

“The most brutal immigration regime in the developed world”:¹ International Media Responses to Australia’s Asylum-Seeker Policy

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Abstract

Despite intense media coverage of Australia’s asylum-seeker policy, there is minimal attention to structures and processes that influence international media perspectives. This article explores international media responses to Australia’s policy using a mixed-method approach. Our research focused on twenty-five articles from international media outlets surrounding the 2014 “riots” at Manus Island Regional Processing Centre. Three major themes (political relationships, domestic policy and practice, and treatment of asylum-seekers) highlight some key trends in international media representations of this event as an example. We discuss the implications of such findings for the production, representation, and reception of international media stories.

Résumé

Malgré une couverture médiatique intense de la politique australienne concernant les chercheurs d’asile, il y a très peu d’attention portée aux structures et processus qui influencent les perspectives médiatiques internationales. Cet article étudie les réactions de la part des médias internationaux concernant la politique australienne en utilisant une approche à méthodologie mixte. Nos recherches se sont portées sur 25 articles émanant de diffuseurs de médias internationaux autour des « émeutes » de 2014 au

Manus Island Regional Processing Centre (centre de traitement régional pour l’immigration de l’île de Manus). Trois thèmes principaux (Relations politiques, Politique interne et pratiques, et Traitement des chercheurs d’asile) mettent en valeur des tendances clés dans la représentation de la part des médias internationaux de cet événement particulier en tant qu’exemple. Nous abordons une discussion des implications de ces recherches pour la production, la représentation et la réception des actualités médiatiques internationales.

Introduction

Between 16 and 18 February 2014, a range of Australian media sources, including the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the Special Broadcasting Services (SBS) and the *Guardian Australia* reported on “riots” that erupted at the Manus Island Regional Processing Centre, an immigration detention centre for processing asylum-seekers in Papua New Guinea, operated on behalf of the Australian government. The reported “riots” resulted in around sixty asylum-seekers being injured and the tragic death of a twenty-three-year-old Iranian asylum-seeker, Reza Berati.² The violence that ensued following the news of his death once more pushed the issue of Australia’s mandatory detention policy and the conditions under which asylum-seekers live in offshore processing centres into the international spotlight.

Domestic and international media attention to Australia's policy of mandatory detention of asylum-seekers is not new or unusual. Mountz, for instance, suggests that on the international scene, Australia is perceived as having "endless creative capacity" when it comes to the harshness of its asylum-seeker-policy. For instance, in November 2014, the United Nations Committee against Torture strongly criticized the government's handling of asylum-seekers in offshore detention centres; subsequently, Australia's Human Rights Law Centre stated, "On asylum-seekers, Australia is acting in absolute defiance of international law and is being condemned on the world stage for doing so."³ This suggests that Australia's ability to meet its international obligations to refugees and to implement humane asylum-seeker policies are constantly under scrutiny.

Prior to the 2014 events on Manus Island, Australia had experienced two decades of mandatory detention and offshore processing.⁴ First accounts of what the Australian government would today classify as "unauthorized" boat arrivals commenced around 1976 and continued until 1981, carrying Indochinese asylum-seekers following the aftermath of the Vietnam War. During this time, 2,069 asylum-seekers were met by a mainly sympathetic reception from the Australian public, and as these arrivals were perceived as "genuine," asylum-seekers were granted refugee status relatively quickly.⁵ However, between 1989 and 1994, another thirty-six boats carrying 1,688 asylum-seekers arrived, and the previously welcoming Australian public questioned their legitimacy as "jumping the immigration queue." This attitude was fuelled by public and political discourses that saw these new asylum-seekers as a threat to the economy and security of Australia.⁶ In 1992, the Keating Government (Australian Labor Party) responded to such public perceptions, with bipartisan support, by introducing mandatory detention for any non-citizen arriving in Australia without a visa.

Deterrence measures increased in September 2001 under the Howard Government (Liberal-National Coalition) through the "Pacific Solution," particularly in reaction to the well-documented "Tampa Affair."⁷ Asylum-seekers arriving "unlawfully" were sent to Australian-funded detention facilities on nearby islands, namely in Nauru, Manus Island, and Christmas Island, where they remained indefinitely until their claims were processed. Those recognized as refugees were resettled in Australia or a third country (the preferred option). In 2008, the Pacific Solution was formally ended by the Rudd Government (ALP), which saw the closure of offshore processing centres and the removal of Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs). However, this policy stance was seen as unpopular and was consequently reinstated by the succeeding Gillard Government (ALP), who,

from August 2012, oversaw the reintroduction of offshore processing in Nauru and on Manus Island.⁸

