‘Boat people’ in Australia: press, policy and public opinion

BRIDGET HOLTOM

Abstract

Australia’s postcolonial tendency to control its borders and regulate the ‘Other’ underpins the politicisation of the ‘boat people’ phenomenon. This paper explores how asylum seekers who arrive in Australia by boat are represented in the press and excluded through policy, and how this exclusion is further embedded in public opinion. The research on which this paper is based comprised a content analysis of newspaper articles relating to boat arrivals and the undertaking of qualitative focus groups. The analysis aims to contribute to existing literature by situating political, public and media debates of asylum policy within a broader framework of migration in Australia.

Key words: boat people; asylum; press; public opinion; Other; Australia.

Bridget Holtom is a final year undergraduate student in Geography who recently completed an exchange from The University of Edinburgh to the School of Biological Earth and Environmental Sciences (BEES) at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. This paper was produced as part of a guided research project, Special Program in BEES (BEES0007), under the supervision of Dr Danielle Drozdzewski.

“We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come.” (John Howard, Australian Prime Minister, 1996-2007, Election policy statement 2001)

Introduction

The social construction of asylum seekers who arrive in Australia by boat is affected by a tripartite process involving the press, government policy and the public. This paper analyses these three elements and argues that each contributes independently and collectively to the construction and maintenance of the symbolic and physical exclusion of ‘boat people’. The degree to which this process of exclusion is legislated in law, written into policy, considered by the public and framed in the media is important as the process determines the protection offered to asylum seekers. Exclusionary policies, such as offshore processing and mandatory detention, breach Australia’s international obligations as outlined in the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and its 1969 Protocol. Therefore, Australia’s collective right to ‘decide who comes to this country’, undermines the rights of refugees to claim protection on Australian soil.

The discourse of exclusion that is socially constructed through press, policy and public agendas continues Australia’s long history of justified exclusion. Australia’s current social and political responses to difference are situated within a context of colonial invasion, Indigenous oppression and the White Australia Policy (Jupp 2009). Social construction theorists argue that identity differences are categories constructed by social rather than biological processes (Jackson and Penrose 1993; Anderson 2007). Importantly, these categories are bounded and are often dichotomised in both the private and public psyche (Levi-Strauss 1967). The process of Othering can occur along various fissures. Most notably,
racial Othering is a process that positions the White Self in opposition to a coloured Other (Said 1978). Similarly, the nation-state can also be seen as an ‘imagined community’, whereby social constructions of nation form on fissures in unity (Anderson 1983). Shared identity and values were imperative during the formation of the young Australian nation. Similar to Britain and other European states, national identity was defined as White and non-White citizens were viewed as incompatible, highlighting how fundamental the notion of difference was and continues to be in the construction of Self in opposition to the Other (Hage 1998; Kamp 2010). Some Australian citizens continue to separate themselves as ‘we’ in opposition to boat arrivals as ‘Other’, thereby sustaining a legacy of exclusionary attitudes and policies.

To explore the intersections of the policy, press and public agendas, the history of boat arrivals in Australia will be explored briefly to provide context for the current analysis and discussion. Second, the methodology used will be explained and justified. Finally, an analysis of the way press and policy agendas intersect with public opinion and the discourse of ‘boat people’ will lead to the conclusion that representations of boat arrivals in the press embed ideologies of difference in the public psyche and justify policies of exclusion.

A history of ‘boat people’

For the purpose of this article, the term ‘boat people’ refers to irregular maritime migrants who arrive by boat seeking asylum in Australia and are subject to offshore processing by Australian authorities on islands of excised territory (Phillips 2011). Under international refugee law, every individual has the right to claim asylum on arrival and every state has the obligation to protect that individual (Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees [CRSR] 1954). Therefore, Australia’s excision of territory is in part an attempt to evade protection obligations, as within national migration law ‘territorial asylum’ (visa sub-class 800) is distinct from other refugee visa sub-classes. This results in the exceptional treatment of boat arrivals (Billings 2011, p. 272). Despite a long history of the migration of various groups to Australia by boat, the term ‘boat people’ first entered the conscience and conversation of Australian people in the 1970s with the arrival of Vietnamese asylum seekers. Between 1976 and 1981, in the aftermath of the Vietnam war, 2059 boat arrivals came to Australia under the Fraser administration (Betts 2001, p. 36). Initially welcomed, by the late 1970s there was growing opposition, newspapers referred to the migration as ‘yellow peril’ and the legitimacy of the refugees was questioned by the public (Brawley 1995).

