
TWITTER AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

AN ANALYSIS OF ASYLUM SEEKER NARRATIVES IN THE NEW MEDIA LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis reports on a research project investigating the different ways that asylum seekers are represented in the Australian print media and social media. The study involves textual analysis of print media reports and social media discussion of asylum seekers over two separate eight-day periods during 2013 and 2014. In light of the discourses conveyed by the analysis of the two types of media, the primary question that the thesis considers is how do the print media and social media contribute to and interact in the public sphere in relation to the issue of asylum seekers? Supplementary key research questions which inform this overarching investigation include whether mainstream print media provides the requisite interrogation of public policy necessary for a healthy public sphere; whether and in what manner social media impacts on public communication about political issues; and whether social media enables members of the public to participate in and disrupt traditional media narratives about asylum seekers.

The thesis findings include that the print media discussed asylum seeker policy on the basis of its political merits, and conveyed dominant narratives in relation to asylum seekers constructing them as a problem to be solved on the basis of their illegitimacy, immorality and criminality (consistent with the approach adopted and the narratives conveyed by the two major political parties). By contrast, analysis of the data indicated that social media provided an opportunity to disrupt those dominant narratives and convey alternatives that engaged with the experience of asylum seekers. Against the backdrop of those findings, this thesis considers the respective roles of the mainstream media and social media in the public sphere, drawing on the theories of Jürgen Habermas in relation to the role of the public sphere in a functioning democracy. It concludes that social media enhances the dialogue about politics

and society that is ever present in the public sphere, by enabling competing voices to be heard and to engage with one another.

DECLARATION

I certify that the content of this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution. I certify that all sources of information used and any assistance in the preparation of this thesis have been acknowledged.

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I thank my supervisor, Professor Catharine Lumby, for her enthusiasm, encouragement, insight and intellectual generosity. Every time I meet with her she inspires me anew.

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

In July 2014, the Australian navy intercepted 153 Sri Lankan asylum seekers bound for Australia. The 153 were held in an Australian vessel on the high seas. A number of them were children, and one was a three-year old girl called Febrina. While the High Court of Australia decided what the federal government was lawfully able to do with the 153, Prime Minister Tony Abbott denounced the actions of a separate group of asylum seekers held on Christmas Island, indicating that Australia would not be 'morally blackmailed' by asylum seeker mothers who had attempted suicide in an effort to have their children relocated to the Australian mainland. During that week, significant sections of the mainstream press reported on the illegitimacy, immorality and criminality of asylum seekers. At the same time, social media was alight with reactions to the approach of the government and the mainstream media to asylum seeker policy. One tweet read: 'Mr Morrison, what have you done with the 153?', another 'Have mercy...Febrina is just a kid'.

Asylum seeker policy is a lightning rod issue in Australian politics. This thesis uses textual analysis of print media reports and social media discussion over two eight-day periods in August-September 2013 and July 2014 to identify the discourses about asylum seekers that these two types of media convey. In light of those discourses, the primary question that the thesis seeks to answer is how do the print media and social media contribute to and interact in the public sphere in relation to the issue of asylum seekers? In so doing, supplementary key research questions are asked and answered, including: whether mainstream print media provides the requisite interrogation of public policy necessary for a healthy public sphere; whether and in what manner social media impacts on public communication about political

issues; and whether social media enables members of the public to participate in and disrupt traditional media narratives about asylum seekers.

In considering the ways that social media and print media contribute to and interact in the public sphere, this thesis draws on a body of work that began with political philosopher Jürgen Habermas' articulation of the role of the public sphere in democratic societies. Of particular relevance in considering the success of a public sphere is the capacity of the media to interrogate government policy and to mediate between the government and the people. This thesis considers whether the mainstream media, specifically the print media, provides the requisite interrogation of the government's asylum seeker policy, and, critically, of its construction of asylum seekers within that policy. It then examines the way that social media coverage of asylum seekers engages with mainstream media coverage, and finally, it considers what this multi-layered interaction means for the public sphere.

The analysis suggests that a significant portion of the mainstream print media coverage of asylum seekers conveys dominant narratives generally in line with the positions taken by the two major political parties in Australia, while social media commentary provides the opportunity to disrupt the dominant narratives and convey alternatives, providing not only a venue to share the faces of the faceless, but also a space for different voices to be heard. In considering what the interaction between mainstream media and social media means for the health and future of the public sphere in Australia, this thesis argues that social media expands the 'constellation' of spaces in which voices are able to be heard, to argue, to debate and to contribute to the dialogue about issues essential to this democracy.

CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

This thesis investigates the way social media impacts on communication about political issues, including the way in which social media interacts with traditional media in Australia and what this means for the nature and capacity of the public sphere in this democratic society. Given the subject matter of the study, the literature review examines the current body of research in the field of social media studies, which is an emerging but rapidly expanding field of enquiry. Also integral to considering the interaction of mainstream media and social media in the public sphere is the significant body of work on publics and communication flowing from Jürgen Habermas' foundational theory of the structural transformation of the public sphere. This literature review focuses on these two bodies of work as they directly inform and are central to the research questions examined in this thesis. Literature from the field of print media has been described insofar as it informs or is relevant to social media studies and work in relation to the public sphere, but the field of print media studies has not been explored in detail in this thesis due to limitations in space and in light of its tertiary relevance to the matters under investigation.

2.1 SOCIAL MEDIA STUDIES

There is a growing body of literature in relation to the role played by social media in the public sphere. boyd and Ellison provide a working definition of social network sites as (boyd and Ellison 2008, p. 211):

...web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

This definition is broad enough to encompass relatively closed social media sites such as Facebook which provide users with the capacity to create a profile and to connect to other identified internet users, and more public and open micro-blogging sites such as Twitter which enable publication of 140 character messages by users to the internet.

When analysing social media contributions to draw patterns and meaning, an important element of that analysis must be a consideration of the way that people use social media. There has been considerable relevant research in this area. Crawford has written about the role played by those who participate in social media by 'listening' rather than actively contributing to discussion (she identifies that up to 90% of an online community will only practise light public activity, if any) (Crawford 2009, p. 527). Crawford argues that although there has been a glorification of the 'voice' as the primary form of participating online, listeners provide 'intimacy, connection, obligation and participation online' (2009, p. 527). The consequence of the type of listening that users tend to engage in is that citizens are able to maintain a type of 'mental model' of news and events (described as 'ambient journalism' by Hermida 2010). Consideration of the role of listening and listeners will be particularly important in this study when analysing the data available, namely the tweets of 'active' participants.

Accepting Crawford's articulation of the value of listeners or lurkers as a gathered audience, it is interesting to consider the audience imagined by users of social media. Alice E Marwick and danah boyd have undertaken research into the imagined audience of Twitter users, which might be very different from the actual audience (Marwick and boyd 2011). They observe that followers provide an indication of audience, but that this is imprecise as if an account is public, any member of the public can read tweets from that account. Marwick and boyd discuss the idea of a 'networked audience' that forms a community including random, unknown individuals but based on a presumption of personal authenticity and connection. This

community is built by reference to the specific tools that constitute Twitter's micro-blogging site, including retweeting and hashtags (brief keywords prefixed with the symbol '#').

Multiple commentators have considered the role that retweeting and hashtags (both of which were user innovations) play in the formation of communities on Twitter. Bruns and Burgess describe hashtags as useful in the creation of a community of interest without the need to form follower/followee connections (Bruns and Burgess 2011a). It has also been argued that hashtags that develop into trending topics on Twitter reflect enduring themes of the human condition (Rightler-McDaniels and Hendrickson 2013). Bruns and Burgess conclude that the use of a thematic hashtag constitutes 'an explicit attempt to address an imagined community of users who are following and discussing a specific topic' (Bruns and Burgess 2011a, p. 5) and, importantly, that 'what particularly allows *Twitter* and its hashtag communities to stand out from such other spaces for issue publics is its ability to respond with great speed to emerging issues and acute events' (Bruns and Burgess 2011a, p. 7). In addition, the presence of a multitude of commentators from different backgrounds (including politicians and journalists) combine to create an extended space for the discussion of political and social events (Highfield and Bruns 2012). This ability to form extended ad hoc communities extremely swiftly is critical to the analysis of the interplay between social and traditional media that lies at the core of this study. Moreover, social media have the capacity to disseminate and respond to events in a manner that traditional media cannot, and it is posited that this characteristic of social media may contribute to the disruption of dominant narratives within the mainstream media, thus influencing the nature and structure of the public sphere.

In a related fashion to hashtag topics, the retweeting capability of Twitter also contributes to the creation of communities. boyd, Golder and Lotan have conducted a seminal piece of research in relation to retweeting, which highlights both the potential value in retweeting, and its hazards (boyd et al 2010). As outlined by boyd et al, 'retweets can knit together tweets and

provide a valuable conversational infrastructure. Whether participants are actively commenting or simply acknowledging that they're listening, they're placing themselves inside a conversation. Even when they are simply trying to spread a tweet to a broader audience, they are bringing people into a conversation' (boyd et al 2010). This emphasis on the creation of a community is relevant to the study being discussed in this thesis, as it is through a collective discussion of a social issue that new or alternative meanings can be arrived at together.

2.2 SOCIAL MEDIA AND TRADITIONAL MEDIA

There is some literature that must be considered as a direct building block for further work in analysing the interaction between social media and traditional media. Bruns has written about the way political journalists are better placed to utilise Twitter than the news organisations to which they belong, identifying the centrality of several political journalists (including Annabel Crabb and Latika Bourke) in Twitter discussion of the Julia Gillard/Kevin Rudd leadership spill in 2010 (Bruns 2012). Despite the centrality of these journalists to the discussion due to the extent of retweeting of their comments, Bruns notes that the journalists did not tend to interact with other contributors – the extent of their participation was through their own comments. Similarly, Australian politicians and their staff have adopted Twitter to promote their views (Highfield and Bruns 2012). The flipside of journalistic and political participation with Twitter is the role Twitter (and other social media sites) play as a source for news organisations. Alfred Hermida describes the way Twitter has turned the traditional news gathering model on its head, by facilitating the 'immediate dissemination of digital fragments of news and information from official and unofficial sources over a variety of systems and devices' (Hermida 2010, p. 298). Both facets of the interplay between traditional media and social media are relevant to and will be considered by this study – it is posited that journalists do participate in Twitter discussion of social and political issues, and that Twitter itself serves

as a stimulus or catalyst for news stories in relation to those issues (thus enabling potential disruption of the narratives conveyed by traditional media outlets).

There has been a range of studies in relation to the operation of social media in situations such as political activism (for example, see Bruns et al 2013) and emergency events (for example, see Bruns et al 2012). An in-depth study by Bruns, Burgess, Crawford and Shaw has considered the capacity of social media platforms to provide avenues for communication in emergency situations by examining the role Twitter played during the Queensland floods in 2011 (Bruns et al 2012). The authors concluded that Twitter is a powerful tool for enabling dissemination of news emergency updates by use of hashtags and retweeting of influential users such as the Queensland Police. Relevantly, they concluded that Twitter was simultaneously used in order to share mainstream media and was itself a source for mainstream media. Their research also indicated that in emergency situations social media users shared mainstream media content as an authoritative source for information, and did not challenge or comment upon that information. This thesis heads in a different direction. Its hypothesis is that in relation to a controversial political and social issue such as the arrival of asylum seekers by sea, social media users will attempt to disrupt and promote alternative narratives about asylum seekers, while commenting on the dominant narratives disseminated by politicians and the traditional media.

2.3 DEMOCRACY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

In considering the way that mainstream media and social media interact in the public sphere, a starting point must be the theories of Jürgen Habermas on democracy and the public sphere. According to Habermas, a public sphere is an essential element of a democratic society. In his seminal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas defined the public sphere (1989, p. 27):

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatised but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason.

Central to Habermas' conception of the 'ideal' public sphere is that through active and rational discourse about issues of political concern, public opinion will be generated and that opinion will shape the policies of the government. Theorists from a range of fields have provided critiques of the theory of the public sphere based on issues including its focus on the public to the exclusion of the private (see, for example, Robbins 1990 and Fraser 1992). Despite such criticisms and the imperfection of the theory, the idea of the public sphere has been generally accepted as valuable in understanding the way that democratic societies function. Dahlgren outlines the relevance thus (1995, p. 9):

The political public sphere constitutes a space – a discursive, institutional, topographical space – where people in their roles as citizens have access to what can be metaphorically called societal dialogues, which deal with questions of common concern. In other words, with politics in the broadest sense. This space, and the conditions for communication within it, are essential for democracy.

Habermas' description of the bourgeois public sphere relied on face-to-face communication in venues such as town halls, and some small-scale communication via the printed word. In the initial articulation of his theory, Habermas was reluctant to endorse the mass media as critical to the functioning of the ideal public sphere as he was concerned that the nature of the mass

media would lead to a fragmentation in discussion and views. However, in later writings he accepted the inevitability of the mass media's role in the public sphere (1997, p. 105):

...when the public is large this kind of communication requires certain means of dissemination and influence: today, newspapers and periodicals, radio and television are the media of the public sphere.

The media is undeniably critical to the functioning of the public sphere, as it enables mass communication between the public and their democratically elected representatives. However, that communication is mediated and political. Brian McNair describes the role of the media in the public sphere (2000, p. 30):

The press...are the primary agenda setters, defining the shape of the agenda in the medium and long-term. They have the power to set the dominant political agenda, as elaborated over weeks, months and years, in editorials, columns and other forms of pro-active, opinionated journalism, amounting to extended narratives of unity and division, success and failure, rise and fall. In this capacity the institutions of the press take the lead in establishing the dominant interpretative frameworks within which ongoing political events are made sense of.

