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What is the X factor omitted from the following equation?

Zimbabwean immigrant in the UK + expired leave to remain + no further leave to remain + scrutiny of the tabloid press = a national campaign of support running to more than 200,000 people + legal representation funded by a celebrated millionaire.

The answer is that this particular Zimbabwean featured on prime time Saturday night television for several weeks last autumn. Having reached the final 32 of a talent competition, Gamu Nhengu sang each week to more than ten million Britons. After failing to progress to the fourth and final stage, it emerged that Gamu and her family did not have lawful immigration status. Theories were soon offered that it was her lack of legal status rather than her merits as a potential pop star that led to the decision.

However unsavoury, the reaction of typically right wing tabloids in rallying behind Gamu and her family is not a stretch of the imagination. Similarly it is to be expected that left wing broadsheets would condemn this hypocrisy. The polarisation between these commentaries is clear in this case. When it comes to reporting asylum matters more generally, however, both of these groups might be accused of failing to overcome common pitfalls.

Newspaper search engines can be used as a barometer of editorial opinion. *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail*, right-leaning British tabloids, are the two best selling daily newspapers in the UK. A search for “asylum seeker” on the website of *The Sun* on 14 October 2010 returned a bleak picture. Six of the first ten results were stories about the dishonest or criminal acts of asylum seekers, two portrayed the failings of a lenient system and one was a compilation of articles, which included comments about asylum. Rounding off the ten was a piece which covered the fining of a man for racism after he called his indigenous North American neighbour an asylum seeker.

The same search carried out at *The Daily Mail's* website provided strikingly similar results. Six of the first ten told of the criminal acts of asylum seekers, including one who “escapes jail again.” Confusingly, the denouncement was made notwithstanding the custodial sentence handed down. Two described cases in which asylum seekers had profited from the incompetence of the UK Border Agency (UKBA). One item reported a reduction in subsistence payments wherein officials admitted them to be too high, whilst another covered the stabbing of an asylum seeker.

However, writers of *The Guardian*—traditionally a more liberal voice—saw two sides to the Gamu Nhengu story:

Well. I need hardly tell you that the Sun, Mail and Daily Star have *finally* found the sort of benefit-dependent immigrant family they can get behind, and their ability to hold two contradictory positions at once has rarely been more grimly hilarious (*The Guardian*, 7 October 2010).

Even if it were not exposed as a contradiction by the recent volte-face, the usual negative generalisation of *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* is worthy of criticism in itself.

However, a closer look at *The Guardian's* coverage of another widely reported case leaves open the question of whether its writers have made similar mistakes to that of its tabloid cousins in the pursuit of a better story.

At the beginning of 2010, Serge Serykh, his wife Tatiana and her son had an ongoing application for asylum. The family had been housed at the Red Road estate in Glasgow with its famously grim 31 storey towers, in a block that Glasgow City Council have opted not to use for council tenants since 1980. On 7 March 2010, the family pushed a wardrobe from the building to break the suicide netting below and then jumped to their deaths.

There was an indication soon after that the incident might be more extraordinary than it had appeared. *The Guardian* reported on 8 March that Mr Serykh was believed to be a former Russian spy and that a close source had called it a highly unusual case (*The Guardian*, 8 March 2010).

Three days after the deaths, *The Guardian* published an article which linked them to a broader trend and actually blamed the UK asylum system, stating that “[a] toxic combination of inhumane policy and public indifference tragically drives vulnerable refugees beyond despair” (*The Guardian*, 10 March 2010).

The author went so far as to speculate that events were triggered by acts of the UKBA, placing this case within a pattern of similar occurrences:

The three dead in Glasgow had had financial support withdrawn and faced eviction from their flat. Others have died by their own hand when they thought immigration officers and escorts from privately run agencies had arrived to deport them (*The Guardian*, 10 March 2010).

The Guardian first carried details of the full story on 11 March.