Figure 1. Number of boat arrivals by year, 1976-2011. Source: Adapted from Phillips (2011, p. 11).
Peaks and troughs in boat arrival statistics parallel certain Federal elections, events and policy decisions (Figure 1). In 2001, 433 asylum seekers were rescued by the Norwegian boat *MV Tampa* from a stranded fishing boat called *Palapa 1* (see Ruddock v. Vadarlis 2001). However, despite their wishes, the predominantly Afghan asylum seekers were not permitted to process their asylum claims on Australian soil (Mathew 2002; Willheim 2003). On 28 August 2001, then Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock argued that the legislative amendments to the *Migration Act 1958 (Commonwealth)* were necessary because current refugee policies were “adding to perceptions that Australia is a soft touch” (Philip Ruddock 2001 in Foster 2007, p. 347). The concurrence of the Tampa with the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States of America, and the 2001 Federal election in Australia, led to an increase in exclusionary policies by both nation-states. Although the events were not associated, the salience of similar threats to borders and national sovereignty justified the use of anti-terrorist rhetoric in Australian political party campaigns. The then Defence Minister Peter Reith warned that unauthorised migration by boat could be “a pipeline for terrorists to come in and use your country as a staging post for terrorist activities” (Maclellan 2002, p. 147). These associations with terrorism fuelled public anxiety about Afghan asylum seekers and reinforced Australia’s long history of Othering.

The representation of the *Tampa* event delegitimised the rights of boat arrivals to protection and citizenship by playing on fears of cultural difference. Government officials at the time claimed that passengers had thrown their own children into the sea in an attempt to blackmail the Australian Navy. Then Prime Minister John Howard declared on the radio in October 2001: “I certainly don’t want people of that type in Australia, I really don’t” (MacLellen 2002, p. 147). The risks associated with ‘boat people’ became politically important during John Howard’s election campaign with his assertion that Australia would delimit the circumstances in which people entered the country. Press releases emphasised the difference and dangers of asylum seekers, thus providing auxiliary evidence utilised by John Howard to campaign for and successfully secure the 2001 Federal election. Later reports confirmed that the claims that children had been thrown overboard were falsified, highlighting the political importance of this belief over its reality (see Senate Select Committee on a Certain Maritime Issue 2002). The utilisation of public fears of difference by politicians in election campaigns, and the politicisation of certain events, highlights the ability of Australia, its citizens and politicians to delimit borders at the expense of asylum seekers’ rights to protection.

The drop in boat arrivals in 2002 marks the subsequent implementation of the ‘Pacific Solution’. In 2007, then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd suspended the same amendments made to the *Migration Act* in 2001. The increasing numbers of boat arrivals from 2008 onwards reflect these changes. Therefore, the historical fluctuations of irregular maritime arrivals parallel political decisions and events. Furthermore, policy decisions are reliant on public support and representations in the media influence the formation of public opinion. It is this intersection between policy, press and its impact on public opinion that I sought to explore and explain through the research methods discussed below.

**Methodology**

All methodology has subjective elements and my own subjectivities require explanation. My position as a temporary, female, ‘white British’, student migrant in Australia provided a distance that has enhanced my understanding of the border policy debate in Australia. In some ways I am excluded: I cannot vote, I am singled out, mimicked and subtle cultural mistakes mark me as different. Yet according to theories of Otherness, I am not an ‘Other’
because I form part of the accepted racial and cultural collective (Said 1978; Billings 2011). In this way, historical acceptance of the Anglo-Celtic population by public, policy and press contribute to my own belonging and ability to make place, even as a temporary migrant to Australia. On arrival in Australia, I was shocked and intrigued by my peers’ reactions to ‘boat people’. A realisation of the popularity of the topic was the starting point for my analysis and I sought to explore the disparities between the representation, rhetoric and reality of boat arrivals in Australia. This study employs a cross-examination of a quantitative analysis of newspaper articles with findings from qualitative focus group discussions to explore how the representation of boat arrivals in the media affects public opinion.

