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Author(s): Amadu Wurie Khan

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esharp@gla.ac.uk

UK Media's Pathology of the Asylum Seeker & the (mis)Representation of Asylum as a Humanitarian Issue

Amadu Wurie Khan (University of Edinburgh)

Introduction: 'moral panic' & 'folk devils'

The UK's ethical humanitarian foreign policy 'universalises the political subject' that extends a duty of care to those outside the state's sovereignty suffering persecution, rather than just to its citizens (Chandler 2006, p.69). However, humanitarian organisations and sections of the media and political elite have raised concerns that asylum-seeking migration is immune to an ethical policy commitment. This trend is blamed on sustained negative coverage of asylum, mostly in the anti-immigration right-wing media, which has generated a 'moral panic' among British citizens (Smart *et al.* 2007; ICAR 2004; Ejarvec 2003; Speers 2001; Hall 1997; Cohen 2002). Defined as a state of impending crisis emanating from a perceived problem that is claimed to be out of control, 'moral panic' is a process whose product has a media social agenda: to create 'folk devils' (Roth and Muzzati 2004; Ejarvec 2003; Hall 1997; Cohen 2002). Cohen (1987) observed that the 'folk devils' could be a group of persons, in this case asylum seekers/refugees, who are perceived as 'aliens', 'bad citizens', 'evil' and a threat to societal values or interests (Delante 2008: 677; Rothe and Muzzatti 2004, p.329; ICAR 2004; Ejarvec 2003; Speers 2001; Bloch 2000; Cohen 1987, p.9). The asylum seeker 'folk devil' is mainly depicted through 'othering' or as the culturally inferior 'other', with liminal social status (Lynn and Lea 2003, p.446; see also Cohen 2002). 'Othering' is used here to refer

to a process and a product of identification of the 'self' as being different from an external 'other' (Finney 2005, p.28). Research and theoretical accounts also blamed the media-fuelled 'moral panic' for British citizens' ignorance of asylum as a humanitarian issue and the attendant decline of public empathy for asylum seekers/refugees (Buchanan and Grillo 2003; Barclay et al 2003; Smart *et al.* 2007). This in turn has been blamed for the UK's anomalous ethical policy commitment towards asylum because political elites try to pacify the public that asylum-seeking migration is under control.

However, there is a lack of empirical investigation on asylum seekers/refugees' perceptions of the media's role in depicting them as 'folk devils' and generating public anxiety over asylum, given that they are the source of the 'moral panic'. For example, previous studies carried out in the UK including Scotland (see for instance Barclay et al 2003; Buchanan and Grillo 2003; Wilson 2004; ICAR 2004; Smart et al 2007) have made a linkage between the UK media coverage of asylum and public hostility against asylum seekers/refugees. Nonetheless, these studies have overlooked asylum seekers/refugees' explanations for the negative coverage and its impact on UK citizens-cum-media readership. Also, while theoretical accounts have hinted at an alignment between the coverage and ideological leanings of the UK media, there is no empirical study to test for these (Ibroscheva and Ramaprasad 2008; Leudar *et al.* 2008; Smart et al 2007; Finney 2005; Wilson 2004; ICAR 2004; Buchanan and Grillo 2003). This article is therefore an attempt to fill this lacuna in our understanding of asylum seekers/refugees' perspectives about news media's role in hindering British citizens' access to understanding asylum as an international humanitarian issue. It will also develop our understanding of how

left-right ideological leanings underpin the UK media coverage of asylum.

The data used here is drawn from an on-going research that examined the intersection of UK newspaper coverage and asylum seekers/refugees' belonging and identity formations. Interviewees were asked questions that include: "How do the UK press depict asylum seekers/refugees?" "What are asylum seekers/refugees' beliefs and explanations for this kind of coverage and its impact on readers?" Interviewees' responses were therefore analysed with respect to two areas. Firstly, it looked for clues on interviewees' beliefs and understanding of the coverage and its impact on British citizens' decline of public empathy for asylum seekers/refugees (ICAR 2004; Buchanan and Grillo 2003; Barclay *et al.* 2007). Secondly, it tested for the coverage in relation to the newspapers' left-right ideological stance on asylum. This was based on the assumption that 'victims' of the 'moral panic' have their own explanations for the coverage and its impact on public attitude and behaviour towards asylum seekers/refugees. It was also assumed that the way the coverage reflects newspapers' left-right political leanings and ideological stance on asylum-seeking migration has not been fully understood (Leudar *et al.* 2008, p.216).

The rest of the article is organised in two main parts: the first discusses the UK press' construction of the asylum seeker/refugee as 'folk devil' through mainly pejorative themes and tropes. This is followed by part two, which discusses interviewees' perceptions that there is a dominance of negative misrepresentations, which contributes to public ignorance of the humanitarian dimension to asylum-seeking migration and the attendant public hostility. The article concludes by summarising the key issues and drawing

attention to the fact that the media should be considered as a major actor in subverting UK citizens' understanding of the UN Refugee Convention throughout its sixty years history. It also suggests that this would help to explain the UK's immunity to an ethical policy commitment towards asylum. To help provide context to the findings, a discussion of the empirical study will be expedient.

