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This is a Submitted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in
Continuum on 09/09/2016, available online:

<http://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2016.1231796>

Manipulative silences and the politics of representation of *boat children* in Australian print media

There is substantial literature on media representations of asylum seeker policy in Australia from a number of theoretical standpoints, namely moral panic theory, whiteness studies and belonging and citizenship. While many of these studies use discourse analysis of textual media as a methodology there is scant attention to the contribution of textual silences in media representations of asylum seeker children. Using Huckin's (2002) idea of manipulative silences, we demonstrate how media representations may steer public attention towards asylum seeker children in two dominant ways: (i) in discourses of deviancy by association with adults and (ii) the rights of *boat children* in association with immigration detention. Both generate confusion between rights, compassion and deviancy and, by shifting public attention, they serve to silence more essential concerns for the children. We seek to analyse these manipulative silences in the context of Australian asylum seeker policies of the Abbott government. In elucidating the use of textual silences to manipulate discourse, it is possible to see how Australian media representations may be skewing dialogue in the public sphere away from core political, legal and humanitarian issues that are imperative for the wellbeing of asylum seeker children.

Keywords: asylum seeker children, boat children, boat people, asylum seekers, manipulative silences, textual silences

Introduction

Australian media has long reported on the politics of asylum seekers attempting to arrive to Australia by boat, including the children. Most often media texts subsume all *boat people*, regardless of age or vulnerability, into mutually shared discourses of deviancy. This association is particularly noticeable when research communities focus on the centrality of units of written, spoken and visual texts in dynamically influencing and maintaining ideologies that are socially constructed in nature. While these discursive practices of Australian media cannot be ignored in the active production of structural explanations of behavioural deviations, the contribution of recurrent silences in media are also important to discourse analysis.

In this paper we apply Huckin's (2002) model for examining *manipulative silences* as a domain of discourse analysis. In order to establish a typology of silence, as it relates to the representation of *boat children* in Australian print media, textual silence must be understood as complementary to a unified system of dialogised discourse. Hence, what is *said* in media offers meaning to what is *unsaid* by virtue of the relationship between the two. What is *said* also serves to silence what is left *unsaid* and render it unimportant in the public sphere. This phenomenon is understood by Huckin (2002) and others (Schröter 2013; Sadeghi 2015; McLaren and Gatwiri 2016; Patil and Ennis 2016) as *manipulative silences*. By applying two taxonomies of Huckin's (2002) model for examining *manipulative silences*, explained later in this paper, we seek to demonstrate here how media articles' contextualising and framing of current affairs enable concealment of other issues in political discourse. We suggest that such discursivity is equally manipulative in the social construction of discourses of deviancy.

In this paper we apply Huckin's (2002) model, explained later in this paper, to elucidate our concerns for silences related to *boat children*. We do this with particular references to the ways that manipulative silences by Australian media serves to shift dialogue in the public sphere away from core political, legal and humanitarian issues that are imperative for the wellbeing of asylum seeker children. Our objective is to apply Huckin's (2002) model to explain the operation and function of manipulative silences, not the intention of the authors of the media articles.

Setting the scene

Debates in academic scholarship analysing media representations of asylum seeker policies have been commonplace in Australia since the Fraser coalition government (1975-1983) in which some 56,000 Vietnamese refugees migrated to Australia (Betts 2001; Klocker and Dunn 2003; Slattery 2003; Kabir 2009; McKay, Thomas, and Blood 2011). Later, the Howard coalition government (1996-2007) reportedly took a 'tough stand' towards 'illegal immigrants' (Mummery and Rodan 2003; Kelly 2006). The Rudd/Gillard Labour governments (2007-2013) campaigned to 'stop the boats' (Martin 2015; Giannacopoulos 2013) and they couched their stance in humanitarian terms. The subsequent Abbot Coalition government (2013-2015) mirrored this stance but were rather militarised and unremorseful in their approach (Giannacopoulos 2013). It is the print media representations of a series of immigration policy amendments during the Tony Abbot tenure as Prime Minister of Australia (18 September 2013 - 15 September 2015) that provide a backdrop for analysing textual silences in Australian newspapers. These included *turn back the boats* policies, off-shore detention, and the reinstatement of off-shore processing, and temporary protection visas.

