‘Any one of these boat people could be a terrorist for all we know!’ Media representations and public perceptions of ‘boat people’ arrivals in Australia

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Abstract
In April 2009 a boat (named the ‘SIEV 36’ by the Australian Navy) carrying 49 asylum seekers exploded off the north coast of Australia. Media and public debate about Australia’s responsibility to individuals seeking asylum by boat was instantaneous. This paper investigates the media representation of the ‘SIEV 36’ incident and the public responses to media reports through online news fora. We examined three key questions: 1) Does the media reporting refer back to and support previous policies of the Howard Government? 2) Does the press and public discourse portray asylum arrivals by boat as a risk to Australian society? 3) Are journalists following and applying industry guidelines about the reporting of asylum seeker issues? Our results show that while there is an attempt to provide a balanced account of the issue, there is variation in the degree to which different types of reports follow industry guidelines about the reporting of issues relating to asylum seekers and the use of ‘appropriate’ language.
Keywords
asylum seekers, boat people, media representations, moral panic, public responses, risk

Introduction

On 16 April 2009, a boat, the Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel (SIEV) 36, carrying 49 asylum seekers exploded off Ashmore Reef on the North West coast of Australia, killing five people and injuring more than 40. Due to the remote location of the incident, several hundred kilometres off Australia’s North coast, initial news reports of the incident were sketchy and it took several days to develop a picture of what happened onboard the boat. Despite the limited evidence, news media attention and public debate about individuals who seek asylum by boat was instantaneous. The SIEV 36 was the fourth boat to enter Australian waters in a fortnight, and the 16th to arrive since September 2008 when the Rudd Labor Government announced that it would dismantle the Howard Liberal Government’s controversial ‘Pacific Solution’ (2001–2007). The ‘Pacific Solution’ involved transporting and processing asylum seekers in ‘offshore’ detention centres (including Nauru, Papua New Guinea and Christmas Island), rather than allowing them onto the Australian mainland where they would have access to Australian immigration laws. The ‘solution’ was designed to act as a deterrent to individuals who seek asylum by boat, whom the Howard Government claimed were actually ‘illegal immigrants’ or ‘queue jumpers’. The arrival of the SIEV 36 promoted public debate about Australia’s responsibility to those seeking asylum in Australia.

Historical context

Australia has a long history of receiving individuals and groups who are seeking asylum as well as a long history of turning people away who are perceived as different. In the 2008–2009 year, Australia granted approximately 13,500 refugee visas. This figure is comprised of approximately 11,000 refugee visas, granted to persons overseas through the UNHCR resettlement program, and 2500 visas granted to people in Australia after they arrive either without a visa or on a temporary visa and then claim asylum. Of the asylum seekers who arrive by boat, approximately 90 percent are found to be refugees and are offered a permanent visa for Australia (Brennan, 2003). When compared to most European countries, the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, Australia receives only a small number of asylum applications each year. On a per capita basis, in 2009 Australia was ranked 16th out of 44 industrialised countries in terms of the absolute number of asylum applications received (UNHCR, 2010). Asylum seekers who arrive in Australia by boat are often incorrectly labelled in media and public discourse as ‘refugees’, ‘boat people’ and ‘illegals’. These terms are often used interchangeably with the more accurate term ‘asylum seeker’. Although these terms are blurred in public debates, a significant difference in international and domestic policy and law between these terms exists. As such this paper will use the term asylum seeker to identify those who have arrived at Australian shores in an unauthorised manner without a valid visa.

The first wave of asylum seekers to arrive by boat was motivated by the Indochinese crisis (1976 and 1981). By 1977, 2059 ‘Vietnamese boat people’ claimed asylum with boats arriving in Australia on an almost daily basis (Betts, 2001). International pressures
and a desire to limit unauthorised arrivals forced Australia to offer permanent resettlement to an additional 15,000 asylum seekers each year from overseas refugee camps. A total of approximately 100,000 Vietnamese people eventually resettled in Australia (UNHCR, 2000). Despite this orderly and authorised resettlement program, public opinion of the Vietnamese arrivals to Australia was overwhelmingly associated with the image of men arriving in Australia in an unauthorised manner by boat (Threadgold, 2006). The news media reports drew strongly on ideas of ‘Asian invasions’ which stimulated fear, panic and prejudice in Australian communities (Betts, 2001; Pedersen et al., 2006). To quell some of this panic, the Australian government embarked on a mass media campaign that showed Vietnamese women ‘acculturating’ to Australian life, at the hairdressers, at home, buying local products and in the care of Australian men and families (Carton, 1994).

The second wave of asylum seekers to arrive by boat in Australia began in 1989, mostly from South China and Cambodia. Again, the arrival of the so-called ‘boat people’ led to an increase in public anxiety about ‘invasion’ and led to the establishment of Australia’s first period of mandatory detention until claims of asylum were processed (McMaster, 2002). In an ‘out of sight, out of mind’ move by the government, detention facilities were shifted from major metropolitan centres to remote locations, away from community support, legal advice and public opinion (Crock, 1993).

The third wave of asylum seekers to arrive by boat began in the late 1990s, predominantly from Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. This wave was different as it involved organised links with ‘people smuggling’ syndicates from Southeast Asia (Hugo, 2002). In line with the Howard Government’s ‘Pacific Solution’ and as an extension of the previous policies of isolated detention, asylum seekers were placed in remote offshore detention facilities for an indefinite period (up to seven years in some cases) while their cases were determined. Concurrently, news media and public hostility towards asylum seekers intensified; the news media, in error, labelled the arrivals as ‘queue jumpers’ ‘illegal asylum seekers’ and ‘illegal immigrants’ and were seen by many as a threat to Australian national identity (O’Doherty, 2007; Pugh, 2004). This wave of arrivals peaked with three key events in 2001.

