Spaces of exclusion

The visual construction of Australian borders and the asylum seeker subject in television news reports of the 2013 Australian Federal Election

LEICHA STEWART

University of Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

Policy regarding people arriving by boat in order to seek asylum was a key focus of political discourse during the 2013 Australian Federal Election campaign. Evening television news reports on the unfolding election revealed a bipartisan push for increasingly punitive approaches to the treatment of people seeking asylum. As such borders and the processes and practices involved in discursively constructing them, as well as the linguistic and visual strategies deployed around maintaining and protecting them were dominating themes of political discourse throughout the campaign and the ensuing election coverage.

Keywords: asylum, television, visual, elections, Australia
This research contributes to the field of multimodal critical discourse enquiry (Bowcher & Royce 2013, Jewitt, Bezemer & O’Halloran 2016), addressing the current dearth of studies which critically analyse both visual and verbal television news data. While close linguistic examinations of asylum seeker discourse within print media are abundant, research which examines the content and conventions of visual and linguistic rhetoric used in television news especially, and their roles in shaping socio-political discourses, is lacking (Bednarek and Caple, 2012). As such, this research adopts a Critical Discourse Analytic (CDA) (Fairclough 2013, Machin & Mayr 2012, van Dijk 2013) framework to analyse television news reports about people seeking asylum to answer the question: How were narratives about people seeking asylum and conceptions of the Australian border shaped through visual resources?

Specifically, this article will discuss how the militarisation of asylum seeker discourses and the visual representation of people seeking asylum, through still images and file footage, promotes exclusionary narratives while simultaneously positioning the Australian Government as powerful and ‘in control of the border’. By aligning asylum seekers with various categories of ‘deviance’ through images, the bodies of asylum seekers are constructed as unacceptable residents of the space marked ‘Australia’ and denied permission, literally and symbolically, to cross the imagined threshold of the Australian ‘border’.

Introduction

Election issues such as immigration and the carbon tax dominated the 2013 Australian Federal Election campaign. Despite only 14% of voters naming asylum seekers as one of the top three issues most important to them,
immigration policy relating to people arriving by boat was the key focus of the political discourse (Johnson, Wanna & Hsu Ann 2015). Evening television news reports on the unfolding election campaign communicated a bipartisan push for an increasingly harsh approach to the treatment of people seeking asylum. On the 19th July 2013, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced plans for a new immigration policy, the ‘PNG Solution’, which dictated that any asylum seeker arriving in Australia by boat, regardless of whether their refugee status was approved or not, would ‘never be settled in Australia’.

The Liberal-National coalition, whose dominating campaign catch cry had been ‘stop the boats’, was left with little room to manoeuvre around Kevin Rudd’s new far right policy position. Coalition Leader Tony Abbott and Shadow Immigration minister Scott Morrison publicly supported the policy but continually reiterated that the Prime Minister and the ALP were too incompetent to implement such a policy. On the 27th July, the Coalition announced its campaign centrepiece, the introduction, should they win office, of Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB), a policy which would move asylum seekers arriving by boat, both literally and figuratively, into the domain of the Australian military service. This policy would also provide the Abbott Government with a range of rhetorical resources with which to shape ongoing media and political narratives about people seeking asylum.

Contemporary narratology theorists (Bal 2009, Herman 2007, Puckett 2016) argue that narratives and storytelling play a crucial role in the human experience. ‘Stories have come to be viewed as a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process, and change’ (Herman, Jahn & Ryan 2004, p. xii). A rhetorical approach to narrative considers not only the purposive nature of narrative communication as a multi-layered and ideologically motivated event, but also the nature of the relationships between speakers (or storytellers) and audiences, whereby ‘tellers seek to engage and influence their audiences’ cognition, emotions, and values’ (Phelan 2007, p. 203). Thus, an examination of the rhetorical and linguistic resources employed by speakers in television news coverage of the 2013 Australian Federal Election reveals archetypal narratives which are constituted by overwhelmingly negative and problematised representations of people seeking asylum.
This article will examine specifically how discursive constructions of the Australian national border, a border perpetually under ‘threat’, and thus in continual need of ‘protection’ contribute to the ongoing narratives which act to justify the political exclusion and indefinite detention of people seeking asylum. Through the high frequency of military technologies visually positioned on the borderline and the visual representation of people seeking asylum in detention, symbolically and physically removed from the Australian community, the bordering practices of the 2013 Australian Federal Election consistently support exclusionary and punitive immigration policies and policy positions.