As discussed further in the literature review, the current predominantly negative public perceptions of asylum-seekers in Australia not only have the potential to influence how government policies are designed, but can also be employed by government as a "tool" to legitimate policy changes.⁹ Recent research suggests that most perceptions stem from erroneous or misleading beliefs, where asylum-seekers are socially constructed as "illegal" and "non-genuine."¹⁰ More recently, Australian asylum-seeker policy has embraced a focus on border protection,¹¹ indicating a shift to a militarized and securitized model. In September 2013, following the election of Tony Abbott as prime minister, the coalition government's policy aptly entitled Operation Sovereign Borders¹² was introduced, shaped by constructions of asylum-seekers as the threatening "other."¹³ The policy comprises a task force headed by an Australian Defence Force (ADF) general and is granted the ability to "turn back" suspected "illegal" entry vessels (SIEVs) and their passengers to countries of origin (including Sri Lanka and Indonesia).¹⁴ This strategy has caused significant political tension between Indonesia and Australia, as the Indonesian government has yet to agree to either the incursion of the ADF in Indonesian territorial waters or to co-operate with the turning back of the vessels seen to be "illegal."¹⁵

In addition, Operation Sovereign Borders includes the denial of permanent protection visas to asylum-seekers arriving by boat, the reintroduction of TPVs, and the increased capacity of offshore detention centres. The militarized aspect of the policy has also affected the level of access to details on the "operation," as the previously held weekly media briefings from the Department of Immigration and Border Protection were discontinued in January 2014.¹⁶ The media blackout was justified by establishing Operation Sovereign Borders as a "war" on people smugglers with Prime Minister Tony Abbott stating, "If we were at war, we wouldn't be giving out information that is of use to the enemy just because we might have an idle curiosity about it ourselves."¹⁷ As a result, media access to detention centres, whilst already constrained, has been heavily restricted,¹⁸ and the introduction of the Australian Border Force Act 2015 has compounded the issue, as it makes it a criminal offence for workers to disclose any information about detention centres—those who do, risk facing up to two years' imprisonment.¹⁹

Representations of Asylum-Seekers in the Media

Despite the pervasive media commentary on Australia's refugee and asylum policies, there is surprisingly little critical analysis of such commentary, but the growing body of

research on how asylum-seekers are imagined and socially constructed in the Australian media predominantly suggests undue government influence on the reporting of asylum-seekers.²⁰ In particular, there has been minimal attention to the social and cultural practices and conventions that influence perceptions of Australia's asylum-seeker policy from an *international* media perspective. The aim of this article is to look at trends in media representations in international reporting using the Manus Island "riots" as one key example, to contribute a critical perspective on what drives international media reactions to Australia's asylum-seeker policy. In the context of a small social policy research project at University of New South Wales Australia, we sought to explore the following question: *How is the Australian asylum-seeker policy socially constructed within the production, representation, and reception of four international media organizations?* In this article, *production* refers to institutional procedures for gathering, selecting, writing, and editing news.²¹ *Representation* highlights the schematically organized ways to convey information.²² Finally, *reception* refers to potential interpretations and comprehension of information offered in news stories.²³

First, our article briefly discusses key debates on public perceptions of asylum-seekers in Australia, particularly domestic media representations of asylum-seekers, and the intertextuality of media and the state. While the focus is on international media, we outline these debates as background to situate the emerging findings on trends in international media representations discussed in the article. We then present our findings based on a sample of twenty-five articles (appendix A) surrounding the Manus Island detention centre "riots" in February 2014; our research focused on the seven months between 1 November 2013 and 1 June 2014. The twenty-five online news articles were drawn from the *Guardian* (UK), the *New York Times*, the *New York Times International*, and *Al Jazeera*. In addition to their accessibility to a global readership, these publication outlets were chosen to represent a diverse sample, including a mix of news articles, feature articles, and editorial pieces from different countries. Three major themes emerged through our mixed-methods approach of quantitative and textual analysis: (1) political relationships, (2) domestic policy and practice, and (3) treatment of asylum-seekers. These key themes not only bring into question the legality and legitimacy of Australia's policy in the context of diplomatic relationships, particularly with Indonesia (as a "source" country for asylum-seekers in transit), and in the context of international law more broadly, but also highlight some of the policy and practice failures of mandatory detention. We conclude by discussing implications for production, representation, and reception of international media on this topic.