The Abbot Coalition government's stringent policy amendments, documented in the Migration and Maritime Powers Legislation Amendment Resolving the Asylum Legacy Caseload Bill 2014, were introduced by then Immigration Minister Scott Morrison. Amendments gave Morrison unfettered power and authority to make decisions affecting the lives of *boat people* located at sea, irrespective whether they were in- or outside of Australia's migration zone, children or otherwise. This generated much controversy in media reporting (14 December 2014 *The Age*; 04 October 2014 *Sydney Morning Herald*; 04 September 2014 *The Australian*). However many reports attributed success of the legislation to the Abbott government's *turn back the boats* policy in contrast to failed policies implemented by predecessors; the Rudd-Gillard governments from 2007-2013 (06 December 2014 *The Australian*; 06 December 2014 *Daily Telegraph*). Few news reports were critical of the harshness of the policy and the significant powers it vested in Morrison, particularly how the policy enabled decisions to be made independent of scrutiny by the High Court (04 October 2014 *Sydney Morning Herald*).

There is broad agreement among scholars that discourses centred on asylum seekers have racialized overtones (Poynting 2002, 2004; Slattery 2003; Aly 2007), which locate asylum seekers as deviant in media representations. Some have argued that asylum seekers are imbued in the discursive frameworks of 'us' and 'them', or with negative connotations, whereas others have applied psycho-social frameworks (Dudley et al. 2012; Steel et al. 2006) to acknowledge the deleterious effects of detention on asylum seeker children. Whilst, we agree with the majority of scholarship, we contend that most analyses unpack what is represented in talk and text, rather than what is not **said**. Following Huckin (2002), we demonstrate textual silences to **expose** the unsaid text in news reports in the print

media. We examine beyond the **written, spoken and visual** discourses of deviancy imposed upon children by association with adults and the confusion between rights of *boat children* and compassion. In doing so, we **seek** to uncover how textual silences have been maintained through using Huckin's (2002) methodology to identify them.

The paper is divided into three parts: **(i)** a broad overview of key concepts and literature on media representations of *boat people* in Australia; **(ii)** explanation of Huckin's (2002) methodology and our application; and **(iii)** results and discussion of the manipulative silences that were sustained in the media representations of *boat children*.

Media Representations of *Boat People*

Many researchers have examined media representations of refugee and asylum seekers, alongside immigration policy, via a range of theoretical frameworks that include moral panic theory, propaganda models, and semiotics and discourse theory. Perhaps the best known scholarship is that of Poynting (2002; Poynting and Mason 2007, 2006; Poynting and Noble 2003; Poynting and Mason 2008; Poynting 2004) in which he describes cycles of racist media panics as influential in criminalising particular groups of immigrants in Australia, usually Muslims. Using comparative methodology Poynting et al (2002-08) illustrated parallels in ideological constructs of *boat people*, illegal immigrants, queue-jumpers, and crime prone people, with Muslim rapists and terrorists – done so in the context of the terror attacks of September 11 2001. He elucidated how media's moral panics created fear of the Other to which political players became compelled to respond.

Klocker and Dunn (2003) applied propaganda theory, proposed by Chomsky and Herman (2010) to their critique of Australian print media. They observed the provocativeness of crisis narratives in the news headlines used to describe the treatment of

children and their parents who were *boat people* at sea. They identified that these narratives were influential in shifting representations of *boat people* from ‘threat’ to ‘burden’ (Klocker and Dunn 2003). Slattery (2003) and Saxton (2003) independently conducted media discourse analyses and arrived at similar conclusions – that media’s resolute focus on nationalist discourses reinforced binary logic that served to set apart good Australians from bad asylum-seekers. Klocker and Dunn (2003), Slattery (2003) and Saxton (2003) all agreed that print media representations had strong racialized overtones in their reporting. Similar points were made by Macken-Horarik (2003) who identified that the use of multi-semiotic standpoints in making negative representations of *boat people* are central to the politics of race – used in newsprint in ways that enabled political rhetoric to claim prominence over humanitarian perspectives.

