

WHO'S DRIVING THE ASYLUM DEBATE? NEWSPAPER AND GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATIONS OF ASYLUM SEEKERS

Abstract

The welfare and future of asylum seekers in Australia have been very contentious contemporary issues. Findings based on content analysis of media releases in 2001 and 2002 reveal the unrelentingly negative way in which the federal government portrayed asylum seekers. While the government's negative tenor was constant during the study period, the specific terms of reference altered, from 'threat' through 'other', to 'illegality' and to 'burden'. The negative construction of asylum seekers was clearly mutable. Analysis of newspaper reporting during the same period indicates that the media largely adopted the negativity and specific references of the government. The media dependence upon government statements and spokespersons in part explains this relation. The findings generally support the 'propaganda model' that holds a pessimistic view of the news media's critical abilities. However, the media departed somewhat slightly from the government's unchanging stance following some key events and revelations. Clearly, there is scope for disrupting the flow of negative constructions from government to media, and ultimately to audiences.

Introduction

The welfare and future of asylum seekers in Australia have been extremely contentious contemporary issues. This has been a policy arena of some considerable media prominence. During 2001, there emerged in Australia a 'negative and sometimes crudely pejorative' asylum dialogue within the government, media and other public discourse (Curran et al., 1986: 1). Mike Secombe and Andrew Clennell (2002: 19) reflected in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on the how the debate over asylum seekers had been muddied by 'rhetoric and the language of fear'. The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) (2000: 1) expressed concern that the media had helped produced a 'climate of fear' that was being used to 'legitimise the introduction of draconian policies'. In the weeks following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, ministers of the Australian federal government overtly linked asylum seekers to terrorism. They stated there was 'an undeniable link' between illegal immigrants and terrorism (Junior Finance Minister, quoted in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 September 2001; Minister for Defence, quoted in *Insiders*, 23 September 2001). They based this judgment on the fact that the asylum seekers were from Afghanistan or were people with 'strange identities'. Other ministers referred to how the asylum seekers had thrown children overboard — or threatened to — or had sewn their children's' lips together while in the detention centres. These asserted links to terrorism, and threats to children, were found to be baseless (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002). Nonetheless, the stories

were decisive means for portraying asylum seekers as inhumane, barbaric ‘others’ who did not possess basic human qualities of parental devotion (Marr and Wilkinson, 2003: 194–210). This paper reports on the federal government’s portrayal of asylum seekers, and we use that lens to examine how the media dealt with the issue. More precisely, the paper explores the flow of meaning between the federal government and media during late 2001 and early 2002.

Aims

We examined media representations of asylum seekers between August 2001 and January 2002, looking at the overall tenor of articles (positive or negative) and the key themes used to describe asylum seekers. Replicated analyses of government statements, principally those of the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) and the Minister for Immigration, are also reported on.¹ Greater understanding of the circulation of cultural constructions of asylum seekers is essential to establishing the validity of claims that the federal government had ‘attacked and vilified’ the credibility of asylum seekers in a ‘calculated political act’ (Bartlett, cited in Mares, 2001: 154; Marr and Wilkinson, 2003: 30–47, 172–80). Such criticisms relate closely to Chomsky’s (1989: 269) assertion that intentionally inducing fear of a ‘terrifying enemy’ is a standard device used ‘to whip the domestic population of any country into line’ behind contentious policies. The highly restricted media access to detention facilities forced the media to rely almost exclusively on the official version of events supplied by the federal government. More worryingly, Mares (2001) argues that official statements of DIMIA, and from Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock, were rarely questioned or challenged with alternative points of view. These assertions are tested in the research presented here. Of course, the discursive power of the state is by no means absolute. We also examined the extent to which the Australian media questioned federal government policy and rhetoric on asylum seekers during 2001 and 2002.

Method

Content analysis was used to examine the tenor and cultural constructions of asylum seekers adopted by sections of the media and by the Australian federal government. The media data set comprised all reports published between August 2001 and January 2002 that contained any one of the key search terms: asylum seeker(s); ‘illegal immigrant(s)/immigration’ and ‘boat people/person’. This timeframe was selected as it encompassed several key events likely to have affected the portrayal and perception of asylum seekers in Australia. The study period was divided into seven phases relating to these events as indicated in Table 1.

The two newspapers sampled were *The Advertiser* and *The Sunday Mail*.² The data base included all styles of articles (editorials, feature pieces, opinion pieces and news leaders) that made reference to the key search terms. The total number of media documents analysed was 383 articles in *The Advertiser* and 87 in *The Sunday Mail*. Government documents were collated from three key sources:

Table 1: Asylum seekers to Australia, summary of key phases and events, August 2001 to January 2002

<i>Phase¹</i>	<i>Basic description of key event</i>
Pre- <i>Tampa</i> 1.8.01–27.8.01	Phase preceding the ‘ <i>Tampa</i> incident’ (see below).
Post- <i>Tampa</i> 28.8.01–10.9.01	Approximately 438 asylum seekers were rescued by a Norwegian freighter (the <i>Tampa</i>) outside of Australian territorial waters. The government refused permission for the <i>Tampa</i> to dock at an Australian port.
Post-9/11 11.9.01–7.10.01	Terrorist attacks occurred in Washington (Pentagon) and New York (World Trade Center), USA.
Post-overboard 8.10.01–23.10.01	The federal government stated that asylum seekers had thrown their children overboard after being refused permission to enter Australian territorial waters.
Post-drowning 24.10.01–9.11.01	Approximately 356 asylum seekers drowned as their vessel sank en route to Australia.
Post-election ² 10.11.01–21.11.01	The Australian federal election.
Post-Woomera 22.11.01–31.1.02	Several incidences of unrest occurred at Woomera detention centre, including riots, protests, hunger strikes and self-harm among asylum seekers.

- 1 To allow for the time lag between actual events and government statements and media reporting, each phase begins with the first mention of the relevant event in the media sources analysed.
- 2 Revelations that asylum seekers may not have thrown their children overboard began to emerge at this time; the baseless nature of the original government claims were exposed during 2002, most comprehensively in the ‘children overboard’ Senate inquiry (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002).

departmental media releases (DPS) from DIMIA (12 in total); ministerial media releases (MPS) by the Minister for Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Philip Ruddock (31 in total); and transcripts of media interviews (TS) posted on Minister Ruddock’s website (12 in total). The selection of texts for analysis was identical to that just outlined for the newspaper products.