Literature Review

Public Perceptions of Asylum-Seekers in Australia

Recent research suggests that negative perceptions of asylum-seekers in Australia are seamlessly linked to notions of threat, illegitimacy, and instability in the minds of the public because of the way asylum-seekers are depicted in the media.²⁴ This concept of threat stems from the Australian government's approach of positioning asylum-seeker arrivals—particularly by boat—against notions of sovereignty, and extending this perceived "threat" into debates on the country's economy, resources, culture, and, importantly, national security.²⁵ In addition, after the terrorist attacks in New York on 11 September 2001, different media outlets and some politicians have linked asylum-seekers (particularly of Middle Eastern or Muslim backgrounds) arriving by boat to discourses of terrorism and threats to national security.²⁶ These perceptions have played an important role in creating a social "othering" of asylum-seekers and refugees in Australia,²⁷ developing a more strident "anti-asylum-seeker" discourse over time.²⁸ The construction of asylum-seekers as a threatening "other" has contributed significantly to rising public support for harsher policies,²⁹ as political rhetoric can effectively be used to inflame public perceptions that are already negative.

The apparent proliferation of negative perceptions of asylum-seekers in some media outlets and by politicians from the two main political parties is underpinned by concepts of sovereignty, and in particular the Australian body politic's reconceptualized notions of sovereignty, referring to "exclusion with external forms of influence or involvement in domestic political affairs."³⁰ This (re)interpretation of sovereignty has shaped the focus on border security in asylum-seeker discourses, and as such, these representations of sovereignty appear important to the Australian government to support their policies and strategies of constructing asylum-seekers as "illegals" to then provide "solutions" to stop boat arrivals.³¹ Commencing with a statement in October 2001 by Prime Minister John Howard ("We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come")³² and continuing to this day encased in a militarized guise, sovereignty is now articulated by the current government as the "right to exclude," citing in its defence for this strategy an obligation to protect Australian citizens from terrorism and the deviant "other."³³ Concurrently, media representations of ideas of sovereignty arguably play a key role in supporting, sustaining, and "setting the agenda" for the government's campaign by constructing public opinion rather than merely reflecting it.³⁴

Domestic Media Representation of Asylum-Seekers

In Australia, asylum-seeker and refugee advocacy groups increasingly use social media to good effect in their media

campaigns, and there is a growing trend among such groups to counter negative portrayals of asylum-seekers through positive coverage of asylum-seekers' stories. For instance, the material developed by a national online community advocacy group Get-Up, and a volunteer not-for-profit human rights media organization Right Now, suggest the potential for the use such stories to lobby the government for more compassionate responses.³⁵ In sharp contrast, the literature suggests that traditional domestic media have perpetuated representations of asylum-seekers as deviants, juxtaposed with discourses on national integrity, disease, and otherness.³⁶ It is unsurprising then that domestic media constructions of asylum-seekers are predominantly negative, with a subtext of implied criminality.³⁷ As such, the multicultural discourse currently informing government policy is *not* shaped by principles of "social cohesion" and "integration"; rather, and considering the example of how Sudanese migrants are represented in the Australian media, there seems to be a disconnect between the multicultural agenda and "social othering" rhetoric.³⁸ Dominant media discourses can directly shape how social phenomena, including asylum-seekers arriving by boat to Australia, are interpreted and understood by its audience.³⁹ As such, the media appear to be complicit in the social construction of a particularly influential reality.⁴⁰

Intertextuality of Media and State

Several authors suggest that there are two reasons why the Australian government has an apparently asymmetrical power relationship with domestic media and their role in the creation of knowledge surrounding the social construction of asylum-seekers.⁴¹ Firstly, the media understandably rely heavily on government sources for information, often because they have limited options,⁴² and by doing so may disallow a space for other stakeholder voices, including asylum-seekers, to be heard. Secondly, the production of media does not occur in a vacuum, and as a result can lead to its construction being influenced by a political rhetoric that can engender public and media perceptions of a threatening "other."⁴³ This dynamic creates a cycle whereby public perceptions and government policy are based on media and government representations, which in turn suggest that the government has led public opinion and media representations surrounding asylum-seeker policy.⁴⁴

However, this asymmetrical power relation also offers an avenue for change, as the power differentials can shift according to the key events that surround asylum-seekers,⁴⁵ suggesting that social categorizations of asylum-seekers are not fixed but malleable.⁴⁶ Such shifts in power can occur for a number of reasons, but one major influence is how international events continue to shape dominant ideas about

asylum-seekers. For example, the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States led to a change in how asylum-seekers were portrayed in the media, as mentioned above. Similarly, the extensive media coverage of the European refugee crisis in 2015–16 triggered shifts in perceptions of asylum-seekers after Germany's acceptance of thousands of mainly Syrian refugees; this changed, however, in a very short time, from being seen as an enormous act of compassion to what is now effectively portrayed by the country's far right as an act of betrayal of the German people.⁴⁷ Importantly though, when a *disruption* occurs to the hierarchical flow of information between the government and the media, the latter are capable of seeking other sources of information.⁴⁸ For example, this would have happened when the Australian government, in the context of Operation Sovereign Borders, imposed a media "blackout" for the first six months of its implementation, which in effect meant withholding access to official information on its operations from the media and public.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, policy shifts can occur only when diverse voices can contest political objectives,⁵⁰ which, when paired with external international events, can become catalysts for alternative and more balanced news reporting.