In a context where the media have undeniable power to shape the discourses received by the public, and the public has little capacity to interact with the media, the advent of and development of the internet has been welcomed and research into its capacity to represent a new and more democratic public sphere. Dahlgren published the authoritative paper on the nature and structure of the internet as a public sphere in 2005. For the purposes of his analysis, Dahlgren defines the public sphere thus (2005, p.148):

...a functioning public sphere is understood as a constellation of communicative spaces

in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates— ideally in an unfettered manner—and also the formation of political will (i.e., public opinion). These spaces, in which the mass media and now, more recently, the newer interactive media figure prominently, also serve to facilitate communicative links between citizens and the power holders of society.

Dahlgren goes on to explore the capacities of the internet as a public sphere, concluding that although the internet does not provide a quick fix for democracy, for those who have access and motivation, it provides real and viable opportunities for political interaction (2005, p. 151).

Conversely, a school of theory has developed that argues that the internet is not a useful public sphere (in the sense that it enables discussion of diverse points of view on an issue), as it is a space where people of like mind tend to connect only with one another in an 'echo chamber'. This theory was initially developed from work by Sunstein (2001), and some research into interaction on the internet regarding political issues supports the view that users tend to form ties on the internet with those holding similar views (see, for example, Adamic and Glance 2005). This tendency is known as homophily, and contrasts with the conflicting argument that internet use promotes heterogeneity of political discussion (containing distinct and differing points of view). In particular, Brundidge concludes that internet use contributes to increase the heterogeneity of political discussion networks (Brundidge 2010; see also Wojcieszak and Mutz 2009).

With regard to social media in particular, Colleoni et al summarise the capacity of social media sites to 'foster both the public sphere scenario with low levels of homophily and the echo chamber scenario where homophily is high, as they tend to reinforce group cohesion as well as information diffusion' (Colleoni et al 2014, p. 319). In a wide-ranging and authoritative study, Colleoni et al concluded that (2014, p. 328):

It depends on how we analyze Twitter. If we look at Twitter as a social medium we see higher levels of homophily and a more echo chamber-like structure of communication. But if we instead focus on Twitter as a news medium, looking at information diffusion regardless of social ties, we see lower levels of homophily and a more public sphere-like scenario.

There has been recent research undertaken into the specific capacity of social media to aid democracy. In an analysis of social media coverage of a contentious news issue in Austria, Maireder and Ausserhofer identified social media's potential to open up political discourse, noting that '[t]he open, transparent, and low-threshold exchange of information and ideas Twitter allows shows great promise for a reconfiguration of the structure of political discourses towards a broadening of public debate by facilitating social connectivity' (Maireder and Ausserhofer 2014, p. 306). In the same investigation, they noted the capacity for social media to elevate actors who may have previously been on the periphery of debates (Maireder and Ausserhofer 2014, p. 314).

Scholars have also documented the capacity for social media to influence political events in the physical world, in addition to political discourses. In his work on social media and protest, Gerbaudo tracks the manner in which Facebook was used as a tool during the Egypt uprising in 2011. He notes that '...in the course of the Egyptian revolution, social media became the means of a choreography of assembly, facilitating the coalescence of this cosmopolitan Facebook youth around a common identity, and its material precipitation into a 'street youth' (Gerbaudo 2012, p. 48). This demonstrates the capacity of social media to utilise, comment upon, and ultimately transcend the content of the mainstream media to create change in society.

This thesis seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature described above which explores the effect and role of the internet and the social media within the public sphere. By analysing the way that the Twitter data reflect either homophily or heterogeneity of political discussion within the public sphere created through the hashtag ‘#asylumseekers’, and considering this in light of the broader role of these tweets within the political discussion of asylum seeker policy in Australia, the thesis will draw conclusions about the capacity of social media to contribute to Australian democracy by providing alternative voices within the public sphere.

CHAPTER 3 - METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

This thesis analyses discourses surrounding asylum seekers in the Australian print media and on the social media platform Twitter and considers the way that the two different types of media interact in the public sphere. Given this, the project involves the analysis of two different data sets – tweets and print media articles.

3.1 PRINT MEDIA DATA SETS

Print media was selected as the mainstream media focus of this project as it plays a critical role in shaping news narratives (McNair 2000, p. 30; McKnight 2012, p. 19). During specified periods, articles relating to asylum seekers are gathered from three newspapers: the *Australian* (or the *Weekend Australian*), the *Daily Telegraph* (or the *Sunday Telegraph*) and the *Sydney Morning Herald* (or the *Sun-Herald*). Those newspapers were selected to provide a range of data. They include the two ‘quality’ broadsheets available in Sydney (which are published by different entities, News Limited and Fairfax Media) and the one ‘tabloid’ newspaper available in Sydney, also published by News Limited. Articles containing any reference to ‘asylum seekers’ were identified for analysis in each of the selected papers.

3.2 SOCIAL MEDIA DATA SETS

In order to analyse the way that asylum seekers are constructed on Twitter, it is necessary to gather and analyse a set of tweets during a specified period. The first challenge is to capture a data set of tweets that relate to the topic of asylum seeker policy in Australia. The most popular method of capture of Twitter data is by reference to hashtags. In a significant analysis of the role of social media during the Queensland floods in 2011, Bruns et al captured a data set of tweets by reference to the hashtag #qldfloods, commenting that ‘[b]y tracking topical hashtags and capturing hashtagged tweets, we may assume to establish a dataset of the most

visible tweets relating to the event in question, since it is the purpose of topical hashtags to aid the visibility and discoverability of Twitter messages' (Bruns et al 2012, p.19).

Given this, it is straightforward to focus on tweets which contain the thematic hashtag '#asylumseekers'. There are some limitations associated with this approach, as not all Twitter users will attach the hashtag to a comment about asylum seekers, and some instances of retweeting or replying might involve the deletion of the hashtag (see, for example, Bruns et al 2012, p.19). However, on balance, collecting tweets by reference to the #asylumseekers hashtag is the most appropriate way to gather a reliable dataset.

It is necessary to use a Twitter analytics tool to gather and extract tweets containing the hashtag '#asylumseekers'. Some researchers have developed open-source tools to retrieve data relating to hashtags (drawing on Twitter's Application Programming Interface or API). The work conducted by the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries & Innovation (**CCI**) relies on the open source tool *yourTwapperkeeper* (Bruns et al 2012, pp.19-20; Bruns and Liang 2012 generally). For the purposes of this thesis tweets have been captured and archived via the commercially available Twitter analytics tool Tweet Archivist. The tool captures a set of tweets containing the '#asylumseekers' hashtag and provides information including the username, universal time stamp, the text of the tweet, and any links or images associated with the tweet.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations associated with this tool (and indeed all similar tools used for social media research). Any attempt to gather data on Twitter will result in a non-comprehensive set of tweets because the gathering of the data relies on the information Twitter makes available to the public through its API. The CCI recognizes that 'no dataset captured by using the *Twitter* API is guaranteed to be entirely comprehensive...especially where research focuses on identifying broad patterns in *Twitter* activity from a large dataset,

however, such research nonetheless remains valid and important' (Bruns et al 2012, p. 20; see also boyd and Crawford 2012). Given the experience of these researchers, it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of the data set gained from Twitter and to bear in mind the nature of that data set when analyzing and drawing conclusions about the information extracted from Twitter.

3.3 ANALYSIS OF PRINT AND SOCIAL MEDIA DATA SETS

boyd and Crawford warn that big data 'enables the practice of apophenia: seeing patterns where none actually exist, simply because enormous quantities of data can offer connections that radiate in all directions' (boyd and Crawford 2012, p. 668). Given this, it is necessary to be wary of drawing conclusions based solely on quantitative analysis of the data, despite the fact that data of this type appear to invite such an approach. According to boyd and Crawford 'in reality, working with Big Data is still subjective, and what it quantifies does not necessarily have a closer claim on objective truth – particularly when considering messages from social media sites' (boyd and Crawford 2012, p. 667). Bearing in mind this warning, the most appropriate strategy is to adopt a mixed methodology approach, drawing on both quantitative statistical analysis and qualitative textual analysis.

As identified by boyd and Crawford, the wealth of data available through social media invites quantitative analysis. Given that the focus of the project is on the interplay between traditional media and social media and their roles in the public sphere, key information can be drawn from the Twitter data about the most prominent and influential users (including any journalists or news organisations with Twitter accounts) and the most linked to articles. However, statistical analysis alone will not provide an adequate foundation for the drawing of conclusions about the way the social media and traditional media interact or what this means for the public sphere. For example, if a news article was linked to multiple times, then on its

face that article could be considered influential and the contents of that article representative of the opinion of the Twitter user. However, a purely quantitative approach such as this does not take into account that the tweet accompanying the link may comment upon the news article in a way that changes the meaning conveyed.

In those circumstances, it is necessary to incorporate elements of qualitative analysis of the Twitter data set. Given that one of the questions the project asks is whether the social media enable members of the public to disrupt traditional media narratives about asylum seekers, it is critical that the methodology chosen enables an understanding of the discourses and narratives embodied in both the social media and traditional media data sets. The most appropriate methodology to achieve this analytic outcome is textual analysis, which can be applied to both the print media and social media data. According to Fursich '[t]extual analysis is often chosen by cultural media scholars to overcome the common limitations of traditional quantitative content analysis such as limitation to manifest content and to quantifiable categories. Textual analysis allows the researcher to discern latent meaning, but also implicit patterns, assumptions and omissions of a text' (Fursich 2009, pp. 240-241).

Textual analysis of the print articles and the tweets will be used to examine the cultural constructions of asylum seekers adopted by the mainstream media and by users of social media. Textual analysis enables an examination of the most likely interpretations arising from the contents and context of a text by those who consume them (McKee 2003, p. 1). As outlined by Alan McKee in his authoritative work on textual analysis, one of the key contexts that informs the meaning or meanings that can be drawn from a text is the wider public context, or sense-making community', that the text exists within (McKee 2003, pp. 99-105). In this case, print media articles exist within the Australian national community, and recognisable dominant discourses (as well as alternative discourses) are likely to be present within those

articles (McKee 2003, pp. 101-102). Tweets, on the other hand, exist in a different community which is potentially not bound by the same sense-making systems as the national community. Drawing conclusions about the likely meanings conveyed in the print media and on Twitter allows an assessment of the way that people make sense of the world around them and 'if we understand how the media represent these large and important concepts, we will be closer to explaining how these representations can also cause concepts – and thus behaviour and social experience – to change over time' (Bowles 2010, p. 49). In this case, it will allow analysis of the stories or narratives conveyed by the two types of media in relation to asylum seeker policy in Australia, assessment of the way the two types of media relate to one another, and a basis for discussion of the roles they play in the public sphere.

Despite the fact that tweets are confined to 140 characters each, previous studies have used textual analysis to understand the potential meanings associated with individual tweets. In its study of the role played by social media during the Queensland floods, the CCI used textual analysis alongside quantitative methods, noting that '[w]hile at a maximum length of 140 characters, tweets necessarily represent a highly compressed textual format, they nonetheless contain enough information for researchers to be able to extract a significant amount of valid information' (Bruns et al 2012, p. 21).

CHAPTER 4 - ANALYSIS

4.1 DATA GATHERED IN AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2013

A federal election was held in Australia on 7 September 2013. The first set of data gathered for the purposes of this project was during the period immediately prior to the election, and as such the articles referring to ‘asylum seekers’ were primarily focused on the policies of the two major political parties.

During the eight-day period from 28 August 2013 to 4 September 2013, information was gathered from three newspapers: the *Australian* (or the *Weekend Australian*), the *Daily Telegraph* (or the *Sunday Telegraph*) and the *Sydney Morning Herald* (or the *Sun-Herald*). Articles containing any reference to ‘asylum seekers’ were identified for analysis in each of the selected papers. Articles analysed included editorials, news reports, features, opinion pieces and letters to the editor. Over the eight-day period, 48 articles were collected in total, including 14 from the *Australian*/the *Weekend Australian*, 12 from the *Daily Telegraph*/the *Sunday Telegraph* and 22 from the *Sydney Morning Herald*/the *Sun-Herald*.

During the same eight-day period, tweets containing the hashtag ‘#asylumseekers’ were extracted from Twitter for analysis. Over the relevant period, 1654 tweets were collected.

4.1.1 PRINT MEDIA ANALYSIS

A breakdown of the number of articles published in the three papers over the first period is set out in the table below:

Date	The Daily Telegraph	The Australian	The Sydney Morning Herald	TOTAL
28 Aug 2013	2	4	3	9
29 Aug 2013	1	2	-	3
30 Aug 2013	1	4	3	8
31 Aug 2013	2	-	1	3
1 Sep 2013	2	-	1	3
2 Sep 2013	3	1	4	8
3 Sep 2013	1	2	1	4
4 Sep 2013	-	1	9	10
TOTAL	12	14	22	48

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF ARTICLES PUBLISHED 28 AUGUST 2013 - 4 SEPTEMBER 2013

An analysis of the types of articles published during the first period is contained in the following table:

Type	The Daily Telegraph	The Australian	The Sydney Morning Herald	TOTAL
News	10	12	11	33
Opinion	-	2	1	3
Editorial	1	-	-	1
Letters ¹	1	-	10	11
Cartoons	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	12	14	22	48

TABLE 2: TYPES OF ARTICLES PUBLISHED 28 AUGUST 2013 - 4 SEPTEMBER 2013

¹ Including comments and text messages.

