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REFUGEES, RADIO JOURNALISM AND COMMUNICATIONS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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Abstract

Federal Government policies aimed at preventing boatpeople¹ from reaching Australian shores have cost taxpayers an estimated \$300 million per year since 2001. Staff and students at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) have embarked on a new project to ask whether a more deliberative form of public engagement might have yielded a different, more composed response to the increase in numbers of boatpeople arrivals that occurred after 1999. This QUT project explores the potential for journalists to facilitate community deliberation about viable and realistic responses to the challenges created by asylum seeker and refugee arrivals. This paper presents the findings of a pilot radio project aimed at promoting deliberation and redressing some of the imbalances in current media coverage on these issues.

Introduction

¹ The colloquial term, boatpeople, is used in this article to refer to people who arrive in Australia by boat without visas or other required documentation. It is not meant as a derogatory term. It is used because the article discusses the differences in public perception of unauthorised boat arrivals compared to other asylum seekers and refugees.

The question of how to respond to incoming boatpeople has been one of the most contentious issues in Australian politics in recent years. This is exemplified by the findings of Reame, a media monitoring company that records and analyses the programs of 270 Australian radio stations. In the months following the so-called Tampa crisis of 2001, Reame managing director Peter Maher said: 'In all the years we have been analysing talkback, no subject has ever been discussed more widely or with more passion than Australia's stance on refugees' (MacDonald 2001: 7). Two years later, Maher recalled: 'At that time, about 61 per cent of all callers were totally opposed to asylum-seekers and were totally in agreement with the Government's policy then. Nothing has changed, the figure is nearly exactly the same. I still can't get over the level of vitriol directed at those asylum-seekers' (Peake 2003: B2).

It is estimated that Federal Government policies – formed in quick reaction to public agitation in 2001 to deter boatpeople from Australian shores – cost taxpayers an additional \$300 million per year (Kingston 2002: 5). Staff and students at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) have embarked on new project to ask whether a more deliberative form of public discussion about the topic might have yielded a different solution. This QUT project places journalists at the centre of community deliberation about economically and socially feasible responses to the challenges created by incoming asylum seekers and refugees. The QUT team members did not start with a presumption that there was a pre-existing 'best answer' to the questions of how to respond to changes in the numbers, methods of arrival and ethnic background of asylum seekers. Instead, the team has been exploring how the news media might try to gauge public concerns on the issues and produce journalistic works that helped citizens to resolve such concerns.

Newsroom deadlines and budgets dictate that mainstream journalists usually draw heavily from official sources from political, business and other large organisations to set the news

agenda (Fishman 1980: 51-52; Gans 1979: 128; Hall et al. 1979: 58; McNair 1998: 62-81). By contrast, the QUT team has been experimenting with approaches that go straight to ordinary citizens to establish the news agenda. Queenslanders have been asked what concerns them about asylum seeker and refugee arrivals, and why they hold such concerns. The short-term aim is to use the input to produce stories on topics that citizens feel confused or insufficiently informed about.

The longer-term goal is to develop the approaches used by bodies such as the National Issues Forums and Kettering Foundation in the United States, which have mapped processes of how communities (i) nominate particular problems for public deliberation, (ii) frame those problems to identify their true nature, (iii) identify possible solutions to problems and (iv) weigh the benefits and tradeoffs associated with different solutions (Mathews 2002; Mathews and McAfee 2001). The overall project arises from research that the author commenced on journalism and such deliberative processes while she was undertaking a six-month international fellowship with the Kettering Foundation in Ohio, USA, in 2004.

Limitations of Previous Media Coverage of Refugees

The topic of refugees and asylum seekers has prompted many fractious debates in community and media circles since 1999. The peak of community tensions was arguably in 2001, when the subject became the year's 'hottest' election issue. Rehome's analysis found that talkback radio stations fielded 8430 calls that year on boatpeople and the Howard Government's position on the topic. Boatpeople were often described in terms such as 'human waste' or potential employees of the terrorist leader, Osama bin Laden (MacDonald 2001: 7).

Given that relatively few Australians were directly encountering incoming asylum seekers or immediately affected by their arrivals, it can be assumed that much of the information fuelling this public concern was delivered via the mainstream mass media. Academic researchers and media commentators have identified significant problems with media representation of asylum seekers and refugees that might have limited public understanding of the issues.