Extensive research exists on the health impact of immigration detention and political persecution of families and children (Mares and Jureidini 2004; Silverman and Massa 2012; Zwi and Mares 2014; O'Connor 2014; Steel et al. 2006; Dudley et al. 2012; Silove, Austin, and Steel 2007). As stated, some have involved the unpacking of discrimination embedded in immigration detention policy. Frequent associations are drawn between mental health of families and children, immigration detention and human rights (Essex 2014; Newman, Proctor, and Dudley 2013; Newman 2013; Dimitrov 2006; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2004). Many authors suggest that compassion has done nothing to alter the horrific context of *boat people* due to stereotypes that influence public opinion about them (Hugo 2002; Bradimore and Bauder 2012). Others propose that media representations of despair and desperation, including images of human rights violations of *boat children* held in immigration detention centres, have produced

compassion in the short-term. In the long-term people living in receiving nations have become resistant to the same old images and, consequently, Australian media reporting on *boat people* quickly returned to debates aimed at political point scoring.

Scholarship that analyses media representation does frequently acknowledge the contexts involving children. Despite this, children are most often subsumed in the broader discussions of media representations of asylum seekers – children are either consequential or have been used as pawns in political debate since the Vietnamese orphans of the 1970s. For example, Gale's (2004b) discourse analysis of media identified that images of children were dotted in reporting of the *Tampa Affair* (Norwegian cargo vessel *MV Tampa* rescued and ferried asylum seekers to Christmas Island from aboard a Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel (SIEV) in August 2001). While images represented human grief, Gale (2004b) observed the influence of media discourse narratives that stimulated 'crises' and 'fear' on public conscience. Likewise, newsprint media on the *Children Overboard Affair* (Parents throwing children from a sinking SIEV in October 2001) and other events involving children have been abundantly analysed. This has included media representations of parents as serial child abusers who are *so deviant* they would even throw their own children in the sea (Mansouri 2005; Leach 2003). Media also claimed that parents were inciting children to engage in self-harm when in detention – both instances alleged to facilitate illegal immigration (Mansouri 2005; Leach 2003). While these claims were later disproved, misrepresentations of *boat people* as having no regard for Australia's national security interests has remained deep-seeded in public consciousness.

There is acknowledgment among scholars about the predominance of discourses of fear and demonization of asylum seeker adults and, by association, their children and/or

unaccompanied minors. Most authorship, notwithstanding their varied standpoints, analyse the discourse that is represented in talk and text. We suggest that what is absent from the obvious written or spoken word, or visual imagery, is equally significant. Using Huckin (2002) we seek to demonstrate how manipulative silences concerning asylum seeker child are robust and intentional. In the next section we outline Huckin's (2002) methodology and its relevance to our analysis.

Methodology

Through talk **and** text media governs ways that the referents of language can be meaningfully received, reasoned and understood. What this means for *boat people*, particularly the children, is that discourses in the language used to describe them provide a certain authority in which to understand them. This is regardless of whether representations in those descriptions are factual or not. Discourse, suggests Foucault (Foucault 1970, 1971; McLaren 2009, 2015), is identifiable as repetitions in language texts (written, verbal and visual). While, the significance of discursive constructions is well researched, Huckin (2002) notes that what is not said is equally significant. This is because, **according to Huckin (2002)**, what is silenced is informed by **ideological discourses** and the meaning behind intentionality of media. To identify these silences he develops an elaborate taxonomy of manipulative silences that includes contextually, deception, intentionality and advantage.

For the purposes of this article we will demonstrate manipulative silences in texts by employing the taxonomies of contextuality and intentionality. We use these taxonomies in the selection, analysis and coding of data. In determining the relevance of the news reports to our research we used keywords that were based on the emerging themes identified in

literature on asylum seeker debates. A Boolean search, using keywords derived from the literature, was used: “boat children” OR “asylum seeker children” AND “asylum seeker” AND “boat people” AND immigration AND detention AND “boat policy” OR “boats policy”. The identified news reports were analysed based on the topics and subtopics employed in the production of the news article. That is, in further breaking down the news reports from the keywords into topics and subtopics (Huckin 2002) that categorised the news article, we were able to extend beyond the macrostructural and make the crucial link between what is present and/or absent in the actual text. In undertaking this process we are enabled to examine the manipulative silences within texts.