Design and Method

The theoretical paradigm of critical realism, which posits that observable reality is socially produced through unobservable generative mechanisms,⁵¹ guided our exploration of the structures and processes that may have influenced international media responses to Australia's asylum-seeker policy during the selected time frame. Such mechanisms include social practices, social agents, and language, which in turn produce social phenomena.⁵² A mixed-methods approach is particularly valued with the theoretical framework of critical realism.⁵³ As such, the media are collectively seen as an institution, a cultural construct imbued with social values and knowledge.⁵⁴

Methods

Quantitative content analysis combined with textual analysis allowed us to ascertain trends in the ways in which asylum-seekers were depicted in international media reporting and if these changed within the seven-month time frame. In our quantitative analysis, predetermined codes derived from the research aims and question (newspaper source, topic, tone, stakeholders, and politicians) provided a framework to understand how international media responded to Australia's policy and practices, by framing data through restricted analytic criteria relevant to our research question.⁵⁵ However, quantitative content analysis can only describe what messages are produced and transmitted by the media, rather than illustrate what *meanings*

are imparted and how these messages may be received and interpreted by audiences.⁵⁶ To complement this quantitative approach and further our understanding of trends in international reporting on the “riots” in Manus Island, we used textual analysis to explore questions such as “What gets reported? Where does the issue get reported? What is the location of coverage, how much gets reported, and why does it get reported?”⁵⁷ Our main themes, namely political relationships, domestic policy and practice, and treatment of asylum-seekers, were generated in a *concept*-driven way, based on the results summarized in table 2 (quantitative content analysis by topic). The sub-themes were then generated in a *data*-driven way, employing a subsumption strategy of textual analysis.

The coding scheme (table 6) and the sampling procedures outlined below ensured that our methods were transparent.⁵⁸ Given the small scale of the research, we acknowledge a limitation, in that representative results cannot be reproduced; however, our main aim was to explore recent representations in international media responses to gain a preliminary idea of trends on this topic. Initial findings on such trends can then inform future larger-scale and longitudinal research in this interdisciplinary area. Furthermore, we were aware that textual analysis cannot be completely objective as codes require interpretation of themes via researchers.⁵⁹ This is why we (authors 1, 3, and 4) discussed extensively and agreed on the selected codes before proceeding with our analysis. Assuming that media are socially constructed, we researchers must be familiar with the socio-political contexts in which news reports were produced,⁶⁰ and so this was the topic of several in-class discussions prior to the research being undertaken.

Sampling

Our media sample included twenty-five news print articles published in English from four international outlets: the broadsheet newspapers of the *Guardian* (UK), the *New York Times*, the *New York Times International*, and *Al-Jazeera*. While all four are all available online, at the time of the study, we focused on the print editions of these newspapers. As this was not a funded initiative and the work was required to be completed within a short period (one academic semester), we focused on four broadsheet newspapers to gather our data. This provided us with a discrete sample to ensure that our analysis could be completed within the required time. Our aim was not to systematically analyze a large sample of articles, but to look at recent trends in international media reporting of key events around asylum-seeker issues. The articles were sourced through two databases, Proquest Newsstand and Factiva, using the search terms *Australia AND Refugee OR Asylum-seeker*. We limited

our search results to three and a half months before and after the discursive incidents surrounding the death of Reza Berati on Manus Island in February 2014, that is, between 1 November 2013 and 1 June 2014. As this tragic outcome was a notable event putting an international spotlight on Australia’s mandatory detention policy, we chose this as a specific point of reference, and extended the time frame to demonstrate a shift (if any) on media reporting over time. Our initial search returned fifty-three articles; each article was then reviewed to match our content criteria. To answer our research question specifically, each article had to relate to Australian policy and/or practice concerning asylum-seekers and/or refugees or the resulting effects of such a policy and/or practice, reducing our sample from to twenty-five articles.

Results

Quantitative Content Analysis

Using quantitative content analysis, the sample was organized through five descriptive codes: newspaper source, topic, tone, stakeholders, and politicians. Each code was tabled to detail the results in a quantitative manner (table 1). For ease of reference, articles belonging to the *New York Times* and the *New York Times International* were combined into one category (which we refer to as the *New York Times/International*).

First, articles were sorted by newspaper source: out of the twenty-five newspaper items sampled, all three publications had similar frequency of news articles relating to Australian policy and asylum-seekers. The frequency indicates that the results are not skewed towards a single media organization (see table 1).