The most notable and dominant characteristic of the 48 print media articles caught during the first eight-day period, is that 33 (68.75%) were news articles dealing with the asylum seeker policies of the Labor government and the Coalition opposition with a focus on the upcoming Federal election.

ABSENCE

These news articles shared a common element in their characterisation of asylum seekers, namely that the asylum seekers themselves were absent from, or irrelevant to, the narrative about the policies. During this period political issues arose in relation to the Papua New Guinean government's capacity and willingness to carry out its obligations under the deal with the Labor government; these issues constituted a significant proportion of the coverage. The articles were generally critical of the Labor government's deal with Papua New Guinea (particularly those articles published by the News Limited papers) but that criticism focused on the political and legal issues associated with the deal and its likely failure, rather than on the effects of the policy on the asylum seekers. For example, an article published in *The Australian* on 29 August 2013 entitled 'Islanders protest over PNG deal' outlines the Labor government's difficulties in implementing its new policy following objections by Manus Island residents on the grounds that local businesses had not been awarded key contracts arising from the new processing centres (Callick 2013, p. 2). The focus of this article on the political ramifications of the Labor government's policy is typical of the majority of the coverage in the print media.

Even articles that appeared to focus on asylum seeker experiences rather than politics, in fact used those experiences as tools to enable political analysis. An extreme example is an article in the *Australian* on 28 August 2013 entitled 'Asylum-seeker child tries to take his life in detention' (Taylor 2013, p. 2). An initial reading of the headline and the opening paragraph suggests that the news article will engage with the experience of the asylum seeker child driven to attempt suicide. However, in context the article falls into the same category as those

described above; it is a news article criticising the efficacy of the Labor government's policy. The attempted suicide is a factor used to introduce and support that criticism, but is not the subject of the article. Indeed, despite the apparent focus on the asylum seeker, textual analysis of the article reveals that the asylum seeker in question is just as invisible as those unmentioned in the bulk of the news articles.

The absence of the asylum seekers from these stories is enlightening. Stuart Hall says that in order to understand and interrogate a dominant narrative, it is necessary to identify the silences in that narrative. Alternative narratives can come to light when considering 'the things that ideology always takes for granted, and the things it can't say – the things it systematically blips out on' (Hall, 1983). The political focus of the news articles indicates that asylum seeker policies are merely part of the broader political narrative regarding problems to be solved in Australian society, exemplified by the positioning of the articles as part of ongoing election coverage in dedicated sections of the papers. The absence of the asylum seekers themselves from that political narrative indicates that the narrative has moved beyond any concern or articulation of the experience of asylum seekers. Rather, the fact that asylum seekers are invisible in the narrative suggests that the mainstream media is conveying the government's narrative that asylum seekers do not belong, and are undeserving of asylum and of the basic human rights granted to Australian citizens. The policies explored in these articles rest on such underlying perceptions about asylum seekers.

The observations above align with conclusions reached by Natascha Klocker and Kevin Dunn who conducted a project analysing newspaper and government representations of asylum seekers in 2001 and 2002 (Klocker and Dunn 2003, p. 71). They concluded that there was substantial evidence 'of an exchange of meaning between government and news media on the issue of asylum seekers' and that 'the shared content, foci and sources are suggestive of a strong government influence on the media' due in part to the fact that the government was

the primary source of information for the newspapers (Klocker and Dunn 2003, p. 86). In the data instance gathered for this thesis, despite criticisms of government policy, the print media articles followed and were framed by the political debate between the government and the Coalition, and in particular did not question or attempt to disrupt the prevailing narrative from both major parties in relation to asylum seekers, implicitly accepting that asylum seekers should be absent from the narrative and were a problem to be solved.

BLAME

During a *Four Corners* program, 'No margin for error', broadcast on the ABC on 2 September 2013, (*Four Corners*, 2 September 2013) Fiona Scott, the Liberal candidate for the western Sydney seat of Lindsey indicated that asylum seekers were contributing to heavy traffic and hospital queues in western Sydney (Cohen et al 2013). Ms Scott's statements were not reported in either of the News Limited papers, but were reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 4 September 2013 in a news article entitled 'Traffic stopper: Liberal hopeful blames asylum seekers for congestion' (Robertson 2013, p. 3). The news article provides a straight report of Ms Scott's comments and of Coalition leader Mr Abbott's position on the statements. While not explicitly confirming he shared Ms Scott's views, Mr Abbott indicated that asylum seekers put pressure on the Australian budget and facilities. These views occupy the majority of the article, with six lines devoted to an alternative view from Refugee Action Collective spokesman Ian Rintoul, who said Ms Scott's views were 'shockingly ignorant'. Despite this, the journalist does not examine Ms Scott's comments or attempt to verify their accuracy, and the overall impression taken from the article is likely to be that Ms Scott may have exaggerated but that asylum seekers are placing pressure on Australia's infrastructure; which is effectively a transmission of the narrative deployed by the Coalition.

The asylum seekers are not invisible in this narrative - they are essential. They are characterised as obstructing or causing problems for western Sydney residents. Arguably, this

explicit narrative is the subtext that allows for the dominant narrative (in which asylum seekers are invisible and represent a political problem to be solved) to persist and pervade the mainstream media coverage. The Fiona Scott coverage is very important to this study, as it simultaneously illuminates the dominant narrative and provides an important comparison between print media and social media, as discussed below.

ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES

There are three significant examples in the collected articles of exceptions to the dominant representation of asylum seekers outlined above: a news article, a feature article and a series of letters all published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

The first is a news article published on 2 September 2013 and entitled 'And God saw that it was not good, so his people did something about it' (Partridge 2013, pp. 2-3). The article reports on efforts by Anglican churches to help asylum seekers and to provide an alternative narrative about asylum seekers by way of signs outside churches. Importantly, the article describes the interactions of an individual priest with various groups of asylum seekers, including identifying the practical difficulties experienced by asylum seekers once they are granted visas in Australia. A group from Myanmar knocked on the door of the Anglican Church at St Peters on a rainy day, dripping wet. According to the article 'people from the congregation started taking off their jumpers and walking to their cars to find them clothes'. These descriptions serve to humanise the asylum seekers and to provide an alternative and empathetic way of responding to their experience. The article also reports on Anglican churches' use of signs to 'draw attention to the asylum seeker issue', with signs reading, for example, 'God Loves Boat People' (above an image of Noah's Ark) and 'Kevin, PNG is not the answer, Love God'. Aside from drawing attention to the political issue, the signs (and the publication of a story about the signs in the *Sydney Morning Herald*) serve to further humanise the asylum seekers in the eyes of the Australian public.

The second article that significantly departs from the dominant narrative is a feature story published in the News Review section of the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 31 August 2013 and entitled 'Journey without end for couple parted by politics' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 31 August 2013, pp. 4-5). This article tells the story of an Iranian married couple's experience seeking asylum in Australia: the wife who arrived early in 2013 and (at the time the article was published) was being treated in a Brisbane hospital while awaiting a visa, and the husband who arrived two days after the Labor government's Papua New Guinea policy began in July 2013, and was informed upon arrival at Christmas Island that he would never be re-settled in Australia. The Iranian couple are both framed by reference to the institutions of marriage and family, the wife by reference to her health and loneliness, the husband by reference to the dangers of the trip to Christmas Island and his desire to reach his wife. A photograph of the husband is prominent on the page. All of these factors serve to provide a gateway for readers to relate to and identify with this couple, and through them with asylum seekers more generally. The article explicitly recognises the dissonance between the story of these asylum seekers and the political treatment of the issue, noting that their experience 'is the human flipside to the politics of the boats'. By providing a human face to this community, this article serves to re-insert asylum seekers into the narrative, making it more difficult to accept the dominant narrative that they are simply a political problem to be solved.

Finally, a series of letters to the *Sydney Morning Herald* dated 4 September 2013 respond to Fiona Scott's comments. Seven letters are set out under the heading 'Ill-informed focus on asylum seekers dumbs down debate' and each of the letters is critical of Ms Scott's comments, with criticisms of both the accuracy of the comments and the political motivations which are perceived to sit behind them. For example, 'It's yet another pitch-perfect dog-whistle to those ill-informed voters who love a scapegoat' (Ackroyd 2013, p. 16). Some of the letter writers use humour, particularly sarcasm, to dismiss Ms Scott's comments, for example, 'Good heavens,

now I realise why there was such a delay in my parcel delivery recently. Of course, it was those wretched asylum seekers causing a backlog in the freight system, because they're clogging the roads' (Clear 2013, p. 16). Although these letters do not address or characterise the asylum seekers themselves, they directly challenge the characterisation of asylum seekers as causing a problem for Australia (as espoused by the Coalition). It is notable that the only direct challenge to this narrative contained in the print media is in letters from readers of the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Although the three exceptions discussed above serve to disrupt the dominant narrative to some extent, they are notable for several reasons. They constitute a small proportion of the overall coverage (9 of 48 (7 of which are letters), or just under 19%) and they were all published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, meaning that News Limited readers would not have been exposed to any alternative voices. The hegemonic and uniform nature of the majority of the print media coverage of asylum seekers during this period creates a situation where those seeking to express or receive alternative viewpoints must seek other outlets, such as social media.

4.1.2 THE TWITTER ALTERNATIVE

Analysis of the 1654 tweets containing the hashtag '#asylumseekers' during the eight-day period from 28 August 2013 to 4 September 2013 indicates that social media participants used Twitter to discuss and disseminate alternative narratives about asylum seekers and asylum seeker policy.

A review of the tweets indicates that Twitter users primarily developed these alternatives through interaction with and comment on external political developments. During the eight-day period there were three major developments in relation to asylum seekers that provoked a high rate of social media coverage and comment, triggering hundreds of tweets and

involving a number of participants creating influential tweets that were retweeted multiple times. The social media coverage of those developments provides a useful indication of the manner in which social media are able to disrupt dominant narratives and provide alternatives. Each of the major developments is explored below.

GOD LOVES BOAT PEOPLE - AUSTRALIAN CHURCHES SUPPORT ASYLUM SEEKERS

Hundreds of tweets dealt with the attitude and approach of Australian churches and religious institutions to asylum seekers. The tweets appear to have commenced with the dissemination of an image outside a church, entitled 'God Loves Boat People' over a boat labelled 'Noah's Ark'. The image was tweeted by user @nicolasnicola22 on 27 August 2013 directly to multiple other Twitter users.



FIGURE 1: GOD LOVES BOAT PEOPLE (SOURCE @NICOLASNICOLA22, 27 AUGUST 2013 AT 3.55PM)

The contents of the tweet picked up the message in the photograph, including the words and hashtag 'GOD LOVES #BOATPEOPLE'. Notably, a photograph of the same image appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* article described above (published five days after this image began

circulating on Twitter) (Partridge 2013, pp. 2-3). In conducting this research checks for a link to mainstream media were unable to establish a direct link. However, given the timeframe it is hypothesised that the Twitter discussion was the catalyst for the mainstream media coverage of the issue. If this is the case, the capacity of social media users to stimulate alternative narratives in mainstream media appears to be powerful.

Following the initial dissemination of the 'God Loves Boat People' photograph, the hashtag '#GodLovesBoatPeople' was used by a number of Twitter users in related tweets about the approach of Australian churches to asylum seekers. For example, the Uniting Church Australia tweeted (@UnitingChurchAu, 2 September 2013, 4.44pm) the following link to an article in Fairfax Media's the *Newcastle Herald* containing the same photograph:

Uniting Church in Newcastle accepting #refugees and #asylumseekers to our shores
<http://t.co/KmSPnNKFHv> #GodLovesBoatPeople

Importantly, once the *Sydney Morning Herald* article discussed above was published on 2 September 2013, Twitter users began to disseminate that article very broadly (linking to the article as published on both the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* websites). The same user who initiated the original 'God Loves Boat People' image was also responsible for tweeting the *Sydney Morning Herald* article directly to other Twitter users, who then retweeted the article to their own followers. The user, @nicolasnicola22, tweeted the article to a broad range of users, from prominent individuals and organisations committed to social justice (for example, prominent human rights lawyer Julian Burnside and the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law at Monash University) to politicians (such as Kevin Rudd, Greens' leader Christine Milne, and the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection, Scott Morrison). Influential users such as the Castan Centre subsequently tweeted (@CastanCentre, 1 September 2013, 7.22pm):

We heart the churches standing up for #asylumseekers: <http://t.co/MKRf5JAMeU>

The manner in which the 'God Loves Boat People' image and story was shared on Twitter highlights the capacity of social media to instigate stories that are then picked up and developed further by the mainstream media. In this case, one individual user (unaffiliated with any media organisation) appears to have influenced mainstream media coverage of the issue, thus creating the alternative narrative about asylum seekers contained in the *Sydney Morning Herald* article as discussed above. Once that article was published, the same user played a significant role in the further dissemination of that article and its narrative.

NARRATIVES OF LAW

The second significant development during the relevant period was the Coalition's announcement that if it were successful at the federal election it would not provide free legal services to asylum seekers.

The Twitter commentary on this issue appears to have commenced following a Radio National report on the Coalition policy on 30 August 2013. A series of individual users posted influential tweets that were retweeted over the following days. One of the earliest was a tweet from a user called @roshart (30 August 2013, 3.42pm), which stated:

#Abbott vows to withdraw legal services for #asylumseekers via @RadioNational I'm with @JulianBurnside <http://t.co/4SVFYlaPEw> @ASRC1 #auspol.