The data set comprised of news reports, feature articles, editorials and opinion pieces. Media news reports contained a performativity in which narration of a story was ideologically charged, hence it provided evidence of flow of power along the layers of social stratum (Pathak 2012). According to Huckin (2002) this is framing. A frame is socially based and organises information into a coherent whole. This, he suggests, is ideologically centred because the text producer when choosing certain topics and subtopics ignores others; it is through this that he/she creates manipulative silences that are intentional, deceptive and advantageous. For instance, the opinion pieces in the data set create what Huckin (2002) describes as manipulative silences. These silences are maintained through the framing of the topic; the **framing** may mislead readers. This is because text producers of opinion pieces are narrated by columnists that **the reading public often assumes has** a position of expert (Fulton and McIntyre 2013). **This assumption is what manipulates the public mind, irrespective of the writers’ intentions.** Such articles blend evaluative propositions with fact-based beliefs and thereby provide explanatory

frameworks in which the representation of asylum-seeker parents and their children are more likely believed. Finally, the letters to the editor, which assume a discursive function of speaking on behalf of others, offer indications of the formation of social solidarity in public discourse (Patil 2014; Wahl-Jorgensen 2001; Schultz 2000).

For our own analysis, *The Age*, *The Australian*, *Herald Sun*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Daily Telegraph* were chosen because they have the largest Australian readership. Our Boolean search of the Factiva Database from September 2013 to September 2015 identified 238 unique articles that included news reports, feature stories, editorials, and letters to the editor and opinion pieces. Each article was read and those which were not relevant to the Australian asylum seeker and immigration contexts were excluded, leaving 100 articles. These articles were independently read and sorted into dominant focus areas, upon which each theme was subject to an initial discourse analysis to enable subsequent analysis of textual silences. Independent reading, theming and analysis, before the two researchers compared results, aimed to satisfy inter-rater reliability (Pope, Ziebland, and Mays 2006). In the selection of the 100 articles, the key questions were: Are the textual silences manipulative? Do they follow a pattern? Are they ideological? What was the slant chosen by the text producer? What topics were absent or not mentioned? Through asking these questions in the selection, coding and reading of our texts we identified three dominant themes.

Findings

The 100 articles were categorised into dominant themes: (i) discourses of deviancy by association with adults; (ii) media representation of the rights of *boat children*, which was mostly related to immigration detention; and (iii) confusion between rights, compassion

and deviancy in media representations of *boat children*. Of the 100 articles, 75 represented the issues of asylum seeker children by framing it through the lens of deviancy. Asylum seeker children were represented as diseased, vulnerable to self-harm, suicide and pawns in the people smugglers trade. While, 15 articles appeared sympathetic to the rights of asylum seeker and refugee children, they were pitched in such ways that *boat people* were taking advantage of the human rights offerings that the Australian government had given. There were 10 articles that critiqued government policy either by emphasising the systemic child abuse engendered by mandatory detention policies, or articles that pointed to abuse of the rights of a child in conflict with Australia being signatory to the Convention of the Rights of the Child. Our discourse analysis of these articles indicated that the non-negative statements were muddled by the broader discourses of deviancy located across the articles that contained them and children as *subject individuals* were largely absent.

Media and discourses of deviancy

The news reports consistently framed the debates around asylum seeker children by using pejorative language. News reports used language, such as *boat children*, *child detainees*, *illegal arrivals*, *illegal boat people*, and *detained boat children*, *children in detention* and *suicide asylum boy* in their headlines. While the headlines of other news reports used less provocative words, such as *asylum seeker children* and/or *refugee children*, the text of the news reports were littered with references to the failure of the Rudd and Gillard Labor government's policies that led to the detention of children, particularly the success of Abbott government's policy in stopping the boats.

The use of pejorative language in the headlines acted as clues in terms of the main topics covered. Of the 75 articles that were constructed through the lens of deviancy, 60 of

them were primarily interested in discussing the success of the *turn back the boats policy* introduced by the Abbott government, 10 analysed how diseases, self-harm and child abuse claims of asylum seeker children in off shore detention sites in Narau and Manus Islands were exaggerated and 5 included examination of the rights of asylum seeker children in detention.

The news reports that extolled the success of the *turn back the boats policy* of the Abbott government used a number of discursive strategies to maintain manipulative silences through the main and sub topics used to explain government policies. *The Australian* (August 23 2014) supported off shore detention by stating that although ‘detention is harmful ... [it is] necessary to prevent children dying at sea.’ An editorial in the *Daily Telegraph* (06 December 2014) published after the amendments to the Migration Act which gave unfettered powers to the Immigration Minister triumphantly declared, ‘Morrison’s policy victory’. The main text of the article noted that former Immigration Minister Scott Morrison had, ‘accomplished all of the major repair work on Australia’s border protection following six years of Labor mismanagement’. Then the article shifts the slant by discussing the benefits of the new legislation. The authors note that it will ‘release more children and families from detention in Christmas Island’, and these ‘measures form a balanced approach that allows some improvement in humanitarian treatment for those already in detention while at the same time offering no incentives to people smugglers’. The author in the last half of the news report goes back to the main frame, that is, the previous Labor government’s policies are to blame for *boat children* in detention and it led to ‘1000 people dying a sea’ and ‘actively attracting people smugglers to launch boat after

unseaworthy boats towards Australian waters'. So through a number of strategic silences, the writer was able to 'reiterate' the success of the *turn back the boats* policy.

