



Mixed messages: migration in the media

Summary seminar report

Introduction

Some 25 journalists and media specialists met at the premises of the Institute for Public Policy Research) in London on 5 July 2004 for a half-day seminar organized jointly by IPPR and the Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM). The aim of the seminar was to discuss the way in which migration is portrayed and debated in the media, and to identify ways in which that coverage might be improved. A copy of the agenda is attached. Later in the day, a public discussion on migration in the media was convened by IPPR and GCIM, which was attended by around 150 people.

The seminar

The seminar was opened by IPPR Director Nick Pearce, who welcomed the participants and highlighted the importance of migration in the global policy agenda, as well as the degree to which the issue remains misunderstood by the public. GCIM Co-Chair Jan O. Karlsson also welcomed the participants and introduced them to the work of GCIM. Mr Karlsson pointed to the gap that exists between experts who specialize in international migration and those political leaders and decision makers who are responsible for the formulation and implementation of migration policy. Like Mr Pearce, he suggested that public views on international migration are often distorted, both demonizing and victimizing migrants.

The UK situation

The seminar drew a substantial amount of its evidence from the UK, where press coverage of migration and asylum issues has been particularly negative in recent years. Participants observed that the attack on asylum seekers has focused particularly on two principal issues: social welfare benefits and (especially since 9/11) crime and security.

Speakers also alluded to the fact that the popular press has claimed direct responsibility for the introduction of more restrictive asylum and migration policies by the British government, and that their success in this respect had encouraged

them to sustain their attack. This, in turn, had made politicians even more wary of addressing the issue of migration in a rational and positive manner.

Two participants presented studies which they had undertaken of such coverage. According to one of these studies, while discrimination against many other minority groups is now considered to be illegitimate in the UK, refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants have become a prime target of attack for much of the tabloid press. This negative coverage has tended to set the agenda for other, more serious newspapers, as well as the broadcast media.

It was noted that NGOs and other organizations that work with refugees, asylum seekers and migrants have also become a target for the popular press. While such organizations lack the leverage to promote their own agenda, they have also tended to be reactive rather than proactive in their approach to the media. They have also been somewhat slow to recognize the role that exiled and migrant journalists might play in encouraging more balanced and understanding reporting. It is for this reason that an initiative has been launched to create a network of exiled journalists in the UK and other countries, with the aim of finding them employment in the media.

The impact of negative press coverage

Turning to the impact of negative press coverage, participants felt that the anti-migrant sentiments presented by the popular press had entered into the public consciousness, fostered xenophobia and contribute to the apparently rising level of violence against migrants and asylum seekers. Such xenophobia seems likely to have a long-term impact, contributing to the marginalization and social exclusion of the country's ethnic minorities. In some cases, negative reporting can even stigmatize individuals and groups in the country of origin.

The second study presented at the seminar, based on a content analysis of the press, a literature review, interviews and focus group meetings with migrants in London, took up the issue of negative press reporting and its social and political consequences. The study concluded that the information and images presented by newspapers, much of which is inaccurate or misleading, has given rise to fear of and hostility towards migrants in the UK. Paradoxically, while the public shows a growing disrespect for the popular press, they admit to the influence which it exerts upon their attitudes.

The study pointed out that public attitudes towards migrants are not uniform. On one hand, members of ethnic minority groups seemed to have a better understanding of why asylum seekers come to the UK. On the other hand, hostility is most likely to surface in deprived areas, where health, housing, schools and other services are inadequate, and where such services appear to have been placed under additional pressure by the arrival of people from other countries. While such concerns are legitimate ones, it was pointed out that inaccurate press reports about the 'preferential treatment' allegedly given to asylum seekers had helped the public discourse on this issue to assume a xenophobic character.

A comparative perspective

As well as examining the way that the press covers the issue of migration in the UK, the seminar considered the role of media in other parts the world. There was a general consensus that the situation in Britain is somewhat unique, due to the high level of newspaper readership, the very competitive structure of the newspaper industry, and the UK's preference for self-regulation and 'soft' regulation, rather than legislative controls on the press. While press hostility to migrants was by no means unknown in other countries, it tended to be less vitriolic, to be conveyed in more subtle ways, and to have less impact on the broadcast media.

Even so, it was noted, reporting on the issue of international migration leads much to be desired. The statistics and other information used by journalists are not checked or presented carefully enough. There is a considerable degree of confusion in relation to the terminology used to describe different categories of migrant. And there is a general tendency for migrants to be used as scapegoats for a country's economic and social problems, such as unemployment, crime and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In these circumstances, migrants are likely to be subjected to discrimination and exclusion, while politicians and policymakers in receiving countries may be deterred from speaking about the need for, and advantages to be gained from international migration.

Additional conclusions

A number of other conclusions emerged from the seminar, and these are summarized below.

1. Those individuals and organizations that are concerned about the way the media treats the issue of international migration should avoid the notions of 'positive' and 'negative' coverage. Accuracy and fairness are more appropriate concepts.
2. Many journalists are confused – or are deliberately confusing – in their use of migration terminology, as indicated by the frequent use of concepts such as 'illegal asylum seeker'. More efforts should be made to educate the media in this respect, and to point out their responsibility when they use such inaccurate and unfair terms.
3. Too much of the coverage given to migration issues relates to specific incidents and events. The media should be encouraged to treat the topic in a more detailed and analytical manner, by means, for example, of feature articles and documentaries.
4. National journalists should be brought closer to the reality of international migration: many, if not most, have never actually met the people they are writing about, and consequently have little understanding of their history, their motivations and aspirations.

5. Local journalists are closer to the realities of international migration, and in some instances have produce accurate and fair reports on the subject. Organizations working on behalf of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers should work more closely with local journalists so as to achieve this objective.
6. Television and radio can play an important role in enhancing the tone set by the popular press in the debate on international migration, but on too many occasions they allow their own agenda to be set by the more sensationalist newspapers.
7. The media does not operate in a political vacuum, and in this respect, governments and opposition parties have a major role to play in creating a climate which facilitates accurate and fair reporting on migration issues. Journalists, it was noted, have made it more difficult for politicians to deal with the issue of migration in a rational manner. Governments are criticized for both failing to keep migrants out, but are also criticized when they try to deport a person who has no right to be in the country.
8. There is need for more innovation in relation to the media discourse on international migration. More could be done to promote the employment of minority and exiled journalists, to establish new and low-cost publications that deal with the issue in an accurate and fair manner, to provide the media with feature stories on migration-related themes, and to engage in a dialogue with journalists, editors and proprietors.
9. Some countries and some media outlets provide individuals and organizations with a 'right of reply' when stories have been presented in an inaccurate, unfair or misleading manner. Such opportunities should be exploited to the maximum.
10. Increased regulation and new codes of conduct are not the key to responsible reporting. More emphasis should be placed on encouraging journalists to report in a professional, accurate and fair manner, with adequate protection against any demands for unprofessional conduct by their editors and proprietors.