In September 2001, the Howard Government refused entry to the Norwegian freighter the MV *Tampa* after the ship rescued 438 mainly Afghani asylum seekers (including women and 48 children) from a sinking Indonesian ship, the *Palapa*, that was heading to Christmas Island to claim asylum (for in-depth discussion see Leach, 2003). The Howard Government mounted a number of arguments through the news media that reinforced their reasons for not allowing the *Tampa* entry to Australian waters, including the protection of Australia’s sovereignty; that these individuals were likely to be illegal immigrants – and potentially terrorists; that they were seeking to exploit Australia’s laws relating to asylum seekers; and that the detention centres were already full. The second key event was the September 11 attacks on the New York World Trade Centre. This event blended the discourses of terrorism with asylum seekers. Prime Minister Howard was able to link the two events by claiming that terrorists might be hiding among the asylum seekers arriving on the unauthorised boats (Klocker and Dunn, 2003). As a result of these two incidents, the government instigated a legislative change in which the Border Protection Bill (2001) made the issue of asylum seekers arriving by boat the responsibility of the Australian government and military, strengthening the maritime investigatory and
enforcement powers against both Australian and foreign vessels. This change gave the Prime Minister the right to turn away any vessel in Australian waters, overriding laws aimed to protect the rights of refugees and asylum seekers (including the 1951 Refugee Convention). The third event was the ‘Children Overboard’ incident (October 2001) in which the Howard Government released pictures and accused asylum seekers on the ‘illegal’ vessel, the SIEV 4, of throwing their children overboard to secure rescue by an Australian Navy vessel thus gaining entry to Australia (Slattery, 2003). The debate about this incident ensued for months, during which time a Senate enquiry showed the claims of the Government were untrue and that the pictures had been taken after the boat sank.

The Rudd Labor Government was elected in November 2007. Within the first few months in office, the new government took several symbolic steps that signalled a different approach to issues relating to asylum seekers. This included the abolition of the ‘Pacific Solution’ and Temporary Protection Visas, and also a review of the controversial Citizenship Test. A reduction in the number of boat arrivals meant that advocates could lobby for further changes to the asylum procedures and policies, and also hope for a change in language about asylum issues from the new Prime Minister. However, in early 2009, after an absence of boat arrivals for several years, unauthorised arrivals began to increase in line with world events. The Rudd Government was forced to be ‘seen to be doing something’ about this new wave of arrivals and so was obliged to once again use the Christmas Island detention facility to house asylum seekers and increase the tough rhetoric on people smugglers.

**Media representations of asylum seeker issues in Australia**

Media representations of asylum seekers in the Australian press typically fall into a binarised form (Mummery and Rodan, 2007). On one hand, asylum seekers are portrayed as in genuine need of protection, fleeing their country because of a well-founded fear of persecution. On the other, they are portrayed as exploiting asylum policies for their own economic and personal gain (Nickels, 2007; Robinson, 1996; Steiner, 1999, 2001). While humanitarian ideals play a role in how the news media frame asylum seeker issues, these ideals are often counter-framed by legal and security concerns, with the media debates often centred on the ‘national interest’, ‘border security/protection’ and the ‘refugee crisis’ (Every and Augoustinos, 2008). This specific framing has been termed by Gale (2004: 336) as the ‘politics of fear’. Some leading advocacy groups have accused the Australian media of promoting fears and unfavourable attitudes towards refugees through the negative framing of the ‘refugee news’ (Refugee Council of Australia, 2000).

Media portrayals of asylum seekers are complex, as they both shape, and are shaped by, broader opinions about asylum seekers and national identity. In a comprehensive content and thematic analysis of newspaper reporting, examining the tenor and cultural constructions of asylum seekers adopted by sections of the media and by the Australian federal government, Klocker and Dunn (2003), found that the Australian media in 2001 and 2002 followed the Howard Government’s lead in portraying asylum seekers in a negative manner. They found that the media was highly dependent upon government statements and spokespersons, supporting the ‘propaganda model’ first proposed by Herman and Chomsky (1988) as a framework for analysing and understanding mainstream media. This model suggests that the media are not engaged in investigating the
story, rather they are simply reporting the Government’s line and focus of the story. Klocker and Dunn (2003) argued that the ‘threat’ construct presented by the media provided a strong rationale for the strict asylum policies that followed the events of 2001.

In the years following the events of 2001 several complaints were brought to, and upheld, by the Australian Press Council about the language and terminology used in newspapers to describe people seeking asylum in Australia (Australian Press Council, 2004a). These included the media’s use of the words ‘illegal immigrant’, ‘illegal refugee’, ‘illegals’ and ‘illegal asylum seeker’ that were shown to be derogatory and inaccurate. As a result, the Australian Press Council, in an attempt to maintain free and ethical reporting, issued a new guideline that cautioned against the use of such unqualified terms that are often inaccurate and typically imply criminality (Australian Press Council, 2004b).

**Aims**

This article investigates media representations of asylum seekers who arrived by boat in Australia in the five days after the SIEV 36 incident. We aim to investigate how the media present such issues through their print and online editions, how the public respond to these issues through the use of online fora, and if the Australian press are complying with Australian Press Council reporting guidelines on asylum seekers.