The *Daily Telegraph's* Piers Akerman is among the conservative commentators who have disparaged what they see as journalists' portrayal of boat people and asylum seekers as 'poor and desperate wretches' who have suffered at the hands of Prime Minister John Howard's 'cruel, inhumane government'. Boatpeople should instead be described 'as they are: would-be illegal immigrants', Akerman (2002) says.

A considerable body of academic research and commentary presents the opposite perspective, and instead indicates that there has been a widespread problem of stories demonising asylum seekers by describing their arrivals in terms of invasion, attack, contagious disease, floods or tidal waves (e.g., Lygo 2004; Mares 2002: 28-9; Pickering 2000). The news media have circulated direct and implied messages that asylum seekers may threaten peace and national security, and that their numbers may include 'sleeper' terrorists (Betts 2002: 34; Mares 2002: 49-50, 134). At the highpoint of community tensions about boatpeople in 2001, stories rarely included the voices of asylum seekers and refugees themselves. The mass media, particularly the tabloid media and talkback radio, have furthermore been found to reflect general Australian discomfort with the increased numbers of Middle Eastern and Islamic people among asylum seekers and refugees (Poynting and Noble 2002; Ward 2002).

Some of the inadequacies of reporting stem clearly from the Federal Government's monopoly as the overwhelmingly dominant source of information in stories on asylum seekers. Federal Government limitations on access detention centres severely curtail journalists' opportunities to obtain perspectives from inside such centres. The Government's restrictions are so severe that they prompted Reporters Sans Frontières to downgrade Australia's rating on its international Press Freedom Index in 2003, from 12th to 50th most-free country for reporters.

Some problems in reporting have also stemmed from limitations of journalists' understanding of the issues. For example, following the so-called 'Tampa crisis' in 2001, newspaper headlines and stories mixed the terms such as 'asylum seekers', 'refugees', 'boatpeople' and 'illegal immigrants' as if they were interchangeable (Mares 2002).

A content analysis that I conducted of stories in Queensland's *Courier-Mail* in 2003 suggested that coverage of asylum seeker and refugee issues improved considerably in the years following the Tampa crisis. In the 100-day period that was studied – from July 1 to November 15 – a wider range of issues were covered. Although government figures were still the dominant sources, journalists were making a concerted effort to include asylum seeker and refugees' stories, voices and perspectives. Almost totally absent, however, were the voices and perspectives of community members or groups representing various community sectors, such as non-government organisations (Romano 2004).

The absence of such community input reduces the potential for journalists to create stories that resonate with community concerns and help citizens to fully understand and respond to changing conditions. For example, journalists have rarely shown awareness of the reasons for such intense public anxiety about asylum seekers at a point in time when there has

been no increase in the total quota of refugees accepted into Australia. The only change has been a sudden rise in the number of boatpeople attempting to lodge on-shore applications in the late 1990s in comparison to numbers of refugees accepted through off-shore programs.

Radio Deliberation and Refugee Issues

The radio project currently being undertaken by QUT attempts to identify how a deeper understanding of the basis of these community concerns can help journalists to better address community information needs. The QUT team plans to use a range of different strategies to tap into community sentiments. Such strategies include stakeholder consultations, community forums, town-hall meetings and focus groups.

In the early stages of research, only five focus groups have been undertaken so far, each in the greater Brisbane area. However, even this rudimentary research has revealed some noteworthy trends, which QUT Journalism students have used to develop experimental radio programs. The focus groups have identified information gaps that might prevent citizens from composedly considering how to respond to asylum seeker and refugee arrivals. If journalists were aware of such information gaps, they would find it very easy to ‘plug’ them through judicious use of background information.

The first issue that journalists could address with little difficulty is public confusion about what a refugee is. Focus group participants were generally unaware that under Australian law, refugee status is only granted to people who are deemed unable to return to their homeland due to a fear of being persecuted because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a social group. Many focus group participants felt that *any* person escaping problems in his/her homeland might be legally eligible for refugee status.

Although the definition of a refugee can be explained in a few judiciously chosen words, such explanations are almost never included in stories about asylum seekers and refugees.

