

RAM Project (and the Exiled Journalists Network)

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Journalists are often the targets of repressive and violent regimes as it is they who highlight the problems within a given country. The RAM project aimed to provide a network for exiled journalists within the UK, provide support to its members and use their journalistic skills in an attempt to positively influence the British press' coverage of asylum and refugee issues. In late 2005 the project helped launch the Exiled Journalists Network a distinct organisation covering many of the same as well as new areas.

Area Media

Kind-category of project support and campaigning

Kind-category of actor Migrant group

Country UK

Year 2006

5 key-words journalism, exile, advice, support, training

Description of the project

Key Project Participants

MediaWise

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EJN provides advice support and training to exiled journalists based in Britain. The project originally started as Refugees Asylum-seekers and the Media (RAM Project), a child of MediaWise, a British charity which provides advice, information, research, and training on media ethics. The success and growth of the project, coupled with the belief that it should be run by exiled journalists for exiled journalists, led to the independence and formation proper of the Exiled Journalist Network.

The aims, as stated on their website, are:

“To advance education of the public about the needs and aspirations of exiled journalists granted refugee status and those seeking political asylum.

The relief of unemployment of those exiled journalists granted refugee status in the United Kingdom by the provision of vocational training, skills training, advice and support and by other means.

To provide a model of good practice, for overcoming difficulties between different groups and people of different backgrounds.

To seek fair and accurate coverage of refugee and asylum issues in the mass media.”

This is realised in a number of ways including organising training seminars, offering advocacy support and giving advice to exiled journalists based in the UK. They also monitor the media for bias coverage of asylum seekers and refugees, produce a monthly newsletter documenting the media's coverage of immigrant issues, as well as writing articles on issues affecting immigrants in the UK, often focussing on asylum cases.

When and how long: structure and steps of the project

The project was formed out of, though is now independent from, MediaWise, a British ethics based charity. It is possible to trace the formation of the project back to 1997 when MediaWise began looking for partners and funding to examine the consequences of inaccurate and sensational coverage of asylum-seekers, refugees, Roma and other 'non-settled' groups. This led to the launch, in 1999, of the RAM Project, which aimed to promote best practice in media coverage of refugee and asylum issues. One of the activities of the RAM project was to identify exiled journalists living in the UK. This in turn led to the creation of, with the help of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), the Exiled Journalists' Network. Launched in October 2005 it has taken on some of the work of the RAM Project and is branching out into new areas not previously covered.

Below is the timeline of the RAM Projects activities, illuminating the process by which EJM was formed:

Refugees, Asylum-seekers and the Media Forum

Discussion about media representations of refugees and asylum seekers, February 2001

The challenge of reporting refugees and asylum

Report on RAM Regional events, compiled by ICAR, published by PressWise, May 2003

Directory of Exiled Journalists

Profiles of over 40 exiled journalists, to help them find work in the UK media, May 2003

On the Receiving End: Exiled Journalists Speak Out

Short film made by PressWise in association with Omni Productions, May 2003

UK media coverage of asylum seekers and refugees

Speech by RAM Project Communications Officer Forward Maisokwadzo, June 2004

Reporting Asylum and Refugee Issues

Guidance leaflet from MediaWise, in association with the NUJ and UNHCR, March 2004

Media image, community impact

ICAR report, with MediaWise input, about how the media affects people's attitudes, July 2004

The RAM Report

Report on the work of the RAM Project, edited by Rich Cookson & Mike Jempson, June 2005

Exiled Journalists Network launch

Launched by the MediaWise RAM Project at the Burwalls conference, October 2005

Exiled Journalists in Europe

Report on the help and support available to journalists living in exile in Europe, October 2005

Place and context

The Mainstream Media

The issue of asylum, refugees and immigration is an emotive subject in the UK. Whilst it is a complex issue to summarise briefly, it has been argued by some that a negative image of refugees and asylum seekers has been created and fostered by sections of the press, especially right wing tabloid publications such as The Daily Mail and The Sun.

For example in their report, *Media image, community impact; Assessing the impact of media and political images of refugees and asylum seekers on community relations in London* (commissioned by the Mayor of London and published in July 2004) the Information Centre About Asylum Seekers and Refugees summarised:

- That unbalanced and inaccurate media images are frequent and powerful, with the potential to increase community tension.
- Some press coverage is unbalanced and lacking in accuracy in ways likely to increase tension, and in some circumstances tension does exist between members of established communities and asylum seekers and refugees, which leads to harassment.
- Resentment displayed and language used in harassment reflect themes in press reporting and indicate a link back to media coverage but more needs to be known about how far and in what ways the reporting may trigger hostile action against asylum seekers and refugees.
- This influence is of course not straightforward - it can be limited by the resilience and scepticism of the people and communities receiving these messages, and by their experience of diversity in daily life.
- On the other hand the influence of the messages can be amplified by uncritical reading of newspapers, a sense of resentment and injustice rooted in deprivation, and by low appreciation of diversity.
- However, resilience to media images does not mean that it is safe to conclude that reporting of asylum does not need to be balanced and accurate.

EJN's monitoring of the media and attempts to counter balance its output is an endeavour to improve the perception of exiles in the UK. Forward Maisokwadzo, the EJN Co-ordinator & RAM Project Communications Officer, argues that "if refugees are involved in a serious crime, yes the media has a duty to report this, but they should do it in an accurate way. They have a duty to be fair when reporting crime committed by asylum seekers."

Journalists:

The traumas and trials of being a refugee or asylum seeker are well documented. Often arriving in the UK with no family or friends, attempting to establish a new life can be an extremely difficult task. Journalism often depends upon language and it can take some time for non-native to adapt to their profession in a new country.