The emergence of online news websites and rapid response fora provided us with an opportunity to extend the analysis beyond traditional newspaper reporting to explore public responses to media representations of these issues through an analysis of letters to the editor and online readers’ comments on the articles. This aspect of the study is particularly novel and innovative as it explores the link between media reporting of asylum seeker issues and subsequent audience opinions about these issues. While not a media reception study, these analyses do provide insight into how the public respond to newspaper reporting and the role of online fora in stimulating debate and discussion. Such online fora are valuable because they show how audiences interpret and respond to the information provided in media texts.

**Theoretical framework**

We drew upon a number of different social theories to guide this study. The first theory used was the theory of ‘moral panics’ as asylum seeker issues have long been regarded as potential moral panics (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) list five criteria for the creation of a moral panic: concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, and volatility. The issues of concern to this research were the exaggeration of the actual threat posed by asylum seekers through the use of overstated claims and statistics or those that were used out of context, and the use of this long standing panic to engineer social consensus. This is consistent with the ‘folk devils’ model used in moral panic research whereby one member or group in society is considered as deviant and outside the normal realms of society (Cohen, 1973).

The second theory was that of the ‘risk society’ in which Ungar (2001) argues that as new risks emerge in societies they create their own ‘issue-attention cycles’ which revolve around complex and unpredictable forces. These issue-attention cycles identified by Ungar (2001) are intrinsically linked to the way in which ‘moral panic’ is created by
agencies such as government and the media. Ungar suggests that much of the current social anxiety is related to the ‘risk society’, questioning how risk society issues affect the emergence of moral panics (Ungar, 2001: 273).

Our study was also informed by news framing theory. Framing theory recognises the role of news frames in directing attention of audiences to particular explanations and courses of action. Frames are seen as having a considerable influence on the way in which audiences understand and respond to issues and events. Framing theory suggests that media framing can impact how audiences feel about an issue (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Scheufele, 2000).

When investigating the online articles and readers’ comments, we drew upon Krimsky (2007) who proposes that the internet may lead to a new phase of risk communication in which ‘lay’ individuals are able to critically interact with scientific and other forms of information. This interaction allows individuals to become active participants in assessing the validity of information, weighing up any risks or benefits associated with this information and building networks of trust that may not be concordant with dominant perspectives thereby actively contributing to the creation of Ungar’s risk society (Krimsky, 2007). The analysis of the public driven online content, specifically the readers’ comments, builds upon the earlier work of Murphy and Maynard (2000) who argue that the way in which an issue is framed in media and public discourses, has much to do with who is doing the framing, thereby reinforcing the importance of identifying the source of the information.

The history of asylum seeker arrivals to Australia, together with the theories of ‘moral panic’ that link the idea of ‘risk’ and ‘threat’ are essential in understanding the reporting of asylum seekers who arrive by boat. Conforming to the principals of moral panic (Cohen, 2002), the social anxieties associated with the arrivals of asylum seekers by boat reinforces an old invasion mentality, underpinned by asylum seeker stereotypes, and a sense of ‘otherness’ reinforcing an ‘us versus them’ view (Lea, 2002; Young, 1999). Pugh (2004) argues that media and government discourse surrounding asylum seekers distance these ‘stateless wanderers’ from the reasons for their flight and marry them to a debate about identity and homeland rather than the human rights violations they may have experienced. In linking asylum seekers with threats to security – in particular terrorism and economic opportunism – the news media are provided with an opportunity to influence public opinion away from the humanitarian issues associated with asylum seekers toward border security and sovereignty issues (Pugh, 2004). Others argue that selective and sensationalist reporting by the media of ‘risk’ with limited expert assessment of these ‘risks’ plays a significant role in stimulating concern about the risks associated with different social issues – in this case the invasion of ‘illegals’ and ‘terrorists’ (Cottle, 1998; Kitzinger and Reilly, 1997).

Method

Data comprised newspaper and online media reporting of the SIEV 36 from 16 to 20 April 2009 in two Victorian based newspapers, the Herald Sun (www.heraldsun.com.au; circulation 518,000 weekdays, 515,000 Saturday), The Age (www.theage.com.au; circulation 204,200 weekdays, 296,750 Saturday), and one national paper, The Australian (www.theaustralian.com.au; circulation 138,765 weekdays, 316,194 weekend). This time period allowed us to follow three ‘working week’ days of reporting (Thursday 16th,
Friday 17th and Monday 20th), as well as two weekend days of reporting (Saturday 18th and Sunday 19th) when there was more in-depth opinion based reporting about the incident. These five days represented the days with the most media attention, after which there was a marked drop-off in attention to the incident (see Figure 1). The *Herald Sun*, *The Age* and *The Australian* were chosen as they have a substantial share in both the online and print circulation in Victoria. They also provide an example of the diversity within Australia’s print media, between broadsheet dailies, *The Age* and *The Australian*, and the tabloid *Herald Sun*. We were also able to observe the differences between the political stance of the newspapers as the *Herald Sun* and *The Australian* are both News Limited publications and traditionally favour the conservative political parties, while *The Age* is a Fairfax publication and is traditionally more liberal. While previous studies on asylum seeker arrivals in Australia have focused exclusively on the morning and print editions of daily papers (Gale, 2004; Klocker and Dunn, 2003), we felt that given that the debate around the incident gathered at such a fast pace, including regular updates and responses to articles, it was important to include online editions of the papers which often include updates, additional information as well as publishing entirely new news articles that never appear in the print edition.

