeing persecution overseas.⁴⁶ A poll conducted by Opinium for the Refugee Council in 2011 put public support at 67%,⁴⁷ and the vast Transatlantic Trends poll in 2011 found 65% and 73% of UK respondents 'sympathetic' to those fleeing to the UK to avoid persecution and conflict respectively.⁴⁸

46 Cited by Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper in 'Labour is changing its approach to immigration' on *Politics Home*, 20th December 2012 <http://centrallobby.politicshome.com/latestnews/article-detail/news-article/yvette-cooper-labour-is-changing-its-approach-to-immigration/>

47 Refugee Council, 'Helping others is part of the British DNA' (April 2011) http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/news/archive/press/2011/april/20110418_refugeepoll

48 *Transatlantic Trends Immigration: Key Findings 2011*, p. 11. http://trends.gmfus.org/files/2011/12/TIImmigration_final_web1.pdf

These numbers are still more impressive given that they co-exist with some wild speculations about how many people are given protection in the UK every year. In the same Refugee Council poll mentioned above, 44% of respondents believed that more than 100,000 people had been granted refugee status in the UK in 2009, and almost one in 20 guessed at over half a million. (The actual figure was a more prosaic 6,740). British Future found something even more dramatic in its own poll six months later: 40% of the people it asked guessed that one in 10 of the UK population – or 6 million people – were refugees.⁴⁹

Asylum seekers are also over-represented in the more abstract way people *think* about migration. When the Migration Observatory at Oxford University polled the public in 2011 on the groups people “normally think about” when considering migration flows in and out of the UK, 62% of respondents plumped for asylum.⁵⁰ For context, this can be set against the percentage of entrants into the UK in 2012 who actually asked for asylum: 7%.

Put together, this tells us something strangely reassuring. It is surely a credit to the general decency of the British public that refugee rights enjoy significant, sustained majority support even when the numbers involved are thought to be overwhelmingly larger than they actually are. The public might overstate the UK’s asylum-seeker population more than 70-fold, but they nonetheless maintain instinctive values of sympathy and protection for those who need it. This is something to remember and celebrate, and certainly something for asylum advocates to work with.

Equally, the salience of the numbers is not lost on today’s politicians. There is a clear mandate for maintaining generosity towards refugees.

Reframing Labour’s approach to immigration in an article for Politics Home at the end of 2012, Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper drew on the British Social Attitudes Survey results to argue that Labour would strengthen UK borders while protecting deeply-held British values on refugees;⁵¹ speaking in 2011, the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg listed

the nations from which refugees have fled since the 1950s to make their home in the UK, confident that public opinion was on his side.⁵² Both recognised, rightly, that there is no stomach for shutting the door on people who need our help.

‘Asylum seekers’ and ‘refugees’: a sliding scale

That is how things stand for refugees. The picture is far less rosy for asylum seekers, however, towards whom the public are far more wary both in their own right and in relation to other migrant groups.

In 2010 polling, 59% of respondents agreed with the statement “asylum seekers contribute nothing” and “drain resources” from the UK (this is 20 points more than agreement with the same statement about immigrants in general).⁵³ Two years before this, 53% of respondents told the Centre for Social Justice that asylum seekers were “mostly uneducated or untrained with few valuable skills”.⁵⁴

It is little surprise that, having decided that this group of people contributes very little, the public also want to see fewer of them. 56% of those polled by the Migration Observatory wanted to see the number of asylum seekers coming to the UK drop; 38% wanted to see numbers “reduced a lot”. “Asylum seekers,” the Observatory concluded dryly, “remain one of the least popular groups of migrants”.⁵⁵

The Observatory dug a little deeper to try and find out why. It cited 2011 Ipsos MORI polling, which invited respondents to differentiate between (in the Observatory’s words) “asylum seekers perceived to have legitimate claims, and those perceived not to have legitimate claims”. Perceived legitimacy had a huge impact on public opinion. 65% agreed with the statement “Britain should accept fewer asylum seekers”; but 64% of those same respondents agreed that “we must protect refugees who need a place of safety in Britain”

52 See <http://www.dpm.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/60-years-refugee-council>

53 Rob Ford, *British attitudes about immigration and asylum: what do we know? Presentation to the Inter-agency working group on asylum and immigration* (December 2010). Downloadable from http://www.academia.edu/1676887/British_Immigration_Attitudes_What_do_we_know

54 Centre for Social Justice, *Asylum Matters: Restoring Trust in the UK Asylum System* (London: 2008, CSJ), p. 96.

55 Migration Observatory, *Thinking behind the numbers*, pp. 13-14. The only legal migration categories for whom a larger percentage of respondents backed reduction were low-skilled workers and the extended family of people settled in the UK.