Current global media discourses centring on the ‘threat’ of immigration and the ‘protection’ of national borders reinforce the need for researchers in fields of social justice to continue challenging dominant paradigms in order to illuminate the complex power relations underpinning them. This qualitative research has been undertaken with the purpose in mind to not only highlight recurring and problematic asylum seeker narratives communicated throughout the 2013 Election’s television news coverage, but to expose the power relations which have ‘naturalised’ (Fairclough 2013) these constructions as ‘commonsensical’ (Capdevila & Callaghan 2008, Jones & Peccei 2003, Schuster 2003, Thornborrow 2003, Toolan 2012).

Literature Review

In the post 9/11 era of heightened security and general global anxiety, nationalism has been described as ‘the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time’ (Anderson 1991, p.3). Billig (1995) offers extensive work on the notion of nationalism in contemporary political discourses. Coining the term ‘banal nationalism’, he focuses on how everyday national referents have the power to mobilise public support for exclusionary practices and legitimise these practices by claiming they are in the ‘national interest’.

Research into asylum seeker discourses (Anderson 1991, Billig 1995, O’Doherty & Augoustinos 2008) has demonstrated that through a combination of the positive construction of Australian national identity and the construction of boat arrivals in Australian waters as a risk or a threat governments are able to secure popular public support for actions taken in response to these arrivals.
Securing public support is possible even for actions that could be seen as constituting a violation of human rights, and of breaching Australia’s obligations as a signatory of the UN Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 2011). For example, O’Doherty and Augoustinos (2008) examined the uses of nationalist discourses in regard to the 2001 ‘Tampa Crisis’ and found that the use of nationalist discourses to legitimise exclusion and oppressive practices was a way to de-racialise arguments pertaining to immigration.

Furthermore, the rhetorical power of ‘security’ discourses, when aligned with ‘border protection’ operations acts to privilege the life, rights and humanity of one category of people (Australians) at the expense of another (asylum seekers). Burke (2008) has explored the use of ‘security’ in contemporary Australian political discourse and asserts that:

Security has been central to the construction of powerful images of national identity and otherness, and central to their use in bitter political conflicts that were too often resolved in violent and anti-democratic ways. (p.2)

Australian nationalist discourses incorporate notions of ‘border security’ with perceptions of fear, risk and a need for formalised national protection to legitimise exclusion of asylum seekers and punitive immigration policies (Burke 2008, Gale 2004, Lianos 2013).

In recent years there has been a proliferation of scholarly writings on Western governments’ growing reliance on the militarisation of immigration, law enforcement and responses to the modern ‘war on terror’ (Andrejevic 2011, Chambers 2015, Chambers 2012, Dorr, Elcioglu & Gaydos 2014, Graham 2012, Graham 2010, Hodge 2015, Hughes 2010, Jefferis 2013, Smit 2010).

In Australia, the most current scholarly literature on asylum seeker discourse foregrounds the militarisation of immigration policy, with three prominent foci: territorial borders as spaces of danger and risk and the enaction of their security as a function of sovereignty and identity, the introduction of the military led Operation Sovereign Borders by the Coalition Government in September 2013 and the asylum seeker ‘body’ as a site of subjugation (Chambers 2015, Dechent 2014, Hodge 2015, Hughes 2010).

Vogl (2015) examines the territorial excision of the Australian mainland from the Australian migration zone and the subsequent securitisation of the
spaces of exclusion

Australian border. She argues that the primary narrative driving the legitimisation of border security is the insistence that the ‘border’ (often used metonymically for the Australian nation-state or the ‘Australian people’) is under imminent threat from the outside, a threat that ‘can be effectively subdued by the sovereign’s complete control of the border’ (p.131). Vogl’s (2015) findings concur with observations made repeatedly across emerging immigration literature (Dorr et al. 2014, Hughes 2010,), that the border is represented as a space which is simultaneously ‘entirely controllable and permanently vulnerable’ (Vogl 2015, p. 131).

Exploring themes of dominance, power and the role border security plays in creating patriotic identities and subjectivities, Hodge (2015) draws on Judith Butler’s (2009) concept of a ‘grievable life’ to point out how the violent frames of Operation Sovereign Borders function to criminalise and delegitimise asylum seeker bodies. According to Hodge when these militant contextualisations are combined with other common representations of asylum seekers; as criminalised, or deviant, they deny the asylum seeker subject any semblance of ‘ordinariness’ and preclude them from the subject status of ‘personhood’ (p.123).