The reference to Mr Burnside is accompanied by a link to a post on Mr Burnside's website in which he confirms his support for the Greens and denounces the policies of the two major parties in relation to asylum seekers. This tweet was retweeted by numerous users (including Mr Burnside himself; @JulianBurnside, 30 August 2013, 3.42pm).

Subsequent tweets by multiple users linked to an article on the ABC website entitled 'Coalition vows to stop funding legal advice to asylum seekers' (Nightingale 2013). That article contained both Mr Abbott's justification for the policy, and significant criticisms from refugee advocates

such as Mr Burnside and the Refugee Action Collective and from Ms Milne. Mr Abbott was quoted thus: 'Why should people who come to this country illegally get legal aid to run immigration applications and appeals when so many Australians who find themselves before the courts for whatever reason don't get legal aid' (emphasis added). Ms Milne described the policy as 'cruel' and Mr Burnside indicated that asylum seekers did not have the funds to pay for legal advice and therefore genuine refugees would be sent home. The tweets linking to the ABC article contained comments such as 'what a disgrace' (@KellieTranter, 30 August 2013, 6.27pm). A reader of the article and those tweets could understand the policy to be unjust and could empathise with asylum seekers' experience. Other, oppositional readings would also be available.

A number of Twitter users tweeted a link to online articles in the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Swan 2013). The *Daily Telegraph* article was also published on the front page of the print edition on 31 August 2013 and was entitled 'Free Ride Over – Coalition pledges to stop publicly funded asylum seeker claims' (Benson 2013, p. 1). There is no counterpoint to comments by Mr Abbott and Mr Morrison. Asylum seekers are represented as enjoying a benefit they have no right to and the Coalition policy will rectify this (the funds will stop 'flowing'). Critical to textual analysis of those tweets are the words that accompany the links to the articles. For instance, one user tweeted a link to the *Sydney Morning Herald* article accompanied by the words 'the assault on the basic rights of #refugees continues - Coalition to deny #asylumseekers free legal help' (@DanielHRLC, 30 August 2013, 7.17pm). Similar comments accompanied other tweets linking to the newspaper websites and the ABC website. This confirms that even when tweeting a link to an article such as that of the *Daily Telegraph*, readers of the tweets would understand the text to be criticisms of the Coalition policy and the inhumane treatment of asylum seekers.

By challenging and critiquing the Coalition policy in relation to legal advice, Twitter users

effectively upend the dominant narrative in the mainstream media of the asylum seekers being problematic and undeserving. Doing so by way of a discourse around law is particularly powerful. The dominant narrative is infused with legal justification, with both the Labor government's 'PNG Deal' and the Coalition's 'Operation Sovereign Borders' relying on the auspices of law in order to justify and enact their policies. The Coalition's refusal of legal services to asylum seekers effectively sets asylum seekers outside the law, by characterising them as 'illegal' and undeserving of access to legal services (see the quote from Mr Abbott extracted above). Much of the social media criticism also deploys a discourse of law, by highlighting the denial of human rights (guaranteed under international law) that the proposed policy reflects. The Twitter response to the Coalition policy also illustrates social media's capacity to harness influential groups within society, including those representative of the legal community. The Victorian Bar Association tweeted (@VictorianBar, 3 September 2013, 6.59pm):

Law Council of Australia concerned by plan to remove legal aid for those seeking protection in Aus #asylumseekers <http://t.co/DFCYtYQAEG>.

The link is to a media release from the Law Council of Australia highlighting the issues with the policy and stating, 'vulnerable people will be left to navigate a legally complex system on their own' (Law Council of Australia, 3 September 2013). The authority and nature of these institutions further serves to undermine the legitimacy of the Coalition policy. Essentially, social media users deploy the language and authority of the law to disrupt the dominant narrative about asylum seekers reflected in Coalition policy. This deconstructs the dominant narrative by illustrating that it rests on uneasy foundations.

#FIONASCOTTLOGIC – THE USE OF HUMOUR

As reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 4 September 2013 (Robertson 2013, p. 3), during a *Four Corners* program broadcast on 2 September 2013 the Liberal candidate for Lindsey

made comments indicating that asylum seekers were responsible for the congestion on the M4 motorway and for the crowding in Western Sydney hospitals.

Despite the fact that there was only one newspaper article published in relation to this topic, Twitter users latched on to Ms Scott's comments and used them as the basis of challenger narratives about asylum seekers. The two major types of response to the comments were serious, surprised critiques (highlighting that the comments were incorrect and unsupported) and humorous responses that served to amplify the ludicrous nature of Ms Scott's comments and undermine their reliability.

In the immediate aftermath of the *Four Corners* broadcast, influential users tweeted critiques of Ms Scott's comments that were retweeted multiple times. For example, user @DanielHRLC tweeted (2 September 2013, 4.21am):

Doubt #AsylumSeekers are demonised for political gain? Watch Fiona Scott blame them for traffic jams & hospital waiting lists on #4Corners

And user @JohnFalzon tweeted (2 September 2013, 3.56pm):

#AsylumSeekers are NOT the reason for traffic jams. #4Corners #4goodnesssake!

The following day, the hashtag #FionaScottLogic began to gain popularity. This is the most significant use of humour during the eight-day period and it is used here to highlight the untenable nature of Ms Scott's comments. An early tweet read (@MariamVeiszadeh, 2 September 2013, 11.28pm):

*I chipped a nail this morning. Must be because of those pesky #asylumseekers ! !
#FionaScottLogic #racistdogwhistling#ausvotes*

Over one hundred individual tweets used the hashtag #FionaScottLogic (in combination with the hashtag #asylumseekers) to similar effect. Each used sarcasm to challenge Ms Scott's

comments and demonstrate their falsity. This use of humour echoes the humorous content of some of the letters to the editor discussed above. Both the #FionaScottLogic tweets and the humorous letters to the editor explicitly deconstruct the narrative that Ms Scott's comments reflect, effectively flipping the meaning of the comments through sarcasm. Thus humour works to overturn the dominant narrative which Ms Scott's comments make explicit; that asylum seekers are a problem to Australian society.

Evers, Albury, Byron and Crawford have written about the effectiveness of humour in transmitting serious messages to recipients (Evers et al, 2013). In that study, the authors found that 'one of the benefits of humour is that it may...promote sharing of content' (Evers et al 2013, p. 269). In this instance, in addition to emphasising the illegitimate and ridiculous nature of Ms Scott's comments, humour also had the additional consequence of forming a community of like-minded people sharing content to promote an alternative narrative about the impact of asylum seekers. The asylum seekers themselves are present in these humorous tweets and are effectively in on the joke, while it is arguable that the technique results in the creation of a new 'other' excluding Ms Scott and, more broadly, the Coalition and Coalition voters, from the joke.

The Twitter response to Ms Scott's comments is illuminating. It demonstrates the powerful capacity of social media to react to an argument underlying the dominant narrative, through directly undermining its factual merits and by using humour to challenge and deconstruct the narrative.

INFLUENTIAL INDIVIDUAL USERS

Setting aside the discussion of major developments, a notable feature of the Twitter commentary on asylum seekers was the dissemination of tweets from influential individual users. Tracking such users gives insight into the capacity of Twitter to give voice to individuals who may not otherwise be in a position to interact with political issues in a public and critical

manner. The user @nicolasnicola22 is one such user. As outlined above, he played a critical role in disseminating the 'God Loves Boat People' image and the subsequent story in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. One strategy employed by @nicolasnicola22 was to direct his public tweets towards prominent individuals, including politicians, journalists, and other public figures such as lawyers or activists. This strategy has a dual outcome; it enables the message to be communicated directly (and democratically) to the prominent individual who may then retweet the message to his or her own followers. The potential effect of this strategy can be seen in the way that Twitter commentary appears to have influenced mainstream press coverage of the churches' reaction to asylum seekers (discussed above).

It is also evident that this strategy enables minority voices to be heard. One of @nicolasnicola22's tweets included a link to a YouTube video containing a message from a 17 year-old girl criticising Australia's asylum seeker policy. @nicolasnicola22 tweeted this video directly to a number of other users, for example (28 August 2013, 3.09am):

*@tim_chr @GuardianAus 17year old Sarah's view of Aust's terrible #refugees policies
#asylumseekers #AusPol #AusVotes <http://t.co/egdAz87Yly>*

This example demonstrates Twitter's capacity to enable a member of a group that is generally politically disempowered (and cannot vote) to participate in political discussion. The YouTube video in this instance directly criticised the strategies of the Labor government and Coalition opposition in their advertising in relation to asylum seeker policies, including using the following statement:

*Australia takes in a tiny number of refugees compared to some other western nations,
and 'boatpeople' make up only 3% of our annual immigration. And don't turn around
and tell me that this is all for the asylum seekers safety. That by deterring the boats its*

saving these people from an unsafe journey and stopping the people smuggling trade, because you don't 'promote' someone's human rights by taking them away [sic].

The above demonstrates not only that Twitter enables disenfranchised members of society to contribute to political discussion, but also gives those users the opportunity to disrupt the mainstream narrative, as conveyed by the political parties and the mainstream media.

4.2 DATA GATHERED DURING JULY 2014

The political and social landscape in relation to asylum seeker policy changed dramatically from September 2013 to July 2014. As discussed above, in September 2013 there were very settled narratives in relation to asylum seekers which arose out of an election campaign in which both major parties were attempting to convey very similar election policies which proceeded on the basis that asylum seekers were a problem to be solved, and revolved around simple messages regarding 'stopping the boats'.

By July 2014, the new Coalition government had been in power for 10 months and during that time had put in place its 'Operation Sovereign Borders'. The goal of Operation Sovereign Borders is to 'stop the boats'. It is a policy that requires (among other things) that any asylum seeker arriving on Australian shores be conveyed to Manus Island or Nauru for processing. If found to be a refugee, the asylum seeker will be permanently settled on Manus Island or Nauru, and will not be settled in Australia. Operation Sovereign Borders also involves the use of the Australian navy to intercept boats and place asylum seekers on lifeboats to be sent back to Indonesia. As Minister for Immigration and Border Protection, Mr Morrison, controlled media briefings and provided very limited information about the operation. The policy is controversial and has attracted media attention on a number of bases. Given the above, the environment for analysis of print media articles about asylum seekers in this second data collection period differs vastly from the environment in which the first data were gathered.

During the eight-day period from 6 July 2014 to 13 July 2014, information was gathered from three newspapers: the *Australian* (or the *Weekend Australian*), the *Daily Telegraph* (or the *Sunday Telegraph*) and the *Sydney Morning Herald* (or the *Sun-Herald*). Articles containing any reference to ‘asylum seekers’ were identified for analysis in each of the selected papers. Articles analysed included editorials, news reports, features, opinion pieces and letters and texts to the editor. Over the eight-day period, 155 articles were collected in total, including 32 from the *Australian*/the *Weekend Australian*, 48 from the *Daily Telegraph*/the *Sunday Telegraph* and 75 from the *Sydney Morning Herald*/the *Sun-Herald*.

During the same eight-day period, tweets containing the hashtag ‘#asylumseekers’ were extracted from Twitter for analysis. Over the relevant period, 11,981 tweets were collected.

4.2.1 PRINT MEDIA ANALYSIS

A breakdown of the number of articles published in the three papers over the second period is set out in the table below:

Date	The Daily Telegraph	The Australian	The Sydney Morning Herald	TOTAL
6 July 2014	-	-	14	14
7 July 2014	2	1	10	13
8 July 2014	1	3	9	13
9 July 2014	14	10	11	35
10 July 2014	21	9	10	40
11 July 2014	6	7	4	17
12 July 2014	3	2	4	9
13 July 2014	1	-	13	14
TOTAL	48	32	75	155

TABLE 3: NUMBER OF ARTICLES PUBLISHED 6 JULY 2014 - 13 JULY 2014

An analysis of the types of articles published during the second period is contained in the following table:

Type	The Daily Telegraph	The Australian	The Sydney Morning Herald	TOTAL
News	5	5	13	23
Opinion	4	7	3	14
Editorial	-	3	1	4
Features	1	2	1	4
Letters ²	38	14	54	106
Cartoons	-	1	3	4
TOTAL	48	32	75	155

TABLE 4: TYPES OF ARTICLES PUBLISHED 6 JULY 2014 - 13 JULY 2014

Aside from the obvious difference between coverage of the issue of asylum seekers during an election campaign, and coverage during the execution of an asylum seeker policy, there was a further event in July 2014 that sets the scene for the analysis of the second data set. The collection period in July 2014 occurred during a significant 'on-water matter' relating to the interception of a boat bound for Australia containing 153 Sri Lankan asylum seekers. The boat was intercepted by the Australian Navy outside of Australian territorial waters and the passengers transferred to an Australian vessel where they waited on the high seas. Lawyers for some of the asylum seekers on board launched a challenge in the High Court of Australia, and as a consequence the Coalition government was required to release some information about the location of the asylum seekers. During the same period, the Coalition government returned a separate boatload of 41 Sri Lankan refugees to Sri Lanka. Both of these events attracted media coverage and form the locus around which the print media articles collected during this period spin.

² Including comments and text messages.