49 *British Future, Hopes and Fears: State of the Nation Report 2012* (January 2012), p. 19. See <http://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Hopes-and-Fears-updated.pdf>. The actual percentage figure for those granted refugee status as a proportion of the whole British population in 2012 is roughly 6,000 out of 60,000,000, or 0.0001%

50 Migration Observatory, *Thinking behind the numbers: understanding public opinion on immigration in Britain* (2011), pp. 9-10. See <http://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/migobs/Report%20-%20Public%20Opinion.pdf>

51 Cooper, ‘Labour is changing its approach to immigration’

and 73% that “we must protect genuine asylum seekers who need a place of safety in Britain”.⁵⁶

There is a steep sliding scale of support here, from untrusted ‘asylum seekers’ to legitimated ‘refugees’ or, stronger still, ‘genuine asylum seekers’. A statement with built-in assurances that the claim has been tested and accepted – that someone has moved up the scale from ‘asylum seeker’ to ‘refugee’ – then commands the support of an overwhelming majority.

The Centre for Social Justice captured a slightly different version of why this movement through the scale is so important in public opinion: 90% of respondents were concerned about abuse of the asylum system, but 79% supported granting asylum to those who “genuinely need it”.⁵⁷ The 2013 *Migration in the News* report from the Migration Observatory observed that the language newspapers used to describe refugees “attract[ed] a separate, varied and heavily international set of terms,” and operated in a whole different sphere from the language around asylum seekers (“which has more in common with discussion of immigrants and migrants”).⁵⁸

It all maps out reasonably clearly. The public don’t need persuading to support refugees (or ‘genuine asylum seekers’). Public support on this is solid, and has been for a long time. Media discussion of refugees acknowledges the international context. Public opinion on asylum, meanwhile, lags a long way behind.

So where are the examples of media coverage which give us cause for hope in both these areas? Where are refugee rights celebrated, and where are human rights fears being raised about our misfiring asylum system?

There aren’t hundreds of such examples, but there are enough to inspire some encouragement. It is easy to forget that refugees and asylum seekers can benefit from the prevailing media culture, as well as suffering at its hands. This is an important point: the assumption that asylum campaigners can only generate positive coverage by challenging existing attitudes in the media is widespread,⁵⁹ but some of the most dynamic

56 *Ibid.* The Ipsos Mori poll referred to can be read at <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/News/asylumpollfeb11topline.PDF>

57 Centre for Social Justice, *Asylum Matters*, p. 95.

58 Migration Observatory, *Migration in the news: Portrayals of immigrants, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in national British newspapers, 2010-2012* (2013), p. 5.

59 See for example Heaven Crawley, *Understanding and changing*

recent coverage of asylum issues comes where the story works *with* the grain of the media agenda. As the examples below will show, the recycling of simple, dramatic stories can work in our favour.

Telling stories

On 20th February 2013, *The Sun* carried a short article on its website headlined ‘Afghan refugee wins scholarship to Eton College’, about a young man who had achieved something extraordinary.

Rohid Zamani had arrived in the UK from Afghanistan, aged just three. His family had “fled the horrors of Al-Qaeda” and, 13 years after being granted refugee status here, Rohid had just been awarded one of the most sought-after scholarships in education, to study sciences at Eton. His plan was to go on to medicine at university. The piece included the kind of photographs seemingly obligatory for stories about young scientists – Rohid in goggles surrounded by test tubes, Rohid with his school books under his arm – as well as his memories of what brought him to the UK. His mother had insisted the family flee after watching a man get beheaded by Al-Qaeda operatives in the local market place. “There were people getting killed for almost no reason,” Rohid told *The Sun*. “Every day we were afraid”. And now here he was, on the verge of attending “David Cameron’s old school”.⁶⁰

It was a great story. In fact, it proved irresistible to churnalists across the media.

Later in the afternoon, it was published on the *Daily Mail* website under the by-line of a *Mail* journalist, using all the same quotes and pictures along with some new photos (Princes William and Harry at Eton) and a few words from Rohid’s former teachers. From there it appeared in his local press in Hull, on the BBC website, and on the *Telegraph* online. The next morning you could read about it in print editions of *Metro* and in the *Times*. Rohid became famous in a hurry.⁶¹

public attitudes: a review of existing evidence from public information and communication campaigns (2009), downloadable from <http://www.heavencrawley.com/research4.html>; and the British Red Cross’s call in 2013 to “challenge unfair, inaccurate and negative newspaper coverage of refugees and asylum seekers” <http://www.redcross.org.uk/About-us/News/2012/October/Call-to-set-record-straight-on-refugees-and-asylum-seekers>

60 Ellie Ross, ‘Afghan refugee wins scholarship to Eton College’ in *The Sun*, 20th February 2013 <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/4804386/Afghan-refugee-wins-scholarship-to-David-Camerons-school-Eton-College.html>

61 See Chris Brooke, ‘The Refugee who won a place at Eton’ in the *Daily Mail*, 20th February 2013 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2281644/>

There are two relevant questions. Firstly, why was the story picked up so widely? And secondly, why should we think that is a good thing?

