One of the motivations for our project was to use research to intervene in public debates on immigration by providing alternative perspectives on what is often a polarised and entrenched debate where the perspectives of migrants and racially minoritised communities barely feature (Conlan, 2014; Migrant Voice, 2014) and where, as we found, research evidence on ‘what works’ in managing migration is rarely used by policy-makers. Indeed, the first stage of the project, before it was fully formed or funded, involved an attempt to intervene. As members of a spontaneously formed group of activists, many of the members of the final research team took part in carrying out a street survey which was published in The Voice (Chan, 2013), the main Black British newspaper in the UK. Throughout the research project, we communicated our research with the media via press releases, the @MICResearch Twitter feed and our project blog (mappingimmigrationcontroversy.com). The media coverage our project received included The Telegraph, The Independent, The Financial Times, BBC Woman’s Hour, The Herald, and Russia Today. Here, we want to reflect on some of the difficulties of trying to engage with mainstream media when researching contentious issues.

**Immigration research in a hostile media environment**

The negative tone of debate on immigration in the British media poses particular challenges for communicating research within that context, as it is often a question of how research fits, or does not fit, dominant narratives. Existing research has demonstrated how media coverage of immigration has been marked by moral panics about immigration as a threat to social cohesion and the scapegoating of immigrants for a variety of social anxieties (Hall et al., 1978;
Cohen, 2011; Philo et al., 2013). Immigration has also been associated with criminality through journalists’ use of terms such as ‘illegal’ or ‘bogus’ (Alia and Bull, 2005) and dehumanisation through the use of terms like ‘surge’, ‘flood’ (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2007, cited in Philo et al., 2013), ‘swamp’ (The Sun, 2002) or ‘swarm’ (Holehouse, 2015). Government policy as a driver of migration in and from conflict zones, including the UK’s role in wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, also tends to be ignored in mainstream media coverage (Lewis et al., 2005 cited in Philo et al., 2013). In Bad News for Refugees, Greg Philo and colleagues examined how inflammatory media coverage of asylum seekers and refugees legitimates punitive official public and policy responses, which in turn undermine the sense of identity and security for migrant and racially minoritised communities (Philo et al., 2013). This interaction between inflammatory media coverage and punitive immigration policy can be understood as what Papadopoulos et al. term a ‘regime of mobility control’, which includes both state and non-state actors, and encompasses processes of observation and action (2008: 163).

This means that trying to translate research into media-friendly formats carries the risk of our research being interpreted within the terms of hegemonic anti-immigrant perspectives, framing what is deemed newsworthy and thus the coverage of research – which, as we found, tends to be selective, focusing narrowly on findings which fit into a polemical rather than data-driven approach, and more specifically an anti-immigration narrative (see examples below). Furthermore, the popularity of UKIP and related populist viewpoints means that those perceived as defending immigration, including academics, become easily dismissed as an out-of-touch liberal metropolitan elite (see Chapter 3) who hold positive views on immigration because they are sheltered from its consequences, in contrast with the beleaguered ‘white working class’.1 This makes it all the more important that we as researchers intervene in debates on immigration. It also means that our research risks being either reduced to pro or con, pigeonholed as coming from an out-of-touch elite, or being misinterpreted.

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1For a challenge to this argument and a discussion of the implications for researchers, see Gunaratnam and Jones (2015) and also Virdee (2014).
Media coverage of our research project

Our project received media coverage from several outlets, but we will focus on a few key examples that illustrate the challenges of communicating research to the media. The first media coverage that our project received was from The Telegraph, in response to a press release at the very beginning of the project, and emphasised the fact that we had received £200,000 of public money to carry out the research, calling it a ‘sizeable grant’ (Riley-Smith, 2013), even though this is not a large sum of research funding in relative terms (the budget included paying wages to eight researchers over the 18-month duration of the project, fees to the community organisations, the costs of commissioning the survey, travel costs and other incidentals involved with carrying out the project). The rest of the article focused on the controversy surrounding Operation Vaken and the Go Home van pilot and the fact that the pilot had not been successful. The implication was that our project was problematic because it was using taxpayers’ money to criticise government policy – specifically a scheme which had been discontinued – and also because we were seen to be defending immigrants. The organisation Migrants’ Rights Network was asked by The Telegraph for a negative comment about the project (as it was not one of the project partners) and warned us of the story.