Other news reports expressed dissent towards *boat children* using other frames, such as 'self-harm', 'disease' and 'child abuse claims' being exaggerated. In a news report, on 3 October 2014 the *Daily Telegraph* reported that 'Nauru child abuse claims were fabricated'. The report used a number of strategic manoeuvres that reinforced textual silences in the representation of the issue. Under the headline, 'Claims of abuse on island go overbroad', the article started with a provocative statement, 'Nauru child abuse claims 'fabricated'. The author then noted that the service provider which is paid to 'look after refugee children' is 'alleged to have fabricated stories of abuse and using children as a human shield in protest activity'. In the first 2 paragraphs the author framed the main topic of asylum seeker children in detention as leveraging 'child abuse claims' to get to Australia. The main 'slant' of the article is supported by extensive quotes from an intelligent report provided to the federal government. The manipulative silence exists in the news report when the author includes no attempt to clarify the veracity of the intelligence report. Instead, the author goes on to extensively quote it as an authoritative source and details how 'staff of Save the Children' are 'allegedly manufacturing cases of sexual assaults against children by security staff'. Silence was further maintained when at no stage did the author offer alternative opinion, such as that of the opposition Labor party or the Greens. This news report implicated humanitarian workers in supporting the manufacture of false allegations, thereby increasing focus on deviancy of all those who are associated with helping *boat people*, including children, get to Australia.

Media regard for the rights of boat children

The findings of 25 news reports that discussed the rights of *boat children* suggest that the children were subsumed in broader discourses of risk and as being underserving of Australian government's compassion. When the Human Rights Commission President, Gillian Triggs, launched an investigation of the Abbott government's off shore detention policy, news reports represented it as a waste of resources and as a political stunt and/or attack against the Abbott government.

An opinion in the *Herald Sun* (27 October 2014) titled, '\$27m wasted on HRC's nagging' framed the argument by stating that the Human Rights Commission established by the Labor party is a waste of tax payer's money and worse still to 'pay activists to push its causes'. In strategically questioning the legitimacy of the Human Rights Commission the author attacked the credibility of the President of the Human Rights Commission by questioning her motives in announcing an inquiry into the Abbott government's off shore detention policy. The author did not state the terms of reference and/or details of the inquiry. Instead, the author introduced another sub topic to attack the previous Labor government's asylum seeker policy by noting that around 1200 children were held in detention alone. The author continued to attack the credibility of the inquiry by noting that Gillian Triggs should have called an inquiry into the Labor government's 'failed' policies in 2012 rather than during the Abbott government.

Most of the news reports did not mention that children had continued to be detained while they awaited health, security and identity processing. Some of these checks were known to take years to process despite the stated government's commitments to uphold the rights of the child. We suggest that the Australian media took this apparent failure as an

opportunity to make unrestrained representations about the government's incompetency rather than having genuine regard for the rights of the child. The manipulative silence served to silence the rights and wellbeing of the asylum seeker children.

Confusing rights, compassion and deviancy

While the dominant focus of media articles is on *boat children* involved in detention debates, they tend to confuse compassionate reporting with alarmist representations. For example, *The Australian* reported on July 5 2014 that 'teachers worried about missing students who fled'. While the headline used the generic term 'children', the very next line they were described as 'missing asylum seeker children'. Using the discursive tactic of 'risk framing' the next paragraph identified and named the high school and the human rights campaigner, as well as how teachers were 'freaking out'. The report then stated that Immigration minister's office has confirmed that the 'missing children' had not been found. While there was some compassion, this was obfuscated by highlighting that the children were at large, as if they were criminals.