Firstly, the story attracted such rapid widespread coverage precisely because it met all the criteria defined in Chapter One. It was straightforward to understand, it was easily repackaged and reproduced, and it had a winning juxtaposition at its heart: from war-torn desperation to the school of English statesmen. From Taliban gunmen (the *Mail* piece includes photos of several) to scientist in a white coat. From someone whose family witnessed beheadings to a medic putting people back together again.

And secondly, this is welcome because the simplest building blocks of asylum and refugee stories were all there. Tabloid and broadsheet media alike carried all the arguments we would wish to see in the public eye much more often: an understanding of the situation that forces a family to flee their home; the good-sense assumption that the British public is supportive of their rights; an implicit pressure that the UK government should have the means to decide and provide protection; and support for a family thrust into a new and confusing life.

We should acknowledge the danger, of course, in trying to make Rohid representative of the refugee experience in the UK. Some charities raised precisely these concerns in private at the time; some impressive high-profile campaigners have been publicly declaring the dangers of this approach for years.⁶² But it seems self-defeating to focus on what

[Rohid-Zamani-The-Afghan-refugee-won-place-Eton.html](#); 'From Afghanistan to Eton ... via Hull' in the *Hull Daily News*, 20th February 2013 <http://www.thisishullandeastriding.co.uk/Afghanistan-Eton-Hull/story-18200444-detail/story.html#axzz2bTjxxRe3>; 'Refugee student from Afghanistan wins Eton Scholarship', BBC online, 20th February 2013; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-humber-21520266>; Tom Rowley, 'The Eton scholar who fled from the terror of the Taliban' in the *Daily Telegraph*, 27th February 2013 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/9895059/The-Eton-scholar-who-fled-from-the-terror-of-the-Taliban.html>; Fred Atewill, 'Afghanistan refugee who fled Taliban bags Eton scholarship' in *Metro*, 20th February 2013 <http://metro.co.uk/2013/02/20/afghanistan-refugee-who-fled-taliban-bags-eton-scholarship-3506403/>

62 See for example the 2011 article by Eiri Ohtani, Chair of the Detention Forum: http://www.migrantvoice.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=199:eiri-ohtani-on-the-migrant-voice-spring-conference&catid=54:eiri-ohtani Her concern that media-ready stories "fail to portray migrants as people, who are all too human" accurately captures the simplifications demanded by the modern press, something she argues to be dangerous for individuals already stereotyped and scapegoated across society. But her solution is to replace the simple story with the complex reality – "simple stories foreclose possibilities of dialogues and negotiation and of being influenced and changed, and meaningful interactions that must be the foundation of any social co-existence" – which is of negligible relevance to modern media production. This approach falls into a trap which has lain in plain sight for years: withdraw from the debate on a point of principle and leave the ground open to anti-migration voices better suited to today's

is missing from Rohid's story once it has been routed through the modern media, when so much important material is included. To put this another way, there is much to build on and learn from when refugees are celebrated across the mainstream media. It doesn't happen very often. We can't afford to junk the opportunities this presents.

What Rohid's tale proves is that the rules of modern media apply for human rights stories too. Journalists will run the stories that work for them. Even if there is an underlying scepticism about these stories, the rules of churnalism can overcome them. Asylum and refugee stories geared to the modern media environment will succeed.

The Sun's piece is not a one-off. When professional footballer Fabrice Muamba suffered a near-fatal on-pitch heart attack in March 2012, his background as a refugee child from the Democratic of Congo suddenly became a factor in his status as a fearless fighter. He had fled "from the bullet-flecked battlefields of Zaire to the pristine pitches of the Premier League" (*Telegraph*), "haunted by the slaughter he had seen" as an 11-year-old boy (*The Sun*). In one extraordinary interview for the *Mirror* reprinted in the aftermath of Muamba's collapse, he is drawn as a "boy who was scared, couldn't speak English and was shivering in the winter cold when he arrived at Heathrow in 1999 but, most importantly, was safe".⁶³

The story of double 2012 Olympic winner Mo Farah has become so hackneyed it probably doesn't need much repeating. Amid acres of coverage of the Somali-born British athlete, the *Daily Mail* published an interview with his brother back in Somalia, who recalled: "Everyone's family was in turmoil during that time. There were refugee camps outside the city, people living in tents. Others were desperate to get out, and although we were very young we knew it was a time when families were making painful decisions".⁶⁴ This was the context against which Farah's

media landscape. (Punctuation in original article)