The dominant narratives conveyed during the first collection period were the absence of the asylum seekers and the blaming of asylum seekers. These two narratives interact, as the invisibility of asylum seekers from the narrative rests on an acceptance that they are a problem to be solved, and the blame narrative makes the subtext text by articulating why the asylum seekers are a problem. The print media coverage in the second data collection period differs markedly from that gathered in the first period in that the most dominant narratives are powerful and negative, bringing to life even further the subtext which lies beneath the previous absence of the asylum seekers from the narrative and pinning to asylum seekers the reasons that they are so problematic that they should be excluded from Australian society. The three dominant narratives conveyed during this period are that asylum seekers are operating under false pretences (are not 'genuine' refugees), are immoral, and are criminal.

FALSE PRETENCES/ ILLEGITIMACY

There is a vein of illegality that runs through the discussion of asylum seekers, and is the subtext on which rests the military and legal apparatus that is the Operation Sovereign Borders policy. This harks back to the idea that proliferated during the early 2000s, that asylum seekers who arrive by boat are 'illegal' and 'queue-jumpers' (see Klocker and Dunn 2003). Consistent with these findings, reports in the print media data gathered in 2013 indicate that Mr Abbott described asylum seekers as 'illegal' even prior to taking office in September 2013 (see, for example Nightingale 2013). Drawing on this context, during the July 2014 analysis period a series of articles described the return of 41 Sri Lankan asylum seekers to Sri Lanka, subsequent to a four question screening process that was conducted at sea. According to reports in the *Daily Telegraph*, the majority of those returned were in fact economic migrants rather than asylum seekers (Benson 2014, p. 1, p. 8). These newspapers report that the asylum seekers were coming to Australia on false pretences, and draw on narratives of illegitimacy,

irresponsibility, selfishness, and greed with an ultimate message that these asylum seekers are unworthy. On 7 July 2014, the *Daily Telegraph* broke the story that of the 41 asylum seekers returned to Sri Lanka, only one was a 'legitimate' asylum seeker, while the rest were economic refugees (Benson 2014, p. 1, p. 8). Following this initial report, the language in the News Limited press was heightened over the next days. On 10 July 2014, an article was published in the *Daily Telegraph* entitled 'Oh the Humanity' indicating that asylum seekers had complained that Australian authorities had confiscated iPhones, digital cameras, and gold credit cards, and that they had been provided with Uncle Toby's muesli bars that were out of date (Chambers 2014, p. 5). On the same day, the *Daily Telegraph* published an opinion piece from conservative commentator Andrew Bolt, which also relied on the above reports (Bolt 2014, p. 13). A full-page news article in the *Australian* on 11 July 2014 also reported along similar lines to the *Daily Telegraph*, indicating that the 41 Sri Lankans were not seeking asylum but a better life (Balogh 2014, p. 9). An editorial in the *Australian* on 9 July 2014 argued that the economic migrants 'warranted a firm response' and further included narratives about irresponsibility and bad parenting by criticizing parents for a lack of compassion and responsibility in taking children on board (Australian 9 July 2014, p. 13). These News Limited articles conveyed narratives of greed, selfishness, entitlement, lack of gratitude and lack of worthiness. They rest on the idea that the asylum seekers were travelling to Australia under false pretences, and reinforce the government position that Operation Sovereign Borders, and in particular the return of asylum seekers to their country of origin, is appropriate (despite concerns expressed by legal scholars and others, that such action is in breach of both domestic and international laws).

Along similar lines is an opinion piece published by the *Australian* on 9 July 2014 authored by Bandula Jayasekara, the Sri Lankan consul general to New South Wales and Queensland (Jayasekara 2014, p. 12). She argues that asylum seekers coming from Sri Lanka were coached

by refugee councils and refugee lawyers to say that they were harassed and tortured in Sri Lanka, and warns Australians not to be 'hoodwinked' by vested interests and to be mindful of the lawyers and lobby groups who have an interest in profiting from 'creating fear and hate to achieve their sinister objectives'. Although along different lines to the stories described above, this piece also conveys a narrative that Sri Lankan asylum seekers are coming to Australia under false pretences, and furthermore indicates that they are willing to lie and deceive to do so.

IMMORALITY

On 9 July 2014, the *Sydney Morning Herald* broke a story that female asylum seekers on Christmas Island had attempted suicide in the hope that if they died their babies would be adopted by Australians and would be granted Australian citizenship (Whyte 2014, p. 7). The *Sydney Morning Herald* article reported that the mothers were in 'utter despair'. In the subsequent days, the News Limited press ran a series of articles in relation to these reports and also published a number of letters. On 10 July 2014, the *Australian* published a front page article entitled 'Revealed – the true story about what's happening on Christmas Island' and reported that a handful of Christmas Island detainees had engaged in minor acts of self harm, in what authorities claimed were cynical attempts to be transferred to the mainland to be housed in community detention (Taylor and Balogh 2014, p. 1, p. 2). The article also noted that both the Greens and Labor had attempted to use the unconfirmed reports for political mileage.

The following day, on 11 July 2014, there were a number of articles and letters published in the *Australian* relating to the issue. These articles developed the idea that the asylum seekers engaging in acts of self-harm (or attempted suicide) were doing so for calculated, cynical and immoral reasons. A front-page news story in the *Australian* stated that refugee groups were coaching asylum seekers to self harm for political reasons, and implying that the women on Christmas Island who were self harming, by drinking concoctions of shampoo and dishwashing

liquid, were doing so on the direction of refugee advocates in the hope of being transferred to the mainland (Taylor 2014, p. 1, p. 2). Further, an opinion piece by Greg Sheridan picked up on statements by Mr Abbott that the self-harming asylum seekers were attempting to ‘morally blackmail’ Australian authorities. Mr Sheridan went on to criticise the Fairfax media, ‘there is a lazy assumption in the Australian media – informed mainly by pro-asylum-seeker groups – that any sign of desperation is a sure indication that the people involved are feeling persecution’ (Sheridan 2014, p. 2). These articles expand upon Mr Abbott’s comments in a way that clearly characterises asylum seekers as manipulative and immoral in their attempts to reach Australia by any means. The nature of the coverage also implicates refugee groups, the Labor party, the Greens, and the Fairfax media in this manipulation.

A letter published in the *Australian* on 11 July 2014 serves to highlight the extent of feeling in the community in relation to the self-harm issue. That letter stated (Delia-Putta 2014, p. 11):

The Jews in Nazi concentration camps did not self-harm, nor did their children. They used willpower to survive. By contrast, some refugees in Australian detention centres, which cannot in any way be compared to concentration camps, harm themselves and do nothing to prevent their children doing the same.

This letter sustains the narrative of immorality, particularly in relation to the potential for children to self-harm and extends it to include weakness and selfishness. The comparison with the experience of Jewish people during the Holocaust elevates it even further and draws on the worthy/unworthy binary described above.

CRIMINALITY

A final negative narrative conveyed during the second collection period relates to the criminality of asylum seekers. On 9 July 2014 the *Daily Telegraph* ran a front-page article with the very large, capitalised heading ‘Asylum Assassins’, reporting that an Iranian refugee granted a protection visa in 2010 faced court over the stabbing death of his girlfriend’s former

partner (Mullany 2014a, p. 1). Inside the paper was a major, two-page story entitled 'Blood and Tears' which described how the victim was 'slain in the mall' (Mullany 2014b, pp. 4-5). The two-page spread contained a sidebar that listed other asylum seekers charged with criminal offences during the last several years. The narratives of criminality and violence could not be clearer, and despite the fact that the crime that was the subject of the main article was essentially domestic, they are conveyed in relation to all asylum seekers and not just the accused. The headline and the use of the side bar to include other instances of (largely non-violent) offences by asylum seekers makes transparent the strategy of using this one crime to convey the narrative of criminality about all asylum seekers. These stories about violent criminality expand the common narrative of illegality, and perpetuate the idea that if invited into Australia, asylum seekers will bring with them violence and unlawfulness.

POLITICISATION

A prominent theme that is evident in this analysis is the politicisation of the asylum seeker issue by both politicians and newspapers.

The News Limited press published articles, opinion pieces, editorials and letters which all attacked the positions of those opposed to the government policy. Targets included the Greens, Labor, Fairfax, the ABC, the amorphous 'Left' and the High Court. An editorial in the *Australian* dated 7 July 2014 was entitled 'No excuse for hysterical language in asylum debate' and noted that while government secrecy about the issue was regrettable, much of the commentary was ill informed and hysterical (Australian, 7 July 2014). The editorial also included a specific criticism of ABC journalist Fran Kelly who had asked Mr Morrison a question about people being 'disappeared'. On the same day, the *Daily Telegraph* published an opinion piece entitled 'Left's reaction to Tamils over the top' criticising the Greens and other 'Leftists' such as former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser for constructing Sri Lanka as a villain (Daily

Telegraph, 7 July 2014, p. 29). Later in the week, on 10 July 2014, the *Australian* published a further editorial on the issue entitled: 'Labor seeks siren song of left cheer squad on boats'. This piece criticised opposition leader Bill Shorten, arguing he had weakened his position on asylum seekers in an attempt to gain Green votes (*Australian*, 10 July 2014, p. 13). Letters to the editor on the same day were published under the heading 'The Left is working against the national interest'. Finally, on 11 July the *Daily Telegraph* published an opinion piece entitled 'Left's humanity would see people die', arguing that Mr Abbott's Operation Sovereign Borders policy was in line with his election promises and was saving lives at sea, and that opposition to the policy was a preference to 'see people die' (Blair 2014, p. 2). Ironically, the above demonstrates that although the News Limited press critiques the 'Left' for behaving hysterically in relation to the asylum seeker debate, articles and editorials in the News Limited press use heightened language which could itself arguably be characterised as hysterical.

The contents of the data gathered and discussed above indicate that the News Limited press had a clear and political editorial policy during this period. The significant majority of articles it published contained either (or both) powerful negative narratives about asylum seekers or overt criticism of those opposed to the Coalition government's asylum seeker policy (analysis indicates that during this period approximately 81% of articles across the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Australian* contained these narratives). David McKnight has published authoritative analyses of the Murdoch press's political power (McKnight 2012; McKnight 2010), concluding that 'the influence exercised by the news media of News Corporation is as much about setting a diffuse political and cultural agenda over the long term as it is about supporting (or opposing) a particular party or decision' (McKnight 2010, p. 304). McKnight's analysis indicates that in setting that political agenda, the Murdoch press has at times engaged in editorial policies promoting or opposing different political parties, including for example a concerted attack on the Labor minority government that held office from 2010 to 2013 (McKnight 2012,

p.19). Consistently, the data gathered in this project reflects the News Limited press's strong defence of the Coalition government on a number of fronts, during a period in which the government was under significant pressure due to the revelation about the high seas interception of the Sri Lankan boat and the High Court's consideration of the legal issues around that interception.

Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that the High Court itself was the target of some critique in the News Limited papers. This largely took the form of letters and texts to the editor. On 9 July 2014, the *Daily Telegraph* published four letters regarding the High Court proceedings, three of which critiqued the High Court as follows:

How dare the High Court interfere with the policy of our elected government?
(Reynolds 2014, p. 24).

Who is running this country? If the High Court issues an injunction to prevent the handover to Sri Lanka of 153 would-be asylum seekers, it would seem the High Court has taken over control of our borders (Richards 2014, p. 24).

When the High Court interferes with the border security policies of an elected government, it's time those learned judges were told to butt out (Hill 2014, p. 24).

While these letters demonstrate a lack of understanding of the role of the High Court and the checks and balances that are necessary in a democratic society, they also indicate the level of investment of some readers into the Coalition government's border protection policy, and the editorial policy of the *Daily Telegraph* in choosing to publish those letters.

While the *Australian* and the *Daily Telegraph* have a very clear political editorial policy, during this period the *Sydney Morning Herald* treatment of asylum seekers reflected a different approach. The paper pinned its viewpoint to the mast on 9 July 2014 by way of an editorial in which it acknowledged that the government was given a mandate to 'fix this mess' but noted

that there were legal and ethical limits to the mandate and concluded that it was the *Sydney Morning Herald's* view that the government would fail to meet its legal and ethical obligations in handing over Sri Lankan asylum seekers to the Sri Lankan navy. The editorial also noted that this view was widely held by the community and by legal scholars (*Sydney Morning Herald* 9 July 2014, p. 16).

The *Sydney Morning Herald* also published an extensive opinion piece by Waleed Aly that analysed the politicisation of the issue. The article was entitled 'Shame of harsh treatment of asylum seekers is bipartisan' and discussed 'the terms of our public conversation' about asylum seeker policy (Aly 2014, pp. 18-19). According to Mr Aly (emphasis added):

Whatever talk there might be that the Abbott government encountered its "children overboard" moment overlooks the fact that that episode did nothing to damage John Howard's fortunes, and that whatever the demonization of asylum seekers it might have embodied, the tradition is clearly flourishing. That's why reports of detainees' attempted suicides are seen not as tragic signs of unbearable mental pain, but as a cynical political stratagem; dismissed as merely rank "blackmail".

This opinion piece draws together the negative discourses about asylum seekers discussed above, with the politicisation discussed here. It highlights the way that the construction of asylum seekers as immoral and cynical serves a distinct political purpose in justifying the treatment of asylum seekers under both major parties' policies. Given the mainstream media's role in constructing asylum seekers largely in accordance with the government's position, this gives rise to significant concerns about the role of the media in the public sphere in Australia.

ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES

Despite the dominant negative narratives about asylum seekers expressed in the print media during this period, there were a number of articles published which conveyed alternative narratives touching on the humanity of the asylum seekers.