The research context

This article consists of two parts that are complementary to each other, namely, a media analysis of UK newspapers and interviews among asylum seekers/refugees in Scotland between 2007 and 2009. Both data were part of an empirical research design to investigate the intersections of the UK media reporting of asylum and asylum seekers/refugees' belonging and identity formations. The media analysis is based on media monitoring of UK newspapers over a six-month period, 20 September 2007 to 25 February 2008. This period was selected because the monitoring was done alongside the initial stages of fieldwork so that asylum news stories could be selected that would be shown to interviewees to trigger discussions. Eleven newspapers were monitored and included Scottish and English editions of tabloid and broadsheet newspapers and their Sunday 'sister versions': *The Express*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Mirror*, *The Sun*, *The Daily Record*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The Herald*, *The Scotsman*, *The Evening News* and *The Evening Times*. These newspapers reflect the two broad genres of broadsheets and tabloids, and were selected for their large circulation numbers. They also reflect the left-right political leanings and ideological stance on asylum-seeking migration (Leudar *et al.* 2008, p.216). *The Evening News* and *The Evening Times* were categorised as regional newspapers

because they have a geographical circulation in the cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow respectively. They were selected because they were the two dominant newspapers circulating in these areas, and therefore more likely to be read by asylum seekers/refugees. As it turned out, the newspapers monitored were included among the ones interviewees said they have read. Other newspapers including *The Metro*, *The Times* and *The News of the World* were also read, but not monitored due to practical reasons.

The Internet's Lexis-Nexis and Factiva databases were used to access newspaper articles. 'Articles' is used here to include news reports, features, opinion pieces and letters. In all, ninety-six articles were collated with twenty-five articles in the broadsheets and seventy-one in tabloids, seventeen of which were in local newspapers. Eighty-nine of the articles were news reports, three were opinion pieces, four were features and three were letters.

The articles were accessed by using keyword search for: 'asylum', 'asylum seeker', 'refugee', 'citizen' and 'citizenship'. Articles generated by keying in 'citizen' and 'citizenship' were reviewed to ascertain if they were related to asylum-seeking migration. Relevant articles were retained, and the rest discarded. Letters and opinion pieces were included because, though not written by journalists of newspapers in which they were published, they carried in their content representations of asylum seekers/refugees. In addition, scholarly consensus is that letter writers are likely to mirror the ideological stance of newspapers (Wilson 2004, p.19). The articles were subjected to a content and discourse stylistics analysis. Content analysis means the manual systematic straightforward isolation of themes, labels, phrases, sources, statistics and the frequency at which they occurred in the articles. This is to

identify key trends in asylum reportage. Items were coded for 'asylum', 'asylum seeker', 'refugee', 'citizens' or 'citizenship', themes or focus of the story, tropes and labels used to refer to 'asylum seekers', 'refugees', or 'citizens' – and statistics cited. The themes and tropes were determined by recording the issues or subject matter reported. The frequency of the occurrence of the issues was then grouped into sub-themes, which in turn were coded to form a main theme or key focus of the article. The article's title was not in itself considered a sufficient measure to determine themes, although it was used as a guide in this process of thematic and content analysis (Smart *et al.* 2007). This was to guard against any cases where the focus or theme of the article did not reflect the headline. Discourse stylistics means the identification of the multiple interpretations of items in the articles (White 2004; Bell 1999). It therefore involves identifying the discursive styles, inter-textual referencing as well as the comparing and contrasting of articles about the same issue in relation to use of language, tropes, statistics and conflation that featured in different newspapers (White 2004; Bell 1999). Both analytical approaches are inspired by a desire to undertake a robust analysis that combines the quantifiable isolation of key items (content analysis) and their multiple interpretations (discourse stylistics) in relation to the consequences they might have for social, cultural and political practices (see for instance White 2004; Bell and Garret 1998; Bell 1999). Following White (2004) and Bell (1999), combining the two approaches would help us make sense about how the preference of language and discursive formations would be a reflection of the newspaper's beliefs, in this case about asylum. As Bell (1999) and White (2004) argued, the content analysis as an approach is not robust in making sense of news reporting as social, cultural and

political process of communication. A discourse stylistic approach was therefore used to compensate for this. In addition, the frequency of usage of items should be constitutive of the discursive strategy of journalists, which could have an impact on the way the story is received by readers including asylum seekers/refugees, and how it would affect their lives (Wilson 2004; Bell 1999).

The interview data was from fieldwork conducted among twenty-three asylum seekers/refugees, aged between 26 and 65 years residing in Edinburgh and Glasgow, Scotland. This includes eight, four males and four females, who described themselves as Muslims. The other fifteen described themselves as Christians. They were from Sierra Leone, Pakistan, Iraq, Kurdistan, Somalia, Algeria, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Burundi, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chile and Columbia. Except for the Chilean, who came in the 1970s, all sought asylum between 2007 and 2005. The interviews were in-depth and semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews, which were largely informal conversations at which interviewees talked freely about their experiences. Areas covered include their experiences of living in the UK and occasional touching on their homelands; experiences of the UK media; and their opinion on the reporting of asylum. Interviews were mostly conducted in interviewees' homes and venues in communities they live. Interviewees were tape-recorded, and transcription was both whole and partial. Whole transcription means verbatim, and partial refers to transcription based on 'sensitising' themes and issues (Parker & Gehrke 1998). Sampling was by 'snowballing', 'convenience' and non-random. Interviewees were selected because they were easy to access and communicate in English. Being English speaking and the fact that four of the interviewees were involved in a project addressing issues of media

representation might be seen as a limitation. However, using English-speaking interviewees is a lesser limitation to using interpreters, who are likely to compromise confidentiality, bring ethnic, racial, and class bias against interviewees (Mackenzie *et al.* 2007). In addition, ability to speak English is a reflection of the general trend in the educational profile of asylum seekers/refugees in Scotland. For example, a skills audit of asylum seekers/refugees in Glasgow found that in general they were well educated or participating in education and training in Scotland (Charlaff *et. al.*, 2004; Sims & Bowes 2007, p.738). The cohort therefore should not be seen as biased towards who could speak English. Different networks supporting asylum seekers/refugees and public gatherings organised for asylum seekers/refugees were visited to access interviewees. Snowballing implies recruiting interviewees through others that have been interviewed. Note taking of contextual information was used to inform the analysis (Small & Uttal 2005). Interviewees were granted confidentiality and anonymity to facilitate participation (Powles 2004).