Second, articles were differentiated by three topics (see table 2): Australian government policy and practice, asylum-seeker and/or refugees, or both topics combined. All three media organizations based the majority of their articles on Australian government policy and practice. Interestingly, unlike the *New York Times/International* and *Al Jazeera*, the *Guardian* was seen to focus on a single topic of an asylum-seeker event, instead of mixing policy and political perspectives.

Third, the articles were categorized into three “tone” dimensions: negative, neutral, and positive (see table 3).

Table 1. Articles by newspaper source

Newspaper	Number of articles	%
<i>Guardian</i>	8	32
<i>New York Times/International</i>	10	40
<i>Al Jazeera</i>	7	27
Total	25	100

Table 2. Subject of article by newspaper

Subject	<i>Guardian</i>	<i>New York Times/ International</i>	<i>Al Jazeera</i>	Total
Australian government policy and practice	6	6	4	16
Asylum-seekers and/or refugees	2	—	2	4
Both Australian government policy/practice and asylum-seekers and/or refugees	—	4	1	5
Total	8	10	7	25

Table 3. Tone of article by newspaper

Tone	<i>Guardian</i>	<i>New York Times/ International</i>	<i>Al Jazeera</i>	Total
Negative	6	9	3	18
Neutral	2	1	4	7
Positive	—	—	—	—
Total	8	10	7	25

Table 4. Stakeholders represented by newspaper

Stakeholders	<i>Guardian</i>	<i>New York Times/ International</i>	<i>Al Jazeera</i>	Total
Politicians	14	11	7	32
Academics and lawyers	1	4	1	6
Advocacy groups	5	2	3	10
Asylum-seekers/refugees	2	2	—	4
Total	22	19	11	52

Articles that were found to use a negative tone used words with negative connotations describing the policy and practices as “brutal,” “hard-line,” “harsh,” “illegal,” “punitive,” and “tantamount to torture” (we recognize here that the media could report on policies using a negative tone if they were perceived as detrimental to asylum-seekers and refugees, while at the same time, still be deemed successful by the government). Positive tones referred to articles that presented a favourable stance on the Australian government’s approach to addressing issues surrounding asylum-seekers through mandatory detention. Neutral articles conveyed neither a positive nor a negative position towards Australian asylum-seeker policy. We chose to analyze the tones of the articles as one way to explore the broader attitudes represented by international media towards Australian policy and practice. Overall, the tone was overwhelmingly identified as negative, and this was consistent before *and* after the events of the Manus Island “riots” in February 2014. Of note, none of the articles were categorized as positive, suggesting

that all three media organizations conveyed similar messages and opinions on Australia’s asylum-seeker policy.

Fourth, stakeholders were identified as a person or specific groups represented in the articles (see table 4). Four groups were identified: politicians, academic and lawyers, advocacy groups, and asylum-seekers/refugees. The total representation of politicians was higher than the other three groups combined, suggesting that articles were politically weighted and the media had relied predominantly on political sources. Asylum-seekers and refugees as a group were identified four times only, highlighting a lack of comments from those most affected by the set of policies. In addition, we noted that the voices most prominent in the representations of Australia’s asylum-seeker policy in international media responses were male politicians. Gender was not a category we included in our initial analysis but was one that emerged from our small sample nevertheless.

Finally, to further explore the dominant representation of politicians, we identified the names of politicians and

Table 5. Politicians quoted by newspaper

Politicians	New York Times/ <i>Guardian</i> <i>International</i> <i>Al Jazeera</i>			Total
	<i>Guardian</i>	<i>International</i>	<i>Al Jazeera</i>	
Tony Abbott (prime minister, Australia)	4	4	1	9
Scott Morrison (minister for immigration and border protection, Australia)	3	1	5	9
Sarah Hanson-Young (federal parliamentarian, Australia)	2	—	—	2
Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (president, Indonesia)	1	—	—	1
Marty Natalegawa (minister for foreign affairs, Indonesia)	1	3	—	4
Julie Bishop (minister for foreign affairs, Australia)	1	—	—	1
Malcolm Fraser (former prime minister, Australia)	1	—	—	1
Richard Marles (shadow minister for immigration and border protection, Australia)	1	—	—	1
Indonesian government officials	—	2	1	3
John Kerry (secretary of state, United States)	—	1	—	1
Total	14	11	7	32

the frequency with which they were represented within our sample (see table 5). Ten different politicians from three countries (Australia, Indonesia, and the United States) were quoted, although this list overwhelmingly involved Australian and Indonesian politicians and government officials, with only one government official from the United States. Half of the quotes came from two politicians in the governing political party of the time, Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Minister for Immigration and Border Protection Scott Morrison. However, political voices from Nauru and Papua New Guinea were non-existent; this is surprising, as firstly, both countries are key stakeholders hosting offshore detention centres, and secondly, local workers from Papua New Guinea were involved in the Manus Island “riot.” From the analysis, Australian political voices dominated the discourse, since Australian politicians were responsible for the policy; nevertheless, the absence of voices from Nauru and Papua New Guinea in our small sample was still striking.