Latent content analysis was used to assess the tenor and key themes within newspaper reports and government statements. These were also analysed for the presence of contextualising or background information, such as ‘push factors’ motivating asylum seekers’ flight to Australia. A record was also kept of the number and status of sources noted in reports and statements. Manifest content analysis was used to tally the presence of all positive and negative terms used to describe asylum seekers. Content analysis as a method for analysing media product

has been critiqued because of a tendency for results to be analysed in isolation from the very processes through which media images are constructed (Fleras, 1994; Head, 1981; Jensen and Jankowski, 1991; Priest, 1996). The approach has been the subject of related criticism because empirical results are too easily divorced from a sense of history, interaction or significance when taken out of social context. The focus of this project was partly on content, but our attention and method were also aimed at unravelling the complex relations between government and media ‘meaning making’ regarding asylum seekers.

Intertextuality between the media and the state

There are a good number of established media studies that have assessed the state–media exchange of meaning according to a propaganda model (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). This model contends that the state exerts a powerful influence over media reporting of events (Green, 1991; Goodall et al., 1994; Sparks, 1986). The state is able to exert an influence on the media as an economic benefactor (Sparks, 1986: 83–84), as a censor of information and as a major source of ‘credible information’ (Curran et al., 1982; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). These relations influence what is emphasised and omitted in media reporting, with the resulting media product being active in the ‘negotiation of hegemony’ (Gramsci, 1971, cited in Green, 1991: 218), involving the ‘marginalisation of dissent’ (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: 2) and the ‘mobilis[ation] of consent’ (Wilson, 1989: 163–64). The state is reliant upon the media for the communication of its policies to the public (Curran et al., 1982), for mobilising support for special interests and for confirming the legitimacy of the status quo (Goodall et al., 1994; van Dijk, 1991a; Hall, 1986: 7). The opposing interpretation of the state–media interaction suggests that the influence of the former over the latter is not absolute. Schudson (1991: 175; see also Curran et al., 1982) argue that there are occasions when mass media institutions differentiate their opinions from those of the state and ‘attain a degree of autonomy’ that enables them to ‘exert independent influence on politics, society and culture’. News journalism is part of the ‘machinery of representation’ which is enormously influential in determining our knowledge of society and the policies that we are prepared to accept (Hall, 1986: 9; Jensen, 1991b). In this manner, the media are a significant driver of public opinion.

Van Dijk (1991a) examined the media portrayal of Tamil arrivals in Western European countries in 1985. He observed that these individuals were first portrayed by governments as ‘economic migrants’ but were eventually linked to international crime and terrorism, and as a threat to the ‘Self’ and ‘our territory’. He recognised that this problematic portrayal was made possible by a monopoly-type situation in which government sources are the primary informants of the media in relation to asylum seekers. Van Dijk identified an intertextuality in relation to these constructions, stating that the:

official panic of the political elites about what they saw as a deluge of poor Third World peoples arriving at their doorsteps soon led to a corresponding media panic. Before long, this barrage of negative media coverage ... also

affected large parts of the public, which ... was easily persuaded to resent the 'threatening' presence. (van Dijk, 1991a: 2)

One of van Dijk's (1991a) most critical observations concerned how the government, which appeared to be responsible for producing these constructions, used the resultant negative public opinion towards asylum seekers as legitimisation for the continuation of stringent anti-immigration policies.

While the Howard Coalition government may have claimed that its asylum policy was driven by public opinion (Adelman and Cox, 1994; Betts, 2001: 41–46), there is also evidence that postwar policy-makers in Australia have *led* rather than followed public opinion (Holton and Lamphier, 1994). Several governments have closely managed and manipulated information and imagery in relation to controversial issues, such as immigration, in order to seek public support (Holton and Lamphier, 1994). The federal government mobilised text and imagery to pacify a largely Anglo-Celtic populace regarding the post-World War II migration program, constructing non-Anglo migrants as non-threatening, keen assimilators. The current federal government is also seen as having led media and public opinion in relation to its policies on asylum seekers (Mares, 2001; MacCallum, 2002; McMaster, 2001; RCOA, 2000). Unlike the post-World War II migration program, the emphasis has been to generate public concern and to construct the migrants involved as an alien 'other'. Nonetheless, the process is a similar one, with the state driving public opinion through the media. While there has been a good deal of discussion of the relative symbolic capital and influence of the media and the state in Western societies, there has been too little by way of empirical testing of such intertextuality.

Government representations of asylum seekers

Neville Roach resigned as chairman of the Council for Multicultural Australia in late January 2002 in protest at the federal government's negative asylum rhetoric, which he described as 'possibly more damaging' than the asylum policies themselves (Madigan, 2002: 4). Latent content analysis of government documents revealed that 91 per cent were negative in their overall tenor towards asylum seekers (see Table 2). Only two documents were neutral, and there were only three official statements during the study period that could be coded as positive towards asylum seekers. The federal government's negativity was unrelenting and fluctuated only minimally in relation to some critical events outlined in Table 1 (see also Figure 1). The evaluative tenor of government documents remained highly negative during the immediate pre-election period, even following the drowning of approximately 356 asylum seekers.³ The handful of documents that were not negative in their overall tenor either preceded the government's hard-line response to the *Tampa* humanitarian emergency, or were produced after the federal election had been decided (Figure 1).

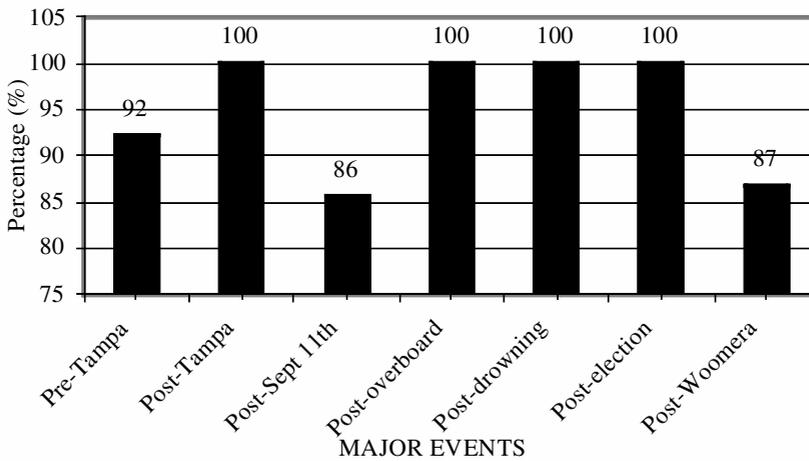
Manifest coding of the content of government documents revealed the overwhelming dominance of negative terminology in describing asylum seekers (Table 3). Indeed, 90 per cent of the descriptive terms used by the federal

Table 2: The evaluative tenor of government documents dealing with asylum seekers, August 2001 and January 2002

<i>Government documents</i>	<i>Positive (no.) %</i>	<i>Negative (no.) %</i>	<i>Mixed (no.) %</i>	<i>Neutral (no.) %</i>
Departmental media releases	(2) 16.7	(10) 83.3	(-) 0.0	(-) 0.0
Ministerial media releases	(1) 3.2	(28) 90.3	(-) 0.0	(2) 6.5
Transcripts	(-) 0.0	(12) 100.0	(-) 0.0	(-) 0.0
TOTAL	(3) 5.5	(50) 90.9	(-) 0.0	(2) 3.6

Sources: Latent coding of government documents: Departmental Media Releases from DIMIA; Ministerial media releases by the Minister for Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Philip Ruddock, and transcripts of media interviews.