The precariousness of asylum seeker lives is further discussed in Dechent (2014). This article documents the slow but steady erosion of the rights of people seeking asylum, and the humanitarian obligations Australia has towards them, through amendments to the Migration Act 1958. Changes to Section 198A (3) of the Act, Dechent (2014) argues, have reversed the nature of the original document so that rather than protecting rights and interests of refugees and people seeking asylum, the Australian Government’s interests are privileged and protected.

Traditional news media research has tended to regard images in news discourses as performing a limited range of functions. Early work in this area has viewed images primarily in illustrative terms, as an adjunct to the information conveyed by the dominant verbal elements of the text (Bednarek & Caple 2012). The development of televisual and digital technologies, however, has meant that image is more easily embedded into print, online, and broadcast news formats. An integrated approach to both text and image
demands a more sophisticated analysis of how news images, in combination with text communicate meaning. As Couldry and Hepp (1999) identify, ‘communication has to be understood as involving the ongoing mediation of meaning construction’ (p.197). Imagery and text play a significant role in this process, particularly in this ‘third age’ of political communication, in which ‘the public sphere itself is increasingly constructed in and through the media’ (McNair, Flew, Harrington & Swift 2015, p. 46).

The neglect of research into contemporary visual elements of news discourses is noted by a number of scholars (Bednarek & Caple 2012, Grabe & Bucy 2009, Kaufer, Parry-Giles & Klebanov 2012, Wang 2014). Despite these calls for further research to explore, more extensively, the implications of image use in broadcast news media bulletins, they have largely been ignored. Significantly, this lack of visual considerations is particularly notable within analysis of political communication. While Richardson and Wodak (2009) have contributed some visual analysis of the construction of asylum seekers in political communication, their research examines data drawn from Austrian and British Governmental communications, subsequently, a continuing gap exists for such analyses with an Australian media focus. Grabe and Bucy (2009) explain how converging technological and political trends including ‘the continued domination of television as the primary channel of political communication’ (p.4) have ‘shifted politics onto a visual platform’ (ibid.). Despite the development towards more visually reliant electoral outcomes such as image-making campaign strategies, ‘surprisingly little research attention has been given [previously] to the systematic analysis of political visuals’ (Grabe & Bucy 2009, p. 4).

Methodology

This research employed a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis as both methodology and method (Meyer, 2009) to analyse television news reports about people seeking asylum from the 2013 Australian Federal Election campaign. As many researchers working in the field have affirmed (Chouliaraki 2006, Feng 2016, Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001, Montgomery 2007, Price 2013), examining the words and images used in dynamic news reports and providing a detailed theoretical account of how they are combined to make
meaning is an essential yet complex task.

One of the most common ways CDA allows researchers to make likely predictions about how texts may be understood is by considering semiotic choices in terms of the words and images used in textual construction (Dancygier 2012, Fairclough 2013, Machin & Mayr 2012, Meyer 2009, Wodak & Meyer 2009). Machin and Mayr (2012) point out that descriptions and representations of people and groups are always inherently loaded in terms of cultural values. ‘In any language, there exists no neutral way to represent a person. And all choices will serve to draw attention to certain aspects of identity that will be associated with certain kinds of discourses’ (p. 77). These concepts have enabled the researcher to identify the main ways that people seeking asylum have been represented and to explore what aspects of their constructed identities have been emphasised. Identifying these dominant representations has occurred through looking at linguistic choices made by various speakers, along with image correlations in the television news reports. One of the central tenets of CDA is that language constitutes social action (Fairclough 2013, Fairclough 2012, van Dijk 2013, van Dijk 2006, Wodak & Meyer 2009). Thus, consistently finding words or phrases with negative connotations (e.g. ‘illegal’ or ‘queue jumpers’) which have been used to label asylum seekers, suggests that dominant political and media discourses perform exclusionary functions that could also be detrimental to the physical and social conditions asylum seekers experience (Hodge 2015, Butler 2009).

The data comprises 336 television news reports aired between 7th June 2013 and 7th December 2013. This date range was chosen to include not just the election period, but three months prior to the election and three months post-election, allowing the researcher to better identify any changes to asylum seeker news discourses or particular political language used over a six-month period. Due to the extensive data sample, the utilisation of NVivo, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) for the organisation and content analysis stages was essential. The large number of news reports and the complexities of analysing the various discursive elements within each one necessitated importing all 336 reports into NVivo for the purposes of transcribing, categorising and coding the data. NVivo enables the transcription and coding of news reports as they are viewed (while the recording plays)
allowing for detailed categorisation of both the visual and the verbal track elements simultaneously. Viewing both information inputs at once aided in conserving the integrity of the data by ensuring the context of each visual and verbal track remained intact. For example, the NVivo transcription process not only identified all speech verbatim, it also identified the speaker, and where appropriate, their role as communicated by superimposed on-screen graphic text such as ‘Foreign Minister’ Julie Bishop, or ‘Immigration Minister’ Scott Morrison.