Both media and interview data are deployed here to reinforce each other: the media monitoring is intended to provide empirical evidence for, and serves as, a backdrop to interviewees' perceptions that the UK press reporting of asylum seekers/refugees is largely negative and undermines UK citizens' understanding of asylum as a humanitarian issue. The media monitoring therefore demonstrates that interviewees' perceptions might be founded, and provides a context to our understanding of interviewees' perceptions of the mainly negative coverage and its implications for UK citizens' access to accurate information of asylum, particularly as a humanitarian issue. Contemporary analyses of media's role in the public's

understanding and response to the asylum issue in the West ought to include the views of asylum seekers/refugees. This is because they bore the brunt of media-fuelled public ignorance and hostility. Their views therefore constitute a ‘bottom-up’ empirical critique, which has been lacking, during the past sixty years of UK newspapers’ contribution to UK citizens’ access to public knowledge and understanding of the UK’s international obligation to grant asylum (see Wahl-Jorgensen 2006).

Part 1 - Media’s Pathology of the Asylum Seeker

The analysis identified two broad slants in UK newspapers’ asylum reporting, namely, an anti-asylum press and an asylum-friendly press (see Table 1). The anti-asylum press here refers to the Scotland and England editions of *The Daily Express*, *Sunday Express*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Sunday Mail*, *The Sun*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Sunday Telegraph*. The asylum-friendly press consists of *The Herald*, *The Sunday Herald*, *The Guardian*, *The Mirror*, *The Sunday Mirror*, *The Daily Record*, *Evening Times* and *The Evening News*.

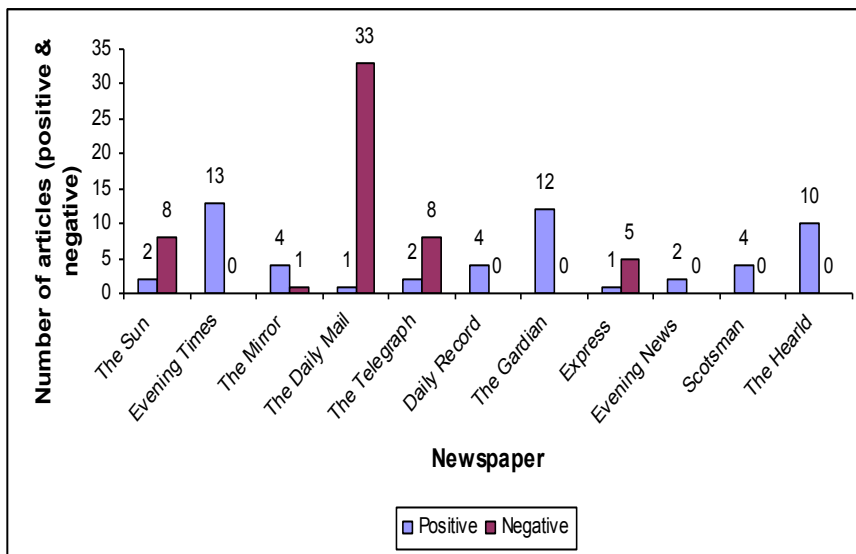
	Left & Asylum-friendly	Right & Anti-asylum
Broadsheet	<i>The Guardian</i> (364,513) <i>The Herald</i> (42,653) <i>The Scotsman</i> (46,709)	<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> (882,413)
Tabloid	<i>The Daily Record</i> (328,183) <i>The Daily Mirror</i> (1,525,477)	<i>The Daily Mail</i> (2,353,807) <i>The Daily Express</i>

		(789, 867) <i>The Sun</i> (3,126,866)
Regional	<i>The Evening Times</i> (59,365) <i>The Evening News</i> (44,464)	

TABLE 1: Classification of the British Press, with circulation numbers collated from The Guardian (2010)

As will be evidenced in the discussion, the asylum-friendly and anti-asylum categorisation of the newspapers was based on the scope and degree of the bias and pejorative pattern of the coverage. In this respect, the asylum-friendly press coverage was distinctly innocuous, non-inflammatory and balanced in its coverage. As *Graph 1* illustrates, except for one in *The Mirror*, all forty-six articles that were in the asylum-friendly press were favourable to asylum seekers/refugees as well as policies and interventions relating to them. In contrast, the anti-asylum press was predominantly negative, pejorative and hostile in the coverage of the asylum issue. *Graph 1* shows that fifty-four out of sixty articles in the anti-asylum press were unfavourable to asylum, which demonstrated a predominance of negative over positive coverage. The six articles that were favourable to asylum seekers/refugees included three on children asylum seekers, and one each about a terminally ill woman, a male homosexual, and a male footballer in articles relating to asylum. Many reasons could be unpicked to explain this anomaly in the anti-asylum press coverage. Their inclusion might be attributable to public empathy and emotional connect with a section of society that are widely associated with vulnerability and innocence such as childhood, homosexuality and illness, which are beyond the control of individuals. The support for the footballer might be attributed to

his ability to earn a decent wage and pay taxes, which is in contrast to the stereotypical representation of asylum seekers as ‘scrounging’ and an economic liability on the welfare state. As others have argued, the newspapers listed here that constituted the anti-asylum press are normally associated with right-wing views and are anti-immigration and anti-asylum (White 2004). *The Herald*, *The Guardian*, *The Mirror* and *The Daily Record* were widely perceived as belonging to the left of British politics.