They left Canada in 2007 after Serykh had become obsessed with the idea that the Canadian government was trying to kill him because he had uncovered their plot to assassinate the Queen. Coming to Britain, they alerted an MP to this alleged plot (*The Guardian*, 11 March 2010).

The article proceeded to ask “Who is to blame for the Glasgow suicides?”

The idea is that Serykh had infected his wife and his stepson with his paranoia, and persuaded them to kill themselves. Yet the fact that the three had to chuck down a large wardrobe before they jumped, to break the anti-suicide netting that had been installed, is an indication that they were not the only people in the vicinity who were considered to be in danger of finding their lives intolerable (*The Guardian*, 11 March 2010).

The following Sunday, *The Guardian's* sister publication ran an editorial denouncing the failures of the UK's oppressive and unfair policies. It gave a number of examples to support its claim that “something is rotten in Britain's asylum system” (*The Observer*, 14 March 2010). Amongst them was the recent tragic news from Glasgow without any reference to intelligence services or alleged conspiracies to kill the Queen.

Using the story of the suicides, all three articles tried to persuade readers that the asylum system is failing. The danger in making generalisations was demonstrated the following week when the more complex picture of belief in an assassination plot emerged to make the logical jump much less sustainable. Surprisingly, the newspaper continued—even after this date—to print the claim and it is a glaring omission that the third, most recent piece made no mention of the additional information at all.

It is true of at least two of the three articles that the claim of a failed system was not based solely on the recent suicides. Further examples included the suicides of other asylum seekers, UKBA's failure to investigate abuse in detention and the hunger strike protest by residents at the Yarl's Wood detention centre. One wonders, then, why the example of Serge Serykh and his family was used at all, particularly once the full story came to light. In the face of a wealth of alternative evidence, that week's story—replete with uncertainties and ulterior motives—is a weak link in the chain, leaving the conclusion of a failed asylum system open to doubt. It would seem that twists of espionage, international assassination and intense mental illness added to its appeal.

The sample taken above from the websites of *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* shows more than 90% coverage for asylum seekers or refugees defrauding the social security system or convicted of a criminal offence. This is almost certainly a heavy exaggeration of the dangers posed to British society. Critics will not be persuaded by this editorial decision of the need to curb immigration, reduce benefits or step up deportation.

Conversely, critics of *The Guardian* will not be persuaded that the suicides of Serge Serykh and his family warrant changes to the system. Even if one takes account of all possible scenarios, it is a unique case and an inappropriate model when considering the institution of asylum. The family were either wracked with delusional paranoia, or there really was a state-sponsored plot to kill the Queen and, having revealed this, Serge Serykh really was being hunted by the Canadian government. In either case, the story is exceptional and an easy target for anyone seeking to undermine *The Guardian's* broader claim on the asylum system.

Both poles of this political spectrum in the media use individual cases to make wider claims that they do not substantiate. This inevitably has broader implications for asylum policy. Between them, the newspapers discussed inform many millions of readers, a significant proportion of the UK. Nominees for political office address the desires and concerns of the electorate notwithstanding the fact that these feelings are drawn from both the rational and the irrational, the substantiated and the unsubstantiated. Therefore, these publications play a prominent role in the policies that political parties offer to voters. It is often posed that readers choose to read publications that reinforce views they already hold. When this is coupled with the rise of the newspaper website comments column, it is increasingly credible to suppose that these publications represent the views of significant proportions of readers. If indeed this augments their already prominent position within popular debates, it must also increase the importance of properly substantiating arguments.

It is perfectly credible to criticise contemporary policies aimed at reducing success in asylum applications as obstructive, intimidating or even oppressive: *The Guardian* articles referred to here drew on a number of examples to advance this argument. Nevertheless, the newspaper preferred to centre the issue around a sensational story,

even if it was the least supportive substantively. In highlighting the stories of Gamu Nhengu and Serge Serykh over others, each of these newspapers is left open to the charge of prioritising the demand of its readership over the most accurate account, and to the detriment of a constructive policy argument.

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