63 See Jonathan Liew, 'Fabrice Muamba: a true battler who escaped civil war' in the *Telegraph*, 18th March 2012 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/football/teams/bolton-wanderers/9151126/Fabrice-Muamba-a-true-battler-who-escaped-civil-war.html>; Emily Nash, Alex West and Neil Millard, 'Muamba speaks' in *The Sun*, 23rd March 2012 <http://wwwthesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/4203643/Muamba-speaks.html>; Simon Bird, 'Inspirational Fabrice Muamba interview: "My dad fled Congo rebels and my family are in hiding"' in *The Mirror*, 19th March 2012 <http://www.mirrorfootball.co.uk/news/Fabrice-Muamba-interview-from-2011-How-Bolton-star-escaped-civil-war-in-Congo-to-become-one-of-football-s-brightest-young-stars-article746071.html>

64 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2190417/Revealed-We-twin-brother-Mo-Farah-forced-abandon-child-war-tom-Somalia-tells-harrowing-story-separated-aged-parents-agonising-decision.html>

rise could be measured and celebrated.⁶⁵ Mo Farah was the most exhilarating story of an exhilarating sporting summer: in a story with hundreds of angles, why wouldn't his flight from a warzone be one of them?

The haunted young Muamba, and the desperate family of Farah, are stories familiar to anyone who knows or works with asylum seekers and refugees. They can be found in waiting rooms, support centres and legal offices around the UK. These are stories we hear every day; and put to a famous name they suddenly become familiar, too, to millions of readers. Some might feel uncomfortable that it takes a famous name to make this happen. The discomfort is understandable, but that's just how the media works. It is time to take encouragement from the places where it serves our interests

Good stories from boring procedures

There is another, slightly different example, in which the prime focus of the story is asylum and the workings of the asylum system. This is a notoriously difficult thing to get journalists interested in. But some stories have enjoyed substantial coverage because of the way they came to be told, once more in line with the rules of modern media.

On Sunday 3rd February 2013, the *Guardian's* legal affairs correspondent Owen Bowcott interviewed leading asylum barrister S. Chelvan. Chelvan was about to deliver the annual lecture sponsored by the charity Stonewall, and Bowcott published the story 'Gay asylum seekers feeling increased pressure to prove sexuality, say experts'. It is, in many ways, the sort of story that the *Guardian* does much better than most other sections of the media. It focused on shifts in legislation, and the case law governing how refugee claims are assessed when people flee persecution for being gay. It was legally pretty technical.

Yet versions of this story were picked up quickly on the Monday – by the *Independent*, *Huffington Post*, and Pink News online. On the 27th, it was the subject of a five-minute slot on Today on Radio 4, the BBC's flagship current affairs programme. On the back of this, the story appeared in the *Telegraph*.

65 The Migration Observatory conducted research into how media pieces during the Olympics on Farah and other athletes developed narratives around Britishness, religion and identity. See *Jessica Ennis, Mo Farah, and Identity language in the British press: a case study in monitoring and analysing print media* (2012) <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/migobs/Report%20-%20Olympics%20media%20monitoring.pdf>

With all its bitty detail, this might have seemed an unusual article to get widely picked up and rehashed. Except that other outlets saw the immediate media potential to an aspect of the story which was treated relatively lightly in the *Guardian*.

In Bowcott's second paragraph, he notes "the extraordinary methods to which individuals are resorting – including filming themselves having sex – to justify requests for refuge". By the time other media covered the story, the use of sex tapes in asylum hearings had become the focus. Thus the *Huffington Post* led with the headline 'Gay and lesbian asylum seekers "forced to show sex films..."'; thus Pink News, and their headline 'LGBT asylum seekers feel pressured to film sex...'; and thus the headline in the generally more austere *Independent*: "Gay asylum seekers feel they must go to extreme lengths to prove their sexuality, including filming themselves having sex". Halfway into the *Today* broadcast, the presenter starts to talk about asylum claims and taped "evidence of arousal" for gay clients.⁶⁶ The *Telegraph's* Dan Hodges, formerly in charge of communications at Refugee Action, used his influential blog to reflect on how such a 'perverse' process had ever come to pass.⁶⁷

Each of these pieces proceeded from the dramatic headline to cover some highly complex details about the asylum system. After all, it is systematic failings which drive gay asylum seekers to such lengths, and here was a chance to air those failings. Chelvan told the *Huffington Post* "There is an embedded culture of disbelief. They say immediately 'we don't believe you, you go away and prove it.' It's a clear breach of human rights, it's inhuman and degrading".