The selection of articles was based on the direct daily reporting in relation to the SIEV 36 incident and what was subsequently termed by the media as the ‘boat people crisis’. We searched print based newspapers by hand, including the letters to the editor section, and set up ‘alerts’ to inform us of any new online additions or reports of the SIEV 36 incident. We also checked online responses from the public at the end of each day. Because these responses are often deleted online after about a week, we downloaded all responses for contextual analysis.

**Analysis**

For each individual article, we explored the central role of news frames in reporting the SIEV 36 incident. In particular, our framing analysis helped us to elaborate how the
media ‘packaged’ information about the SIEV 36, and how it subsequently portrayed and represented various stakeholder perspectives in the debates that ensued (Blood and Holland, 2004). We looked at the overall tone of the articles (positive or negative) by searching for key terms and frames and used a thematic analysis to identify the key themes to describe asylum seekers and the incident (Entman, 1993; McQuail, 1994). When reviewing the articles, those that used incorrect or inaccurate terms (such as ‘illegal’ or ‘queue jumper’) or that in some way referred to the asylum seekers as a burden were regarded as negative in their tone. Articles that used personal stories, or those that provided expert opinion without the use of derogatory terms, were regarded as positive in tone. Those articles that were solely news reports were counted as neutral.

A key focus of this analysis was on the definitions, interpretations, moral evaluations and recommendations in news stories about the asylum seekers. Identification of characteristic and dominant news frames was conducted to identify the types of risks that are given prominence; the sources used; the news values that influence coverage and the promotion of certain types of news frames over others; the use of quantification rhetoric; and the range of meanings made available to audiences. For the public responses (through letters to the editor and online responses) we undertook a qualitative content analysis informed by ‘grounded theory’ techniques that allowed us to identify themes and issues within individuals’ comments (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

We analysed the data by hand continuously throughout the study, using a constant comparative method – by reading and rereading responses and letters, coding, identifying categories/themes (and similarities and differences between these), sorting data to ensure that the concepts/theories were appropriate and noting differences between different groups of individuals. Regular meetings were held to interpret and discuss findings, to build thematic areas and theoretical concepts and to identify and refine new research questions and directions as they emerged from the data.

Rather than presenting the results for the printed articles and the online content separately, we have chosen to combine the presentation of our analyses. We believe that this presentation is appropriate as the reality of the news media at the present is that online content including content and news updates are equally valid as the printed versions.

Results

General characteristics

Over the five days of monitoring we identified 84 print and 84 online articles about the SIEV 36 (Table 1). If the article appeared in print, we excluded it from our ‘online’ data to avoid doubling up on analysis. Editorial and opinion pieces first appeared in the print version of papers, with regular ‘news’ updates in the online versions of the papers. The Australian had the largest number of articles in its print edition (n = 39, 67 percent), while the tabloid Herald Sun had the fewest (n = 19, 35 percent). Print articles were extensive news reports of the incident or were articles that included expert opinion and in-depth commentary, while online articles were more likely to be brief news updates as the incident unfolded from news wire services such as the Australian Associated Press. The Herald Sun published the most articles online, (n = 35 articles 65 percent), while The Australian printed the least (n = 19, 32 percent). The letters page of the 17 April edition
of the *Herald Sun* included nine letters published on the subject of asylum seekers, while almost 200 comments were published online. Likewise *The Age* and *The Australian* also had more than 100 online readers’ comments relating to the SIEV 36 story (see Box 1 for an overview of key themes to emerge from the data).

The *Herald Sun* only published articles with a positive tone in its online reports (n = 4, 8 percent), while *The Age* published all of its positive articles in the printed edition of the paper (n = 7, 15 percent). *The Australian* was more balanced in its publication of positive content (2 online and 6 print). This representation of asylum seekers in a negative or positive tone is consistent with the editorial view of each of the papers. As illustrated by the headlines in Box 2 the *Herald Sun* framed the issue with the most negative or inflammatory language, often insinuating that Australia’s new policies relating to asylum seekers were a ‘soft touch’ leaving the country open to ‘illegal immigrants’. *The Australian* took the most conservative approach, often using political metaphors and references in the headlines supporting the previous Howard Government’s policies on asylum seekers (see Box 2).

**Box 1.** Dominant themes arising from the content analysis and link with theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia is a ‘soft touch’ for ‘illegals’</td>
<td>• Illegality of method of arrival by asylum seekers – suggesting that asylum seekers were inappropriately forcing their way into Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ‘Queue jumping’ metaphors</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Descriptions of refugees as ‘illegals’</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Warnings of ‘waves’ and ‘floods’ of refugees claiming asylum in Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social anxiety and societal risk</td>
<td>• Focus on asylum seekers deliberately destroying their boats to ensure they were allowed into Australian waters</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Downplaying humanitarian factors associated with arrival in Australia</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Use of ‘reader polls’ to enforce the risk of asylum seekers to Australia and the perceptions of ‘us versus them’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Descriptions of ‘en masse’ arrivals through the use of longitudinal data</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Linking asylum seekers to terrorism and threats to national security</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Role of people smugglers in exploiting immigration policies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moral panic</td>
<td>• Main reason for coming to Australia was economic opportunism and dishonesty</td>
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*Note:* ^1 All online articles were news related, rather than opinion.