Graph 1: Asylum in the Newspapers – Showing a dominance of negative depictions in the right-wing press over a positive one in the left-wing press [Including English, Scottish and Sunday Editions]

In all, as listed in *Table 2* below, seven themes and six tropes were identified in the newspapers surveyed, which together enabled an understanding of the manner in which the British press pathologised the asylum seeker.

Tropes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'Us & them' - Asylum seekers as violent & a threat - Undeserving asylum seekers - Burden on the tax-payer - Britain as 'soft-touch' - Desperate asylum seekers - Chaotic asylum system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Criminality - Deportation - Administrative incompetence & policy failure - Asylum 'amnesty' - Financial cost of the asylum system - Children asylum seekers

TABLE 2: A summary of themes and tropes

As shown in *Table 2* above, one out of six themes was associated with a positive portrayal of the asylum issue, that of children asylum seekers. The tropes were negative. The themes and tropes were represented through metaphorical language comprising labels or terminologies and phraseology. 'Metaphorical language' is used here to refer to labels or terminologies, phraseology and tropes that journalists deployed to describe and relate to asylum seekers/refugees. In all, ninety-eight terms and phrases were identified. Sixty-two of these were assessed to be hostile or anti-asylum, and negatively represented asylum seekers/refugees. They were hostile or negative because the terms or labels were either pejorative in their usage relating to asylum seekers/refugees or inaccurate because the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) has barred their use. Terms were also considered as inaccurate because British law had not proscribed seeking asylum in the UK (Grillo 2003; Smart *et al.* 2007). Examples included terminology like 'bogus', 'would-be' and 'failed' to prefix asylum seekers and refugees. *The Sun* and *The Telegraph* alone accounted for the majority (fifty-

two out of sixty-two) of the anti-asylum pejorative terms and phrases. This demonstrates that negative or anti-asylum depictions of asylum seekers/refugees far exceeded that of an innocuous or asylum-friendly representation in the anti-asylum press, a finding that is consistent with previous studies (Buchanan & Grillo 2003). In contrast, twenty-six terms and phrases considered as asylum-friendly were identified in the same analysis. Terms may appear at face value as hostile or non-hostile, however they are categorised as asylum-friendly or anti-asylum because of the context of usage in the article. For example, terms and phrases with prefixes such as 'rejected' and 'unsuccessful' to asylum seekers were considered as asylum-friendly because they were neutral, innocuous or non-derogatory in the context they are used in the news story. Others such as 'failed' and 'would-be' were assessed to be anti-asylum because they were pejorative in their usage. These kinds of representation will now be demonstrated by discussing three areas that dominated the coverage, namely, crime, the UK government's effort to control asylum and asylum as a financial burden.

A large proportion of newspapers focussed on reporting crimes that asylum seekers/refugees committed or allegedly commit. They focussed on the conviction, the arrest and legal proceedings against asylum seekers/refugees for crimes including rape or other forms of sexual assault; identity and welfare benefit fraud; drug dealing; violence and lawlessness; and working illegally. Representing asylum seekers/refugees as perpetrators of criminality was more commonplace in the anti-asylum national tabloids such as *The Sun*, *The Express*, *The Daily Mail* and broadsheet press like *The Daily Telegraph* than in the asylum-friendly press. The newspapers'

reporting often failed to mention that the crimes are isolated cases and not disproportionate to crimes committed by the public.

The coverage represented three types of criminal conduct that newspapers ascribed to asylum seekers/refugees: fraud, violence and perceived illegal immigration acts. References to asylum seekers/refugees were often, in these contexts, prefixed by the term 'bogos', and used to represent asylum seekers/refugees as perpetrators of two types of fraud, namely, 'identity fraud'¹ and 'welfare fraud'². For example, labels such as 'bogos refugee'³, 'bogos asylum seekers'⁴, 'bogos arrivals'⁵, 'bogos asylum claims'⁶, 'bogos identity'⁷ and 'forged paperwork'⁸ were used to describe identity fraud; labels such as 'asylum cheat' and 'swindle', for example, in *The Sun* – September 20, 2007, were used to describe 'welfare fraud'.

Metaphorical phraseology was also used in this regard including 'claims without merit' and 'unfounded claims or applications' in *The Sunday Telegraph* – December 16, 2007, to describe 'identity fraud'; 'those cheating the system' and 'conned benefit staff' in *The Daily Mail* of January 12 and 26, 2008 respectively, to portray asylum seekers as committing 'welfare fraud'. Depicting asylum seekers/refugees as perpetrators of 'identity fraud' often failed to take into account the nature of asylum seeking that compelled asylum seekers/refugees to escape persecution by 'clandestine' means including using fake identities⁹ (see also Sales

¹ *The Daily Mail* – February 23, 2008.

² *The Scottish Sun* – September 20, 2007.

³ *The Daily Mail* – January 12, 2008.

⁴ *The Daily Mail* (Scotland) – January 12, 2008.

⁵ *The Daily Mail* – January 13, 2008.

⁶ *The Sunday Telegraph* – December 16, 2007.

⁷ *The Sun* – September 20, 2007.

