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Romano, Angela R. (2007) Missing the Boat?. In *Proceedings Reporting on Asylum Seekers and Refugees: A Walkley Media Forum*, Regatta Hotel, Brisbane, Australia.

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Missing the Boat?

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A paper delivered to

'Reporting on Asylum Seekers and Refugees: A Walkley Media Forum'

convened by the Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance,

19 June 2007, at the Regatta Hotel, Brisbane, Australia,

in recognition of World Refugee Day (20 June)

Are journalists missing the boat when it comes to covering refugee and asylum seeker in issues? Angela Romano explores past complaints about journalists' performance and whether their coverage has changed or improved in recent years.

Considerable public ire has been directed towards journalists over their coverage of refugee and asylum seeker issues, particularly since 1999 when Australia saw a sharp increase in the numbers of boatpeople heading to our shores. The peak of discontent was arguably in 2001, the time of so-called 'Tampa Crisis' and 'Children Overboard' affairs. At the time, many academics and political activists with liberal agendas accused journalists of allowing politicians to dominate the news agenda and neglecting to scrutinise government claims and actions. The conservative viewpoint was equally negative and was typified by the critique of columnist Piers Akerman. Akerman claimed that the media were replete with lax journalists, who were over-indulgent towards "would-be illegal immigrants", and with leftist columnists, who vilified those disagreed with them and offered readers only "a thin, pathetic grasp on historical reality".

Both sides pointed to numerous examples of journalists who used excessive and even hysterical language and failed to check basic facts. Although some journalists provided illuminating investigative and human-interest reports, there seemed little public satisfaction with the performance of the news media as a whole.

Intrigued by the question of whether the criticisms that were levelled at journalists in 1999 to 2001 were valid today, I conducted my own research about the language, sources and topics that appears in journalistic reports. I scanned the overall activities of Australia's news media and closely analysed *The Australian* and *The Courier-Mail* newspapers from September to November 2006. I also conducted five focus groups in

Southeast Queensland and spoke with 22 representatives of stakeholder groups for their perspectives to try to identify whether reporting had improved.

The Use of 'Loaded' Language in Reporting on Refugees

My study found that newspaper headlines and stories still occasionally mix up terms such as 'asylum seekers', 'refugees', 'boatpeople', 'illegals' and 'illegal immigrants'. Some journalists use these terms interchangeably within stories, even each of the words sets up different premises about what kind of people are being discussed and what their arrival in Australia means.

Journalists also regularly fail to distinguish between legally recognised *refugees* who have fled their homelands to escape from persecution and other people who have left their homes to *seek refuge* from various other problems. This was particularly notable in the weeks following the 2004 Boxing Day earthquake and tsunami and Hurricane Katrina in the United States in 2005. Australian newspapers published hundreds of stories that used the word *refugees* to describe people who had left their homes to *seek refuge* from these natural disasters. The Australian Government does not legally recognise such people as *refugees*.

In 2005, American civil rights activist Jesse Jackson pointed out to journalists that in reporting Hurricane Katrina, it was "racist to call American citizens refugees", as it implied that the mainly black evacuees were foreigners in their own country. Ironically, almost every Australian media organization that printed or aired Rev Jackson's complaints also continued to label Hurricane Katrina survivors as 'refugees'. This kind of use of the word 'refugees' contributes to public confusion about who might have legal entitlement to enter Australia as a refugee.

Worse yet, journalists still occasionally use meaningless expressions. The term 'illegal refugee' still appears in newspapers, even though there is no such thing. Until people's claims to asylum have been processed and accepted as valid by the federal government or United Nations High Commission for Refugees, they are 'asylum seekers'. Only after the government and UNHCR have recognised the validity of their claims can they be called 'refugees', and if that happens, then by definition they cannot be 'illegal'.

On the positive side, I found that journalists no longer employ emotive language like 'national emergency', 'invasion', 'attack', 'assaults on our shores', 'contagious disease', 'floods' or 'tidal waves' to describe asylum seeker and refugee arrivals. Even the term

‘queue jumpers’ to describe boatpeople is usually used in inverted commas or with the words ‘so-called’ in front of it, to indicate the contentious nature of the term.