Each individual news report constituted one unit of analysis. Each unit of analysis was separated into smaller sections during the manual transcription process to facilitate a close examination of verbal material and accompanying images/imagery. Sections consisted of one or more sentences spoken by one particular speaker with a consistently displayed accompanying visual element. Breaking the news report down into small sections of verbal speech with a visual referent allowed for a much more detailed multimodal analysis of each report. As Biocca pointed out in his discussion of television and political advertising: ‘broad classifications … make for blunt tools; the analyst can only hammer away at the structure. But a more probing dissection of the political ad calls for a more precise instrument, a scalpel instead of a hammer’ (2014, p.18). It may be argued that the same applies to analysing television news and political campaigning. While it is important to consider each news report as a whole to identify overarching themes and narratives, micro level analyses of language and image provide insights as to how the overarching narratives and themes have been constructed and communicated.

Initially, manual transcription enabled identification of broad themes such as militarisation, criminalisation and dehumanisation across the entire data set. These emergent themes were then entered into NVivo for the purposes of sorting and retrieving specific news report content. Similarly, specific ‘image types’ were also identified, for example politicians making statements, images of Australian Navy vessels, images of asylum boats, asylum seekers shown in the custody of Australian authorities, asylum seekers shown in detention centres. Next, each separate image in all of the 336 reports was coded accordingly into one of 26 image categories. This coding process did not only reveal the limited number of ways that asylum seekers were actually visually
represented in the data, it also provided valuable quantitative results to support and triangulate some of the significant qualitative findings.

The research data sources have been limited to mainstream Australian free-to-air television networks: ABC, SBS, Nine, Seven & Ten and included both public and commercial television networks. The decision to analyse free-to-air network news reports was made for theoretical and pragmatic reasons. Firstly, research indicates that significantly higher numbers of Australian viewers watch free-to-air programs over subscription or pay TV programs. Denemark, Ward and Bean (2007) point out the central role of free-to-air television news in informing Australian audiences. ‘A broad cross-section of Australian voters continue to rely upon free-to-air television as their main source of political news and information’ (p. 90). Another pragmatic reason for sourcing this particular news content was that the free-to-air news reports were also freely available through the Informit TV News library database. This access enabled the researcher to locate the actual bulletins, which had been broadcast in 2013, and to source the original contexts in which the individual reports were aired. News reports in original video format (including audio) were downloaded from Informit and loaded into the qualitative data management program NVivo. Each article was then manually transcribed so that the verbal elements could be coded and easily searched while retaining its connection to the visual material of the video clip.

The data sample was limited to each network’s traditional ‘evening news’ bulletin. The data set is an exhaustive sample of all free-to-air, ‘evening news program’ reports yielded using the defined search terms (‘asylum seekers’, ‘border protection’, ‘boat people’, ‘Scott Morrison’ and ‘stop the boats’) within the defined date range (7th June-7th December 2013) through the Informit TV News library database.

Discussion

This original research found that, overwhelmingly, free-to-air, evening television news reports during the lead up to the 2013 Australian Federal Election framed asylum seeker and immigration issues as a problem requiring a military solution. This overarching narrative incorporated a limited range of specific
types of language and images which combine to create meaning and reinforce dominant discourses of threat and problematisation. This article will discuss some specific examples identified, particularly focusing on visual rhetoric and the kinds of images repeatedly found in the data, exploring some of the functions they may perform in the construction and maintenance of asylum seeker discourses. The potential implications of file footage use will be examined, particularly footage featuring military artefacts (ships, weapons, personnel) positioned at the borderline. Additionally significant attention will be paid to the visual representation of asylum seekers themselves, examining a range of elements including the kinds of spaces they are depicted as inhabiting (institutional or domestic) and the size of the groups depicted.