⁸ *The Daily Mail* – December 18, 2007.

⁹ *The Daily Mail* – January 23, 2008.

2007). The trope of asylum seekers/refugees as perpetrators of violent crime and a threat to community safety was conveyed through labels such as ‘asylum/refugee rapists’¹⁰, ‘sex offenders’, ‘law-breaking’, ‘enraged mob’ and ‘rioters’¹¹. Journalists ascribed the labels to asylum seekers/refugees facing trial or convicted of ‘sexual assault’¹² and ‘violent or destructive behaviour’¹³. The press also associated asylum seekers/refugees with violations of immigration and work restrictions, which were reported through negative labelling. Examples included not only the use of the prefixes ‘failed’, ‘bogus’ and ‘illegal’, to ‘asylum seekers’ and ‘refugees’ as mentioned above, but also to the term ‘overstayer’ in *The Sunday Express* – December 23, 2007. Suffixes such as ‘refused’, ‘returned’ and ‘rejected’ to ‘asylum seekers’ and ‘refugees’ were also used to depict those whose asylum applications were unsuccessful. Further, phraseology such as ‘working illegally’, ‘people found entering the country illegally’ and ‘those smuggled into Britain’¹⁴, were used to label asylum seekers as committing employment and immigration crimes, and conveyed their desperation to reside in the UK. The desperation trope was further reinforced by the recurring portrayal of asylum seekers/refugees through hardship metaphors such as ‘sleeping rough’, ‘living in poverty’, and ‘entering the UK by crossing the Channel Tunnel’ either on foot or by ‘hiding under lorries’¹⁵. The hardship metaphors conveyed the suffering that asylum-seeking migrants endured, and were instrumental in the anti-asylum press’ construction of irresponsible behaviour and actions of

¹⁰ *The Scottish Sun* – December 20, 2007.

¹¹ *The Daily Mail* – December 22, 2007 and February 23, 2008.

¹² *The Sun* – October 31, 2007.

¹³ *The Sunday Express* – December 23, 2007.

¹⁴ *The Daily Mail* – January 13 & 26, 2008.

¹⁵ *The Sun* – January 4, 2008; *The Daily Mail* – October 2, 2007.

asylum seekers that put them and the public at risk, as this excerpt shows:

They [asylum seekers] play a nightly cat-and-mouse with the police as they try to get across the channel. [*The Daily Mail* – English ed., Jan 7, 2008].

Although the asylum-friendly local newspapers – *The Evening Times* and *The Evening News* as well as broadsheets including *The Guardian* and *The Herald* reported on asylum criminal cases, the stories were not as inflammatory as those by the anti-asylum press. Their coverage largely depicted asylum seekers/refugees as ‘victims’ rather than ‘perpetrators’ of crime. For example, they reported cases of asylum seekers as victims of racist attacks, labour exploitation and forced prostitution, depicting these as emanating from ‘draconian’ government policies as, for example, *The Herald* – October 14, 2007.

Another recurring theme in both the -anti and asylum-friendly press coverage focussed on government efforts to reduce the backlog of potential asylum seeker deportees. The asylum-friendly newspapers reported positively government interventions including the ‘voluntary repatriation programme’ to encourage the deportation of and reduction in the backlog of asylum seekers. However, these newspapers highlighted the risk to the lives and safety of deportees, including the persecution deportees would face if repatriated to homelands. The anti-asylum press, in contrast, tended to focus on the strategies that asylum seekers were using to evade deportation. These strategies included going underground; exploiting the legal avenues through protracted and expensive judicial reviews and the human rights law; and by ‘disruptive behaviour’ including throwing tantrums and behaving violently on deportation flights, thus

threatening the safety of crew and passengers and resulting in cancellation of flights¹⁶. Metaphors of escape, such as ‘slipping through the net’, ‘disappearing off the radar’, ‘dodging deportation’ and labels like ‘illegal overstayers’ were deployed in this respect¹⁷. The anti-asylum press also represented asylum seekers as deliberately refusing to produce identification papers, including passports and other travel documents, to prevent deportation. Further, calls by politicians for immigration authorities to effect deportation ordered by the courts were widely reported in the anti-asylum press. The coverage used metaphors of brutality including ‘kick them out’¹⁸, ‘throw them out’¹⁹ and ‘get the boot’²⁰ to echo politicians’ calls for urgent deportation. Metaphors of brutality were more common in newspaper campaigns for the deportation of asylum seekers who, newspapers claimed, were a threat to community safety. For example, the Scottish and English editions of *The Daily Mail* featured this sort of ‘campaign’ journalism for the deportation of a convicted Jamaican ‘asylum seeker sex-offender’²¹.

Representations of asylum seekers/refugees as a financial burden and a liability to the taxpayer, and the huge financial costs associated with the government’s asylum system, featured prominently. This was evident in coverage of state support to asylum seekers/refugees including the provision of legal aid and other prerequisites to uphold their human rights. For example, the provision of legal aid for asylum seekers/refugees to contest court cases, particularly criminal charges, and to appeal against the Home

¹⁶ *The Daily Mail* – January 8, 2008.

¹⁷ *The Sunday Express* – December 23, 2007.

¹⁸ *The Sun* – December 20, 2007.

¹⁹ *The Sunday Telegraph* – December 21, 2007.

²⁰ *The Sun* – October 31, 2007.

²¹ *The Daily Mail* – December 21, 2007.