Journalists unintentionally exacerbate confusion about what type of person might be called a refugee by using the word loosely. For example, a study of the 35 Australian newspapers lodged in the Nexis database found that for first two weeks following the 2004 Boxing Day earthquake and tsunami, those newspapers published more than 200 stories that referred to people who had been forced from their villages as ‘refugees’ or residents of ‘refugee camps’. In such stories, the ‘refugees’ were all individuals seeking refuge after their homes were destroyed in countries from Indonesia to Africa’s east coast. Because their plight resulted from a natural disaster, they did not fit Australia’s legal definition of a refugee. The distinction between legally recognised refugees and people seeking refuge has not been explained in any story about the Boxing Day earthquake and tsunami to date.

Comments by focus group participants suggest that ambiguity about who might be accepted as a refugee has contributed to fears – such as those expressed so strongly in 2001 – that Australia may be at risk of being ‘overrun’ by boatpeople. These fears may have been compounded by the many journalistic stories that included comparisons of asylum seeker arrivals to unmanageable phenomenon such as pandemics, invasions or floods.

A second issue that emerged clearly from the focus groups was that participants drew distinctions between *boatpeople* and *refugees*. Participants were suspicious about why someone with a legitimate claim to refugee status would need to come to Australia through what were perceived as illegitimate channels. One focus group participant, for example, expressed a conviction that while ‘most refugees’ were escaping from religious or political persecution, they always seemed to have ‘a lot of money’. ‘If they have a lot money,’ he

asked, ‘why don’t they do it by the *proper* means of getting into the country, instead of doing it *illegally*?’

Focus group participants often expressed pride about times when Australia had aided refugees in need. However, they also expressed a view that Australians should look after their own first and were sceptical about the authenticity of boatpeople’s claims to being refugees. Because of such factors, they were concerned about spending taxpayers’ money on boatpeople whose claims might be rejected. As one woman said:

They just turn up, and we have to do something with them. We have to feed them. We have to give them blankets. We have to entertain their children.... And who’s paying for it? I’m quite happy for people to come here to Australia... but it’s not fair that we’ve got to just pay for these people when we don’t know what the situation is.

Katherine Betts’ study of opinion polls conducted between 1991 and 2002 similarly finds that there was an increase in support for the principle of accepting *refugees* into Australia at the same time as an increase in support for turning back *boats* carrying asylum seekers. “The public makes a distinction between refugees selected under the off-shore program and self-selected asylum seekers; hostility to boatpeople does not mean hostility to refugees,” Betts concluded.

This distinction was evident when the Australian community pressured the Federal Government to accept refugees from East Timor and Kosovo in 1999, but then evinced widespread hostility to increasing arrivals of boatpeople in 2000 and 2001. One focus group participant rationalised the paradox of his acceptance of Timorese refugees and his

uncompromising rejection of boatpeople by asking: “How can you take *genuine refugees* and compare them to *boatpeople*?”

Focus group participants expressed a range of other concerns and queries about asylum seekers and refugees, including:

- whether increasing numbers of Islamic and Middle Eastern refugees would impact on Australia’s current culture and way of life;
- whether refugees threatened Australian jobs and were a net economic loss or gain to Australia;
- why detention centres are often portrayed as problematic environments rather than a ‘step up’ compared to the dangerous environments that a ‘genuine’ refugee might come from;
- whether the arrival of boatpeople and refugees in general poses a security risk to Australia; and
- whether refugees should be obliged to go to the ‘country’, to support rural industries and regional industries, rather than create further pressures in major urban centres.

Since the implementation of the ‘Pacific Solution’ and increased border control in 2001, only one boat has arrived, immediately allaying public fears about onshore asylum seekers. A well-known critic of the Howard Government’s policies, *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Margot Kingston, calculates that the ‘Pacific Solution’ cost approximately \$300,000 for each boatperson it was meant to deter. At a social level, it is problematic that the ‘Solution’ does not address the underlying social roots of public concern about changes in the nature rather than number of refugees.