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**Table 1.** Articles printed online and in the paper (separated into news and opinion), 16–20 April 2009

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Printed</th>
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<th>Online</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>News article</td>
<td>Opinion article</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>News article</td>
<td>Opinion article</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Age</td>
<td>26 (46%)</td>
<td>19 (73%)</td>
<td>7 (27%)</td>
<td>30 (53%)</td>
<td>19 (73%)</td>
<td>7 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>39 (67%)</td>
<td>31 (79%)</td>
<td>8 (21%)</td>
<td>19 (32%)</td>
<td>31 (79%)</td>
<td>8 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herald Sun</td>
<td>19 (35%)</td>
<td>16 (84%)</td>
<td>3 (17%)</td>
<td>35 (65%)</td>
<td>31 (79%)</td>
<td>3 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>84</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>168</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
While each newspaper took a different approach to the presentation of the SIEV 36, all were substantially more negative than positive in the tenor of the overall frame of the asylum seekers, with many articles suggesting that the government policies had ‘caused’ the incident (see Box 3).

Box 2. Selected newspaper article headlines

| PM adrift in deep waters over asylum seeker deaths (Herald Sun, 17/04/2009) |
| ‘Soft touch’ blast on refugee (Herald Sun, 17/04/2009) |
| Warnings of more illegal arrivals (Herald Sun, 19/04/2009) |
| REVEALED: Warnings about next wave of illegals. NEW BOAT ALERT (Herald Sun, 18/04/2009) |
| Soft line fosters people smuggling (The Australian, 17/04/2009) |
| Opposition quick to blame Kevin Rudd for loss of life (The Australian, 17/04/2009) |
| Guess who’s to blame for the exploding boats? John Howard (The Australian, 20/04/2009) |
| Turnbull tirade blown to hell (The Australian, 18/04/2009) |
| Government haunted by great unwashed (The Australian, 20/04/2009) |
| Facts behind rising asylum seeker tide (The Age, 18/04/2009) |
| Sabotage fear on boat blast (The Age, 17/04/2009) |
| Who’s afraid of the ‘R’ word? (The Age, 18/04/2009) |

The most prominent frame in the early reporting of the story was the ‘illegality’ associated with individuals involved in the incident and their method of arrival in Australia. Terms such as ‘queue jumpers’ and ‘illegals’, were regularly used to describe those aboard the boat, while the phrase ‘people smugglers’ was used to describe those aiding the asylum seekers. Very rarely did any other perspective appear in the Herald Sun. The Age published two articles that were dominated by a counter frame or a positive tone, one by leading refugee advocate Paris Aristotle and one by social commentator David Marr; these articles were a presentation of the statistics and discussion of the policy in an attempt to dispel some of the common myths relating to asylum seekers. Despite
editorial bias towards more conservative policies concerning asylum seekers, *The Australian* did provide expert political comment, in particular presenting several articles that discussed the common errors in public opinion relating to Labor’s asylum seeker policy. *The Australian* also provided accounts from those who were involved in the incident (also see Box 3): ‘There was no choice but Australia. I just wanted to be safe.’ (O’Brien 2009).

*The Age* gave the most balanced presentation of the story in their print edition, with 10 (38%) articles with a humanitarian counter frame. This frame was seen in articles that presented individual stories of asylum seekers, firsthand accounts of the incident (or similar incidents) or discussions surrounding the reason that a person might flee their country. *The Age* also carried editorial comment about its decision to run stories with a humanitarian component: ‘Our coverage of the tragedy aims to put the debate into context, while reporting on the facts as they emerge … and answering some of the key questions raised by the debate … and suggesting how a mature nation should respond’ (Gordon, 2009). This editorial was followed by several articles that discussed the personal stories of the asylum seekers, and the numbers of asylum seekers who arrive in Australia, to contextualise the reality of the asylum seeker experience. For example, under the headline: ‘Caught in an inhuman tide’, *The Age* presented the story of Ahmed Ali Fahim, an Afghan asylum seeker waiting in Indonesia for his refugee status to be processed so he could come to Australia: ‘They said they would kill me. I had no doubt they would. I had seen what they have done to other Hazaras’ (Allard, 2009: 4).

*The Age* article, ‘Facts behind a rising asylum seeker tide’, sought to provide discussion about a number of common myths about asylum seekers and border protection. For example: The opposition claims that Government has weakened Australia’s border protection policy sending out ‘“come on down”’ signals to people smugglers to ply their trade’ (Nicholson and Garttan, 2009: 6). This claim was dismissed with comment that the Government had: ‘streamlined detention rules, abolished temporary protection visas, scrapped the “Pacific Solution” and stopped trying to find third countries to accept refugees’ (2009: 6). This balance showed that *The Age* journalists were willing to counter the dominant ‘illegal’ frames with a more humanitarian framing of the story. The *Herald Sun* on the other hand only presented the humanitarian counter frame in one short quote from the Refugee Council of Australia in response to reporting that the asylum seekers on the SIEV 36 deliberately destroyed their own boat.

Thirteen articles (15%) used the term ‘illegal’ in some way, while two articles, both from the *Herald Sun*, displayed the term in the headline: ‘REVEALED: Warnings about next wave of illegals’ (Lewis and McManus, 2009), and ‘Warning of more illegal arrivals’ (Milne et al., 2009). The use of this term worked to legitimise the actions of detention. The term ‘boat people’ was used in one fifth of all articles (n = 17, 20%) while four used it in the headline, for example: ‘Boat people ignite fuel “by accident”’ (Murdoch and Allard, 2009). *The Australian* used the term as a running descriptor accompanying the headline for each story. Politicians were also quoted extensively, mainly supporting that the ‘illegal’ individuals on the SIEV 36 should be sent home, such as former Labor and Independent Western Australian MP, Graeme Campbell: ‘I’d be turning them around, towing them back to Indonesia with just enough diesel to get to shore and leaving them there, otherwise we are going to be inundated’ (McManus and Trickey, 2009).
Many readers’ comments in the online comment sections of the web pages also referred to the illegality of the way in which individuals on the SIEV 36 had tried to enter Australia (see Box 3 for more reader’s comments):

I will be honest and say I don’t want them here. Why? because there is a right way (through the UN refugee camps) to come and a wrong way (paying people smugglers obscene amounts to flout the rule of law) and those who chose to come via the people smugglers just can’t be bothered doing it the right way, maybe they believe the rules should not apply to them. (Tracey, Herald Sun, 21 April 2009)

The sense of illegality served to increase the sense of anxiety and risk that the public felt about allowing asylum seekers into Australia as reflected in the readers’ comments.