Content Analysis

The media is engaged in a process of representing and reproducing social constructions of events (Leapman 1984). Often facts are both mistakenly and purposefully manipulated in order to engender certain reactions from readers (Posetti 2001). Through repetition and titling, some words, images and phrases are made more visible and therefore more associated with an issue than others (Entman 1993). This process is called agenda-setting and concerns the interrelationship between the media agenda, the public agenda and the policy agenda (Dearing and Rogers 1996, p. 6). Whilst no causal effect can be established between these three agendas, this research aimed to uncover some of the conscious and unconscious agenda-setting surrounding the asylum debate that occurs in the Australian media.

Newspapers were chosen for textual analysis as they can provide a base for the formation of public opinion and shared identity. Three main newspapers in Sydney were identified because they ‘self-align’ along a spectrum of political ideologies and dominate news distribution in the city (Posetti 2001, p. 21). The Sydney Morning Herald (The SMH) is owned by Fairfax and the The Australian and The Daily Telegraph are both owned by News Limited. Importantly, the combined ownership was more than 90 per cent of Australian newspaper media in 1999 and statistics in 2011 suggest that the combined readership is now approximately 95 per cent (Barr 2000, p. 4; Australian Bureau of Circulation 2010; Rourke 2012). Both News Limited and Fairfax distribute Australia-wide, creating a platform for the shared imagining of the Australian community as one nation, drawn together by a concern for shared issues (Anderson 1983; Sharpe 1996).

The study used a method of manifest content analysis that “quantifies content in terms of predetermined categories” (Bryman 2008, p. 275). The predetermined categories were based on a pilot study using 12 articles, 4 from each newspaper throughout January 2012. The key words identified through the pilot study were coded by theme and grouped into categories. These predetermined categories were then used to develop a comprehensive content analysis matrix, later adapted with supervision and applied consistently to all newspaper articles. The categories identified had either a negative or positive association with asylum seekers and these were tallied to compare differences between newspapers (Kamp 2010). This was done to uncover the subjective realities and the manifest discourses encoded in newspapers (Myers et al. 1996). Articles for both the pilot study and further analysis were sourced within the newspapers’ online archives using the search terms ‘asylum’, ‘asylum seeker’, ‘boat’, ‘refugee’ and ‘boat people’, in varying combinations. A total of 99 articles provided a data set that could be considered representative of the newspapers’ coverage of ‘boat people’ news stories and commentary. The first 30 articles per newspaper identified by the search criteria, as per date order, published between 1 January 2012 and 1 May 2012, were used for analysis. Articles outside of these restrictions were discarded in order to standardise data collection. This period was used primarily because it corresponded with re-ignited parliamentary and
public debate over boat arrivals and offshore processing legislation. This time period also coincided with opportunities for undertaking focus groups.

**Focus Groups**

The research also employed qualitative methods in the form of focus groups to question if, how and why people justify either their acceptance of or prejudice towards irregular maritime arrivals. It was important for validity to use methodology that imitates the debates many Australians have with their friends and family (Morgan 1988). The issues of immigration and ‘boat people’ are highly contentious, and as one participant proffered:

A: The topic is often raised, briefly discussed, but rarely taken beyond a shallow level of conversation. (FG2)

The focus groups provided a space for participants to explore the controversial topic without fear of repercussion (Cameron 2000). The focus groups explored how participants interacted with knowledge on asylum issues and their own opinions of newspaper representation in Australia. Two focus groups were convened during 2012, and participants were sourced through a method of convenience sampling and self-selection. The first focus group (FG1) consisted of seven students from a third year Geographies of Migration course at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). The second group (FG2) consisted of five final year Urban Planning students from the Faculty of the Built Environment at the same university. These latter participants had never studied the issue. Ethics clearance was approved by the UNSW Human Research Ethics Advisory Panel (no. 1727).