On 7 July 2014, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published an article about the torture that Tamil asylum seekers could face on return to Sri Lanka, outlining the documented cases of torture that had occurred and the nature of that torture (Doherty 2014, p. 5). Such descriptions bring to life the experience from which asylum seekers from Sri Lanka are seeking to escape, humanizing them to the reader (in stark contrast to the articles about the same asylum seekers which drew on the narratives of illegitimacy and false pretences discussed above). On 8 July 2014, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a news articles entitled 'Father pleads for news of daughter', reporting that the father of a 3 year old girl on board the Australian vessel on the high seas was 'desperate' to know where his child was (Gordon and Doherty 2014, p. 8). As occurs throughout this analysis, reference to the role and feelings of a parent has great potential in terms of framing asylum seekers both positively and negatively.

Finally, on 8 July 2014, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a long article entitled 'Reverend rewrites art of the Sunday sermon' (Murphy 2014, p. 8). The article described a Gosford Anglican priest's role at the 'grassroots' of the church and his use of Twitter and Facebook to convey photographs to a wide audience. According to the article, between 80,000 and 500,000 people around the world are likely to see the signs. Reflecting on the asylum seeker situation in light of a criticism that he had not been 'religious' enough in the signs, the priest posted the short verse 'John 11:35: Jesus Wept'. This article does provide an alternative narrative; by invoking pity and sympathy for the asylum seekers it reminds readers of the humanity of those asylum seekers. However, for the purposes of this thesis the article also identifies the powerful capacity of social media to convey alternative narratives to many people around the world and within the public sphere. This will be discussed further below in the review of the Twitter coverage during this period.

4.2.2 THE TWITTER ALTERNATIVE

During the period from 6 July 2014 to 12 July 2014 there were 11,981 tweets captured containing the hashtag ‘#asylumseekers’. This is over seven times the number of tweets obtained during a similar capture period in September 2013. The number of tweets can be partially explained by the fact that during this period the asylum seeker issue was particularly topical, but it may also point to an increasing use of social media, and Twitter in particular, to discuss and analyse political issues and the manner in which they are covered in the media.

A review of the tweets indicates that a significant majority (conservatively, in the order of 95%) are tweets that provide alternative, positive narratives about asylum seekers, and/or critique the asylum seeker policy of the Coalition government. That majority of users form a community that shares a similar approach to asylum seekers and conveys and disseminates discussion about asylum seekers and policy. Much of that discussion is framed by reference to the mainstream media coverage, including the print media coverage outlined above. Some of the key features of the Twitter coverage of asylum seekers during this period are discussed below. Although every tweet has been reviewed, not every tweet will be reported in this thesis as it is beyond its scope. Instead, the major trends have been identified and will be explored.

FEBRINA IS 3 – GIVING A FACE TO THE FACELESS

As noted above, one of the alternative narratives present in the print media coverage during this period arose from an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* outlining a father’s plea for information about the location and safety of his 3-year-old daughter, Febrina, who was on board the Australian vessel in the high seas. During this period, a photograph of Febrina was circulated widely on Twitter by a number of users. The photograph shows Febrina smiling and dressed in a princess outfit. Tweets sharing the photograph included:

@leerhiannon: BREAKING: Photo of 3 year old Febrina that Abbott and Morrison have allegedly ‘disappeared’ (@leerhiannon, 7 July 2014, 6.47pm).

@SamJMitra: Have mercy @ScottMorrisonMP! Febrina is just a kid! (@SamJMitra, 8 July 2014, 4.30pm).

@amnestyOz: 3yo Febrina is one of 153 #asylumseekers now afloat on the high seas (@amnestyOz, 8 July 2014, 5.58pm).

@mamamia: Febrina is 3. And she's one of the 153 #asylumseekers the gov wants to send back (@mamamia, 7 July 2014, 3.00pm).

Identifying Febrina by name, by age, and illuminating her by way of a photograph, works to make her real. In this instance, Twitter enables the amplification of one of the alternative narratives contained in the print media. It gives a face to the absent or faceless. The image of a child undermines the dominant print media narratives of illegitimacy, immorality and criminality, as Febrina is so young that she is a symbol of innocence and a catalyst for people to think carefully about the conditions that the asylum seekers are experiencing. It is also notable that the image was shared by a range of users, from politicians, to charitable organisations, to alternative media outlets, to an individual (who directly addressed Mr Morrison). All have the capacity to participate in and shape this alternative narrative.

GIVE ME YOUR TIRED, YOUR POOR, YOUR HUDDLED MASSES – CHALLENGING GOVERNMENT POLICY

One of the most retweeted images during the capture period was a cartoon by Michael Leunig originally published in the *Age*. The cartoon was tweeted by two users by reference to the #asylumseekers hashtag (@StanSteam2, 9 July 2014, 7.53am, retweeted 177 times; @itsmarkbishop, 9 July 2014, 8.26am, retweeted 72 times).

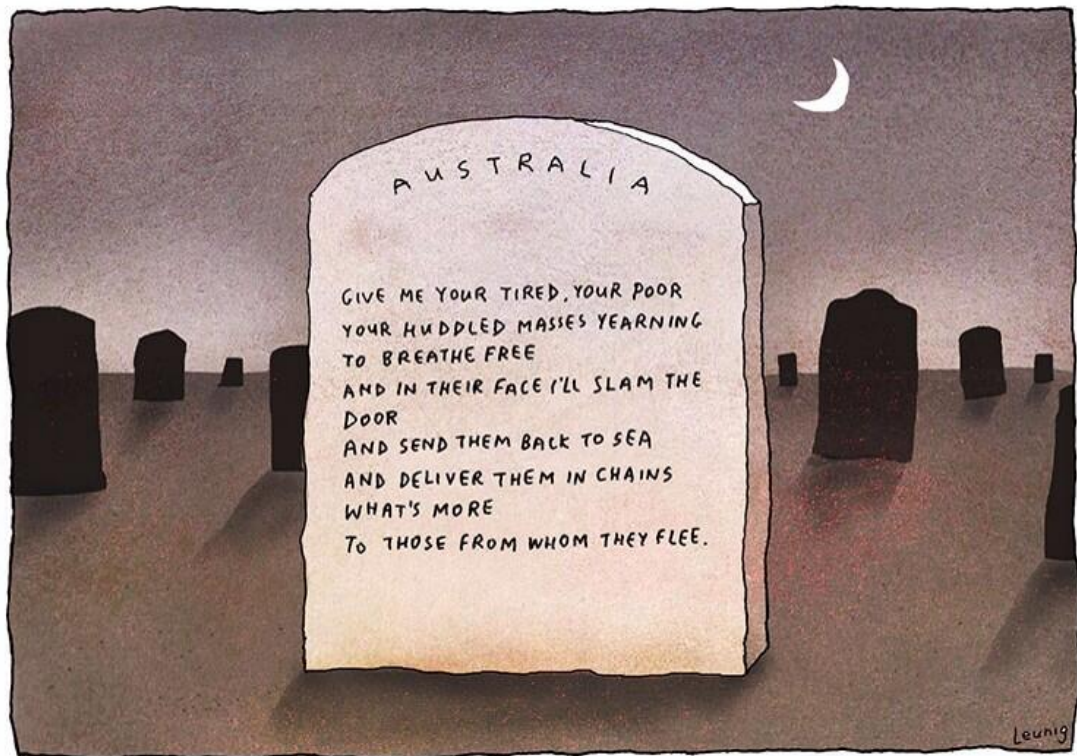


FIGURE 2: GRAVESTONE (SOURCE LEUNIG, *THE AGE*, 8 JULY 2014; ACCESSIBLE AT [HTTP://WWW.LEUNIG.COM.AU/INDEX.PHP/CARTOONS/RECENT-CARTOONS/309-GRAVESTONE](http://www.leunig.com.au/index.php/cartoons/recent-cartoons/309-gravestone))

Challenges to government policy are implicit in many of the tweets gathered in this collection period, but this cartoon uses poetry and art to emphasise the humanity of the asylum seekers, ‘the huddled masses yearning to breathe free’, and to comment upon the inhumanity of the government policy. It references a sonnet by Emma Lazarus entitled ‘The New Colossus’ engraved on the Statute of Liberty on Ellis Island and referring to the millions of immigrants who passed through Ellis Island at the beginning of their new lives in the United States. The first three lines of Leunig’s poem repeat lines in ‘The New Colossus’, and the remainder echoes Lazarus’ poem, but here instead of the statue lifting her lamp in welcome and guidance beside the golden door, the door is slammed shut. The high level of retweeting of the cartoon indicates that it struck a chord with Twitter users, and demonstrates the capacity of social media to enable the dissemination of an image that evocatively summarises an alternative viewpoint of this issue.

Twitter provides a vehicle for the dissemination of alternative narratives emanating from other major institutions (outside of the government and the media), including the church. As discussed in relation to the first data set, many tweets dealt with the attitude and approach of Australian churches to asylum seekers, and those tweets ultimately appeared to be the catalyst for coverage of the position of the Australian churches in the mainstream print media. The use of social media to disseminate the churches' position was specifically explored in an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 8 July 2014 in relation to the Gosford Anglican Parish's use of Twitter and Facebook to share images of its signs.

Analysis of the tweets gathered during this period supports that article's contention, as tweets from the Gosford Anglican Parish's Twitter account (@anggoscom) garnered multiple retweets, as did the article about the parish's use of the signs on social media. An example was the tweet by the account on 7 July 2014 at 1.21pm, which read:

Mr Morrison, what have you done to the 153?



FIGURE 3: JOINING OUR HEARTS TO THE DISAPPEARED (SOURCE @ANGGOSCOM, 6 JULY 2014, 8.21PM)

The above tweet was retweeted 97 times, and the same tweet from the parish priest's account (@FrBower, 7 July 2014, 1.23pm) was retweeted 127 times. This tweet directly addresses Mr Morrison and highlights that the 153 asylum seekers have been effectively 'disappeared'. It provides an alternative narrative to that conveyed in the mainstream media, re-framing the Coalition government's seizure of the Sri Lankan asylum seekers as criminal and the asylum seekers as vulnerable.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* article about Father Rod Bower's use of the signs (Murphy 2014, p. 8) was also the subject of significant Twitter coverage during this period, and was tweeted and retweeted by multiple users. This demonstrates again the flow of information between the two types of media.

MY COUNTRY, MY SHAME – NARRATIVES OF LAW AND MORALITY

Narratives of legality run strongly through the discourses conveyed by the Coalition government and the bulk of the print media coverage during this period. Dominant narratives about asylum seekers include their illegality and illegitimacy, as well as their criminality. Setting up asylum seekers in opposition to the law justifies the harsh treatment of the asylum seekers under the law.

In contrast to this construction, during the same period Twitter users disseminated and shared alternative narratives based on the law, which flip the binary and identify the behaviour of the Coalition government as outside the law, and the asylum seekers as in need of Australia's protection. There were several focuses for this discussion.

The first was the publication of an article by Alastair Nicholson, the former Chief Justice of the Family Court of Australia. The article, entitled 'My country, my shame', was published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* on 4 July 2014 (prior to the capture period) but was tweeted and retweeted throughout the following week by a number of users (for example, @AgeCommunity shared the article on 5 July 2014 at 10.57pm and it was then retweeted 57

times). The article discusses Mr Nicholson's role in a case regarding children in detention, and the deterioration of the policy to keep children out of detention in recent years. Although Mr Nicholson's article draws on a legal narrative, and identifies that Australia is in breach of international law, it hangs that legal narrative on an ethical framework that requires readers to see the links between the laws and our moral and ethical obligations to asylum seekers, particularly children:

What then must we do? I think that we must work together to show governments that this situation will not continue to be tolerated. I believe that there is a slow beginning of a groundswell in the community of distaste for these policies and with the leadership of people like Malcolm Fraser the wheel will turn, but not before much human misery will be suffered by some of the most vulnerable people of all. Perhaps the move against these policies by a minority of the Labor caucus in the federal Parliament is a harbinger of change.

We must bring it home that the people that we are mistreating in this way are people just like us with the same hopes and aspirations. We must stand up to the Abbotts, Morrisons and sadly, the Shortens of this world.

Narratives such as those contained in this article contrast sharply with the narratives of illegality and illegitimacy conveyed by the government and much of the print media.

A second and critical impetus for the analysis of asylum seeker policy by reference to Australia's legal obligations was the release of a statement signed by 53 of Australia's most prominent legal scholars indicating that the refoulement of the Sri Lankan refugees was in breach of Australia's obligations under international conventions. That statement was shared by a number of Twitter users including some of the signatories, and was subsequently retweeted multiple times. For example, the Kaldor Centre released the statement via a tweet

that was retweeted 58 times (@KaldorCentre, 7 July 2014, 4.17pm), and Professor Ben Saul's (Professor of International Law at the University of Sydney) link to the statement was retweeted 23 times (@profbensaul, 7 July 2014, 4.34pm).

Following the release of the statement, several of the signatories engaged in press interviews, with a number of tweets resulting from those interviews, including the following:

@ABCNews24: Prof Mary Crock: I think this is really quite profoundly shocking what Australia is doing at the moment #asylumseekers (@ABCNews24, 7 July 2014, 6.04pm - retweeted 43 times)

The characterisation of the Coalition government's activities as illegal continued to be disseminated by way of articles about the legal issues. In an article published by the *Guardian*, Richard Ackland described the principle of refoulement and how Australia was in breach of its international obligations '[f]or the Abbott government the importance of stopping boats of asylum seekers landing on our golden soil is a higher priority than protecting them according to international law' (Ackland 2014).