Box 3. Selected quotes from both printed articles and online readers’ comments

**A ‘soft touch’**

‘They have spent a month and a half being transported in the back of vans, public buses, in boats and then spent three to five nights in the jungle out in the open in Indonesia, and then another week on the boat. They had a lot of people on the boat getting sick and being feverish so we wonder if they were already sick before the boat blew up’. (Bita, 2009)

**Social anxiety and societal risk**

‘Asylum seekers have a much better chance of succeeding if they reach the mainland, whereby they apply for protection under immigration laws’. (McManus and Trickey, 2009)

‘These people are illegal immigrants. Think of all the genuine refugees who do the right things and go through the proper channels. Que [sic] jumpers the lot of them’. (Nicole of NSW, Herald Sun, 17 April 2009)

‘Come through the front door or stay at home’. (Robj of Adelaide, Herald Sun, 21 April 2009)

**Moral panic**

‘These are the kind of people who are socially and economically impossible to tolerate and they merely use this country as a punching bag for revenge of past sufferings because they will get away with anything. Send them home’. (GRG of Melbourne, 17 April 2009)

‘They no doubt did this to themselves, to rally up all the bleeding hearts of Australia to their cause. They see our Nation as being soft and gullible. Ripe for exploitation. Thanks Krudd’. (Kieran of Melbourne, Herald Sun, 17 April 2009)

‘Why is it that illegal immigrants are called “asylum seekers” and “refugees”? Call it like it is’. (Gill, Mt Waverley, Herald Sun, 50/50)

**People smugglers**

‘There is no doubt that the Rudd Government has been widely reported internationally as softening Australia’s border controls. That must act as a magnet for illegal immigrants’. (Sheridan, 2009)
Social anxiety and societal risk

The notion that people would deliberately destroy their ship to ensure that they would be taken to Australia was regularly used by journalists to increase societal anxiety and to limit the humanitarian concerns for those on board. Rather than illustrating the desperation of individuals fleeing humanitarian disasters to get to a safe country, the Herald Sun often used examples (see Box 3) to highlight the idea that asylum seekers would deliberately destroy their boat to ensure they reached the mainland to gain protection.

Online polls run by the newspapers also served to increase this anxiety and the notions related to the risk of the asylum seekers. In an online poll in the Herald Sun 84 percent \((n = 4192)\) of respondents believed that ‘boat people should be sent home’; in The Age 54 percent \((n = 915)\) of respondents felt that the ‘Government should do more to reduce the number of asylum seekers’; and in The Australian, 67 percent (number of respondents not available) felt that the government was ‘too soft on border control’.

The media’s constant referral to the numbers of asylum seekers who had arrived in Australia by boat, since a) the start of the year, b) the end of the ‘Pacific Solution’ and c) the beginning of the Rudd Government, was an additional way to emphasis the risks that asylum seekers posed to the Australian government and the concern that the Australian public should have about their arrival ‘en masse’. For example, The Australian: ‘There have now been 455 unauthorised arrivals since the Rudd Government announced the changes last year’ (Maley and Fitzpatrick, 2009: 1). This language created the image of an ‘unstoppable wave’ of asylum seekers making it to Australia by boat. Readers’ comments in the Herald Sun proclaimed outrage at the actions of asylum seekers, claiming they were ‘queue jumpers’ and ‘illegal immigrants’ and were ‘bullying their way into our country’.

The sense of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ was strong in all of the readers’ responses in the Herald Sun: ‘Go back to your own country and leave jobs for white Australians only’. While one reader suggested ‘sinking their boats’. Readers’ comments constantly sought to link asylum seekers to terrorism and terrorists that could pose a threat to the security of Australia and Australians: ‘They are already killing each other. Just the kind we need. Are some Taliban on the run, or genuine refugees?’ (Michael, Herald Sun, 17 April 2009). While opinion pieces often doubted the legitimacy of those onboard and their exploitation of the Australian people, many attributed this to the softening of the Rudd Government’s political approach to asylum seekers.

Box 3. (Continued)

‘It is very clear to any rational observer that the Rudd Labor govt changes to border protection laws has made people smuggling once again more attractive as it simply makes it much easier for someone to come in through these boats and claim asylum’. (Gregh, The Australian, 17 April 2009)

‘Resistance to boarding parties can take many forms. These range from a general lack of co-operation by crew and passengers to physical barriers designed to prevent boarding, verbal abuse and engine sabotage by asylum boat crew members’. (Dodd, 2009)

Note: 2Krudd is a common slang term to refer to the Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd.
Moral panic

Guided by the five themes illustrating moral panic (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994), we found that almost half (n = 40, 48%) of all articles incited moral panic in some way. For example, Greg Sheridan (2009) of The Australian asks: are people smugglers ‘profiteers who simply help people jump the immigration queue in their wholly understandable search for a better life in a new country?’ This question perpetuates the false assumption from the Howard years that there were immigration ‘queues’ in areas where people were fleeing for their lives, or at convenient places en route to safe countries. This article had a large reader response on The Australian online, with 82 comments posted within a few hours. Opinions were divided. Some stated that in the Howard years ‘most of those so-called “illegals” were found to be genuine refugees’ and raised concerns about the implication in the article that all asylum seekers arrived by boat. Others strongly agreed that Australia’s change (‘softening’) policies relating to asylum seekers opened it up for exploitation.