Textual Analysis

Informed by the literature review, our subsequent textual analysis identified three additional main themes and thirteen sub-themes:

1. *Political Relationships*: Australian and Indonesian Relations; and Australian Policy and International Law
2. *Domestic Policy and Practice*: Media Blackout; Policy and/or Practice Failure; Militarization; Privatization; Creation of the Deviant Other; and Government-Held Responsibility

3. *Treatment of Asylum-Seekers*: Living Conditions (Offshore); Living Conditions (Onshore); Risk to Physical Safety; Children in Detention; and Mental Health

Each article was coded into one main theme and then counted once or more into the subgroup of the main theme (table 6, appendix B). The media outlets focused on Australia’s political relationships with the Indonesian government, highlighting the changing level of tension and cooperation between the two nations. Additionally, political voices were often referenced in defence and criticism of offshore detention policy. Of note, the category of Treatment of Asylum-seekers (specifically Risk to Physical Safety) was discussed frequently, detailing the harsh and uninhabitable environments of detention centres.

Table 7 (appendix B) shows the results of the three main themes outlined in table 6 but by newspaper source. Key trends in media representations reveal that:

4. The *Guardian* reported the highest frequency of news articles on Domestic Policy and/or Practice in relation to asylum-seekers (fourteen).
5. The majority of articles published in both the *New York Times/International* (eight) and *Al Jazeera* (six) were coded into subgroups under the third category of Treatment of Asylum-Seekers.
6. *Al Jazeera* reported the same number of articles coded into Domestic Policy and/or Practice as the *New York Times/International* (four).
7. Articles in the *New York Times/International* (six) discussed Political Relationships; the *Guardian* (four) and *Al Jazeera* (three) also discussed this topic (albeit to a lesser extent), with a focus on how Australia’s

policy approach affected asylum-seekers, suggesting a concern for the human impact of policies.

The three main themes were then further coded into subgroups (tables 8, 9, and 10, appendix B), and the five highest-coding frequency sub-themes were: Risk to Safety (ten), Indonesian and Australian Relations (seven), Australian Policy and International Law (six), Media Blackout (five), and Creation of the Deviant Other (five). The *Guardian* reported the highest frequency of themes relating to Risk to Safety (six) and Creation of the Deviant Other (three). Further key trends identified were:

8. The *Guardian* was the only newspaper to report on Media Blackout (five, table 9), while the *New York Times/International* focused on Australian–Indonesian political relationships (four, table 8).
9. The focus on Australia’s international law commitments was evenly reported across all three outlets (two articles for each, table 8).
10. When reviewing the *Guardian* and *Al Jazeera* articles in relation to frequencies in subgroups across tables 8, 9, and 10, references to Risk to Physical Safety came up highest for both media organizations (six and three respectively, table 10).

Discussion

Production

The journalistic pursuit of objectivity can potentially be lost to structured bias, where demand for credible sources coupled with time pressures of news production can lead to the favouring of established sources.⁶¹ Our results showed a favouring of political sources in the production of news stories in international media, which correlates with previous studies that revealed an asymmetrical power relationship between government and domestic media.⁶² Obviously, the media privilege the voices of those responsible for the policy, but this should not automatically mean precluding input from other key stakeholders, so the absence of voices from country representatives who were partners in implementing the policy was particularly striking. It could be argued that the “convenience” of accessing (pre-prepared and readily accessible) political comment had led to an exclusion of other key stakeholders’ voices. Concurrently, international media outlets provided a relatively more inclusive platform for stakeholders, including advocacy groups, academics, lawyers, asylum-seekers, and refugees, who are all then able to contribute to the discursive practice and social constructions of asylum-seekers in Australia through such coverage. This adds to perspectives arguing that while the reporting on asylum-seeker issues was seen to be largely negative, “it is no longer reliant on the stance of the government [but includes] a broader range of perspectives.”⁶³

Furthermore, political voices within the international media included not only Australian government representatives, but also Indonesian government officials. However, as noted above, government officials from Papua New Guinea (even though the events took place on Manus Island) and Nauru were not represented. This may also be linked to continued lack of access for journalists to Nauru in particular, an issue that will arguably increase in a regime guided by the Australian Border Force Act 2015. Now that media access to offshore detention centres has been restricted even more, and the legislation makes it a criminal offence for workers to disclose any information about the centres, credible sources of information on key events are even more scant. Our analysis of news content prior to the enactment of the legislation in 2015 suggests that the government already heavily influenced the production of information, and the enactment of the Australian Border Force Act is likely to reinforce rather than disrupt this dynamic.