Office decision to refuse them asylum was depicted mainly as a financial burden to the British taxpayer rather than a prerequisite for justice. Other programmes covered by the press, including providing financial incentives to encourage asylum seekers to opt for voluntary repatriation and using chartered flights to deport those evading deportation, were also reported as a ‘waste of taxpayers money’²². The financial support was caricatured through ‘incentive’ metaphors as ‘a soft-touch approach’, ‘asylum seekers’ cashing in’, ‘smacks of rewarding criminality’ and ‘an incentive for bogus claims’²³. For example, the government and National Lottery’s award of grants to organisations providing support to asylum seeker/refugee migrants was derided as a ‘waste of taxpayers’ money’ in *The Daily Mail*, *The Sun* and *The Daily Express*, even though these grants would improve service provision and support for asylum seekers/refugees. The reader was therefore told that the overall cost of policies to deport or support asylum seekers in line with human rights requirements was running into ‘tens of thousands’ or ‘tens of millions’²⁴, among other numerical metaphors. The effect of this confluence of inflammatory metaphorical depictions in the anti-asylum press was to communicate a misleading message of the asylum system as exploitative, a burden on the taxpayer and Britain as a ‘magnet for asylum seekers’²⁵. Anti-asylum journalists argued that deportation was a cheaper financial option that would save the taxpayer huge amounts of money that was incurred in their up-keep and in meeting human rights requirements during incarceration.

²² *The Daily Telegraph* – December 16, 2007.

²³ *The Daily Mail* – October 2, 2007.

²⁴ *The Sun* – December 13, 2007.

²⁵ *The Scottish Daily Mail* – October 2, 2007.

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that negative or anti-asylum depictions of asylum seekers/refugees exceeded that of an innocuous or asylum-friendly representation, a finding that is consistent with previous studies (Buchanan & Grillo 2003). The finding also concurs with other studies that the preponderance of pejorative over innocuous or positive language in most of the newspapers studied might have led interviewees to blame parts of the UK media for contributing to the public construction of asylum seekers as criminal, opportunistic, exploitative and a burden that poses a threat to the UK welfare system. By so doing, asylum seekers/refugees are pathologised as the cultural ‘other’ with liminal social status and as ‘folk devils’ (Lynn & Lea 2003, p.446; see also Cohen 2002). What are asylum seekers/refugees’ views about this kind of coverage in the UK press? The next section discusses interviewees’ perceptions of the lack of accurate and biased news reporting of asylum seekers/refugees and how it contributes to the public’s consumption of spurious asylum stories, and public ignorance of the asylum issue as an international humanitarian obligation of British citizens.

Part 2 - Media & the Humanitarian Context

All interviewees expressed the view that the asylum issue was widely reported in British media, and that negative coverage exceeds a positive one. In addition, all said that there is hardly a day that went by without ‘a story about asylum seekers’ (A) in both TV and newspapers. The majority felt that most of the stories were negative, prejudiced and biased against asylum seekers/refugees. In their view, the media depicted asylum seekers/refugees as ‘scroungers’, ‘not wanted [or] welcome’, ‘spongers’, ‘here to take our jobs [or] social

services', 'don't have education', 'greedy', 'take taxpayers' money and just live on benefit', and 'flooding the UK' (field notes 2007/2008). As evident above, these accounts of negative representations were discovered in the media monitoring, and were widely believed by most interviewees to be responsible for the British media's dominant construction of asylum seekers/refugees as a burden on the welfare state. In addition, most interviewees also confirmed that the press represented asylum seekers/refugees as perpetrators of criminality as well a threat to public safety. Interviewees who shared this view said asylum seekers/refugees were represented as 'evil', 'junkies', 'rapists', 'criminals' (B), and 'second and third class citizens' (C). This could be interpreted to mean, what the literature referred to as 'othering' of asylum seekers/refugees as 'social deviants' and 'folk devils', and made them scapegoats for societal malaise including anti-social behaviour, crime and for taking British jobs (field notes, August 2007).

Most interviewees attributed variation in reporting across newspapers, to have been influenced by ideological stance on asylum-seeking migration. In general, interviewees perceived the right-wing press as allied to the Conservative Party and likely to report that migration was an economic liability to the state. Delante observed that the right wing media has been associated with mobilising opposition against migration (Delante 2008, p.680). On the other hand, interviewees perceived a left-wing press to be allied to the then governing Labour party, to be broadly asylum-friendly and to communicate the economic benefits of migration:

Mainly the Conservative newspapers are opposing the influx of foreigners coming to this country. This is general with the Conservative or what they called right

wing newspapers. And *The Herald* and others on the left are more humanitarian and think that people have a right to move around in this earth, on this globe, which is something natural, I mean immigration, from the beginning of history. (D)

However, this interviewees' dichotomising of the press into right-left ideo-political positions was only clear-cut in relation to broadsheets. No clear pattern was discernible from their perceptions in describing the ideo-political agenda of the tabloid press. For example, while some interviewees claimed that *The Times* espoused conservative right-wing views in its asylum reporting, and saw *The Guardian* and *The Herald* as 'leftie' and '[supporting] the Labour Party'²⁶ (B), the general belief was all tabloid newspapers were anti-asylum as this excerpt explained:

Well, *The Times* is conservative, and *The Sun*. They are all like anti-asylum, because they are very harsh, *The Sun* [...]. But I would like *The Guardian* because they go like straight. But *The Sun*, *The Mirror*, and the small papers they just concentrated on negative, as if they are anti-immigrant.
(B)

Nonetheless, interviewees conceded that although there were positive asylum stories in the asylum-friendly left-leaning press that represented the asylum seeker as a 'victim' of 'harsh' and 'barbaric'²⁷ asylum regime, these were far exceeded by the negative portrayals in

²⁶ Interviewees and I had an insightful discussion about perceptions that the Labour Party owns *The Guardian*. The main reason tendered by interviewees for this view was that both have 'leftie' political stance, even though *The Guardian* and New Labour could hardly be described as 'leftie', but liberal (see Coffin and O'Halloran 2006, p.292).