The data gathered through both focus groups and content analysis were drawn into matrix tables and cross-analysed to identify important issues and themes. Dominant themes were subsequently used for analysis.

**Boat People: Excluded through the Press**

One important theme was that of exclusion, which arose as asylum seekers and boat arrivals were often described in contrast to oneself or to Australian citizens or Australia. For example, when discussing whether Australia is a ‘soft target’ for asylum seekers, participants strongly identified themselves at a collective distance from ‘them’:

A: It’s not that we’re a ‘soft target’ it’s that we have a very high quality of life.
S: It’s a long target for them.
V: But a lot of them probably don’t know there is that much hardship involved. (FG1)

Furthermore, the content analysis revealed that 62 per cent of articles referred to Australians as ‘we’, and also referred to asylum seekers using other words associated with the Other. Often the words ‘we’ and ‘them’ accumulated through quotes in newspapers from current and opposition government ministers. For example, one article in the The SMH included a quote from Immigration Minister in New Zealand, Nathan Guy, who said that like Australia, “We cannot start accepting boatloads of people … We need to deter them before they take to the sea” (Flitton 2012, emphasis added). Therefore, this research uses a framework of exclusion to explore the importance of difference in the construction of identity and Otherness in the Australian media.

Benedict Anderson (1983) has argued that the collective identity of a nation is created and embedded through the circulation of national newspapers. Shared news unites a population
through language, tragedy, sport and representations of the nation-state. In Australia, people and events that occur outside of the nation are often portrayed in the press as unknown, not associated or unimportant (Basch et al. 1994). This trend is evident in the allocation of news, with Australian-related stories dominating the opening pages of Australian newspapers (FG2). Furthermore, Table 1 shows the tally of words used in newspapers that were categorised as imagining asylum seekers as ‘Other’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Repetition of words associated with Othering processes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Daily Telegraph</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sydney Morning Herald</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Repetition of words associated with Othering processes in 3 newspapers.

It is significant that journalists reporting for The Australian are more likely to use words that conjure an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality. The newspaper has nationwide distribution, high sale figure, and therefore plays an important role in reinforcing ideologies that have the capacity to either bond or divide the nation-state (Sharpe 1996).

Inclusion begets a necessary exclusion, which is explained by the social construction of the Self in contrast to the Other (Kamp 2010). However, despite conflation of the terms, Otherness is acutely distinct from exclusion. Exclusion can be indiscriminate whereas processes of Othering must portray the person or place as exotic, alien and in direct opposition to the Self (Elder 2005). Edward Said (1978) has argued that representations of other places, people and landscapes often serve to reflect the desires and preconceptions of those who have the power to define both the Self and the Other. This has important implications for representations of Others in the press. For example, the representation of ‘boat people’ in the media is about both desire and distance; we have a desire to help asylum seekers (Needham 2012a), but we also fear the arrival of new boats (AAP 2012). The process of Othering in the press was explored using content analysis to identify how the power to shape discourse can reinforce distinctions of similarity and difference.