Other articles on this topic also used disapproval in the headlines by using words, such as 'runaways', 'fled', 'asylum kids' and 'on the run'. Asylum seeker children were represented as causing emotional harm to 'our' children who had befriended the 'runaways' and who now missed them, thus the manipulative silence denied compassion for harm to the asylum seeker child. As well the 'stress' of having *boat children* that disappear due to running away, deportation or relocation by the government often without notice was represented as stress-causing and burdensome to the schools they attended – again, silencing the stress to the asylum seeker child. There were four additional reports on this event in *The Australian*. Each article repeated the use of language to describe the

children as ‘runaways’. On July 4 2014, *The Australian* reported that the children would be ‘returned to mainstream detention if found’, thus representations were metaphorical of murderers whose parole breach justified re-incarceration.

With an emphasis on deviancy, risk to the community was frequently stated in relation to the *boat children* who had been moved from offshore detention centres into community detention. An article in the *Daily Telegraph* (13 October 2103) ran with a positive headline that stated, ‘Smiles the best cure’. The first paragraph of the article framed the debate by emphasising risk to the community because ‘refugee children are attending class unimmunised’ and they are ‘suffering from a wide range of infectious diseases’. The news report was careful in praising the Sydney Children’s Hospital volunteer screening program but in the majority of the news report was emphasised the ‘poor health conditions’ of refugee and/or asylum seeker children.

The same news report introduced another subtopic of refugee children needing medical checks because of lack of immunisation in their countries of origin. There was an implied framing of risk the larger community, reinforced by quoting an authoritative voice by virtue of academic title: Associate Professor Dr Karen Zwi. She was quoted as saying that the majority of children, ‘mostly aged between 11 and 17, had never been immunised, having come from countries in South East, Africa and the Middle East’. Where was the evidence? It did not matter as manipulative silences used the authoritative voice to mislead the public conscience that these children in Australia were diseased and contagious.

Further, the news report used another manipulative tactic by subtly implying that the findings from a New South Wales program could perhaps relate to the Immigration policy of minimal health checks that are conducted on new arrivals. The reports states, ‘other than

tuberculosis, there is no mandatory routine screening of arrivals'. The doctor was quoted to warn that left undiagnosed it could 'potentially cause a bigger problem later'. However, information about the success of the health screening program was couched in textual silences because the primary framing was the positioning of '*boat children* as a risk' to the community.

The talk and text that represented *boat children* in the news reports was designed to challenge the legitimacy of their status in implicit and explicit ways. When referred to in news reports as *their kids*, the discursive act of equating *boat children* with deviant adults allowed for the news reports to question the genuineness of the claims of *boat children*.

This has the potential to silence notions that children are innocent, vulnerable and in need of special human rights.

Discussion

Employing Huckin's (2002) model of manipulative silences, we divide the implications of the findings into 2 categories. These are each discussed below:

Contextualising deviancy: boat children in national imagination

The majority of news reports framed the issue of asylum seeker detention policy through the discourses of risk to community, undeserving, illegal, criminals, prone to suicide, disease and filth. These discourses are ideologically framed because they are 'drawing on well-established social orientations, attitudes, values and other group belief's' Huckin (2002) and they are not dissimilar to the representations of asylum seeker children arriving on boats in the 1970s (Betts 2001; Klocker and Dunn 2003; Slattery 2003; Kabir 2009; McKay, Thomas, and Blood 2011). A number of discursively strategic manoeuvres are

used in the news reports to maintain manipulative silences. One such manoeuvre was the ‘textual foregrounding and backgrounding’ of asylum seeker children in news reporting which Huckin (2002, 354) argues has shown ‘to have clear cognitive effects on readers’. News reports frequently ran with headlines that used the terms, ‘boat children’, ‘suicide asylum boy’, ‘detained boat child children’. This implicated children as ‘illegal’, ‘prone to suicide’, ‘criminal’ and undeserving of Australian empathy. Such a view has been previously confirmed in numerous studies (Patil 2014; Patil and Ennis 2016; Macken-Horarik 2003), including Klocker and Dunn (2003) who note that the crisis narratives in the headlines referring to asylum seeker children and their families has been influential in shifting media representations of *boat children* from ‘threat’ to ‘burden’. Moreover, the news reports employed this binary logic to resolve ambivalence between deserving of humanitarian compassion as opposed to undeserving *boat people*, positioning the latter as problematic to sovereignty and a threat to core western values (Pickering 2001; Gale 2004a), therefore deviant. Media’s role in delivering political rhetoric to the public has affirmed dominant white thinking – that people who deserved to become Australians were ‘more like us’ (White-Anglo-European) than ‘like them’ (non-white) (Hage 2012).