The Federal Government has been extremely shrewd in the way that it has used the ‘queue jumper’ terminology and projected an image of being tough on ‘illegals’ to utilize the community’s conflicting values of ‘helping those in need’ versus ‘looking after Australia first’. One typical example is Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone’s 2004 announcement of new rules that would allow Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) holders the possibility of obtaining mainstream migration visas. Under these rules, TPV holders who worked in rural areas for at least one year or who married Australian citizens would be eligible to apply for permanent visas. Vanstone stressed that that the Government was not becoming ‘soft on illegal migrants’, but that Australia had reached a stage where it could ‘afford to be more generous’ towards asylum seekers. ‘I can assure you,’ she said, ‘that if the boats had kept coming, these changes would not have occurred’ (Colman and DiGirolamo 2004: 2).

In practice, the rules were far more complex and possibly less publicly palatable than Vanstone had intimated. However, her comments suggested that the Howard Government’s policies embodied mainstream feelings that:

- when boatpeople arrive in significant numbers, then Australians may need to respond with deterrence rather than welcome,
- Australians are generous people who aid asylum seekers and refugees when it is reasonable to do so, and
- Australians welcome asylum seekers and refugees who contribute and blend into Australian society by boosting rural economies and assimilating into the culture (i.e., local family life).

The stories appearing in mainstream media do not usually demonstrate such a nuanced understanding of how audiences use such values to decipher the information that they receive about boatpeople and other asylum seekers. Citizens might be helped to interpret and respond

to issues created by changes in asylum seeker and refugee arrivals if they received more news stories and background data about:

- why global forces led to an increase in asylum seekers travelling to Australia to lodge applications after 1999 rather than attempting to apply in their home countries,
- what factors have changed the ethnic mix of asylum seekers and refugees coming to Australia,
- how claims are processed and the 'legitimacy' of applicants are assessed,
- what boatpeople experience in travelling to and on arrival in Australia,
- what evidence exists to indicate whether incoming asylum seekers should be seen as members of threatening groups or victims of common enemies, and
- what alternatives exist to respond to the factors discussed above, and what are the respective pros and cons of each.

A Pilot Initiative in Deliberative Radio Journalism

QUT journalism students have using the results of the first focus groups to compile three current affairs radio programs, called 'New Horizons, New Homes'. The three 30-minute programs will be aired on community radio 4EB FM in March. The first two programs will address the issues of significance that were identified through the focus groups. The final program summarises the common critiques of Australia's current laws and policies on asylum seekers and refugees, and considers the respective benefits and disadvantages that would flow if alternative responses were adopted.

Several challenges have emerged in the process of producing the pilot radio programs. Even with 90 minutes of program time, students found it impossible to cover all of the topics that they wished to, while still maintaining sufficient depth in each story. As they researched

the topics and read about how Australian laws were applied, many of the student journalists developed a newfound and passionate conviction that Australia's refugee policies were unjust. Scripts had to be rewritten several times before students could obtain a balance of emotional timbre and traditional journalistic 'objectivity', so that the stories might resonate with all listeners rather than just 'true believers' in the cause of being more welcoming to boatpeople, asylum seekers and refugees.

Questions of balance have been challenging to address. Many non-government organisations and other groups exist purely to support asylum seekers and refugees and to work towards a system that would make it easier for boatpeople and other asylum seekers to gain residency or citizenship in Australia. Few, if any, groups exist purely to support and promote the idea of maintaining or intensifying restrictions on the entry of boatpeople, asylum seekers and/or refugees. Institutions and spokespeople who criticise the Howard Government's policies thus abound. By contrast, students found it challenging to find institutions or spokespeople who would offer analytical, as opposed to a populist, commentary from a conservative perspective. In such circumstances, the Federal Government would usually generally be a key source regarding the conservative viewpoint, but despite repeated requests from the students for interviews, government officials did not respond to the students' calls. (Such problems probably result from a general government reluctance to spend too much time on the innumerable requests for interviews made by student journalists across Australia.) This situation forced the students to be creative in using written statements from the government, background research and community vox pops to provide alternative perspectives to those of refugee advocacy groups and refugees themselves.

The programs are a pilot initiative, which have been supported by a Myer Foundation grant. Pending the outcomes of further applications for funding, QUT plans to collaborate

with SBS Radio to conduct further community research and broadcast a more sustained series of stories and programs at a national level. In this longer term, this project will explore strategies to build journalism's role as a mediator of community politics. New models of sustainable journalistic practices around such issues may ultimately contribute produce better solutions for Australian communities and strengthen Australia's social fabric.

About the Author

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