Deconstructing Texts and Terminology
The process of Othering is maintained through selective framing mechanisms through which certain words are repeated in order to increase association (Entman 1991). The negative and positive references to boat arrival migration were compared between the three newspapers (see Table 2). In The Daily Telegraph, negative associations outnumbered positive references 134:37. The Australian recorded the highest use of the direct term ‘boat people’ with 29 counts in 30 articles. In contrast, The SMH recorded only 6 mentions of this term, and positive references outweighed the negative by 84:63. The considerable difference in representation between the newspapers highlights how manifest discourse can be either positive or negative.
Table 2. Negative and positive associations: ‘asylum’ and ‘boat people’ tally.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>‘boat people’</th>
<th>‘asylum’</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Daily Telegraph</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sydney Morning Herald</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In March 2012, the Australian Press Council’s (APC) Advisory Guidelines stipulated that journalists should refer to boat arrivals as ‘asylum seekers’, rather than ‘illegal immigrants’ or the nondescript ‘boat people’ (APC 2012). This guideline was a controversial but critical step by media regulators because it challenged the freedom of the press to knowingly incite negative associations with the phenomenon of irregular maritime arrivals. Therefore, the word ‘asylum’ can be viewed as both positive and negative. The term is positive because ‘asylum’ implies a legitimate reason to migrate. However, as Gibney (2006) has argued, asylum is ambiguous because of the conflation of the term with illegal migration. This confusion has occurred because of the association of asylum seekers with illegal behaviour due to their lack of documentation and their means of migration. While the definition must be used for legal purposes, Gibney (2006, p. 146) asserts that the linguistic shift from ‘refugee’ to ‘asylum seeker’ has come at the cost of public trust because it obfuscates the lines between genuine and bogus asylum claims. The blurring of these lines is played upon by certain media, creating and maintaining obfuscation in the public terminology.

The terminology used in newspaper texts has significant implications for public understanding. For example, when asked whether they had ever met an asylum seeker, participants whose ‘main reference on the issue was the media’ tended to use the terms boat people and asylum seeker interchangeably:

B: Have you ever met an asylum seeker?
S: I don’t think I’ve ever met an illegal immigrant.
M: I haven’t met a boat person, no.
A: You probably have met an illegal, in a shop or something … (FG2)

In contrast, participants who had studied migration at university level were more critical with their choice of words.

B: Do you personally know anyone who has come to Australia by boat recently?
M: Yes, my Dad certainly travelled to Australia by boat. Not as an asylum seeker, as a migrant, but he did come by boat.
F: I did actually meet a refugee once […] I don’t know if he came by boat, but he was a refugee. (FG1)

These excerpts highlight that the conflation of terms in the public vernacular arguably result from media framing. Media framing limits discourse by supplying the tools for public debate. This framing could have implications for the social construction of asylum seekers because the repetition of certain terms, an absence of other references, and the maintenance of uncertainty tends to criminalise or victimise rather than highlight the humanity of asylum seekers.
To consider the intersection of public opinion with press reporting of policy decisions, participants in the focus groups were asked from where they sourced their information on asylum seeker policy and how well they understood the policies. Whilst many were sceptical of news media, even those who studied migration policies found it difficult to deconstruct policies proposed by the government:

B: The Malaysia solution was in the news a lot earlier this year, but I guess what I want to ask you now is [...] do you understand what the policy entails?
F: Probably not as well as we should.
J: Yeah, not entirely.
M: On some level but …
A: Not heaps.
H: No. (FG1)

When asked why, many struggled to explain their lack of understanding. Sharpe (1996) has suggested that the public gain subconscious knowledge from the media, but are often not given adequate or appropriate information. This inadequacy of information explains some participants’ inability to critically understand government policies. Furthermore, facts and policies are often not accompanied by relative statistics in the press, resulting in the representation of one perspective only.

Relative Reporting
Article 31 of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol protects the right of asylum seekers to enter any country without a valid visa due to their good reason for unauthorised entry. Under the Convention, asylum seekers should have equal claim to asylum regardless of their method of arrival, whether boat or plane (Australian Asylum Resource Centre [ASRC] 2011). Despite this equal legislation, boat arrivals in Australia are subject to exclusionary policies and public opinion because the boat itself is socially constructed as illegal. Boats are seen as illegal because the method of migration is now unusual, seemingly uncontrollable and boat passengers are presumed to lack identity documents, which is a symbol of illegality (Billings 2011). These factors, in contrast to the presentation and perception of Australian citizens as fair and law-abiding, contribute to the justification of increased defence mechanisms to prevent boat arrivals. However, since 2000, more than 95 per cent of all asylum seekers have arrived in Australia by plane (Phillips 2011, p. 1). Recent data shows this figure is decreasing, but plane arrivals still outnumber boat arrivals, as shown in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Plane Arrivals (%)</th>
<th>Boat Arrivals (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008–09</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009–10</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010–11</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Asylum seeker arrivals by plane and by boat. Source: Adapted from ASCR (2011).
Statistics about the means of arrival are rarely represented in the media. Out of almost 100 articles analysed, only one mentioned plane arrivals in relation to the number of boat arrivals (Needham 2012b). This reporting was reflected in focus group participants’ responses to a question which asked what they believed the ratio to be. Answers differed between groups, but the average estimate placed current asylum seeker plane arrivals at 12 per cent and boat arrivals at 88 per cent. Focus group participants identified increased relative reporting as a possible counter-balance to negative public discourse:

Am: If the media reported how many people came by boat, as opposed to plane as well [...] for example, there’s 4 million illegal immigrants, 2 came on a boat this year, more relative figures and reporting helps. (FG2)

Relative reporting can provide a solution because it normalises the asylum process. The image of a boat is abnormal in comparison to air travel, and this difference is embodied by the people who travel by boat. Therefore, despite the fact that, historically and presently, more illegal migrants arrive by plane each year, ‘boat people’ remain at a distance, in a queue or behind a fence. In this way, the imagined existence of boat arrivals as Other is reinforced by the physical distance of boats, which justifies social as well as legislative exclusion.

**Boat People: Excluded through Policy**

The maintenance of difference and distance in the public psyche and press about asylum seekers and boat arrivals is made possible through respective exclusionary policies (Billings 2011). Australia’s migration policies both produce and reflect public opinion and media representations of boat arrivals (Tiffen 1993). This highlights the interconnectivity of Othering processes that occur in Australia. I argue that both political and public discourses justify deterrence methods in the name of national security. First, the ‘hard line’ approach to border policy includes methods such as offshore processing, excision of territory and mandatory detention (Ross 2004; Koser 2010; Crock and Ghezelbash 2010). Second, the politicisation of certain events and the utilisation of public fears in the process serve to justify Australia’s right to decide who enters the country. However, these approaches to asylum policy prioritise the *rights of regulation* over the *rights to protection* granted to asylum seekers and extenuate existing fears along fissures of race and nationality.

Juridical exceptionalism is used to justify and further embed the exclusion of Others in Australia. Billings (2011, p. 294) has explained how the excision of geographical territory, where offshore islands are removed from Australia’s ‘migration zone’, has created the phenomenon of ‘non-places’. I extend this idea to suggest that non-places produce *non-people*. In the newspaper articles selected for study, only *The SMH* articles referred to specific asylum seekers by name, with *The Australian* referring to nationalities and *The Daily Telegraph* often mentioning total numbers of arrivals. Furthermore, articles that referenced Christmas Island always mentioned institutions or processes, rather than living habits or individuals, thus dehumanising the everyday lived experience of the excised islands. Therefore, juridical exceptionalism results in excised territories assuming a status of space, rather than place (Massey 2005). Absence of ‘place’ alongside non-citizenship removes the identities and stories of boat arrivals. As a result, without identity and history, ‘boat people’ become non-people in the public psyche. This is shown, for example, in the lack of empathy towards ‘non-people’ displayed by some of the focus group respondents:

B: Do you […] remember how you felt hearing about the Christmas Island crash?
Am: I remember reading about it, and I didn’t really care, to be honest.
B: Why is that?
Am: Because it didn’t concern me.
Aa: I remember watching it, and I thought it was pretty bad I suppose, but then it disappeared and I stopped thinking about it. (FG2)

While these individuals do not represent the majority of participants, this response provides evidence that public indifference can reflect and respond to exclusionary policy decisions. The Australian public have in some way been removed of their responsibility to help. Christmas Island has become what Billings (2011, p. 275) calls an “outpost in the Australian psyche”. In this way, the physical remoteness of excised territories justifies legislative and public distance by creating an ‘out of sight, out of mind’ mentality in the Australian public.