These are issues seldom covered so widely and in such arcane detail. And each time, the story started from elements guaranteed to get the attention of an

66 See Owen Bowcott, 'Gay asylum seekers feeling increased pressure to prove sexuality, say experts' in the *Guardian*, 3rd February 2013 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2013/feb/03/gay-asylum-seekers-pressure-prove-sexuality>; Jessica Scott, 'gay and lesbian asylum seekers "feel forced to show sex scenes to prove sexuality to UK Border Agency"' in the *Huffington Post*, 4th February 2013 http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/02/04/gay-and-lesbian-asylum-seekers-sex-films-prove-n_2615428.html; Corinne Pinfold, 'Human rights lawyer: LGBT asylum seekers feel pressured to film sex to prove their sexuality' in Pink News, 6th February 2013 <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2013/02/06/human-rights-lawyer-lgbt-asylum-seekers-feel-pressured-to-film-sex-to-prove-their-sexuality/>; BBC Today programme, 'Asylum seeker: I had to prove I'm gay', 27th February 2013 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-21601803>

67 Dan Hodges, 'Getting gay asylum seekers to prove their sexuality is perverse – but how do you "codify" love?', in the *Telegraph*, 27th February 2013 <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/danhodges/100204483/getting-gay-asylum-seekers-to-prove-their-sexuality-is-perverse-but-how-do-you-codify-love/>

editor under pressure: sex and, better still, sex tapes; something pretty sordid, titillating turned tragic, but then juxtaposed with the severe and anachronistic settings of a British immigration court.

Irresistible stuff. *Of course* it got picked up and recycled by the media machine. And as a result, an audience far larger and more varied than normal heard about the absurdities of a creaking asylum system.

Campaigners are rightly queasy about the idea of gay asylum seekers making sex tapes as part of their application process – filming yourself having sex is no way to correct the flaws in the system. The Home Office subsequently pointed out that sex tapes did not provide evidence of someone's sexuality, which means that officials aren't about to grant refugee status on the strength of one. But the hopeless failures of the system was suddenly there for all to see.

Stories about gay asylum seekers seem particularly attractive to the press in this respect, partly because they are picked up by the gay press but also aided by the British media's enduring sense that homosexuality is still a rather exotic and enticing issue on which to write. As a further example, academic and refugee expert Claire Bennett published a paper early in 2013 on the challenge facing lesbians fleeing persecution because of their sexuality, and – again – the evidence demanded in order to 'prove' they were gay.

The *Independent* ran the story on 4th April with the arresting first paragraph:

Have you ever read Oscar Wilde? Do you use sex toys? Why have you not attended a Pride march? These are just some of the questions that have been asked of lesbian asylum seekers in what one academic says shows shocking levels of ignorance and prejudice among tribunal judges.⁶⁸

Later the same day, the *Daily Mail* ran Bennett's story with very few amendments. Gay Star News followed suit, and then Pink News. *Metro* joined in for its huge readership the morning after (illustrating its piece, in an extraordinary display of bravura, with two young, scantily-clad women kissing at London's mardi-gras).⁶⁹

68 Jerome Taylor, "'Gay? Prove it then – have you read any Oscar Wilde?' Judges accused of asking lesbian asylum seekers inappropriate questions' in the *Independent*, 4th April 2013 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/gay-prove-it-then--have-you-read-any-oscar-wilde-judges-accused-of-asking-lesbian-asylum-seekers-inappropriate-questions-8558599.html>

69 See Mark Duell, "'Have you ever read any Oscar Wilde?' Lesbian asylum seekers accuse judges of asking 'insensitive' questions to prove their sexuality' in the *Daily Mail*, 4th April 2013 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2303917/Lesbian-asylum-seekers-accuse-judges-asking->

The grab for shocking headlines is familiar by now. But tagged onto those headlines is an exposure of the asylum system, one which it is vital to place before a sceptical audience. It is the *Mail* of all places – the paper so roundly and rightly condemned for its lazy, aggressive approach to asylum – which carries Bennett's quote "I thought I was quite unshockable just in terms of how dehumanising and criminalising the whole asylum process is. I was wrong"

There is something Trojan-horse-like about the whole thing: under guise of a story about sex toys, an expert on the rights of asylum seekers has stolen a position at the heart of the most relentlessly antagonistic media outlet in the country, spelling out the outrageous failings of the UK asylum system.

All this is to be welcomed. There is clearly a 'way in' that some campaigners, journalists and editors have found, one ensuring that scepticism about asylum issues is overcome by the drive for quicker, more accessible stories. These stories don't generally lead with the varied and sometimes terrifying lives lived by refugees, nor with the need to reform an asylum system which doesn't serve the people who need it. Something much more racy grabs the headline – the tragedy behind someone's fame, the sex tapes placed before a judge of the land – and the refugee stories and asylum failures pile in behind.

Briefly, there are other examples.

We can consider the approach taken by the charity Women for Refugee Women when it launched its new research report *Refused* in 2012. *Refused* includes the stories of several refugee women, and concludes with a series of recommendations aimed at government. Historically, this material has not been guaranteed media attention.