²⁷ *The Guardian* – January 16, 2008.

the right-wing press, confirming findings of the media monitoring (see Lewis 2005; Hewitt 2005; Ouseley 2005; Sales 2007).

The general perception therefore was that the dominance of a negative coverage of asylum seekers/refugees is largely to blame for the widespread public ignorance of the asylum issue, and attendant public hostility (see also Erjavic 2003). Thirteen interviewees said public ignorance is the product of inaccurate news reporting 'by journalists who just report without finding the facts' and describes asylum seekers as 'bogus' and 'illegals', as these excerpts explain:

For example, we are presented as bogus asylum seekers, but there is nothing like bogus asylum seekers. An asylum seeker is being known by the state, you cannot say a bogus asylum seeker [...]. As an asylum seeker is someone who has given himself to the state, the state recognises him as living here and that person cannot be bogus.

(E)

I think it is ignorance. I think they lack knowledge. They should not just look at things on the surface because not everyone is here and it is not like 80% would like to go back home and live a happier life. So it is really powerless for every one of us. It is not that we just want to come here.

(F)

Other interviewees blamed 'Islamophobia' and financial reasons for the pejorative coverage and the attendant fuelling of public ignorance and hostility. Nonetheless, interviewees said the factual inaccuracies might be to blame for the lack of understanding by the public of asylum seeking as an international humanitarian issue. The general perception is that news reporting framed asylum as a political issue by focussing on the dangers posed by asylum to social welfare and causing criminality, which others have interpreted as a 'folk

devil' portrayal (see Cohen 2002, Erjavic 2003). Four interviewees, who have been involved in awareness-raising projects in their local area in Glasgow and Edinburgh that aimed to educate residents about the plight of asylum seekers/refugees, speak of the media's role in the public ignorance of the asylum issue:

I told you that we have started in schools, for two years. We are a group of asylum seekers and we go with the police and we go to school and speak with the children about asylum seekers, and this is in primary seven. [...] So eh, one day the teacher, I don't know if the teacher or the police ask the children to write about their opinion about asylum seekers. And they wrote their opinion about asylum seekers. And one boy wrote: "I saw an article in the newspaper and it was totally different from what we have been told by the group of asylum seekers, so I realise that they don't give us the right information". It was good because in Pollok, we faced racism. It was horrible. [...] And I think it is because of the media and may be ignorance. They think asylum seekers came here to take money and live in their accommodation and they don't know the real reason why we are here. So after that when they started to know they changed their mind. If you see now Pollock in 2007 is not the same Pollock in 2001 or 2000. [...] So we got a good result from this project.

(G)

The above excerpt does not only illustrate that failure to provide the humanitarian reasons for seeking asylum in news reporting fuelled ignorance of the asylum issue, but also failure to communicate the UK's obligation to grant asylum. Most interviewees felt that their right to seek asylum under international humanitarian law have been missing in the coverage, as H explained:

All human beings in any society have a right [to seek asylum] when [in] trouble at home. Europe also had their own, say, for example you remember and millions of people were displaced and went all over the place: in Latin America they arrived in millions, the Scots arrived in their hundreds of thousands in Latin America; the British were all the time, the Germans, you name them every one in Europe and there are millions of them were found in Latin America, in Africa so they have to go were they have nobody there, were they were very, very poor. And the governments there gave them land, gave them opportunities for them to succeed.

(H)

Moreover, interviewees said that the only exceptions were the few cases in asylum-friendly newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The Herald*, a view that is backed by the media analysis above. For example, *The Guardian* reported the asylum policies as inhuman and denying asylum seekers their human rights²⁸. Interviewees, as others, claimed that news reporting made little attempt to report that asylum seekers face persecution if deported to homelands, and that persecution was a key motive for seeking asylum (Sales 2007; Lewis 2005). As one interviewee explained, this is largely responsible for the public ignorance and the lack of humanitarian angle to the reporting:

But there are some that will say that no, no, no, they don't have asylum seekers that one made me feel bad because they don't know what that person has been through. They don't know how that person's mind. They don't know if that person that person is going to hurt themselves. You are not just going to be an asylum seeker in another person's land. You must have a fear in

²⁸ *The Guardian* – December 18, 2007; January 16, 2008.

your country that's why you come here for them to help
you.
(I)

There is another consequence that interviewees said emanated from the misrepresentation: the lack of solidarity and moral support among many British citizens for the plight of asylum seekers/refugees in the UK. Expressions of disappointment over the lack of public sympathy for asylum seekers/refugees abound during fieldwork. Many said they fled for safety to the UK with an expectation that 'everybody will welcome you like growing up in Africa' (J), and that 'we are all the same human beings' (J). As one interviewee put it in response to what is to blame for the racist attack they suffered in Glasgow:

What the media has published these things: these people are bad. These people are vampires, these people are like evil people, these people are like you know junkies. So if you hear what is going to happen is like what is called Chinese whispers – and make them hate us.
(K)