Figure 1: Temporal variation in negative evaluative tenor of government documents



Sources: Latent coding of government documents: Departmental media releases from DIMIA; Ministerial media releases by the Minister for Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Philip Ruddock, and transcripts of media interviews.

government were negative. These results support the findings from the latent content analysis above. The language used to describe asylum seekers was rarely sympathetic or neutral, and positive terms were even less frequent. The ‘benefit’ and ‘good character/behaviour’ categories of reference constituted only 4 per cent of the overall references to asylum seekers in government documents, and less than 5 per cent of references suggested their legitimacy or that their plight was worthy of some sympathy (see Table 3). Asylum seekers are clearly some of the most vulnerable and terrorised peoples on the planet, yet federal government documents portrayed them in an overwhelmingly negative manner.

Table 3: Terminology used by the federal government to describe asylum seekers, August 2001 and January 2002

<i>Constructions of asylum seekers</i>	<i>DPS¹%</i>	<i>MPS²%</i>	<i>TS³%</i>	<i>Total (no. of mentions) %</i>
Illegal	17.5	27.0	10.5	(230) 18.0
Illegitimate	2.5	22.3	36.1	(291) 22.8
Bad character/behaviour	11.5	6.9	16.0	(149) 11.7
The other/dehumanised	25.6	8.7	7.7	(160) 12.5
Threat	32.1	14.0	8.3	(208) 16.3
Burden	1.9	9.8	6.3	(82) 6.4
Uncontrollable	0.3	3.6	3.0	(32) 2.5
Total negatives	91.3	92.2	87.8	(1152) 90.2
Legal	0.0	0.0	0.2	(1) 0.1
Legitimate/sympathetic	0.3	5.1	7.1	(60) 4.7
Good character/behaviour	0.3	0.2	2.4	(14) 1.1
Like us/human	0.6	0.5	0.0	(4) 0.3
Harmless	0.9	0.2	1.0	(9) 0.7
Benefit	6.5	1.8	0.8	(33) 2.6
Ordered	0.0	0.0	0.8	(4) 0.3
Total positive ⁴	8.7	7.8	12.2	(125) 9.8
TOTAL	100.0	100.0	100.0	(1277) 100.0

Source: Manifest coding of government documents: ¹Departmental media releases from DIMIA; ²Ministerial media releases by the Minister for Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Philip Ruddock, and ³transcripts of media interviews by the Minister. ⁴In the coding of government documents and newspapers these ‘positive’ categories of description included many terms that are barely positive *per se*, and could have been categorised as ‘neutral’. These included terms like ‘passenger’ and ‘human being’.

The most frequently used terms of reference by the federal government portrayed asylum seekers as ‘illegitimate’ (36 per cent), ‘illegal’ (11 per cent) and ‘threatening’ (16 per cent) (see Table 3). Descriptions of illegitimacy included references to asylum seekers ‘bypassing/transiting through safe countries’, and ‘seeking a migration outcome’ as opposed to refuge, and also the ‘taking of places from genuine refugees’. These constructions of ‘illegitimacy’ were particularly potent as they presented asylum seekers as not entitled to protection within Australia, ultimately justifying their exclusion or detention. Constructions of illegality included the use of terms like ‘illegal immigrants’, descriptions of asylum seekers as ‘unauthorised’, and references to police involvement, criminality or breaking of the law. For example, a ministerial press release (MPS) from Minister Ruddock’s office stated that:

They [asylum seekers] would have disposed of their documents before arriving in Australia to misrepresent their identity and nationality in order to abuse the refugee process. Many are not fleeing persecution. They are trying to migrate. (MPS 112/2001)

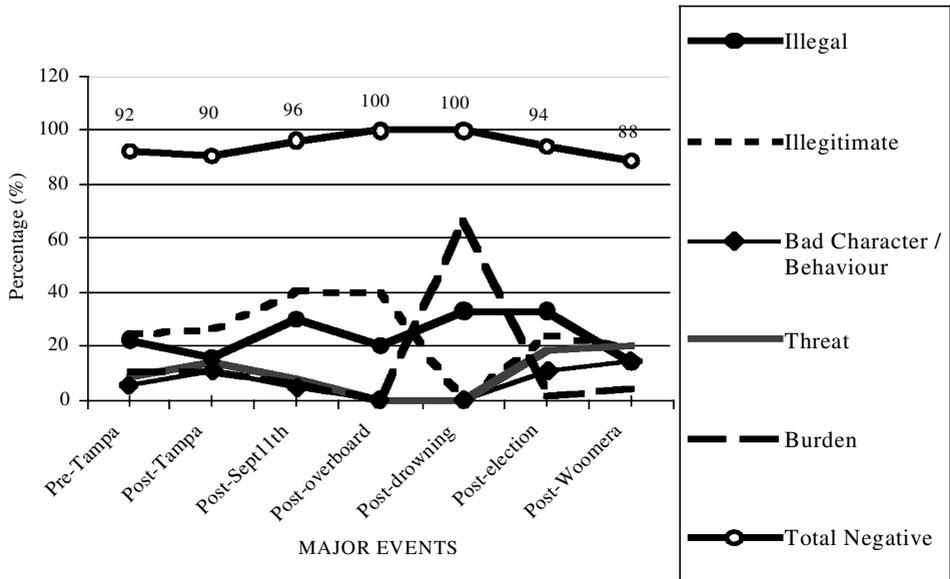
The third most common government set of descriptions of asylum seekers referred to them as a physical and cultural ‘threat’ (see Table 3). These included references to arson and the use of weapons within detention centres, and the threat posed to border integrity and migrant selection. This perceived threat to border integrity was a recurrent theme throughout government documents, especially during the election campaign. Its importance was highlighted by the naming of the 2001 legislation to exclude asylum seekers as the Border Protection Bill. The Senate Select Committee investigation of the ‘children overboard’ claims made by the government came to similar conclusions. The report referred heavily to the federal election campaign and the ‘border protection’ legislation as explanations for the government’s unfounded criticisms of asylum seekers (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002: xxi; Marr and Wilkinson, 2003).