The news reports that used these headlines used other strategic silences in terms of the main and subtopics that were discussed. The main and subtopics ‘play a fundamental strategic role – they allow not only global planning (and global understanding) of discourse, but also the management of a large amount of information over a longer period of speaking and writing’ (van Dijk, cited in Huckin 2002, 353). The findings revealed that a majority of the news reports were more interested in apportioning blame on the Rudd-Gillard government’s and highlight the success of the Abbott government’s *turn back the*

boats policy in breaking the people smugglers trade, than the asylum seeker and child. Even those articles that were critical of off-shore detention policy of the Abbott government in relation to detention of children conceded the success of *turn back the boats*. Framing of policy in breaking the people smugglers trade consequently implied that children were active subjects in illegal activities committed either by their families and/or the people smugglers. The manipulative silences were maintained in news reports by not including the legal implications of the off shore detention policy on asylum seeker children and the humanitarian obligations of the Australian government. This is consistent with research (Rajaram 2003) arguing that the Australian public overwhelmingly supported harsh immigration policy that treated *boat people* as objects and disqualified them as genuine refugees.

The news reports **analysed** used a number of strategic manoeuvres to maintain textual silences in the reporting of asylum seeker children. Majority of the news reports used textual foregrounding and backgrounding and main and subtopics to emphasis the risk *boat children* posed to Australia's national sovereignty because they were detained, they were constructed as active subjects in illegal activity propagated by people smugglers. And the children were emphasised as a threat, diseased and prone to self-harm. In positioning asylum seeker children through these lenses the newspaper reports reproduced textual silences by not critiquing the legal, humanitarian and political implications of the Abbott government's off shore detention policy and *turn back the boats* policy, nor the rights of the child.

Dispersed Intentionality: Confusing rights of boat children with discourses of risk

The findings pre-dominantly suggest that news reports, regardless of their genre, used strategies to focus on the discourses of risk in their representations of asylum seeker children. Many news reports had heightened interest in hailing the success of the *turn back the boats* and off shore detention when arguing that it was helping to prevent children drowning sea, or to free children of the people smugglers trade. Very few news reports examined the political, legal and humanitarian obligations of the Abbott government's policy.

Some of the news reports that discussed either health or education of asylum seeker children primarily positioned them through the lens of deviancy rather than examine the legal and humanitarian obligations of the Abbott government's policy. In some instances, despite the authors of the news reports having adequate access to 'determine the prevailing knowledge and opinion that was available' (Huckin 2002, 355) choose to focus on the risk to the community because they were diseased, filthy, untrustworthy and/or barbaric. The framing in these news reports is very similar to previous research (Kabir 2009; Scates 1997) who argue that 'moral panics' in media representations were commonplace in the nineteenth and early twentieth century representations of Chinese Australians and Afghan cameleers.

Other news reports characterised the non-attendance of asylum seeker children using provocative foregrounding, such as 'runaways' and 'fled'. These news reports then used other discursive tactics to reinforce silences in the text by noting that teachers while on the one hand were worried for the welfare of the children they were aware of the stress and burden these episodes is causing other children and the teachers in general. The news

reports also referred to police and immigration department officials who confirmed that the children were at large. At no stage was there mention of the welfare and rights of asylum seeker children in community detention. By ignoring any discussion about the implications of the Abbott government's immigration policy, the media reporting of *boat people* and by extension *boat children* perpetuated narratives as 'dangerous, undesirable or superfluous to the normal functioning of political communities' (Zannettino 2012, 1095), and unwanted irrespective of whether they are women or children or others with genuine grounds for seeking asylum.

Conclusion

Using Huckin (2002) methodology we were able to demonstrate how manipulative silences were maintained in the representations of asylum seeker children during the term of the Abbott government. We note that by using a number of discursively strategic manoeuvres, the news reports were able to represent asylum seeker children through the discourses of risk, harm, diseased and criminal. We contend that these silences allowed the media to skew public debate away from the central issue; that is the political, legal and humanitarian implications on asylum seeker children and families who are victim to inhumane politics – e.g., the *turn back the boats*, off-shore detention policy and the unfettered power and authority afforded to the Immigration Minister in making decisions affecting asylum seeker of the Abbott government.

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