There are two types of footage used to construct television news packages, actuality footage and file footage. Actuality footage refers to video or images of a specific event which have been filmed at that event. In the news reports analysed for this research actuality footage was often used in stories about election campaign events, as well as diplomatic events such as Kevin Rudd or Tony Abbot’s visits to neighbouring nations. File footage, or archival footage, refers to video recordings or images which are sourced/accessed by television networks (Bock 2009, Machin & Jaworski 2006) and used to construct news packages about ongoing issues, or added to reports covering unexpected events which have not been directly video-captured. Throughout the television news data collected for this research, file footage was used extensively in the news broadcasts. All five of the free-to-air networks demonstrated a haphazard approach to indicating when file footage was being used. Some stories featured a ‘file footage’ tag superimposed over file or archive video, however this identification was not consistent across networks or even individual reports. The lack of identification of material as file footage could be seen as problematic in terms of contributing to and maintaining dominant discourses through the repetitive use of images. Not only are the same types of images and indeed the exact same images used multiple times across the data set, the combination of archive video with a new verbal accompaniment may lead audiences to assume the footage has a strong relational link to the verbal narrative, creating associations when none may have originally existed.
Qualitative evaluation of the total data set of file footage, found that videos featuring asylum seeker boats and Australian Navy vessels demonstrating processes of ‘border protection’ were the dominant representations. Across 336 news reports analysed, 337 separate instances of an asylum boat image and 542 instances of Australian Navy vessel images were identified. In light of Wilson’s (2014) argument that militarisation often involves the ‘highly visible presence of military personnel and artefacts at the borderline or the adoption of overtly military tactics’ (p.142), the frequent presence of Australian Navy vessels and military personnel in footage used in the news reports provides strong evidence indeed of the militarisation of asylum seeker discourses.

A key point of difference in the representation of the two types of sea transport was that the Australian Navy vessel was almost exclusively pictured as moving through the water, at speed, while asylum boats were generally shown as stationary, in distress, or in the process of being boarded by authorities. Crucially, as television news packages certainly constitute a highly stylised type of narrative, the action of a Navy vessel on its way to do something, frames the military vessel as the active protagonist. In contrast, a stationary boat carrying asylum seekers visually positions the people in the asylum seeker boat as passive participants in the situation, being acted upon. Additionally, the size and potential ‘impact’ of each type of vessel visually reinforces the powerful position of the military in juxtaposition to a small and powerless boat carrying people seeking asylum. Such contrast constructs an asymmetrical power relationship, in which the Australian Navy vessel is clearly represented as having the authority, the capability, and the military endorsed power to take action against those seeking asylum.

Data analysis revealed that out of 336 news reports, 91 of them featured footage of an asylum seeker boat filmed as ‘through the eyes’ of military personnel.
This formal scrutiny was represented in three identifiable ways. Firstly, via vision of a surveillance screen on an Australian Navy vessel from which an asylum seeker boat was being monitored. Secondly, via footage of military personnel observing an asylum seeker boat through binoculars, and thirdly, via file footage of an asylum boat filmed from the perspective of an Australian Navy vessel (1), or from a military helicopter (2). Providing television news viewers with a direct perspective of the asylum seeker boat through a lens that simultaneously captures parts of an Australian Navy vessel (or vessels) in the
foreground, effectively guides them to witness events from the privileged position of military operations. These military-regulated camera angles function as semiotic resources along ‘empowerment-disempowerment dimensions’ (Koga-Browes 2015, p. 63) so that such positionings could encourage the audience to identify and align with (at least metaphorically), the Australian Navy, and thus the Australian Government’s policies on asylum seekers.

The gaze framing device also invites the television news audience to participate in the military surveillance of ‘the border’, and functions as a ‘recruitment’ device, according to Butler (2009), who asserts that ‘those of us who watch the wars our governments wage at a distance, are solicited and recruited into war through images and narratives’ (p.127). By showing viewers images from the omniscient perspective (Fiske 2011) of military personnel, they may unwittingly participate in visually patrolling Australia’s borders. Such identification can also result in audiences engaging with the Australian Government’s project of security. The gaze device operates, in the context of television news, similarly to the emerging television genre of ‘securitainment’, a genre which Andrejevic (2011) argues ‘invites viewers to adopt the framing and imperatives of state authorities while simultaneously enlisting them to participate in the project of securing themselves and their homeland’ (p.165). Hughes (2010) has also made similar points about these types of audience positionings but in the context of the ‘docusoap’ genre. In examining the television program Border Security: Australia’s Front Line, Hughes suggested the ‘travelling citizen’ is recruited to the Australian Government’s goal of ‘border protection and risk management’ (2010, p.439). It is here that Hughes sees the reality television program acting as an agent of governmentality. The positioning of television audiences through the technical and ideological use of the ‘gaze’ in television news report coverage of the 2013 Federal Election may arguably have achieved similar functions, reinforcing the discursive positioning of people seeking asylum as the symbolic ‘enemy’.