In addition to constructions of ‘illegality’, ‘illegitimacy’ and the ‘threat’ posed by asylum seekers, the term ‘problem’ featured prominently in the federal government asylum discourse (see Table 3). This form of construction has been identified as the ‘worst and most insidious’ stereotype surrounding minority groups (Fonteyene, 2001). Being portrayed as a ‘problem’ constructs asylum seekers as ‘an anomaly requiring specialised correctives and therapeutic interventions’ rather than ‘ordinary people’ (McMaster, 2001: 37).⁴ In addition, it attributed all blame for negative events to the asylum seekers, and diverted attention from the federal government’s treatment of these individuals.

Although the dominance of negative terminology in government documents was consistent across the study period, considerable temporal variation was observed in relation to the individual negative categories of reference used (see Figure 2). This suggests that the utility and relevance of certain constructions shifted according to the major events. The strongest peak occurred in the ‘burden’ category during the post-drowning phase, during which the federal government emphasised the need to find an international solution to the ‘problem’ of asylum seekers. In addition, the representation of asylum seekers as ‘illegitimate’ peaked just after September 11, with constructions of illegality also used recurrently at this time (see Figure 2). Such terminology was useful in justifying the federal government’s new border protection legislation, which was introduced during this period (26 September 2001). The focus on illegitimacy and illegality was also strong in the post-Woomera riot phase.

By presenting asylum seekers as not entitled to protection and by differentiating them strongly from genuine refugees, government constructions worked to justify their ongoing detention. In early 2002, increasingly desperate and disconsolate asylum seekers in Australian detention centres undertook hunger strikes, as well as other forms of self harm, and rioted (Marr and Wilkinson, 2003). These brought more intense critical attention to government policy from national and international media, and from human rights organisations. In response to an article published in

Figure 2: Categories of terminology used by the federal government to describe asylum seekers, key phases between August 2001 and January 2002



Sources: Manifest coding of government documents: Departmental media releases from DIMIA; Ministerial media releases by the Minister for Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Philip Ruddock, and transcripts of media interviews by the Minister.

The Los Angeles Times, for example, Minister Ruddock made heavy use of illegitimacy constructions:

The Australian government does not ‘lock up’ refugees, nor does it detain people for seeking asylum. We do, however, place in detention people who arrive unlawfully until their asylum claims are determined and we find out who they are [and] where they are from ... They make a lifestyle choice to travel to Australia, breaking the laws of many countries along the way. (MPS 2/2002)

Another important trend was the peak in constructions of asylum seekers as a threat and of bad character in the post-Woomera period (see Figure 2). Government documents that were produced at this time focused on the various disturbances within Woomera detention centre, presenting the detainees as actively and deliberately engaged in dangerous, threatening and intentionally ‘provocative’ conduct (DPS, 61/2001, 20/12/01). In describing riots, hunger strikes and acts of self-mutilation, government documents presented asylum seekers as threatening to their own children and staff in detention centres (MPS 7/2002, 23 January 2002).⁵ Rather than acknowledging these actions as desperate calls for help, the bad character of asylum seekers was emphasised:

Where there are adults causing self harm, forcing children to sew their lips together can only be described as barbaric. It's unacceptable behaviour in our community and should not be tolerated. (MPS 7/2002)

In this manner, government documents effectively shifted attention away from conditions within the detention facilities and on to the purportedly appalling behaviour of asylum seekers.

The federal government's discourse was univocal, with the minister or a DIMIA spokesperson acting as the primary informant in 100 per cent of the documents analysed. This resulted in an overwhelmingly one-sided portrayal of the asylum debate. The focal topics of government documents also contributed to the negative portrayal of asylum seekers, with almost 51 per cent focusing directly on asylum policies. In order to justify Australia's increasingly hard-line response to asylum seekers, these documents had a heavy emphasis upon negative representations. This negativity was also influenced by the absence of contextualising information regarding the circumstances of asylum seekers. Of the government documents analysed, almost 95 per cent did not provide any contextualising information explaining the 'push factors' behind asylum seekers leaving their countries of origin, and no documents provided an explanation for the use of people smugglers. Discussing the actions of asylum seekers without any sense of context dehumanised their circumstances and enabled their actions to be presented as deliberately negative. These findings mirror concerns expressed in the literature regarding the lack of contextualising information in representations of ethnic minorities (Bell, 1993; van Dijk, 1991a).

Print news media representations of asylum seekers

An analysis of tenor and themes was replicated for two Adelaide-based newspapers, *The Advertiser* and *The Sunday Mail*. Latent coding revealed some variation in the evaluative tenor of the two newspapers, although both were substantially more negative than positive (see Table 4). Articles in the daily newspaper *The Advertiser* were less likely to be negative in their overall tenor (61 per cent) than those in *The Sunday Mail* (72 per cent). The sample of articles from *The Sunday Mail* contained a markedly lower proportion of news pieces (62.1 per cent) than from *The Advertiser* (83.3 per cent). The high proportion of opinion-based articles in *The Sunday Mail* reports may have facilitated higher levels of sensationalist and negative treatment. Table 5 shows that the manifest content of articles from the two newspapers studied was also strongly negative (76 per cent), confirming the findings with regard to evaluative tenor.

Temporal variation in the total negative manifest content of the two newspapers is illustrated in Figure 3. Trends in *The Advertiser* and *The Sunday Mail* were very similar. Specifically, manifest content in both *The Advertiser* (Adv) and *The Sunday Mail* (SM) became more sympathetic after the *Tampa* incident and increasingly negative post-September 11. Both newspapers reached a negative peak after the children overboard incident, suggesting that the juxtaposition of this event with September 11 may have had a cumulative negative effect on reporting.

Table 4: The evaluative tenor of newspaper reports dealing with asylum seekers, August 2001 and January 2002

<i>Newspaper articles</i>	<i>Positive</i>		<i>Negative</i>		<i>Mixed</i>		<i>Neutral</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>(No.)</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>(No.)</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>(No.)</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>(No.)</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>(No.)</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>The Advertiser</i>	(71)	18.5	(233)	60.8	(40)	10.4	(39)	10.2	(383)	100.0
<i>The Sunday Mail</i>	(8)	9.2	(63)	72.4	(12)	13.8	(4)	4.6	(87)	100.0

Source: Latent coding of newspaper articles: *The Advertiser* and *The Sunday Mail*.