However, it ended up commanding a great deal. Why? The media made space to cover the research by treating it, in headlines at least, as a new angle on a scandal to which the press regularly returns:

[insensitive-questions-prove-sexuality.html](http://www.gaystarnews.com/article/uk-judges-question-lesbian-asylum-seekers-based-on-ignorant-stereotypes040413); Anna Leach, 'UK judges question lesbian asylum seekers based on ignorant stereotypes' in Gay Star News, 4th April 2013 <http://www.gaystarnews.com/article/uk-judges-question-lesbian-asylum-seekers-based-on-ignorant-stereotypes040413>; Scott Roberts, 'UK: Judges accused of asking lesbian asylum seekers "inappropriate" questions such as "Have you read Oscar Wilde?"' in Pink News, 5th April 2013 <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2013/04/05/uk-judges-accused-of-asking-lesbian-asylum-seekers-inappropriate-questions-such-as-have-you-read-oscar-wilde/>; Carl Morris, 'Lesbian asylum seekers asked: Have you read Oscar Wilde? Do you use sex toys? Where do you go clubbing?' in *Metro*, 5th April 2013 <http://metro.co.uk/2013/04/04/lesbian-asylum-seekers-asked-have-you-read-oscar-wilde-do-you-use-sex-toys-where-do-you-go-clubbing-3582916/>

horrifying rape statistics. ITV News, the *Sunday Times*, the *Huffington Post*, MSN news, the *Scotsman* and some regional press all went with a variation on the top line sent out in Women for Refugee Women's press release: 'half of female refugees in Britain have been raped'.⁷⁰ (The number of unsigned articles demonstrates how quickly this news was recycled and churned through the media). It was appalling figures on sexual violence which drew editors to the research; but in a familiar fashion, this allowed for the discussion of more technical ideas about asylum seekers and their treatment in the body of the articles. Nearly every piece quoted the charity's founder, Natasha Walter: "We are asking the government to note the growing concern about this issue and reform the asylum process to make it more responsive to women's needs". The call for reform is, in the long run, the important bit. But the report was pitched perfectly to make sure that it appeared all over the national press.⁷¹

Or we can consider the story of Mohammed Rafi Hottak, the Afghan interpreter who had worked with British troops and claimed asylum here in 2012. The course of events – first the exposure of a deeply-flawed Home Office refusal decision, and then the government 'u-turn' in withdrawing and overturning that decision – generated mainstream media coverage at every stage. That initial decision to refuse attracted derisive coverage in the *Daily Mail*, *Telegraph*, *Times* and *Huffington Post*, as well as in Mohammed's local paper in Leicester, given that evidence verifying his story could have been "simply obtained" from the Ministry of Defence if anyone had bothered to look.⁷²

It is the easy populism which made this such a ready story for journalists to write and repeat. Brave British soldiers

are forced to correct the errors of bureaucrats and defend one of their own; a senior MP is quoted insisting "We owe asylum to interpreters who have risked their lives for our forces". The pictures do a fine job illustrating official incompetence, showing Mohammed's chest and back scarred black with injuries from the explosion.

As ever, there is an important core to Mohammed's story. The idea that genuine details of an asylum claim are rejected without being appropriately checked isn't news to someone who works with refugees. It probably was to readers of the *Mail* and *Telegraph*. Bundled in with this tale of soldiers and good old-fashioned loyalty is another story: when the asylum system operates this poorly, real people suffer.

Optimism and us

Maybe it would be better if journalists valued technical information for its own sake, and didn't need screaming headlines about sexual abuse or British soldiers or sex tapes. I'm not sure. But it's worth repeating: journalists increasingly do need the easy headline. That's the nature of the business.

When the Migration Observatory research into newspaper coverage of immigration and asylum was published in 2013, there was a mis-step in the response from campaigners. One of the report's authors wrote in the *Guardian* that the research proved the media was 'hysterical'.⁷³ The *Huffington Post* carried quotes from campaigners critical of the sort of reporting which "simplifies people's stories" or underlines the "stereotypical image ... that lumps big numbers of people together".⁷⁴

But simplifying and stereotyping is precisely what the media does. Maybe this is hysterical, maybe not – either way, it isn't about to change. Or at least, trying to change it doesn't seem like the most fruitful or time-efficient task. The journalist Andrew Rawnsley is denouncing modern media when he describes "its craving for novelty, its hunger for sensation, its tendency to trivialise", but his characterisation is spot-on.⁷⁵