The bodies of people seeking asylum are represented in limited and specific ways in the television news reports. A comprehensive content analysis of all images of asylum seekers located within the data reveals that discursive constructions including the bodies of asylum seeker ‘subjects’ depict them in four key settings: in custody (50%), in detention (17%), on boats (17%) and in
Each of the four predominant settings has its own nuanced set of implications for shaping socio-political narratives about people seeking asylum, just as each particular representational image highlights different aspects of an asymmetrical power relationship between asylum seekers, the Australian Government and its institutions. In two of the four image categories: ‘in custody’ and ‘in detention’ the power relationship between the asylum seekers and the Australian Government officials (Australian Defence Force personnel and Border Patrol staff) is clearly prominent and indicated by the bodily representation of the two groups. Most frequently this type of video footage depicts asylum seekers who have been intercepted at sea on various types of transport being ‘escorted’ to a detention facility. Footage taken of people seeking asylum ‘in detention’ is proximally confined to within detention centre walls. These specific categories essentially relate to different stages of the same formal process. Images of people seeking asylum ‘on boats’ include those images in which there are no conspicuous figures aligned with Australian Government institutions such as Australian Defence Force personnel and Border Patrol staff, and ‘domestic settings’ refers to footage where asylum seekers are pictured in residential homes or home-like environments.

Images of people seeking asylum ‘in custody’ are the most common visual representations of asylum seekers in the data. Across the 336 television news reports, 725 separate pieces of footage fall into this image category. The frequency of these types of images in the news packages ranged from between 1-11 separate shots in 188 of the news packages overall. A critical analysis of the images sharply highlights their implications for communicating dominant and salient ideological meanings about people seeking asylum. These implications relate especially to three key themes: power relationships revealed through the bodily orientations of people seeking asylum and Australian authority figures; the constant representation of movement within these images; and the sanitisation of suffering (particularly in relation to sea rescue missions). The asymmetrical power relationship between subjects is one of the most consistently obvious features of these images. The following example is a still taken from a typical ‘in custody’ piece of footage and was screened in a news report that was broadcast on Network Ten on 27th September 2013 (1).
This image reveals a wide discrepancy in the power positions held by the two types of social identities. The Australian authority figures are all standing, there are fewer of them, they appear relatively relaxed (un-threatened), and they are wearing uniforms, which indicates their formal association with government institutions and authenticates an authoritative position. Conversely, the people seeking asylum are all sitting, they are being ‘watched over’ or ‘supervised’ by the Australian authorities, they are all wearing life jackets which gives the group the appearance of uniformity or ‘sameness’, but clearly without any of the
power symbolically inherent in the Border Patrol Staff uniforms. While it is difficult to see in this particular image, in others, the fact that the asylum seekers are sitting in straight rows is more obvious. Schubert (2005), a researcher in the field of social psychology, points out that language used around hierarchies of power often incorporates vertical metaphors, with those in power positioned as high, while people with less or no power are positioned as lower on a vertical spectrum. ‘When a picture of a hierarchy is drawn, the most powerful person is usually at the top, and the subordinates are drawn below’ (Schubert 2005, p. 1). These spatial metaphors of power manifest in images as well and although ‘news visuals’ as ‘factual television’ are ‘imbued with an ideology that includes objectivity as an ideal’ when subjects are observed from a high angle they are ‘generally understood as being in a position of relative powerlessness’ (Koga-Browes 2015, pp. 60-61). In this still from network Ten the distinct vertical positions of the Border Patrol staff relative to the asylum seekers, clearly communicates a narrative of dominance and power over the latter.

For viewers seeing this image, it is also significant that the type of boat they are on is uncovered. While the faces of the Australian authority figures are protected with hats and sunglasses, the faces of asylum seekers are exposed. Not only are they afforded no basic protection from the discomfort of intense direct sunlight after days (potentially weeks) of being exposed to the elements, these camera angles offer up their faces for the general scrutiny of news viewers, inviting judgement of those who are already pictured as being under restraint by the Australian border authorities. Additionally, in an age of privacy protection, particularly when other images are meticulously blurred out, it positions the asylum seekers as people who do not warrant privacy. They can be filmed anytime in any circumstances without the necessary protections afforded to others.