In another example from The Australian (17 April), journalist Mark Dodd (2009) commented that the boat had been declared safe by the Australian Navy before the blast, yet the behaviour of the asylum seekers on board was ‘irrational, hostile and volatile’. The Australian stated that the Australian Defence Force – comprised of highly trained personnel charged with protecting the Australian people – regarded the boarding of boats such as the SIEV 36 as ‘dangerous’, and that ‘hazard allowances’ were paid to any personnel who had to board these vessels. The Australian reinforced that ‘boat people’ were a violent threat to Australians. Readers responded favourably to this assertion: ‘Any illegal boat in our waters should be mandatory target practice for our Navy. No questions asked’ (Mr Master of Australia, 17 April 2009).

However, nowhere was the inciting of ‘moral panic’ more obvious than in the columns and blogs of Herald Sun opinion writer Andrew Bolt. In an official editorial and a commentary (17 April 2009), Bolt criticised the Rudd Government for the liberalising of policies related to asylum seekers and attributed to them an increase in deaths in ‘boat people’. Under the by-line: ‘John Howard was called cruel for his “Pacific Solution”. But at least no one died’, Bolt starts to incite the ‘moral panic agenda’ by linking ‘boat people’ with economic opportunism and dishonesty. He raised concerns that ‘boat people’ were in some way trying to exploit what rightfully belonged to Australians. Bolt used the terms ‘illegal’ or ‘illegal immigrants’ seven times in his opinion piece – including in the article header (Bolt, 2009a). He then compared the SIEV 36 to the Children Overboard incident, stating that the hardline policies of the Howard Government ‘stopped not just the people smugglers, but the deaths at sea. If some of these boats lured here by Kevin Rudd now sink, how truly “kinder” is he? Ask the moralisers now’ (Bolt, 2009b).

In his related blog (20 April), Bolt (2009c) then tries to sway public opinion by stating that the reason the Government refused to engage in a public discussion about the SIEV 36 was to avoid the volatile public consensus about how to deal with asylum seekers: ‘None of this farcical media manipulation would be deemed necessary if the Rudd Government didn’t think Australians were racists, panting to sink the boot into refugees’. The majority of readers responding online agreed with the comments made
by Bolt: ‘Andrew [Bolt] is spot on, I for one don’t want our country over run by illegal queue jumpers who show complete disregard to our laws and indeed “use” our legal system and its resources to help them stay here ... joke’ (H of Brisvegas). Such comments were also common in the letters to the editor sections of the papers. While these letters will have been through an editorial screening process, anti-asylum seeker sentiments were still printed: ‘Go through the correct channels. The arrival of healthy young men in leaky boats from Indonesia does not arouse my sympathy or compassion’ (Patricia Phelan, WA).

**People smugglers: The new threat**

People smugglers are the vilest form of human life. They trade on the tragedy of others and that’s why they should rot in jail and in my own view, rot in hell (Kevin Rudd, 17 April 2009; http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/04/17/2545748.htm)

The discussion of people smugglers emerged on the second day of reporting, and was predominantly linked to the above quote from Prime Minster Rudd. This discussion about ‘people smugglers’ completely shifted away from the ‘illegality’ of asylum seekers towards the ‘vile’ behaviour of people smugglers in exploiting asylum seekers.

Over the five days, a majority of the print articles (n = 51, 6%) discussed people smugglers in some way. In a report headed ‘Sabotage craft, asylum seekers told’ (17 April 2009) *The Australian* newspaper highlighted the devious nature of people smugglers in trying to outwit the Australian Government. Former Howard Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock was quoted as saying that he backed the assertion that the fire on board had been deliberately lit, claiming that this behaviour was commonly encouraged by people smugglers: ‘It is quite clear people were given advice travelling here that if they were intercepted and the vessel was likely to be subject to return, they should disable the vessel to ensure they couldn’t be transported’ (Maley and Lower, 2009: 5). This quote from such a prominent former Immigration Minister highlights two points: 1) That people smugglers and asylum seekers were both intent on disobeying procedures and Australian law – something that is considered hostile and un-Australian; and 2) That Australians were being exploited by the Rudd’s Governments soft policies which were ‘opening the door’ to this type of behaviour.

Several articles focused on the idea that ‘people smugglers’ were the criminals in the SIEV 36 ‘tragedy’ by making money from the Rudd Government’s ‘soft’ policies. Articles praised the Howard Government’s tough policies relating to asylum seekers for deterring people smugglers and limiting the number of deaths of ‘boat people’. These ideas about policies and people smugglers were reflected in the readers’ comments, which reinforced the idea of ‘queue jumping’ but also that the government’s policies were encouraging people to engage in this behaviour.

Readers often criticised each other’s perspectives, and engaged in active online debate about the issue. While these online comments did not go through editorial screening, readers sanctioned each other through their posts, providing counter arguments to posts that they found unacceptable: ‘BD of Melbourne. Pull your head out of your ass. These people are illegal immigrants. Think of all the genuine refugees who do the right thing and go through the proper channels. Que [sic] jumpers the lot of them’ (Nicole of...