70 See 'Nearly half of female refugees have been "raped"' on ITV website, 28th May 2012 <http://www.itv.com/news/update/2012-05-28/nearly-half-of-female-refugees-have-been-raped/>; Eleanor Mills, 'Rejected and raped in "sanctuary" Britain' in the *Sunday Times*, 27th May 2012; PA/Huffington Post staff, 'Half of female asylum seekers in Britain are victims of rape, report says' in the *Huffington Post*, 27th May 2012 http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/05/28/raped-female-asylum-seekers-women-for-refugee-women-natasha-walter_n_1549814.html?; 'Half of female refugees "raped"' in MSN News, 27th May 2013 <http://news.uk.msn.com/articles.aspx?cp-documentid=250101010>; 'Asylum "needs to address rape issue"' in the *Scotsman*, 28th May 2012 <http://www.scotsman.com/news/uk/asylum-needs-to-address-rape-issue-1-2321987>; 'Half of female refugees "raped"' in *Belfast Telegraph*, 27th May 2012 <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/world-news/half-of-female-refugees-raped-28754116.html>

71 *Refused* shows a canny understanding of the media in other ways that doubtless helped it secure coverage, including the use of major political names (Helena Kennedy) and leading literary figures (Esther Freud) to lend support to the report.

72 David Williams, 'Home Office to reconsider asylum plea of Afghan interpreter blown up on British front line patrol after extraordinary U-turn' in the *Daily Mail*, 2nd October 2012

73 Greg Philo, 'Our hysterical media helped create the immigrant "go home" van' in the *Guardian*, 8th August 2013 <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/08/media-immigrant-go-home-van>

74 Tom Moseley, 'Immigration coverage dominated by the word "illegal", major study of newspapers finds' in the *Huffington Post*, 8th August 2013 http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/08/07/immigration-coverage_n_3719268.html?utm_hp_ref=uk-politics

75 Andrew Rawnsley, *The End of the Party: The rise and fall of New Labour* (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 450.

This is an opportunity. The pressures under which journalists work today have made the constituent parts of a good story more predictable than ever. We know what works with the media. We know what readers want to read, and what someone scanning a headline wants to click on.

The concluding section of this paper will look at some of the practical barriers which will need to be overcome before asylum campaigners can easily and regularly seize this opportunity. But I've no doubt that there is a way to connect all this, and in so doing serve the interests of the people who need our help. This may come naturally to some and less so to others, but it is definitely worth pursuing.

Conclusion

So what next?

In principle, this feels like a pretty robust prescription for strengthening media work around refugees and asylum. In practice, though, barriers remain before this sort of approach can become routine.

Some of these barriers are heftier than others. I want to conclude by considering what lies in our way, and then by suggesting a lasting solution.

Asylum seekers and refugees are in a uniquely difficult position

The best person to provide a compelling account of the asylum system is someone who is going through it, or has applied for asylum and come out the other side as a refugee. No campaigner or researcher, however passionate they are on the subject, can lend the topic immediacy and urgency in the same way. But bringing this person before the media is often very difficult indeed.

It is unhelpful to assume that asylum seekers lack the skills and robustness to speak for themselves – consider the number of academics, journalists, activists and trade unionists who come to the attention of authorities in their home countries – but this must be weighed against the likelihood that they have undergone significant trauma, and are now caught up in the suffocating pressures of applying for asylum here.

The system is often a patchwork of delays and uncertainties. The interview is interrogative, the legal help can be patchy (and is getting patchier), the translator can't always translate, information is sparse, community-support can be whipped away without notice.⁷⁶ It would take extraordinary strength to speak out in the midst of all this. And even if someone is recognised as a refugee, this is followed not by the right to stay here indefinitely but by a five year period after which another application must be made.⁷⁷

76 The persistent, systemic failings of the asylum system, covering these and many other issues, is well covered in the *Report of the Home Affairs Select Committee into Asylum* (October 2013) <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmhaff/71/71.pdf>

77 This change was introduced when Charles Clarke was Labour Home Secretary in 2005. Prior to this, refugees were automatically granted indefinite leave to remain. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4241989.stm

At the same time, the resources for a charity to support someone while they decide to do that are piecemeal. There are honourable exceptions – brilliant work is done to give voice to refugees through the Women's Refugee Forum (linked to Women for Refugee Women), Survivors Speak Out (linked to Freedom From Torture) and Migrant Voice – but a concerted counter-attack across the asylum and refugee sector will need more support than currently exists, for these groups and for many more.

Asylum seekers and refugees may have especially good reasons not to talk to the media

If you were waiting on the asylum decision which would determine your safety, would you speak to the press about it? Is it really a risk worth taking? If you had been recognised as a refugee, and were sponsoring your family as they tried to escape conflict to join you – would you take the risk then? What about if it was newspapers in your home country which had placed you in such danger in the first place?⁷⁸

It's remarkable that some people are brave enough to speak out and make a stand even if they're uncertain how it will affect their own destiny. But neither is it surprising that many people also choose not to. It is our job to support those who can, rather than convince those who won't.