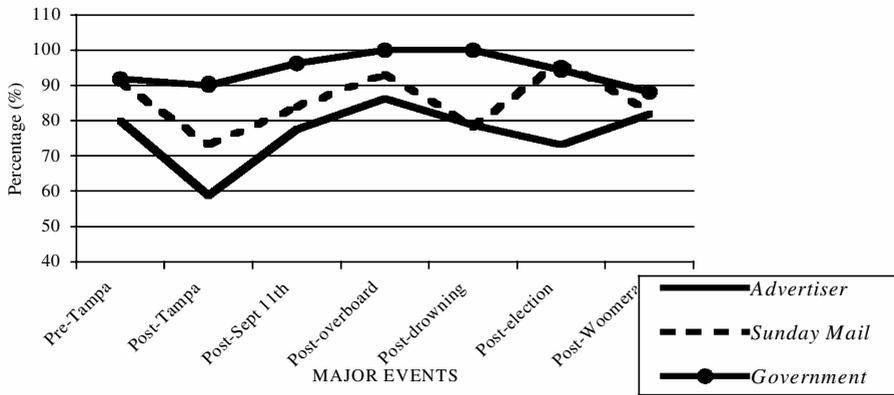
As expected, the terminology used in descriptions of asylum seekers was moresympathetic in the post-drowning phase, although patterns diverged in the post-election phase. At this time, *The Advertiser* began to raise questions regarding asylum policy and the role of asylum debate in the federal government’s re-election. This was evident with the emergence of headlines such as ‘Woomera Crisis: Centre Inhumane, Say GPs’ (Adv758, 29 January 2002: 4) and ‘Woomera Crisis: It’s a Dark Period Says SA Bishop’ (Adv780, 31 January 2002: 5). These headlines also demonstrate that the media were beginning to look for informants outside the political arena. The lingering effect of the drowning incident and the unravelling of the children overboard claims were also likely to have contributed to a decline in media negativity at this time. Finally, the post-Woomera phase was marked by concern about the costs and troubles of the detention centres. While the tone of articles may have expressed some sympathy and concern for asylum seekers involved in self-harm attempts and hunger strikes, the vocabulary used was nonetheless restricted to mostly negative descriptions of their actions.

In addition to temporal consistency, the manifest content of articles in the two newspapers studied was also quite similar. The most frequently used terms in both newspapers were those in the ‘threat’ category of description. Constructions of asylum seekers as the ‘other’ were also prominent (see Table 5). These results accord with research that has found that the news media focus on issues that are considered most threatening to the interests of readers, such as ‘crime, violence, difference and deviance’ (van Dijk, 1991a: 116; Dunn and Mahtani, 2001). Examples from our data set include the following:

The violent behaviour of some detainees in a bid to get their own way has been appalling with buildings burnt, guards attacked and claims children have been forced to have their lips sewn together. (SM12, 27 January 2002: 9)

Special Air Service troops conducted covert surveillance of a man believed to be a ‘sleeper agent’ with connections to Osama bin Laden. SAS troops installed a miniature camera in the asylum seekers’ sleeping quarters to watch over the suspected terrorist. (Adv406, 13 October 2001: 1)

Figure 3: Negative descriptions of asylum seekers by the federal government, *The Advertiser* and *The Sunday Mail*, August 2001 and January 2002



Sources: Manifest coding of newspaper articles (*The Advertiser* and *The Sunday Mail*) and government documents: departmental media releases from DIMIA; ministerial media releases by the Minister for Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Philip Ruddock, and transcripts of media interviews by the minister.

Both newspapers actively dehumanised asylum seekers, with ‘detainee’ and ‘boat people’ being the most frequently used terms within this category of description. Extreme statements like that by the Mayor of Port Augusta — ‘those bastards can run like camels if they escape’ (Baluch, quoted in Maiden and Duffy, 2002: 5) — served to accentuate the dehumanisation.

The Advertiser utilised terminology within the ‘bad character/behaviour’ category more than *The Sunday Mail*, and regularly adopted terms such as ‘trashing’, ‘breaking’, ‘lip-stitching’, ‘demanding’, ‘rioting’, ‘torching’ and ‘vandalism’. The following quotation exemplifies this style of reporting (see Table 5):

Asylum seekers trashed their accommodation, ripping apart metal bed frames and rungs off ladders to use as weapons ... [Asylum seekers] refused to use toilet paper or clean up bathrooms and threw excrement at guards. (Adv406, 13 October 2001: 1)

The Sunday Mail had more of a focus upon the ‘uncontrollable’ nature of asylum seekers’ arrival:

The biggest boatload of refugees ever to hit Australian shores is on its way from Indonesia ... In the past two weeks 983 asylum seekers have flooded into WA ... A Customs plane has gone to the island along with extra security officers as they try to cope with the continuing wave of humane cargo ... federal officers have quickly processed Thursday’s boatload of 360 mainly Middle Eastern asylum seekers in readiness for the new onslaught. (SM6, 26 August 2001: 19)

Table 5: Terminology used by *The Advertiser* and *The Sunday Mail* to describe asylum seekers, August 2001 and January 2002

<i>Constructions of asylum seekers</i>	<i>The Advertiser</i> (No.) %	<i>The Sunday Mail</i> (No.) %	<i>Both newspapers</i> (No.) %
Illegal	(275) 7.4	(64) 7.5	(339) 7.4
Illegitimate	(126) 3.4	(57) 6.7	(183) 4.0
Bad character/behaviour	(456) 12.3	(62) 7.3	(518) 11.4
The other/dehumanised	(658) 17.7	(137) 16.1	(795) 17.4
Threat	(690) 18.6	(180) 21.2	(870) 19.1
Burden	(256) 6.9	(67) 7.9	(323) 7.1
Uncontrollable	(330) 8.9	(115) 13.6	(445) 9.8
Total negatives	(2791) 75.2	(682) 80.3	(3473) 76.1
Legal	(5) 0.1	(-) 0.0	(5) 0.1
Legitimate/sympathetic	(734) 19.7	(143) 16.8	(877) 19.2
Good character/behaviour	(30) 0.8	(2) 0.2	(32) 0.7
Like us/human	(54) 1.5	(12) 1.4	(66) 1.4
Harmless	(30) 0.8	(5) 0.6	(35) 0.8
Benefit	(62) 1.7	(3) 0.4	(65) 1.4
Ordered	(6) 0.2	(2) 0.2	(8) 0.2
Total positive**	(921) 24.8	(167) 19.7	(1088) 23.9
TOTAL	(3712)* 100.0	(849)* 100.0	(4561) 100.0

Source: Manifest coding of newspaper articles: *The Advertiser* and *The Sunday Mail*.