Of note, government influence on the production (as well as representation and reception) of media can decrease as an outcome of measures such as media blackouts,⁶⁴ one of the major sub-themes in our findings. This trend is of critical importance, as measures such as media blackouts in the context of Operation Sovereign Borders could actually result in more personalizing perspectives being presented. As such, forcing media outlets to seek alternate sources of information could counter the government’s efforts to control access to such information, while offering more balanced views on the implementation and impacts of asylum-seeker policies. Another relatively minor finding is the dominance of male voices in our very small sample in the production of asylum-seeker constructs in international media, due to the fact that both Australian government representatives responsible for the issues at the time were (and continue to be) male. Our results showed that only five out of twenty-five stakeholder representatives were women. Further research could investigate whether this gender disparity affects media narratives.

Representation

Findings from our small purposive sample suggest that international media reporting attempted to present relatively more nuanced representations of Australia’s asylum-seeker policy. Indeed, target audiences of newspapers could affect decision-making on representations of political voices.⁶⁵ Additionally, the prominence of two sub-themes—Australian policy and international law, and Australian and Indonesian relations—suggests that our sample of articles from the international media showed interest in exploring shifting notions of sovereignty, particularly in relation to Indonesia as a close neighbour and country of transit

for many asylum-seekers travelling to Australia by boat. If sovereignty is based on the principle of removing external forms of influence in domestic affairs, border security and the right to exclude asylum-seekers is certainly more salient in the Australian context.⁶⁶ The trends in our sample of twenty-five articles suggest that media outlets tended to reject this discourse surrounding sovereignty, by focusing on the importance of international co-operation and regulation in two ways: first, by highlighting the violation of Indonesian sovereignty through Australian naval incursion during the implementation of Operation Sovereign Borders, and second, by presenting Australia's policy and practices against international instruments. While it has been argued that growing negative perceptions of asylum-seekers in Australia are informed by social understandings of sovereignty,⁶⁷ we argue that if international media outlets continue to present alternative understandings of sovereignty, and by extension, differing representations of asylum-seekers and asylum-seeking, more nuanced representations may be more possible. As such, longitudinal, mixed-methods research would be useful to ascertain the impact of international media responses on shifting public perceptions and attitudes.

Reception

Our mixed-methods analysis suggests that the social reality constructed in international media tends to question the legality of the Australian government's actions and establishment of the legitimacy of asylum-seekers. The prominence of the themes Risk to Safety and Creation of the Deviant Other in our small sample highlights the international media's focus on consistent threat to safety that asylum-seekers face in detention, while at the same time, being portrayed as "deviant" in the imagination of Western audiences. Here too, the results show trends whereby more nuanced international media representations in this study have the potential to challenge this "othering" process, but longitudinal research would be useful to determine how positive social constructions by international media can influence domestic media as well as public perceptions of refugees and asylum-seekers.

Conclusion

As a democracy with a long immigration history, Australia has gradually become obstinate on asylum-seeker policy; the ethic of *hospitality*, underpinned by principles of fairness, openness, respect, and generosity, has been replaced with a culture of fear and anxiety towards the "other" that feeds moral panic in relation to asylum-seekers.⁶⁸ Clearly, the media (domestic and international) can play a more influential role in shifting perceptions about asylum-seekers within Australia. The trends discussed in this article suggest

that international media representations can challenge the view of asylum-seekers as "dangerous criminals" typically conveyed in Australian newspapers. As such, more critical stances on media reporting on migration-related topics, as advocated by the Ethical Journalism Network,⁶⁹ are certainly warranted. Through our analysis, we wanted to answer Foucault's call to point out "what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest,"⁷⁰ and add a critical outlook to media responses to Australia's asylum-seeker policy.

Appendix A: Twenty-Five Selected Articles

- Al Jazeera*. "Asylum-seeker Dies in Papua New Guinea Camp," 18 February 2014.
- . "Australia Admits Indonesia Border Incursion," 17 January 2014.
- . "Australia Asylum-seeker Identities Published," 19 February 2014.
- . "Australia Probes Detention of Child Refugees," 3 February 2014.
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- "Breakout at Australia's PNG Detention Centre," *Al Jazeera*, 17 February 2014.
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Appendix B