That article was tweeted by a number of users. Taking the analysis one step further, David Marr authored an article in the *Guardian* entitled 'Asylum secrecy on the high seas is designed to foil the enemy within – the law' (Marr 2014), identifying that government policy to keep operational matters secret was designed primarily to isolate the policy from lawyers and the judiciary who could interfere with the government's conduct. That article was also tweeted and retweeted multiple times.

BRAVO HIGH COURT! – SHARING BREAKING NEWS ON TWITTER

On the evening of Monday 7 July 2014, a group of lawyers representing some of the 153 asylum seekers on board an unknown Australian vessel approached the High Court of Australia for an emergency injunction. The first coverage of this issue in the print media occurred on 8

July 2014, but news of the High Court action filtered out via Twitter the evening before. The first reference to the High Court proceedings on Twitter came via a tweet from human rights lawyer George Newhouse (@GeorgeNewhouse), who was representing the asylum seekers in the action. At 6.40pm on 7 July 2014, he tweeted:

#ShineLawyers are in Court now seeking injunctions for the Tamil #asylumseekers which govt wants to hand over to the #SriLankan authorities

That tweet was picked up by a number of users. Shortly afterwards, it was reported (including live on ABC's 7.30) that the High Court had granted an interim injunction preventing the return of the 153 asylum seekers to Sri Lanka, and this development dominated Twitter coverage of the '#asylumseekers' hashtag for the rest of the day. Twitter users engaged with this event in a unique fashion. Based on the review of the tweets the subject of this thesis, the most common way that Twitter users engage with a story is through retweeting a number of influential or interesting tweets about a development. In this instance, a number of users initially reported on the breaking news, linking to stories on the mainstream media's websites. However, once the story had broken, hundreds of users posted individual tweets almost universally welcoming the High Court's intervention. Most of these tweets were not then retweeted, but instead formed part of a wave of support from individual Twitter users in relation to the High Court's decision. Examples are set out in **Figure 4** below:

THANK YOU THANK YOU THANKHIGH COURT Thank you x x x x x x #auspol #asylumseekers (@bukumbooe, 7 July 2014, 8.04pm)

The Abbott Gov's relentless bullying and bastardry towards #asylumseekers gets slap down in high court (@TheMurdochTimes, 7 July 2014, 8.06pm)

Thank goodness #auspol can't just override the #HighCourt. Temporary relief 4 #asylumseekers (@e_cripps, 7 July 2014, 8.07pm)

Good luck to whoever is fighting for the 153 #asylumseekers in the #HighCourt tomorrow.

Please try and get our dignity back (@nogods4me, 7 July 2014, 8.08pm)

Thank goodness for the High Court! Blocked the return of asylum seekers to Sri Lanka! #auspol #asylumseekers (@IndigSteve, 7 July 2014, 8.10pm)

Loving the high court right now #asylumseekers #refoulement (@Jokeown, 7 July 2014, 8.12pm)

THANK YOU, lives saved! High Court injunction halts handover of asylum seekers (@Bukumboee, 7 July 2014, 8.16pm)

A Big Thank You to the High Court of #Australia #asylumseekers (@IrateResident, 7 July 2014, 8.20pm)

3 cheers for the High Court & the rule of law! #asylumseekers #auspol (@sharnatweets, 7 July 2014, 8.26pm)

Bravo High Court! #auspol #asylumseekers (@creatingchange, 7 July 2014, 8.28pm)

@ScottMorrisonMP I'll sleep better tonight knowing the judiciary has spoken & protected, for now, lives of #Tamil #asylumseekers from YOU (@bukumboee, 7 July 2014, 9.09pm)

The High Court the latest body to tell "our" government NO #auspol #asylumseekers (@sparkle723, 7 July 2014, 9.33pm)

Can't I just vote for the High Court next time? (@ChrisPIrvine, 7 July 2014, 9.55pm)

High Court blocks return of 153 #asylumseekers to Sri Lanka. Judiciary has more common sense than executive #auspol (@arjevs, 7 July 2014, 10.06pm)

George Neuhaus [sic] on #faine "What was paramount to the High Court was that peoples lives were at stake!" #asylumseekers (@StellaSpoons, 8 July 2014, 8.39am)

FIGURE 4: EXAMPLES OF TWEETS REGARDING THE HIGH COURT DURING THE PERIOD 6 JULY 2014-13 JULY 2014

The above tweets provide a direct contrast to the letters published in the *Daily Telegraph* about the High Court proceedings, and highlight the selectivity of the publication of those letters to the editor. They show that the mainstream media do not have a monopoly on the creation of a story. Perhaps most importantly, they demonstrate the capacity of Twitter to

provide a venue for people seeking to be heard, to share their views on an integral part of their democratic society, to be a part of the constellation of voices that constitute the political public sphere.

GRAIN OF SALT - CRITIQUING THE POLITICISATION OF THE MAINSTREAM PRINT MEDIA COVERAGE

As described above, on 7 July 2014 *The Daily Telegraph* broke a story about the return of the 41 Sri Lankan asylum seekers to Sri Lanka in an article entitled 'Sri Lankan boat now back home' (Benson 2014, p. 1, p. 8). That article also reported that 40 of the 41 asylum seekers were in fact economic refugees. The article forms an important lens through which the Twitter coverage of asylum seekers can be viewed, as it provided a focus for Twitter users to discuss the issue and, in particular, to break down and challenge the politicisation of the issue by the Coalition government and the News Limited press.

As outlined above, the *Daily Telegraph* article conveyed narratives of false pretences and illegitimacy about the asylum seekers. The article was shared on Twitter numerous times, including by influential users who were retweeted. The Rise Refugee Twitter account shared the article, with this accompanying message (@riserefugee, 7 July 014, 12.40am):

News article with loaded meanings-confirms about 50 #asylumseekers refouled to #SriLanka

The Rise Refugee tweet calls out both the underlying meanings in *The Daily Telegraph* article, and labels the return of the asylum seekers as 'refoulement', action which is contrary to a principle under international law that prohibits the return of asylum seekers to the land they are seeking to leave.

Other users who tweeted about the *Daily Telegraph* article and commented on the paper's editorial policy and relationship with the Coalition government include:

Thx Murdoch press, I take what u say with grain of salt, interesting they seem to know it all...(@Lady1lzy, 7 July 2014, 7.05am)

and

#asylumseekers Morrison broke story to the D/Telegraph: re Tamil AS; “processed safely at sea, and returned home”. Boycotting DT, no link. (@JonJohnson_1, 7 July 2014, 7.24am).

and

Note how the Ltd News propagandists use the words safely & safety 4 times in 1 article!? #AUSpol #SriLanka #AsylumSeekers (@OzEquitist, 7 July 2014, 8.20am).

The fact that the *Daily Telegraph* broke this story meant that for some time it was the only mainstream media source for the story. Given this, Twitter users had an increased capacity to focus on and engage with the content of a specific piece of print media coverage, which in this instance led to a critique of the meanings conveyed by the story and the nature of the relationship between the *Daily Telegraph* and the Coalition government. As other media sources began to publish stories about the return of the 41 asylum seekers, Twitter users linked to those articles, with comments including:

*Australia returns #asylumseekers to #SriLanka in sea transfer...criminal behaviour from a criminal gov...[with a link to an article on *The Guardian* website] (@femingjude, 7 July 2014, 7.59am).*

and

*Unverifiable, unsubstantiated ‘claims’ from #Morrison. Not good enough #Auspol #AsylumSeekers...[with a link to an article on the *Guardian* website] (@imagineerity, 7 July 2014, 8.12am).*

and

Australian Govt returns 41 #asylumseekers to the govt they are fleeing #notinmyname...[with a link to an article on the ABC website] (@Superlexify, 7 July 2014, 8.00am).

and

DISGRACEFUL Asylum seekers screened at sea returned to Sri Lanka...[with a link to an article on *The Sydney Morning Herald* website] (@MicheleS_Aus, 7 July 2014, 8.07am).

Analysis of the Twitter coverage of this story provides an indication of the way that Twitter users can reinterpret and assess print media coverage. While the focus of the return of the 41 Sri Lankan asylum seekers in the print media was on the fact that 40 of the asylum seekers were economic refugees (and were therefore seeking asylum under false pretences), the Twitter coverage provided users with the opportunity to raise issues that were not considered by the News Limited press, including the legal and ethical issues associated with screening the asylum seekers at sea and returning them to the country they were seeking to flee. The Twitter comments also illustrate that social media users are aware of the relationships between the government and the print media, and are therefore alive to the way that the print media can represent government position without interrogation.

USERS WHO SUPPORT AND CONVEY NARRATIVES IN LINE WITH PRINT MEDIA

A small number of Twitter users support or endorse the negative narratives conveyed by the print media and described above. The most prominent example of this is user @MoarPolitics who engaged with other users of the #asylumseekers hashtag, frequently querying their construction of the issue. During this @MoarPolitics tweeted 81 times, and examples of those are extracted in **Figure 5** below:

@GreenVoter @Refugees There are no breaches. You are giving in to hysterical fear

mongering by advocates in the #asylumseekers industry (@MoarPolitics, 6 July 2014, 10.28am)

@mmechomski Aww, someone's got entitlement issues. You will be provided with info on illegal #asylumseekers when/if required. #auspol (@MoarPolitics, 6 July 2014, 12.52pm)

See, you'll be told when you need to know you sooky, self-entitled parasites...[with a link to the Daily Telegraph article of 7 July 2014 discussed above] (@MoarPolitics, 7 July 2014, 5.54am)

@DianahMieg @abcnews They found them without passports but with their Centrelink forms already filled out. #asylumseekers #auspol (@MoarPolitics, 7 July 2014, 8.10am)

@Catherine_Zen @abcnews Economic refugees not #asylumseekers. You can't even get your facts straight after you've been given straight facts (@MoarPolitics, 7 July 2014, 9.49am)

It's been an awesome day for Australia! Welfare shoppers sent back to where they came from! #AsylumSeekers #auspol (@MoarPolitics, 7 July 2014, 4.33pm)

53 lawyers with no vested interest in propagating the #asylumseekers advocacy parasite industry something. Shock. No really, shock. #auspol (@MoarPolitics, 7 July 2014, 5.28pm)

Is this going to be a black armband edition of #abc730 now the majority has finally said no more illegal #asylumseekers? #auspol #Article 44 (@MoarPolitics, 7 July 2014, 7.13pm)

What kind of sicko puts a three year old on a boat full of illegal #asylumseekers when you are perfectly safe in India? (@MoarPolitics, 7 July 2014, 7.30pm)

FIGURE 5: EXAMPLES OF TWEETS BY USER @MOARPOLITICS DURING THE PERIOD 6 JULY 2014 - 13 JULY 2014

The narratives evident in the above tweets are similar to those contained in the mainstream press, relating to the illegality and illegitimacy of the asylum seekers, and their immorality. Several of @MoarPolitics' tweets were retweeted (29 retweets during the period), but overall @MoarPolitics' tweets and retweets represented less than 1% of the tweets gathered during this period and clearly constituted a minority position within the broader conversation.

CHAPTER 5 - CONCLUSIONS

Consideration of the way that print media and social media coverage of asylum seeker policy interact gives insight into the nature and structure of the public sphere, and enables assessment of the potential of social media to enhance the political public sphere in Australia.

5.1 THE PRINT MEDIA IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The mass media play a critical role in the public sphere, as they convey information and opinion about political and social issues to the public (McNair 2000). That information is, however, mediated and subject to influence based on commercial and political imperatives and pressures (McNair 2000). Fundamental to the functioning of a healthy public sphere is a space for open, vital and diverse discussions of political issues (Habermas 1989; Dahlgren 1995). Therefore as a starting point in considering the public sphere in Australia, it is necessary to consider the extent to which the mainstream media provide such a space.

The data gathered during the collections periods in 2013 and 2014 indicate that the mainstream print media's coverage of asylum seeker policy reflects, to a significant extent, the viewpoints of the major political parties. In the 2013 federal election campaign, both the Coalition and the Labor party had similar asylum seeker policies, centred on 'stopping the boats' and offshore processing of asylum seekers who did manage to arrive in Australian waters by boat. A textual analysis of the print media coverage during this period indicated that asylum seekers were largely absent from the narrative, and that the focus instead was on the effectiveness and political merits of the policies responding to them. Implicit in this coverage was an acceptance that asylum seekers were problematic to Australian society. There were some exceptions that constructed asylum seekers as human and engaged with their experiences under the then Labor government's policy, and some letters to the editor that

critiqued the policies on humanitarian grounds. However, these were exceptions to the general dominant coverage in all of the papers.

In July 2014, the coverage of asylum seekers in the print media revolved around a much more contentious issue, namely the Coalition government's interception on the high seas and potential return of Sri Lankan asylum seekers. The actions of the government were shrouded in secrecy, but were the subject of a High Court challenge that led to the revelation of some information about the government's conduct and the location of the asylum seekers. However, despite the fact that this period was characterised by controversy, it again saw the print media conveying dominant narratives that were in line with the government's policy and construction of asylum seekers. These narratives appeared designed to justify the treatment of the asylum seekers by the government, and included the asylum seekers' illegitimacy (they were not genuine refugees), immorality and criminality. Although these narratives were heightened negative narratives, they were in effect the subtext to the absence narrative evident in the first data collection period, making explicit the reasons that asylum seekers needed to be dealt with harshly by the government. The textual analysis during this second period indicated that the News Limited press in particular had a highly politicised editorial policy to defend the government's conduct in relation to asylum seekers and criticise opponents of that conduct. Again, there were some exceptions to the construction of asylum seekers by reference to these negative narratives, but those exceptions were almost exclusively contained in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and were themselves the subject of attack by the News Limited media (see for example, the attack on the Fairfax media's story about self-harm on Christmas Island by mothers in 'despair': Whyte, 9 July 2014).