Sourcing and Agenda Setting

More complicated than the wording of stories is the question of who sets the agendas for these stories. Several academic studies have shown that politicians and government officials, particularly those from the federal immigration department, were highly and disproportionately influential in framing public discussion on asylum seekers and refugees from 1999 to 2001.

The voices of refugees and asylum seekers themselves were largely absent from the media debate. To a certain extent, such invisibility results from the challenges that journalists face in speaking with asylum seekers and refugees.

The first challenge for journalists arises from the reticence of asylum seeker and refugee issues to speak with media people. Asylum seekers and refugees may fear that speaking publicly or having their images circulated may jeopardise their residency within Australia or threaten the safety of relatives and friends who may still be at risk in their countries of origin. They may believe that journalists are affiliated with the government, because this is often the case in their home countries. They may suffer distress in talking about past traumas and knowing that the indignities they have endured will be exposed to others. Newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees may also lack the fluency or confidence to speak in English in a public context.

A second challenge arises from the Federal Government’s limits on journalists from accessing immigration detention centres. Since 2002, almost all requests for visits have been routinely rejected.

A third challenge is that many non-government organisations have been reluctant to speak with the media or facilitate access to asylum seeker and refugee clients. Some journalists and NGO representative told me that they risked losing Federal Government funding or public support – particularly at the height of public concern in 1999 to 2001 – if they spoke out against the prevailing public perspective of intense hostility to boatpeople. Other NGO representatives claimed it was too difficult to battle journalists’ pre-set agendas and limited mindsets in relation to boatpeople.

Despite such challenges, the onus remains on journalists to build relations with asylum seekers or refugees, because media debates will be inevitably skewed if journalists

speak *about* such sources rather than *with* them. This requires journalists to develop contacts with individual asylum seekers and refugees or their representative groups even when the issues are not 'hot' media topics, in order to have networks and relationships of trust for moments when such issues do make headlines.

In studying the sources that were used by *The Australian* and *The Courier-Mail* in September to November 2006, I found that although political and legal sources still dominate the agenda, the situation has improved.

In the period that was studied, *The Australian* dedicated two to three stories, columns or editorials to asylum seeker and refugee issues per week. However, the voices of refugees and asylum seekers were rarely heard, making up only 3% of all the sources that were quoted or mentioned. Stories were dominated by information and quotes from politicians and government officials (49.5% of sources) and legal professionals or legal/court documents (another 11.5%). Academics appeared in notable numbers (9.5% of sources), reflecting the intellectual tone that *The Australian* adopts, followed by a smattering of sources from international governments, the police, the military, and non-government organisations (NGOs). Ordinary members of the Australian community were completely absent.

The Courier-Mail, in its new tabloid, 'compact' format, covered the issues less frequently. The newspaper slightly more than one story, column or editorial per week, with each being notably shorter than those in *The Australian*. However, the stories that appeared had proportionally higher representation of refugees and asylum seekers (14% of sources). Government officials and legal professionals or legal/court documents were still the leading sources, but were less pre-eminent than in *The Australian* (22% and 16.5% respectively). Notably, community members made up 11% of sources, with the remaining being a range of church, NGO, international government, police, military and academic sources.

The Australian's coverage has focussed intensely on scrutinising the words and behaviours of politicians, government officials and agencies that enact, enforce, enact or contest regulations and laws relating to asylum seekers and refugees. Although it is critical that journalists continue this watchdog function, the debate is not complete unless all stakeholders in the issues are given an adequate voice. *The Courier-Mail's* coverage, although notably less comprehensive in performing a watchdog role on government and legal agencies, provided a broader range of sources that might help readers establish opinions or reach judgement about the issues.

The absence or inclusion of community members in agenda setting is significant. Unless there is strategic input from ordinary community members, citizens may be relegated to the position of mere spectators of political processes, rather than active participants.