Similar narratives and anecdotes of racist attacks and hostile attitudes against asylum seekers/refugees abound during fieldwork that interviewees attributed to media's inaccurate representation of asylum seekers/refugees. L experienced racism in Pollok, Glasgow, which she blamed on the media for making local residents 'think asylum seekers came here to take money and live in their accommodation and they don't know the real reason why they are here'. K, who was racial attacked in Glasgow, blamed the negative news coverage because 'most people have never interacted with asylum seekers', but nonetheless they 'feel so scared'. L said he witnessed 'racial harassment' among children as 'young as eight or

ten year old', which he said the children imbibed from their parents who in turn learned it by consuming anti-asylum media material. Interviewees recounted examples of public discourses that mimic news reporting of asylum seekers/refugees such as: 'go back to your country', and 'why are you here, bogus asylum seekers' to illustrate public consumption of inaccurate information and pejorative asylum news (field notes 2007/08). There was a general belief that this is responsible for 'their neighbours', 'work mates' and general public to make them feel 'not welcomed', 'not accepted', 'not wanted' and 'not belonging' to their communities of residence and the UK (Field notes 2007/08).

Overall, the above perceptions are not unique to interviewees, as other theorists have attributed the public hostility against asylum seekers/refugees to ignorance of the asylum condition by British citizenry (Lewis 2005). Like the interviewees, Pupavac argued that the decline of social solidarity has caused the alienation and an emotional disconnect of the professional and political classes from the 'ordinary man' (Pupavac 2008, p.276). This lack of empathy in social relations and engagement among British citizens, in her view and those of interviewees, has been extended to migrants and refugees (Pupavac 2008, p.276). However, interviewees seemed to suggest such an observation was equally applicable to some media elites. Therefore, interviewees' perceptions of inaccuracies and misleading representations of asylum seekers/refugees to a British readership foment 'hate crime' and 'tensions' in the community (Young 2005; White 2004; ICAR 2004).

Conclusion

While the interviewee data has been treated in a 'realist' way and contains interviewees' subjectivities, this study offers unique empirical insights from the perspectives of asylum seekers/refugees, who bore the brunt of the negative coverage, and the attendant media-fuelled public ignorance and hostility. This asylum seeker/refugee critique of the UK media's role will redress the passive role that media and political elites assigned to asylum seekers/refugees. Even where such 'subjectivities' are misplaced, it does not make them less significant or real. As Stalker (1998, p.5) reminded us, researching subjectivities is justified because individuals are the best authority to speak on their own experiences and beliefs.

Nonetheless, the analysis suggests that the anti-asylum and asylum-friendly dimensions corresponded to the British press left-right political and ideological stance on immigration, a view that resonated with the majority of interviewees. In this respect, the widely perceived anti-immigration press, including *The Express*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, *The Daily Telegraph*, were also anti-asylum and patently represented asylum seekers/refugees in pejorative discursive terms. On the other hand, the asylum-friendly press, including *The Guardian*, *The Herald*, *The Daily Mirror*, were associated broadly speaking with the left wing of British politics. While it is difficult to situate *The Evening News* and *The Evening Times* on the ideological right-left axis, these newspapers portrayed an asylum-friendly coverage. It might be an indication that newspapers that have a local or regional circulation have a propensity to be asylum-friendly rather than being hostile, a finding that resonates with that of Finney (2005). In this sense, it might be that media elites anticipate or

respond to views and reactions of their local readership, as demonstrated in the media monitoring (of part one above), which shows that *The Evening Times* reported on local support among residents for asylum seekers/refugees in Glasgow. This area needs further research.

It has been discussed that interviewees' perception was that through representation, parts of the press, especially the right wing, actively selected and shaped its coverage of asylum rather than transmitting an already-existing meaning of asylum as defined by international conventions. On the other hand, asylum seekers/refugees are represented as 'victims', mainly in the asylum-friendly press. In so doing, newspapers represented two kinds of asylum seekers/refugees: as 'folk devils' or as the evil, cultural 'other', even though such representations were perceived as inaccurate and contested by interviewees; and as 'victims', insofar as 'victimhood' was perceived by interviewees as having a potential to generate empathy and solidarity for asylum among British readers. The media monitoring (of part 1) therefore demonstrates that interviewees' perceptions might not be misplaced, and provides a context to our understanding of interviewees' perceptions of the mainly negative coverage and its implications for UK citizens' access to accurate information of asylum, particularly as a humanitarian issue.

Media elites and the press, therefore, cannot be seen as 'passive' actors but are central to the shaping of UK citizens' understanding of asylum as a humanitarian issue and the UK's responsibility to meet this international obligation. This is especially true, given the fact that an Ipsos MORI poll claimed that 80% of the public said the media has been the source of information about asylum-seeking

migration (Mori, Public Attitude Survey 2007).²⁹ The media is not only germane to, but also a major protagonist in both setting and influencing the terms of the debate around asylum throughout the past decades of the UK's ratification of the UN Convention on the Refugee. Interviewees therefore unanimously called upon the press to be responsible by being 'objective and accurate' (field notes 2007/08) in communicating about the asylum issue, a call similar to those made by policy actors and sections of news media as well as by asylum-supporting networks (Buchanan & Grillo 2003; Smart *et al.* 2007). The overall feeling among interviewees was that communicating accurate information is crucial, if the press were to educate its readership about asylum seekers/refugees and 'change the mentality of the Scottish [and British] people' (M). Consequently, as others have argued, accurate and unbiased reporting of asylum seekers/refugees would mitigate the attendant public hostility (see McDowell & Magill 1984; see Cohen 2002; Erjavic 2003; Sales 2007; Leudar *et al.* 2008).

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²⁹ This was based on 1,001 respondents in Britain between 18th November and 14th December 2006.

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