One of the other key features of the television footage of asylum seekers in custody is the constant theme of movement. Asylum seekers are shown being moved on and off boats, planes, minibuses and other forms of transport, being escorted along piers, being moved up or down or into a queue. With very few exceptions, file footage of asylum seekers that depicts locations outside of detention centres emphasises guarded mobility and official supervision as the main discursive elements. The visually communicated constant movement of
people rescued from asylum boats implies that the government’s mandate is to ‘move them along’, ‘take action’ or ‘take control of the situation’. These meanings achieve two outcomes for the government; it is seen to be effectively dealing with ‘the problem’, by controlling momentum, plus, these officially framed ‘movements’ further differentiate and demarcate asylum seekers from Australian citizens by way of obscuring any sense of ‘ordinariness’ or ‘humanness’ that may derive from them being represented in less forceful ways.

Other examples of ‘in custody’ footage feature asylum seekers being ‘patted down’ or ‘frisked’ by Border Control Staff. The televisual exposure of this formal procedure may lead audiences to associate asylum seekers with many negative connotations these types of visual symbols evoke. The following examples are stills taken from news reports broadcast on Network Nine on 18th July (1) and 19th October (2).

Asylum seekers undergoing security checks

Still 1
In discourses of law enforcement, ‘pat-downs’ of suspects are a procedural requirement. However, as a routine action, a ‘pat-down’ can also function as a visual signal, indicating the suspected wrongdoing of the asylum seekers subject to the procedure, further conflating discourses of seeking asylum with discourses of criminality (Yamamoto 2007). ‘A vision of collective offenderhood naturalises social inequalities and rhetorically legitimises further marginalisation of the marginalised’ (Yamamoto 2007, p.1). In using footage of asylum seekers being patted down in news coverage of boat rescues, discourses of criminality and risk are evoked through implying that people seeking asylum might be carrying weapons, are thus dangerous, and Australian society should be protected from them. Additionally, the use of latex gloves (presumably a standard operational protocol), provides a strong visual link to contemporary medical discourses such as infection control and professional hygiene, as well as socio-culturally motivated discourses of people seeking asylum as being ‘diseased’ or considered ‘a disease’.

Footage featuring asylum seekers in a detention facility was the next most frequent type of visual representation found in the data. Across the 336 news reports, there were 448 pieces of ‘in detention’ footage identified in 104 of them. Comparatively this amount is much lower than instances of footage featuring asylum seekers ‘in custody’. However, it is crucially important in that the types of environments people seeking asylum are presented in, seen as occupying, or appear to ‘belong to’, have very strong implications for shaping
socio-political narratives or understandings about them. In almost all images of detention centres, the main identifying feature and the foregrounded symbol was that of the fence; high, wire, razor. The following stills were taken from news reports aired on ABC on the 16\textsuperscript{th} July (1) and Network Ten on 18\textsuperscript{th} August (2).

\textit{Fences as Symbolic Boundaries}

\textbf{Still 1}

\textbf{Still 2}
The fence is arguably symbolic of the social boundaries separating asylum seekers and refugees from the broader Australian population. Such a separation of subject statuses, non-citizen from citizen, constitutes efforts to 'distinguish between members and unacceptable residents of the territory—through regulation of the internal boundaries' (Waldinger & Fitzgerald 2004, p. 1179). In some instances where the aesthetics of detention facilities are barely distinguishable from other types of buildings which are a regular part of unrestricted community life such as schools or office buildings, the prominence of fences ‘flags’ the bounded premises as something separate and indeed removed, from regular society. These marked perimeters identify the space as a place of monitored exclusion, and for those de-identified figures inhabiting the space; they are also symbolically ‘marked’ as illegitimate, illegal or simply unwelcome.

The representation of asylum seekers within the institutional setting of a detention facility could be viewed as a function of the militarised paradigm used to frame asylum seeker issues in news media reports throughout the 2013 Federal Election. Footage taken inside these detention facilities typically represent asylum seekers as idle or waiting, doing little else but sitting in different areas of the facility.

Asylum Seekers in Detention Facilities

Still 1
The above stills taken from reports aired on Network Seven on 20th July (1) and Nine on 30th July (2), may further encourage perceptions of difference, framing the asylum seeker person not as an individual using agency to make decisions and move their life trajectory forward (as Australian citizens are allowed to do), but as a body in ‘limbo’, in stasis. Paul Hodge (2015) draws on Butler’s (2009) work to argue that through militarised framings (including narratives and imagery) these persons are constructed as ‘non-citizens, illegitimate and unrecognisable as a life that matters’ (p.129).