News You Can Use: Making Story Content Meaningful

In the five focus groups that I led, the participants' comments consistently indicated that their lack of knowledge about asylum seekers and refugees hindered their ability to understand what was happening and the implications of the different responses that Australia might take to changing different issues. Surprisingly, the kinds of information that the focus group participants most needed could have easily been provided to them by journalists.

The first concern that emerged from focus groups was confusion about what a refugee is. Many participants believed that *any* person escaping problems in his/her homeland might be legally eligible for refugee status. Although the definition of a refugee can be explained in a few judiciously chosen words, journalists almost never include such explanations in their stories. Confusion may well have been compounded by the casual use and misuse of the word *refugee* in news stories, which I discussed earlier.

Focus groups participants also clearly differentiated between *boatpeople* and *refugees* – a trend which is also borne out by studies of opinion polls. For example, one focus group participant rationalised the paradox of his acceptance of East Timorese refugees in 1999, but his rejection of boatpeople in 2000 and 2001, by asking: “How can you take *genuine refugees* and compare them to *boatpeople*?”

Focus group participants expressed pride about times when Australia had aided refugees in need. At the same time, they also expressed a view that Australians should ‘look after their own first’ and were reluctant to spend taxpayers’ money looking after boatpeople when the validity of their claims to refugee status was unclear.

The Howard Government has shown a sophisticated understanding of these conflicting values of ‘helping others’ versus ‘looking after your own first’ and the distinctions being drawn between boatpeople and refugees. The Government has tailored its language and policy to direct public sentiment in ways that have ensured political gain.

The best example of this is the government’s popularisation of the term ‘queue jumper’ from 1999 to 2001. The term shrewdly played on the public’s insecurities both about the legitimacy of boatpeople’s claims that they feared persecution and their reasons for not

lodging asylum claims in their homelands or nations transited during their passage to Australia.

Journalists themselves need to become equally savvy about what concerns and conflicting values might underlie public sentiment, in order to ensure that both the angles and backgrounding of their stories provide the public with the information they need to understand and respond to issues and events. The public would have benefited if journalists had more regularly explored why asylum seekers choose passage by boat over other means, and why they do not stay in the countries that they may pass through on their way to Australia.

Other issues of concern that focus group participants felt they needed more information about included:

- what processes are involved in establishing the legitimacy of boatpeople and other asylum seekers' claims to refugee status, and the costs of such processes.
- why detention centres are often portrayed as problematic environments rather than a 'step up' compared to the dangerous environments that a 'genuine' refugee might come from;
- whether the arrival of boatpeople and refugees poses a security risk;
- whether increasing numbers of Islamic and Middle Eastern/Afghanistani refugees might impact on Australia's culture and way of life;
- whether refugees should be obliged to go to the 'country', to support rural industries and regional industries, rather than create further pressures in major urban centres;
- whether refugees were a net economic loss or gain to Australia; and
- whether refugees arrivals at times of high unemployment might threaten Australian jobs.

Although journalists address these issues intermittently, ordinary citizens do not usually follow all of the news about any given issue in a strict and systematic way, and they often forget what they read.

Journalists are also prone saturating audiences with continuous repetitions of facts relating to supposedly 'new' angles on stories, but are surprisingly reluctant to repeat important background details. Since the turn of the century, Australia's media have bombarded audiences with innumerable stories announcing that a boat has been intercepted off Australian shores; a stand-off exists over the processing of boatpeople; or government figures have been accused of dishonesty or impropriety in relation to their responsibilities regarding asylum seekers or detention centres. Without sufficient

background details also being repeated, audiences cannot form a complete and balanced understanding of these issues.

Brief but systematic backgrounding of stories about asylum seekers and refugees would go a long way to ensuring that neither journalists nor their audiences ‘miss the boat’ in terms of how they understand and respond to new developments.

A more detailed summary of this research appears in Angela Romano’s chapter, ‘The news media’s representation of asylum seekers’, in Yearning to Breathe Free: Seeking Asylum in Australia, edited by Dean Lusher & Nick Haslam, and published in 2007 by Federation Press in Annandale, Sydney.