Journalists are often the first target of oppressive regimes because simply by doing their job they undermine undemocratic systems. However, it is not just journalists who use their position in an attempt to affect political or social change who come under attack. In North Korea spelling mistakes are punished with spells in harsh correction facilities, in other countries it is dangerous to simply talk to the wrong press agencies.

Mediawise explained the situation when they first began contacting exiled journalists. "We discovered a huge reservoir of talented and normally resourceful people whose lives and careers had been completely knocked off course by tragic events. Often the circumstances of their flight or decision to seek asylum prevented them from supplying documentary evidence of their work or employment record."

Targets

The targets are:

- exiled journalists: they are searched for (amongst exiled people living in the UK), offered the opportunity to join the network and often helped in having their work published
- the British public: hoping to enlighten people's views of immigrants in the UK through reports, articles and newsletters
- The mainstream media: attempting to change the current bias reporting and promote best practice by influencing journalists.

The EJN is a membership driven organisation; it works for the benefits of its members (exiled journalists). Any individual can join the network as an associate member (if they meet the criteria laid down by the board of trustees) though they will not be given voting rights in the decision making process.

Methodology

The main target, exiled journalists, were tracked down in 2003. Their details, skills and stories were published in a directory which is still regularly updated on-line (www.ramproject.org.uk/directory). In this way the RAM project helped exiled journalists network with each other.

The RAM project focused on aspects of exiled journalists' lives which they had the resources and expertise to improve. "We concentrated on confidence-building and professional issues. Those who wanted to work in the media quickly realised they would need fresh training or reskilling to cope with the very different media culture of the UK. We have sought to introduce them to the UK media, encouraged them to join the NUJ, and provided training, work placements and paid assignments."

When attempting to improve the balance of press coverage of asylum issues different tactics were employed, dependent upon the situation and resources available. Forward explains that despite a sometimes bleak picture it is not an impossible task, "we have to use different strategies to improve journalists' reporting of these issues. Importantly we have to engage the journalists. It is not all bad; our network was set up with the help of the NUJ and this has a membership of 40,000. In this sense we are coming from a strong starting point, with easy access to lots of people, many of whom are sympathetic towards refugees."

Practical support is also offered to members who for various reasons could have their benefits cut by the British government as they pursue a 'tough line' on asylum cases. This support can either be given by highlighting their cases or by covering the essential welfare removed by the government.

Funding and Networks

Networks include: the often pro-asylum NUJ, previous contacts established through MediaWise and campaign groups/charities working with asylum seekers and refugees. Different groups working to benefit asylum seekers and refugees are in regular contact throughout the country and they support much of what they each do. For instance even on a simple level most groups link to each other on their webpage. This can make it easier to track down refugees and then begin to ask within the community if people know of any journalists.

Funding: Mediawise receives donations and grants to cover some running costs as well as selling the publications they produce on various topical issues. The initial support and funding came through Mediawise as it was their project (RAM). EJN is also supported in part by its members. The membership fees vary for asylum seeking and refugee members, supporting individuals and supporting organisations according to their ability to pay.

Strengths

It is run 'by exiled journalists for exiled journalists' and so is completely in the hands of those who know the needs of the groups they are meant to serve.

The network itself is extremely intercultural in that it brings together exiles from all over the world. The common bond between them is journalism, not ethnicity, religion or country of origin. In this sense it can be seen as a positive contribution to co-existence between worldwide cultures, not just between an immigrant group and the host community.

If opinions on the merits of intercultural living were left solely to the British press, it is arguable that those arriving in the UK from abroad would find it harder to be accepted and understood than is currently the case.

The project is innovative because EJM are the only organisation of this type in the country. They are also very vocal and happy to challenge the government, for instance regarding deportation cases.

Exiled journalists often are fleeing from extremely traumatic situations themselves and so as well as attempting to address society EJM also seeks to directly help the problems faced by their fellow professionals.

The dedication of its members has led to substantial achievements in a relatively short space of time. As Forward explains, "We have been able to implement many things: we now have a full time coordinator, me, put out a regular bulletin featuring refugee issues and also employ a part time administrator."

However the network has not only been successful on a practical level, but has helped create groundbreaking practices, "Encouraging people to contribute their experiences in UK, and other parts of the world, has been a significant achievement."

Critical points

The organisation was very proud of its work. It is hard to find negatives for this organisation when they have succeeded within the context of a hostile media and reactionary government policy. There were no obvious critical points from the Intercultural Map perspective.

Conclusion: what is "exportable" in the project

One of the exportable factors is the fact that projects, which are originally set up by natives of a country can nevertheless be heavily influenced and eventually controlled by immigrants themselves. Natives to a country very often have the necessary resources and networks to set up projects (e.g. funding knowledge, contacts etc) but this does not mean that once projects have momentum the groups which are targeted cannot 'take the reins'.

Furthermore the importance of networking and cooperation between people in vulnerable situations is clear. When people pool resources and share ideas, new

solutions to problems can appear. Whilst journalists who are not living in exile may well be able to adequately cover some of the issues faced by their fellow professionals fleeing persecution, it makes far more sense to have a project organised by those who really know what it feels like to be in such a situation.

The exportable nature of the project can be observed in the Mediawise RAM Project report, Exiled Journalists in Europe (available www.mediawise.org.uk). In the report is detailed how similar projects are underway in other countries (for instance in Belgium) inspired by the success of EJN in the UK.

People develop skills and expertise in certain fields. Although often these attributes are tested when borders are crossed they still exist. There are skilled people lying dormant in society, who with some retraining and cultural adjustment can provide a valuable service to their new countries.

LINKS

Exiled Journalists Network web page
www.exiledjournalists.net

Mediawise web page
www.mediawise.org.uk

Information Centre About Asylum Seekers and Refugees
www.icar.org.uk