* Note that the 'total references' is higher than the total number of articles. Each article was potentially multiple-coded.

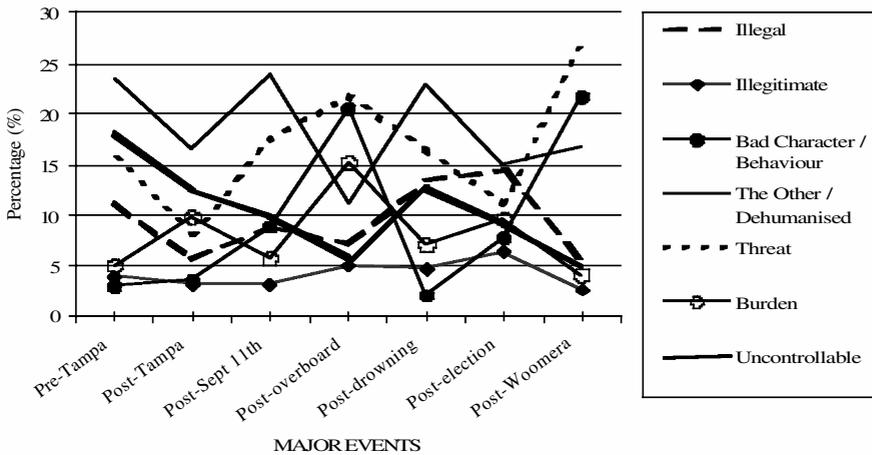
** In the coding of government documents and newspapers, these 'positive' categories of description included many terms that are barely positive *per se*, and could have been categorised as 'neutral'. These included terms like 'passenger' and 'human being'.

The only frequently adopted positive category of reference in both *The Advertiser* and *The Sunday Mail* articles was 'legitimate/sympathetic' (19 per cent) (see Table 5). The positive terminology used in both newspapers overlapped considerably. The term 'refugee' was the most commonly applied positive description (in the 'legitimate/sympathetic' category), although 'desperate', 'terrified', 'fleeing', 'escaping', 'persecuted', 'oppressed', 'wretched' and 'miserable' also featured. Asylum seekers were rarely presented as being actively engaged in positive events, and terminology portraying them as a benefit or of good character was rare.

Analysis of temporal shifts in the various negative categories of reference in *The Advertiser* (see Figure 4) provides further insight into the possible impact of key events on the media's portrayal of asylum seekers. For example, 'threatening' constructions were high in the post-September 11 and post-overboard phases, and peaked in the post-Woomera riot phase. A trough was observed in the post-drowning phase, as asylum seekers were increasingly portrayed as victims rather than

perpetrators with headlines such as ‘Boat People Tragedy: Angels on Voyage of the Damned’ (Adv437, 25 October 2001, p. 1). Constructions of bad character in *The Advertiser* also peaked during the post-overboard and post-Woomera phases, but declined in the post-drowning period. The post-Woomera use of bad character descriptions were contained in reports of the riots in the Woomera detention facility. The peak in constructions of the ‘other’ occurred in the post-September 11 period, as newspaper reports differentiated strongly between ‘Australian citizens’ and the ‘boat people’.

Figure 4: Categories of terminology used in reports of *The Advertiser* to describe asylum seekers, key phases between August 2001 and January 2002



Source: Manifest coding of newspaper articles, *The Advertiser* and *The Sunday Mail*.

Constructions of asylum seekers as a ‘burden’ peaked in *The Advertiser* in the post-overboard phase, with articles focusing on the costs associated with the federal government’s so-called ‘Pacific solution’: ‘\$65m: That’s the cost in just 8 weeks to keep boat people out’ (Adv402, 12 October 2001: 9). Finally, descriptions of asylum seekers as uncontrollable were highest in the pre-Tampa phase (see Figure 4). This is because articles focused on the arrival of several groups in early August and warned that ‘up to 5000 illegals were sheltering on Indonesian islands preparing for a trip to Australia’ (Adv19, 17 August 2001: 11). The prevalence of this category of reference inevitably declined in the post-Tampa phase as the number of arrivals reduced dramatically as a consequence of policy changes. A small peak was also observable in the post-drowning phase, during which the government leant heavily on the necessity of a hard-line response to asylum seekers.

If we throw up our hands and say we’re going to stop doing this, we’ll be saying to the world anybody can come ... And I promise you that would be a recipe for this country, to be — I don’t want to use the word ‘invaded’, it’s the wrong expression — but the shores of this country would be thick with asylum seeker boats, thick with asylum seeker boats. (Prime Minister Howard, quoted in Maiden and McPhedran, 2001: 2)

These temporal variations in the representation of asylum seekers underscore the mutability of social constructions. That is, although the people being constructed — the asylum seekers — remained relatively constant over the duration of the study period, the representations of them shifted markedly.

Formal newspaper reports, excluding opinion pieces and editorials,⁶ predominantly relied upon official sources as the primary informant. In over half of such articles in *The Advertiser* (54.2 per cent) and *The Sunday Mail* (61.3 per cent), the primary source of information was ‘official sources’, including DIMIA spokespeople, Australian politicians and defence officials. One-third of primary informants were ‘other sources’ including foreign politicians, academics, health officials and overseas media. Only 17 per cent of *The Advertiser* reports published sympathetic voices, such as those of refugee advocates or community groups. The proportion in *The Sunday Mail* was even lower (8 per cent). This supports the criticism that the Australian media largely relied on official information in relation to asylum seekers (see Mares, 2001). Asylum seekers and their advocates were rarely given voice in the news media studied here. The most frequent foci of *The Advertiser* and *The Sunday Mail* articles were government policies towards asylum seekers (29 per cent), events involving the *Tampa* (12 per cent), disturbances in detention facilities (11 per cent), the federal election (11 per cent) and the unauthorised arrival of asylum seekers (9 per cent). These empirical findings are indicative of the ‘bad news focus’ found in relation to media representations of ethnic minorities (see also Bell, 1993; Curran et al., 1986; Dunn and Mahtani, 2001; Jakubowicz, 1989; van Dijk, 1991a). Finally, as with the government documents, articles about asylum seekers were mostly devoid of contextualising information. Only 12 per cent of articles in *The Advertiser* made reference to the ‘push-factors’ causing asylum seekers to seek protection in Australia. An absence of such contextualising information has been found to be typical of negative media treatment of minority groups (Bell, 1993; van Dijk, 1991a).