What does it mean for the public sphere when the dominant narratives conveyed by the print media are in lock step with the policies of the government? According to McNair, a critical role of journalism in the public sphere is independence from politicians and interrogation of the

messages that they seek to convey to the public, particularly in this era of spin. McNair quotes *Guardian* columnist, Hugo Young as follows (emphasis added) (McNair 2000, p. 70):

Political journalists owe it to their readers to keep open the richest store-house of cynicism. It's our duty, as we say: and sometimes, as we don't say, our pleasure. You should never be left unapprised of the second-guessing, the triple sub-textual meaning, behind what you might otherwise be in danger of supposing is really going on. Not believing politicians is our stock-in-trade, and casting doubt on the bona fides of their words has been magnified, as a branch of our professional task, in direct proportion to the colonisation of our territory by the word-manipulators with whom they now surround themselves.

If independence and interrogation of government words and policy are an essential part of the media's role in the public sphere, the print media coverage of asylum seeker policy in Australia in 2013 and 2014 is inadequate to achieve this goal. Rather than interrogate the subtext behind, for example, Mr Abbott's comment that asylum seekers are self-harming in order to 'morally blackmail' Australia, the majority of the print media, and the News Limited press in particular, conveyed and perpetuated the narratives of immorality and illegitimacy associated with Mr Abbott's comments (see, for example, Sheridan 2014, p. 2).

The danger of this type of non-interrogative, politicised print media coverage is amplified in Australia in relation to the asylum seeker issue for two reasons. First, the Labor opposition does not formally oppose the government's Operation Sovereign Borders policy and does not have an alternative. This reduces the political debate about the issue and has the tendency, as seen in the 2013 Federal election campaign, to advance the discussion to the political merits and likely success of the policy rather than enable discussion about the ethics and morality of the policy, or highlight the sub-textual constructions of asylum seekers that support it.

Secondly, the Coalition government's commitment to secrecy about what it terms 'on-water matters' has led to a situation where there is very little information available in the public sphere about the treatment of asylum seekers. During the second data collection period, the release of information was resisted and carefully managed by the government. It exclusively released information about the return of 41 asylum seekers to Sri Lanka to the *Daily Telegraph*, thus managing the construction of that story (Benson 2014, p. 1, p. 8). And information about the 153 asylum seekers remaining on the high seas was only provided when the High Court of Australia compelled its release. In this environment of secrecy, an engaged and interrogative mass media is critical, as without it the public does not have the information necessary to adequately debate and discuss the issues at hand.

5.2 SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Given that the data demonstrate that the majority of the print media coverage conveys narratives that support the government's Operation Sovereign Borders policy, and does not provide independent interrogation of either the policy or those underlying narratives, the role of social media in the public sphere is of critical importance. The data analysed in this thesis demonstrate that members of the public used Twitter to engage in the public sphere in a number of ways that, arguably, enhance the public sphere in Australia in relation to the issue of asylum seekers.

Textual analysis of the tweets collected by reference to the #asylumseekers hashtag during specified periods in 2013 and 2014 indicates clearly that Twitter provided a vehicle for the dissemination of alternative narratives which differed markedly from those conveyed by the mainstream media. The narratives about asylum seekers that were shared included those that were directly opposed to the dominant mainstream media narratives. Rather than illegal or criminal, asylum seekers were innocent; rather than deserving of punishment, they were

desperate for our mercy and aid (see for example the tweets discussed above regarding 3-year-old Febrina, and the cartoon by Michael Leunig). The disruptive narratives conveyed and shared by way of Twitter confirm the capacity of social media to provide a venue for the public to disseminate alternative points of view, and given the importance of discussion and debate about issues to the success of the public sphere, at a fundamental level it is evident that social media must enhance the political public sphere in Australia. According to Dahlgren, '[t]here must exist spaces in which citizens belonging to different groups and cultures, or speaking in registers or even languages, will find participation meaningful' (2005, p.152).

Evidently, access to the public sphere is a critical element of an effective public sphere: 'the public in a democracy should have opportunities not just to read about, or to watch and listen to the development of political debates as spectators, but to participate directly *in* them, through channels of access' (McNair 2000, p. 105). The internet provides the opportunity for motivated members of the public to present their point of view in an environment where they can communicate it to other members of the sphere and thus contribute to the debate. The data clearly demonstrate that individuals have the capacity to not only share their point of view, but to become influential participants in the debate (see, for example, the tweets during the August-September 2013 period by user @nicolasnicola22 of a YouTube video created by a 17-year-old student).

In one sense, tweeting is an enhanced version of writing a letter to the editor for publication in a newspaper. It arguably requires a lower threshold of motivation to log on and tweet than it does to write and send a letter to the editor. Tweeting is also unmediated by the newspapers that have editorial policies they are taking into account when they choose to publish letters, as those letters are designed to represent the opinions of the community of readers to themselves, and is effectively a way of giving expression to the paper's editorial policy (McNair 2000, p.109). This was evident in the data analysed for the purposes of this thesis, as letters

published in the News Limited papers mainly reflected and reinforced the narratives contained in the articles and editorials published in the papers more broadly (see for example, the letter published in the *Australian* on 11 July 2014 and the letters published in the *Daily Telegraph* on 9 July 2014).

Taking the analysis beyond the provision of alternative narratives in the social media space by individuals, the textual analysis of the tweets gathered during this period indicates that social media also provide a forum for the explication of points of view from important democratic institutions, such as the church and the legal community. The dissemination of information provided by those institutions is particularly important in circumstances where the government and the mainstream print media are telling largely consistent stories about asylum seeker policy. The data indicate that internet users deployed Twitter to convey alternative narratives originally shared by elements of the church and the legal community. The church's use of Twitter to challenge the dominant narratives about asylum seekers is well-documented in the analysis above, and includes in particular the Gosford Anglican Parish's successful dissemination of photographs of signs outside the church to thousands of Twitter users. Posts such as 'Jesus Wept' and 'Joining our hearts to the disappeared' reframe the treatment of asylum seekers and ask readers for their empathy, effectively flipping the dominant narrative of asylum seekers' immorality to question the morality of Australia's asylum seeker policy. Similarly, the use of narratives of law on Twitter by authoritative sources such as judges and legal scholars to criticise the government's conduct is a direct challenge to the dominant narratives of illegality deployed by the government and the bulk of the mainstream press to justify the treatment of asylum seekers. The data therefore support a view that social media enables the participation of voices from important democratic institutions in the debate about asylum seekers in the public sphere, while the mainstream media minimises or dismisses these contributions.

The interaction of social media discussion of asylum seekers with mainstream media coverage is critical for any consideration of the value of social media to the public sphere. Research indicates that social media content has the capacity to influence print media coverage (Hermida 2010) and this was the case in relation to the data gathered for the purposes of this analysis. Such influence was evident in the example of the 'God Loves Boat People' image disseminated in the first data collection period, which became the subject of a significant article containing alternative narratives in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Partridge 2013, pp. 2-3). The church's use of social media to share alternative messages about asylum seekers was also the subject of a further article in the second data collection period in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Murphy 2014, p. 8). This example illustrates the capacity for social media to influence the content of the mediated texts contained in the mainstream press coverage of this issue, and therefore demonstrates the fluid and potentially interactive nature of the modern networked public sphere.

While social media arguably have the capacity to influence print media coverage, textual analysis of the tweets that are the subject of this thesis confirms that the most prominent way that the two types of media interact is through social media use of print media as a locus for discussion of and commentary on an issue (consistent with, for example, Highfield and Bruns 2012; see also Bruns and Highfield 2013). Many of the tweets analysed used developments reported in the mainstream press as a catalyst for discussion, and importantly, some members of the public used Twitter to critique the nature and content of print media coverage. In circumstances where that print media coverage conveyed dominant narratives in line with those of the government, the capacity to deconstruct and challenge those narratives in the public sphere is extraordinarily important. The textual analysis of the tweets indicates that internet users were alive to the relationship between the News Limited press and the Coalition government, questioning the way that the *Daily Telegraph* was granted an exclusive on the

return of 41 asylum seekers to Sri Lanka, and, importantly, challenging the narratives that the *Daily Telegraph* conveyed in reporting that story. The capacity of social media to provide a public space for these critiques is one way of addressing the failing of the print media to adequately interrogate the government's narratives about asylum seekers. As such, it is arguable that social media is working to rectify the issues with the Australian political public sphere, by providing not only a space for alternative narratives and different voices, but a place to critique the issue with the mainstream press coverage which serves to weaken the public sphere.

In addition to critiquing the text and subtext of mainstream media representations of asylum seekers, social media also provide the capacity for users to address politicians directly. Examples of addressing tweets to politicians abound in the data analysed, with two examples extracted in the analysis above being the tweet from the Gosford Anglican Parish 'Mr Morrison, what have you done to the 153?' and a tweet from user @SamJMitra 'Have mercy @ScottMorrisonMP! Febrina is just a kid!'. Such activity removes a level of mediation between politicians and the public, and is arguably closer to Habermas' conception of the 'ideal' public sphere, where members of the public can have direct influence on the workings of the legislature.

5.3 AN ECHO CHAMBER OR AN EXPANSION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE?

There is a debate in the academic research about whether participation on the internet constitutes a contribution to the public sphere or is merely a matter of like-minded people connecting with one another in what has been termed an 'echo chamber'. Although internet research (particularly prior to the advent of social media) has suggested that readers of and contributors to political blogs tend to seek out users with similar views (see, for example, Adamic and Glance 2005), the most recent and relevant study into political homophily and

heterogeneity on Twitter indicates that when engaging in social activity, Twitter users demonstrate a high level of homophily, but when Twitter is used to discuss or disseminate news or politics lower levels of homophily and higher levels of heterogeneity are displayed (Colleoni et al 2014).

The Twitter data gathered for the purposes of preparing this thesis demonstrates high levels of consistency between contributors' views. Broadly generalising, the majority of the tweets caught during the two collection periods were critical of the Labor and Coalition government policies and conveyed alternative and disruptive narratives about asylum seekers. There were some exceptions to this, including the user @MoarPolitics, who contributed opposing viewpoints generally in line with the mainstream media coverage. Based on this general analysis, it could be argued that a high level of homophily existed between Twitter users contributing to the #asylumseekers hashtag. If the argument that such homophily provides an echo chamber effect is accepted, the consequence would be that political discussion of asylum seekers on social media does not enhance the public sphere as it does not provide a multitude of countervailing voices to enable a debated viewpoint to ultimately be reached. However, such an argument would fail to take into account the unique features of Twitter and of the discussion of this particular issue that – it is argued - elevate it beyond an echo chamber.

The concern about homophily and the echo chamber effect seems to be that by participating in a discussion with like-minded individuals, a contributor to that discussion is effectively 'shouting into the void', and his or her viewpoint has no importance either because nobody is really listening or because the consensus among participants is such that there is no change to public opinion. This argument fails to engage with several specific technical features of Twitter. First, although the majority of those contributing to the conversation under the #asylumseekers hashtag agree with one another, they are in many instances directly addressing politicians or other public figures who do not share their viewpoint. Users can and

do directly tweet politicians who are increasingly using Twitter for their own purposes, and those tweets are available for the public to see (Grant et al 2010; Bruns and Highfield 2013; see also Francoli and Ward 2008 and Coleman and Wright 2008 in relation to political blogging). The data analysed above includes tweets addressed to Mr Morrison and Mr Abbott in relation to their approach to asylum seeker policy. Similarly, in many cases users directly tweet media outlets challenging their construction of an issue. In this case, it is arguable that Twitter users are not merely shouting into the void of agreement, but are in fact directly addressing and engaging with those with the opposite viewpoint, and that 'Twitter is providing a venue for Australia's leading politicians, journalists and politically engaged citizens to connect and shape the political discussion' (Grant et al 2010, p. 599).

In addition, although the majority of active participants in the #asylumseekers hashtag conversation share a common point of view, as outlined by Crawford up to 90% of participants in an online community will only engage in light public activity but will instead form part of the community by listening to what is said (Crawford 2009) and thereby forming a 'mental model' of news and events (Hermida 2010). Considering those listeners in the context of the echo chamber critique of the role of the internet and social media in the public sphere, it is evident that regardless of the constitution of the active participants, there are many members of the Twitter community who are likely to absorb the messages contained in the #asylumseekers hashtag conversation as listeners. There is no way of knowing what the viewpoints of those listeners are, and it is arguable that the presence of the alternative narratives in the Twittersphere could have the capacity to change minds, or at least give a different perspective to a conversation that would otherwise be dominated by the narratives conveyed by the mainstream media.

It is arguable that the Twitter conversation about asylum seekers is not a meaningless echo chamber simply because it is providing such a significant alternative to the dominant

narratives contained in the mainstream media. When the Twitter conversation is seen as part of a broader public sphere, then the primary participants in that public sphere are evidently the mainstream press, who are providing dominant narratives that differ markedly from those disseminated on Twitter. Considering Twitter and the mainstream media coverage of asylum seekers as part of a broader conversation re-contextualises the way that the Twitter coverage can be assessed. Arguably, 'the internet is at the forefront of the evolving public sphere, and if the dispersion of public spheres generally is contributing to the already destabilized political communication system, specific counter public spheres on the Internet are also allowing engaged citizens to play a role in the development of new democratic politics' (Dahlgren 2005, p.160).

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