**Discussion**

Previous research by Klocker and Dunn (2003) found that the media reporting of asylum seekers was negative, and that the negative reporting ultimately focused on the mistakes and achievements of the Government in relation to boat arrivals. This research has found that while the reporting toward asylum seekers is generally negative, it is no longer reliant on the stance of the Government. Rather, there were a broader range of perspectives evident in the reporting of the SIEV 36 incident.

Media reporting by and large still referred back to and supported the previous ‘hard-line’ policies relating to asylum seekers of the Howard Government. This view was reinforced by emphasising that the ‘soft’ policies of the Rudd Government had contributed to a ‘tragic’ event in which innocent people had died. The moral panic and social anxiety or risk associated with the arrival of asylum seekers by boat was also reinforced by emphasising the ‘illegality’ of the method of arrival. As found in other investigations of media reporting of asylum seeker arrivals (Gale, 2004; Pugh, 2004), reports focused on issues of economic gain for the asylum seekers, and exploitation of Australians, rather than the humanitarian issues that may have caused individuals to flee their home countries. In doing so, the media set up a discourse in which the individuals on the SIEV 36 were seen to be exploitative and ‘un-Australian’ by not entering Australia through legitimate refugee processes, thus ‘jumping the queue’. While media reports were not overtly racist in their remarks, the online comments posted by readers to articles had strong racist undertones and were often derogatory and demeaning to asylum seekers. Despite the existence of guidelines about language and terms for journalists, these same guidelines do not apply to the public responses to these articles. Public responses which would have previously received scrutiny from editorial staff (through letters to the editors) in print media, do not receive the same level of moderation in online fora. This raises interesting and important issues for debate around how newspapers manage submissions to rapid response online fora.

However, it was interesting to note that often when papers provided a balanced perspective on the SIEV 36 incident (e.g. through the use of expert commentaries) they also published explanations about why they were providing this balanced view. This shows that while the media may choose to take certain points of view on certain issues, they still are mindful of the views of the majority of their readers. For example, *The Age*, felt it necessary to defend its decision to provide this balance in their reporting, by stating in their editorial that they wished to contextualise and answer questions raised by the issue of individuals seeking asylum by boat and Australia’s responses to these incidents.

Asylum seekers arriving by boat to Australia were reported, and responded to, as a risk to Australian society. This view was common in both press reports and online responses. The discourse surrounded two key issues. The first was that asylum seekers arriving by boat, and the individuals involved in smuggling them to Australia were
exploiting Australia and Australian people. This occurred through reports of the ‘illegality’ of the asylum seekers; and the ‘dishonest’ way in which they were seeking asylum in Australia. Despite the expert opinions used within articles presenting the reality of the experience of asylum seekers in their home country, public opinion and press articles often portrayed asylum seekers as wealthy individuals from poor countries who wanted to exploit Australia for economic reasons. These arguments reinforced the social anxiety that ‘waves’ of asylum seekers were an economic risk to Australians by taking their jobs or their ‘hard earned’ tax dollars though the provision of state based welfare services.

The second linked asylum seekers with risks to Australian security, as was the dominant frame in the years of the Howard Government. While this was not a commonly reported issue in the press, it repeatedly emerged as a dominant theme in public responses to articles. This suggests that while there has been a shift in the focus of media reporting, the focus of public opinion continues to link asylum seekers with terrorism. It was this link to terrorism that perpetuated the belief that asylum seekers posed a risk to Australian society, and would seek to dominate rather than assimilate into Australian culture and its values.

Some journalists have followed and applied industry guidelines about the reporting of the incident. It does appear that some newspapers, particularly The Age and The Australian, applied the Australian Press Council’s guidelines in their reporting of the incident. However the tabloid Herald Sun still commonly used the term ‘illegals’ or ‘illegal immigrants’ deemed by the Australian Press Council as inaccurate and typically suggesting criminality. The use of this term served two purposes; firstly to sensationalise the issue away from humanitarian plight, and secondly to reinforce the conservative opinions of some Herald Sun staffers. These terms were also frequently used by readers in a mutually reinforcing process. Online news websites readers’ comment pages and online polls are not influenced by the Australian Press Council Guidelines, but have become an important way for papers to judge the attitudes and opinions of their readers. Thus, if the terms are still used by influential journalists, there is all likelihood that they will be used by those who read these columns and contribute to the ongoing debate through their responses, and vice versa.

Conclusion

Issues that surround the arrival of asylum seekers to Australia ignite debate, emotion and controversy in the Australian press. The reporting of the SIEV 36 incident was generally characterised by nationalistic views and commentary. However, there was some evidence of an attempt to provide balance to this reporting through expert opinions, the views of the asylum seekers involved and editorial discussion of the global context of asylum seeking. There is however some variation in the degree to which different types of reports and different publications, including online fora, follow industry guidelines about the reporting of asylum issues, including the use of ‘appropriate’ language and descriptions. In addition, the presence of online fora for public response to articles and to provide debate offers new challenges that may be beyond the control of editorial staff, and without significant efforts in online moderation it is unrealistic to expect that the general public will follow industry guidelines.
The 44 Afghan men who survived the explosion have since been granted refugee status in Australia.

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Biographical notes

Fiona McKay is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Medicine, Monash University, Australia. Her PhD research is interested in the perceived risk of refugees to Australia, and how these risks are manifested in Australia’s refugee and asylum seeker policy. These risks may include the threat of terrorism, threats to public health (particularly HIV), threats to the economy and the more abstract threats to nationhood or ‘what it means to be Australian’. These perceptions have been explored through an investigation of the policy responses to refugees and asylum seekers, both in Australia and internationally, the representation of refugees and asylum seekers in the Australian media and the public perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers.

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