Specific events have also impacted on the out-posting of Others in the Australian public psyche (Dayan and Katz 1994). The ‘Children Overboard’ event in 2001 was positioned in opposition to family values in Australia and undermined the humanity of asylum seekers (Slattery 2003). Importantly, more than 90 per cent of participants in the focus groups quoted the Tampa affair and the Children Overboard event as the first time that ‘boat people’ entered their consciousness:

J: I remember the children overboard thing that specifically […] struck a chord, maybe more than other bits of information did. With mothers and parents, that kind of things, who would do that, that’s what I remember clearly. (FG1)

Daniel Ross (2004, p. 109) has argued that Western democracies need tight border control in order to protect the citizens that constitute them. However, I believe that by privileging national boundaries, Australia excludes the ‘non-citizens’ and ‘non-people’ it has a moral and legal duty to protect. John Howard argued the right of a nation to define its borders when he announced in his 2001 election campaign, “we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come” (Howard 2001). This sentiment was reflected in responses by focus group participants who recognised the implications of exclusion on certain factors, but also maintained Australia’s right to determine and control entry:

Am: We should be able to accept asylum seekers on our terms, rather than accepting, you’re here now, we might as well let them in.
M: The country has the right to control its borders and immigration, but to exclude people on how they come here […] I don’t know how we can get away with that. (FG2)

When asked where Australia’s geopolitical obligations lay, there was a unanimous response that Australia had a responsibility to its “own people and taxpayers”, but that more attention and resources should also be provided for asylum seekers and refugees (FG1). The foundation of modern, Westphalian states is their boundaries, and with borders comes the right to control entry (Basch et al. 1994). However, when this right is utilised politically in order to amass support, it comes at the expense of the protection rights for refugees and asylum seekers.

**Conclusion**

In Australia, press and policy agendas intersect with public opinion to contribute to the ongoing exclusion of ‘boat people’. In the press, conscious and unconscious framing mechanisms create a metaphysical distancing of boat arrivals from the public. This distance is
achieved primarily through the repetition of words that incite a negative association with asylum seekers who arrive by boat in Australia. Furthermore, a lack of relative reporting implies that illegal migration is more common by boat than by plane, despite evidence to suggest the opposite. In this way, having the power to shape discourse in the press can result in misunderstandings in public opinion. As a result, the formation of public opinion about asylum seekers is complicated by a process of discourse management, whereby the press plays a key role in providing the information to the public.

The process is complicated further by the intersection of policy agendas and political bipartisanship on the ‘issue’. The politicisation of certain events such as the Tampa affair and the subsequent Children Overboard crisis highlight the political importance of excluding the Other rather than its construction as a natural or necessary process. The events were utilised politically by John Howard in order to bolster party support and implement exclusionary policies to deter irregular maritime arrivals. Political support was made possible by the concurrence of the events with the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States of America. These events and policy decisions played on existing public fears of difference and contributed to the historical and ongoing separation between the Self and the Other in Australia.

The distinction between Australian citizens and asylum seekers is made possible through the increasing importance of national borders and the creation of a shared identity and a unified ‘we’ for those within them. John Howard’s election assertion that ‘we’ will decide who comes Australia and the circumstances in which ‘they’ come, served to further separate Australian citizens from people who arrive in Australia by boat. As a result, asylum seekers embody difference, and the metaphysical distancing created by the press is accompanied by a physical distance achieved by exclusionary policies. This paper has argued that asylum seekers who arrive by boat become non-people through a dehumanising process of creating non-places. The excision of territory and implementation of offshore processing removes the Australian public from their responsibilities to asylum seekers and refugees, which is reinforced by the way that they, and places such as Christmas Island, are represented in the media. Therefore, as a result of the representations of ‘boat people’ in the press, their exclusion in policy and the intersection of these agendas with public opinion, asylum seekers rights to protection are undermined by the rights of Australia and its citizens to determine its borders.

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References


**Speeches and Media Releases**


**Legislation, Conventions and Declarations**


Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (CRSR) (adopted 28 July 1951, entered into force 22 April 1954) 189 UNTS 137

Migration Act 1958 (Commonwealth)


Ruddock v. Vadarlis (‘MV Tampa case’), 2001. 110 FCR 491

**Newspaper Articles**