Although there were periods during which the media were relatively more sympathetic towards asylum seekers, the data presented here indicate that the news media’s portrayal of asylum seekers was problematically negative over the duration of the study period. This was observed both in relation to the evaluative tenor of newspaper articles and the terminology used. Factors likely to have contributed to the negativity of both newspapers include a lack of contextualising information, a reliance on official sources of information and the bad news focus. These results support most critical research findings that the media portrayal of ethnic minorities is largely pejorative and stereotypical (van Dijk, 1991a, 1991b) and that the representations of asylum seekers has been similarly poor (MacCallum, 2002; Mares, 2001; McMaster, 2001; RCOA, 2000).

Flows of meaning

The federal government (90 per cent) and the two newspapers (76 per cent) all portrayed asylum seekers in a chiefly negative manner (see Tables 3 and 5). Temporal variations in the manifest content of the newspapers and the government documents were also consistent. Specifically, Figure 3 illustrates that the vocabulary

of both the government and media became less negative in the wake of the *Tampa*, but more strongly negative following September 11 and the children overboard incident. Some divergence was evident beyond this point, as reporting in both *The Sunday Mail* and *The Advertiser* articles departed from the government's unrelenting pattern of negativity in the post-drowning phase. Generally, the degree of government negativity was more extreme than that of the newspapers.

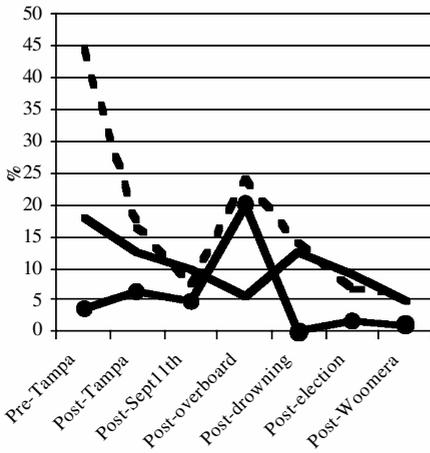
Constructions of asylum seekers as a threat were frequently adopted in both newspapers (19 and 21 per cent) and the government documents (16 per cent). The threat angle has utility for both the federal government and newspaper owners. Threatening constructions in government documents provided strong justification for strict asylum policies, while a sensationalist style of reporting is in accord with the sales objectives of a profit-driven mass media (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). The federal government tended to make more use of constructions of illegitimacy (23 per cent) and illegality (18 per cent), which were useful in justifying exclusive asylum policies, whereas the media made less use of such terms. The media continued to focus on more sensational categories of description, including bad character, uncontrollable and burden. Despite this variance, there was strong evidence of government and media intertextuality apparent at the level of vocabulary. Specific terms and phrases prominently used by both media and government to describe asylum seekers and their actions included: 'illegal immigrant', 'unauthorised', 'destroying', 'detainee', 'setting fire', 'torching', 'costly', 'expensive', 'threat to safety', 'riot' and 'problem' (see Tables 3 and 5).

Temporal shifts in the individual categories of reference provide evidence of considerable overlap between government and media constructions of asylum seekers. Temporal variations of terms describing asylum seekers as uncontrollable and illegal were similar in *The Sunday Mail* articles and government documents from the post-September 11 period onward (see Figures 5a and 5b). The application of bad character terminology was similar in the government documents and *The Sunday Mail*, and *The Advertiser* gave more prominence to such descriptions in the period when reports of children being thrown overboard by asylum seekers were being printed (see Figure 5c). The government documents gave a much greater prominence to the 'burdensome' nature of asylum seekers in the period following the humanitarian disaster of the boat sinking, with the loss of 356 people (Figures 2 and 5d). The other negative representations of asylum seekers, as illegitimate or of bad character, may have been considered too callous during that period (see Figures 5a, 5c). The varied use of terminology describing asylum seekers as a 'threat' and as the 'other' (not shown in Figure 5) indicate that these may serve very different functions for media and government, as mentioned earlier regarding 'threat' constructions.

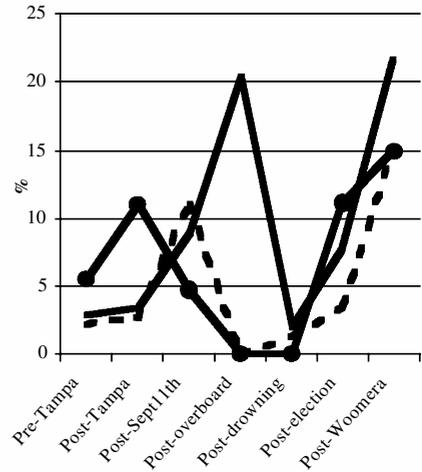
Empirically based claims of causation between government statements and media are impossible. Nonetheless, there is substantial evidence here of an exchange of meaning between government and news media on the issue of asylum seekers. What is more, the shared content, foci and sources are suggestive of a strong government influence on the media. The prominence of 'official sources' in newspaper reporting, as outlined earlier, is indicative of the media's reliance on

Figure 5: Descriptions of asylum seekers as uncontrollable, illegal, of bad behaviour and burdensome, the federal government, *The Advertiser* and *The Sunday Mail*, August 2001 and January 2002

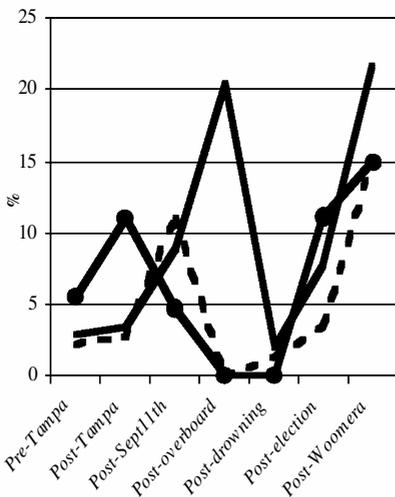
5a – Uncontrollable



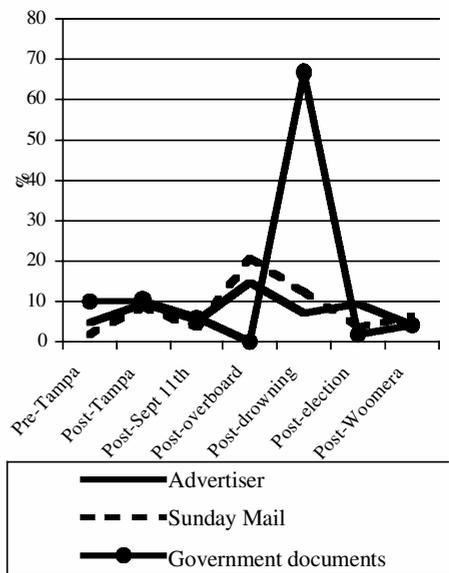
5b – Illegal



5c - Bad behaviour/bad character



5d – Burden



the government for its understanding of asylum issues. Indeed, over the duration of the study period, government was the primary source of information pertaining to asylum seekers. This may have enabled the federal government to exert considerable influence over the media's portrayal of the asylum debate, thereby contributing to the negativity of newspaper reporting. Furthermore, there was considerable evidence for thematic intertextuality between the government and media, with both data sets exhibiting a strong 'bad news focus' centred on asylum policies and disturbances in detention centres (Bell, 1993; van Dijk, 1991a). The dominance of official government informants may also have influenced the media's lack of contextualising information.