After analysing the results of the Ipsos MORI survey in October 2014 (see Chapter 2 for details) and the first stages of the qualitative research we conducted ourselves, we sent out press releases summing up our interim research findings, which resulted in media coverage in the Financial Times and the Independent (Jackson, 2014; Green, 2015). Both articles focused on two key findings based on qualitative research: that high-profile government immigration campaigns caused anxiety and unease amongst migrants and those racialised as being from ‘Black and minority ethnic’ communities, and that they did not even reassure those who were concerned about irregular immigration, leading them to suspect that irregular immigration was worse than they had thought. Other aspects of our findings were left out of the news coverage because they were deemed less newsworthy and/or less conducive to a polemical approach. The Financial Times article also cited quotes from the then Home Secretary Theresa May and Immigration Minister James Brokenshire on how the Immigration Bill was

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2 Though The Independent seemed to confuse this with the Ipsos MORI survey.
making it more difficult for those who did not have a legal right to be in the UK, and how the van pilot was deemed unsuccessful (Jackson, 2014). However, there were no direct responses from the Home Office to our research. The article in the *Independent* emphasised how high-profile immigration campaigns increased racial prejudice. The point was also made that high-profile immigration campaigns made those with legal immigration status and even British citizenship feel unwelcome and reluctant to participate in political activism.

That we were able to put arguments into the mainstream media demonstrating the links between immigration control to racism, and provide evidence about the effects on racially minoritised communities (both are rare), shows the importance of intervening in the media. However, what was more problematic was the *Independent* article’s emphasis on ‘ethnic minorities’ becoming more suspicious of each other:

> Different migrant groups have become increasingly suspicious of one another, with hostility breaking out between asylum seekers, refugees and Eastern Europeans. Some migrants reported ethnic minority British citizens telling them to ‘go home’.

(Green, 2015, n.p.)

Passages such as this give the impression of generations of immigrants and settled ‘minority ethnic’ communities fighting amongst themselves, and it de-emphasises the role of government policy or communications in provoking community tensions, which was also a key finding in our research. It also potentially plays into narratives which claim that anti-immigrant sentiments are not racist because of being expressed by racially minoritised people (for a more detailed discussion of anti-immigrant sentiments amongst racially minoritised communities see Chapter 5).

**Human interest stories and the politics of identification**

In addition to trying to communicate our research through news media, we also participated in public discussions about the representation of migrants in the media. For example, at a workshop at the Detention Forum Salon in London (in which Hannah and Kirsten participated), Ian Dunt (journalist and editor of the blog *politics.co.uk*) argued that ‘politicians, journalists and decision makers still tend to be middle class white men who will identify more with “people like them”’ (Jones, 2015). Dunt suggested that advocates for
the rights of migrants and asylum seekers should choose human interest stories involving people the British public (or journalists, as gatekeepers to the public) find easy to identify with. This raises questions about how such choices might reproduce hierarchies of class, race, nationality, sexuality, etc. For example, an Australian NHS therapist who suddenly lost her status due to bureaucratic errors was seen to be easier to identify with than a Nigerian asylum seeker who had fled her home country because she faced 14 years in prison for her homosexuality (Jones, 2015). In a blog post about the event, Hannah questioned the terms of identification, and who is seen to be an ‘ordinary person’. She asked whether people could imagine themselves or someone they knew being persecuted for their sexuality, and being on the sharp end of the immigration and justice system as a result (see further discussion of this in Chapter 6).

This incident shows the importance for researchers of not only providing alternative viewpoints and evidence but also challenging the terms by which media conventions such as the ‘human interest story’ operate, and the larger power relations such conventions reflect. As we have discussed, doing so carries the risk of being (mis)interpreted within the terms we wish to challenge. However, within the current political climate, the risk of not intervening in public debates on immigration is more dangerous.

Have you been involved in sharing details of a social research project in the mainstream media? What challenges did you expect? What challenges did you encounter? Did they differ?

In your view, what is the role of academic research in public debate, particularly on controversial issues?

Is media coverage a good way of making academic research findings accessible? Are there different opportunities and risks associated with different forms of media coverage? How might you handle these?

What can be gained by persuading journalists to cover academic research reports? What can be lost?

References

Chan, B. (2013) ‘Home Office “Go Home” vans were unacceptable’, The Voice, 23 August, www.voice-online.co.uk/article/home-office-%E2%80%98go-home%E2%80%99-vans-were-%E2%80%99unacceptable%E2%80%99-says-study [last accessed 22 May 2016].


Go home?

10457811/Go-Home-vans-research-gets-200000-grant.html [last accessed 22 May 2016].