Table 6. Coding frame: Themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme	Focus	Example from sampled articles
Political relationships	Australian and Indonesian relations	Political relationships between Australia and Indonesia	"Australia's relationship with Indonesia has been tested in recent months over Australia's policy on asylum-seekers." ¹
	Australian policy and international law	Australia's international law commitments	"The UNHCR inspection of this family camp, which holds 109 children, said the conditions 'raise serious issues about their compatibility with international human rights law.'" ²
Domestic policy and practice	Media blackout	Media censorship surrounding policy and/or practice concerning asylum-seekers and/or refugees	"Tony Abbott is comfortable refusing the disclosure surrounding asylum-seeker policies." ³
	Policy and/or practice failure	Failure in policy and/or practice of Australia surrounding asylum-seekers and/or refugees	"The department is likely to have breached Australia's privacy laws, which place limits on the disclosure of information held by government entities." ⁴
	Militarization	Use of military and/or navy in Australia's application of policy towards asylum-seekers and/or refugees	"It demanded on Friday that Australia suspend its military-led operation to stop the flow of asylum seekers." ⁵
	Privatization	Use of private security firms on offshore detention processing facilities	"A group of exhibiting artists threatened to boycott the event after it emerged that the main sponsor, Transfield Holdings, held a 12 per cent stake in a company providing services to offshore detention centres." ⁶
	Creation of the deviant other	Addresses language or actions by the Australian government that portray asylum-seekers and/or refugees as deviant other	"Government see current policy as a necessary deterrent to asylum seekers who 'cheat the system' by arriving by boat." ⁷
	Government-held responsibility	Actions the government defines as their responsibility towards asylum-seeker and/or refugee policy	"The Afghans, mainly interpreters and their families were granted refugee visas. This policy reflects Australia's fulfillment of its moral obligation to those who provided invaluable support to Australia's efforts in Afghanistan." ⁸

Treatment of asylum-seekers	Living conditions (offshore)	Living conditions of asylum-seekers in offshore detention (including physical surroundings, provisions, and facilities)	"Amnesty International's report that described Papua New Guinea's Manus Island camp as 'excessively cruel and prison-like.'" ⁹
	Living conditions (onshore)	Living conditions of asylum-seekers in onshore detention (including physical surroundings, provisions, and facilities)	"Meager government payments reduced ... others impose extra obligations on the approximately 33,000 asylum seekers already in Australia, who live on 89% of the standard unemployment benefit rate for which they are now required to do community work, but are not allowed to do paid work." ¹⁰
	Risk to physical safety	Risk to physical safety or physical harm experienced by asylum-seekers and/or refugees during any part of their journey to Australia (includes death of asylum-seekers at sea)	"Gross departure from generally accepted medical standards which have posed significant risk to patients and caused considerable harm." ¹¹
	Children in detention	Children held in offshore and onshore detention	"In 2009, three children under the age of eight were held with their parents at the Villawood facility." ¹²
	Mental health	Mental health of individuals in offshore and onshore detention	"The documents show the two Syrians were suffering severe mental health issues at the time." ¹³

Note: See appendix A for full references.

¹ Gordon (2014); ² Laughland (29 January 2014); ³ Hurst (2013); ⁴ Laughland and Farrell (2014); ⁵ *Al-Jazeera* (17 January 2014); ⁶ Carrigan (8 April 2014);

⁷ Laughland (29 January 2014); ⁸ *Al-Jazeera* (1 January 2014); ⁹ *Al-Jazeera* (13 December 2013); ¹⁰ Taylor and Laughland (2013); ¹¹ Laughland (29 January 2014); ¹² Saul (2014); ¹³ Laughland (15 March 2014)

Table 7. Themes by newspaper

Themes	<i>Guardian</i>	<i>New York Times/International</i>	<i>Al Jazeera</i>	Total
Political relationships	4	6	3	13
Domestic policy and/or practice	14	4	4	22
Treatment of asylum-seekers	11	8	6	25
Total	29	18	13	60

Table 8. International relations by sub-themes and newspaper

Sub-theme	<i>Guardian</i>	<i>New York Times/International</i>	<i>Al Jazeera</i>	Total
Indonesian and Australian relations	2	4	1	7
Australian policy and international law	2	2	2	6
Total	4	6	3	13

Table 9. Domestic policy and practice by sub-theme and newspaper

Sub-theme	<i>Guardian</i>	<i>New York Times/International</i>	<i>Al Jazeera</i>	Total
Media blackout	5	–	–	5
Policy and/or practice failure	3	1	–	4
Militarization	2	–	1	3
Privatization	–	2	1	3
Creation of the deviant other	3	1	1	5
Government responsibility	1	–	1	2
Total	14	4	4	22

Table 10. Treatment of asylum-seekers by sub-theme and newspaper

Sub-theme	<i>Guardian</i>	<i>New York Times/International</i>	<i>Al Jazeera</i>	Total
Living conditions (offshore)	1	3	1	5
Living conditions (onshore)	1	2	–	3
Risk to physical safety	6	1	3	10
Children in detention	1	1	1	3
Mental health	2	1	1	4
Total	11	8	6	25

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