Refugees are hard to find

Just when you need a refugee to tell their story – and even when you think you have just the person – finding someone isn't always as straightforward as that.

Firstly, this is because applying for asylum is a stressful business. Asylum seekers waiting for a decision probably don't need to look far to find other people who have been refused. It takes a toll on mental and physical health.⁷⁹

78 Nothing better illustrates the persecution of homosexuals in Uganda, for example, than the 2010 headline in the Ugandan broadsheet *Rolling Stone*: '100 Pictures of Uganda's Top Homos Leak'. The banner next to the headline reads 'Hang Them'.

79 The British Medical Association warned in 2002: "Whilst many asylum seekers do arrive in the UK in relatively good physical health, health problems can rapidly develop whilst they are in the UK". See British Medical Association, *The health needs of asylum seekers* (2008)

So someone recognised as a refugee can be forgiven for leaving all this behind to focus on rebuilding their life. Equally, people working with asylum seekers can be forgiven for quietly celebrating the work involved in securing refugee status, before moving on to the next person in need of help.

Secondly, the movement from asylum seeker to refugee – from someone without any status to someone with the right to stay here – can be a bureaucratic black hole. Shifting from one system to another, local authorities sometimes struggle to get essential support to new refugees; this can have terrible consequences. It is little surprise that email addresses and mobile phone numbers change along the way.

One curious result is that refugee charities can quickly fall out of contact with the people they have helped. In turn, this means that the people with compelling stories aren't always on the end of the phone when a great story comes along.

There are legal barriers

Anyone seeking asylum is involved in a complex legal environment. If they are lucky, they have a good immigration lawyer – but a lawyer's responsibility to their client can include recommending against even anonymous co-operation with the media.

Whether or not this is the right approach is for lawyers and their regulators to decide, but it is certainly burdensome for a media professional who could otherwise use an ongoing case to generate coverage of the asylum system. These decisions will not always lie in our hands.

Journalists don't always have a grasp of asylum and refugee issues

The good news about this problem is that its outcome does lie in our hands.

I've lost count of the number of times a journalist has got confused about terms and ideas I take for granted. A conversation about the plight of asylum seekers will veer off suddenly into questions about illegal migrants. Numbers relating to winning refugee status on appeal will be repeated back to me as if they related to housing for asylum seekers.

We might know our stuff, but we can't expect a journalist working on five stories at once to be expert in asylum policy. It would be odder if they were. That's

fine, provided we have good enough relations with journalists – including those who sometimes publish things with which we disagree – to make a persuasive case for a good story when it comes our way. It's an investment which won't pay-off with all journalists, but which needs to be made nonetheless.

Solutions

None of the barriers are insurmountable. We know that asylum seekers can and will tell their stories, and we know how effective this can be. And of the thousands of extraordinary asylum and refugee stories out there, we only need a generous handful of them.

But we are also looking to identify stories with the strongest news values: the refugee whose business has created two hundred jobs in his new home town, the woman whose human rights work landed her in danger at home but whose work has now been recognised in the UK. Stories like these sometimes simply end up in the laps of asylum charities – which is great for short-term media success, but it means little as a long-term strategy.

There is an ideal solution here, albeit one which will require additional resources and time.

In this scenario, asylum campaigners with a great idea for generating news could turn to a 'pool' of people willing to tell their stories. This would be a group of asylum seekers or refugees who have given clear consent that they wish to share their stories, and who are properly supported to do so under the conditions with which they are comfortable. This support could be co-ordinated by researchers independent of any charity, who have found and maintained a pool of people to whom charities can turn.

In the first instance, this pool would be a resource for any campaigner being chased by a journalist who needs a human interest angle to a promising story. It would also be available to campaigners who have seen a gap in the media and need a perfect case study to generate the coverage they need. Over time, campaigners could even commission stories: if International Women's Day is three months away, who could the researchers find to make sure asylum played a central part in the media that day?

This would be a resource for all, separate from the charities with the media contacts but accessible to all those who finally want to make these contacts count.

...

The great poet and politician Václav Havel once wrote:

if changes in the system are not to be temporary, piecemeal, inconsequential, or half-baked, they must first of all be discussed in a businesslike manner, and conditions must be created to enable such a businesslike discussion to take place.⁸⁰

Havel didn't advocate going on a war footing to make change into a reality. He advised instead that we should gear up to debate those hostile towards us on decent, 'businesslike' terms. We should create space where there is less abuse and more trust.

Well, there has been a great deal of abuse chucked our way in the last decade. Now is not the time for chucking it back, but for moving into a whole new conversation.

⁸⁰ Václav Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Writings 1965-1990*, ed. Paul Wilson (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), p. 375.

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