Despite most evidence suggesting that the Australian media have taken the government's lead in the representation of asylum seekers, there were a handful of noteworthy contrary instances. Sections of the media began to question both government policy and the manner in which events surrounding asylum seekers were portrayed by official sources. In the post-Woomera phase, for example, the policy of mandatory detention in general, and the detention of children in particular, was increasingly questioned. As a result, the media's explanation of riots, hunger strikes and self-harm attempts began to diverge from the government's entirely pejorative interpretations. Newspaper articles increasingly expressed information from non-government sources in an attempt to contextualise events:

'Until you've been there you can't imagine either as a person, or as a professional, just how distressing and inhumane the conditions are,' Dr Sparrow told Channel 9. 'There's [sic] no facilities and there aren't any services provided to actually support the refugees either medically, or psychologically or in recreation, and this all has a very profound effect on their medical and physical health.' (Adv758, 29 January 2002: 4)

The use of information from non-official sources increased after the federal government ordered reporters to stay at a distance of 700 metres from Woomera detention centre. Sections of the media questioned the extent to which the government was able to enforce a 'blackout' on news from detention centres (Adv749, 28 January 2002; Mares, 2001: 15). The media protest against the government's portrayal of asylum seekers was most obvious in those circumstances where its access to information was being threatened, as well as in response to extreme events such as the drowning incident. Nonetheless, what we might call critical, analytical and contextual reporting remained relatively rare overall.

Pessimism and hope

Analyses of temporal variations outlined in this paper indicate that government and media representations of asylum seekers shifted according to the key events. These findings underscore the mutable nature of cultural constructions and draw attention to the fact that the labels used to describe asylum seekers are not unshakeable. The representations of asylum seekers, while remaining generally negative, changed considerably over the study period. This observation has important

political implications, as it demonstrates that the constructions surrounding asylum seekers may be shifted in a positive direction if the political will to do so exists. Given that the federal government and the media have been highly influential in reinforcing negative public perceptions of asylum seekers (Klocker, forthcoming), a prime responsibility for reversing this xenophobic trend should also rest with those institutions. The UNHCR emphasised the ‘special responsibility’ of both politicians and the media to combat xenophobia and intolerance and to resist the ‘temptation to scapegoat refugees’ by making unwarranted linkages between refugees and crime, particularly terrorism (UNHCR, 2001: 3). The evidence obtained throughout this study indicates that such recommendations had little effect on the federal government’s representations of asylum seekers, which exhibited unrelenting and potent negativity over the duration of the study period.

Critical commentators have regularly accused the federal government of directing media negativity in relation to the asylum debate (MacCallum, 2002; Mares, 2001; McMaster, 2001; RCOA, 2000). By and large, both government documents and newspaper articles shared a hyper-negative portrayal of asylum seekers. Government representations of asylum seekers appear to have been associated with a political desire to justify and enhance support for increasingly exclusive asylum policies, and with the politics of a federal election. In addition, there is evidence of a considerable exchange of meaning between government and media at the thematic level, and with respect to the specific vocabulary adopted to describe asylum seekers. One explanation for this similarity is that the federal government and media have reacted to shared external stimuli — that they were responding to the same events and debates. This explanation accounts for the shared theme and foci, but the deployment of similar vocabulary is suggestive of an exchange of rhetoric. The fact that the media were largely reliant on the federal government for information indicates that the federal government played a commanding role in this exchange of meaning regarding asylum seekers. The findings provide a basis for speculating that a hierarchical pattern of influence was in operation over the duration of the study period, supporting Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) propaganda model.

There were occasions when the media deviated from the federal government’s representation of asylum seekers. The media departed from the government line in instances where media workers’ access to information was threatened, or in response to extreme events such as the drowning tragedy. Evidence of disruptions to a hierarchical exchange of meaning between government and media, although rare, highlight the possibility of establishing more balanced media representations of asylum seekers, even in the face of a government’s unrelenting negativity. The flow of meaning is by no means unidirectional. Indeed, the media can exert an ‘upward’ influence on the asylum discourse if they recognise the overwhelmingly negative and biased representations of asylum seekers that currently pervade. Evidence that the media can estrange themselves from negative government rhetoric emerged in the wake of the drowning incident in late October 2002, and should have been capitalised upon following the revelations of the ‘children overboard’ Senate inquiry.

Notes

- 1 The constructions of asylum seekers have been strongly linked to Islamophobia, and anti-Arab sentiment, which symbolically feed off, and into, Western imaginaries of Muslim terror and fanaticism. The findings on Islamophobia and nationalism in discourses surrounding asylum seekers are reported on elsewhere (Klocker, forthcoming).
- 2 *The Advertiser* is a daily (six issues a week) metropolitan newspaper serving the greater Adelaide area. *The Sunday Mail* is the Sunday stable mate of *The Advertiser*. The papers are owned by News Ltd and have a circulation of almost 600 000, higher on weekends (up 800 000).
- 3 The findings of the 'children overboard' inquiry of a Select Committee of the Australian Senate (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002: Chs 8 and 9) suggested that Australian security officials had organised 'disruption campaigns' against boats such as that which had sunk, with the loss of 356 lives (see also Marr and Wilkinson, 2003: 33–34, 40–43, 66–68).
- 4 A significant point of divergence was noted between the empirical results of this study and observations in some contemporary commentaries. While RCOA (2000) and Mares (2001) attest that the federal government frequently portrayed asylum seekers as a 'crisis', 'invasion' or 'flood', these constructions were not common in the government documents examined. It may be that these natural disaster discourses were simply too sensationalist. The use of such terms in media releases may have undermined the solemnity and integrity that official government statements depend upon in order to protect their discursive legitimacy and power.
- 5 A series of reports during 2002 and 2003, and some civil cases between ex-employees and centre owners, detailed the appalling material and psychological conditions within detention centres.
- 6 Opinion pieces and editorials were excluded from analysis of primary source as they tended to rely predominantly on the opinion of the author.

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