Asylum seekers, having been recast as enemies and denied human rights as legitimate seekers of asylum, instead become war combatants and threats to our borders. Evoking a war footing renders asylum seekers further removed from the prospect of asylum as their bodies are reconstituted in the security domain (p.127).

As such, punitive immigration policy measures and the denial of human rights continue to be legitimised in political and media discourses through repeated implied meanings that an asylum seeker’s life is not as equally valued as the life of an Australian citizen.

Decisions made by media producers about the types of images included in media discourses may be indicative of strategic attempts to encourage preferred interpretations by audiences. People are often individualised when the authors want to present them as ‘human’, inversely a variety of ‘enemies’
may be collectivised in order to obscure their humanity and reduce reader sympathy or recognition (Hansen & Machin 2012). Images of individual persons are more likely to evoke a sympathetic or emotional response in viewers while images of large or even medium groups may potentially have the opposite effect: ‘a crowd of people in danger is “faceless” and can actually numb viewers, rather than evoke a compassionate emotional reaction’ (Bleiker et al. 2013, p. 404). Continual representation of people seeking asylum in groups may also act to communicate a sense of collectiveness, whereby individuals are incorporated into a homogenous social ‘group’ and assigned social characteristics. In Yamamoto’s study of discursive constructs of asylum seekers in Japan, he cites the promotion of a concept of ‘collective offenderhood’ attributed to groups of asylum seekers, founded on conflating discourses of crime and foreignness (2007). This type of collective construction is similarly found in television news discourses of asylum seekers during the 2013 Australian Federal Election, although their ‘criminality’ is established through procedural violations rather than ‘foreignness’.

The following examples, depicting large groups of asylum seekers have been taken from a Seven Network report which aired on the 7th of July, and a Nine Network report aired on the 13th July.

Images of Large Groups of Asylum Seekers

Still 1
spaces of exclusion

Still 2

Of all the video footage of asylum seekers used in news packages throughout the 2013 Federal Election, 13 per cent featured a group of 15 or more people, 45 per cent showed a group of between four and 14 people, 25 per cent of images showed a group of two or three people, and 17 per cent pictured a single individual. Images of large groups of asylum seekers pictured them in asylum seeker boats, in detention centres or ‘in custody’. In accordance with Hansen & Machin’s critical views, these findings demonstrate that the particular style of images which were least likely to evoke sympathetic responses from viewing audiences were the very images most likely to be used in news packages during the 2013 election. These images also visually promoted the common narrative that ‘too many’ asylum seekers are coming to Australia, again contributing to the legitimisation of government calls for their exclusion. Images of medium and large groups of asylum seekers also reinforced ‘container’ metaphors constructing Australia as being ‘at capacity’, implying that large numbers of asylum seekers would ‘overfill’ the container, and increasingly justifying their continued detention in offshore facilities.

Conclusion

Borders and their discursive construction, often in the service of ‘border protection’ rhetoric was a prominent feature of television news reports about people seeking asylum prior to and following the 2013 Australian Federal
Election. Rhetorical techniques enacted by politicians and reinforced by news editing choices both maintained and contributed to the naturalisation of exclusionary and punitive immigration policies. Importantly, these repetitive constructions were shaped by overarching assumptions that people seeking asylum are a problem and pose an ongoing ‘threat’ to Australians. Abundant and dominant discourses of ineligibility, illegality, militarisation, and dehumanisation were underpinned by the organising principle of problematisation.

Militarisation of asylum-seeker discourse surrounding the 2013 Australian Federal Election are repetitive and consistent. While military discourses are constituted by a set of inextricably linked words, phrases, images, ideas and concepts, this article has attempted to isolate some of the most prominent and significant themes in order to examine them in further detail. Images of asylum seeker boats and Australian Navy vessels, war metaphors, military terms and the implementation of OSB arguably function in television news reports to naturalise and legitimise a military response to people seeking asylum in Australia.

Images and footage used in the news report data to depict people seeking asylum overwhelmingly demonstrated visual communication techniques which resulted in the symbolic exclusion of the asylum seeker subjects. Locating asylum seekers repetitively within settings which foreground geo-spatial limitations and enforced surveillance and movement, rather than within domestic or community settings, visually demarcates asylum seekers as ‘outsiders’ or unacceptable members of the community, establishing grounds for their continued exclusion from Australian life.

DR LEICHA STEWART is a sessional academic at University of Melbourne, currently working in the School of Culture and Communication. Her work focuses on the language and images used in television news reports during the 2013 Australian Federal Election to construct immigration discourses and shape dominant narratives about people seeking asylum.
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