Missing the boat: Australia and asylum seeker deterrence messaging

Authors:

Caroline Fleay
Curtin University

John Cokley
Griffith University

Andrew Dodd
Swinburne University of Technology

Linda Briskman
Swinburne University of Technology

Larry Schwartz
Swinburne University of Technology

Corresponding Author:

Caroline Fleay
Centre for Human Rights Education
Curtin University
GPO Box 1987
Perth Western Australia 6845
Tel: +61 8 9266 1678
Email: c.fleay@curtin.edu.au

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](#). Please cite this article as [doi: 10.1111/imig.12241](https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12241)

This article is protected by copyright. All rights reserved

Received Date : 19-Jun-2015

Revised Date : 04-Nov-2015

Accepted Date : 31-Dec-2015

Article type : Original Article

Missing the boat: Australia and asylum seeker deterrence messaging

ABSTRACT

Many of Australia's border protection policies have focused on attempts to deter the arrival of asylum seekers by boat. These include government 'messaging' in the hope this will influence the decision making of would-be boat arrivals. This article outlines the findings of an exploratory study on the sources of information accessed by asylum seekers prior to and during their boat journeys to Australia about their destination country. The findings suggest that government media and internet strategies focused on deterring asylum seekers are adopted without full regard to how information is sourced before and during these boat journeys.

INTRODUCTION: STOPPING THE BOATS

Asylum seeker boats have ceased arriving on Australian shores, fulfilling the aspirations of successive Australian governments to prevent the arrival of what Weber and Pickering (2011) term "illegalised travelers". In attempts to meet this goal, over the past two decades Australian governments have introduced three intertwined strategies: harsh policies that effectively punish asylum seekers who arrive in Australia by boat, turning back boats at sea, and adopting 'messaging' in the hope that this will influence the decision making of would-be boat arrivals.

Since the federal election in September 2013, the policies of a conservative Coalition Government have been particularly harsh. The Coalition's pre-election slogan of 'stop the boats' highlighted that this would be one of its main areas of focus in government and it accordingly introduced such measures (Coalition, 2013a; 2013b). Nonetheless, these policies

built on those of the previous Labor Government (2007-2013) that reacted strongly to the increasing number of boat arrivals during its terms in office.

This paper provides a brief overview of the asylum seeker policy regime. It then explores the concept of deterrence messaging as well as research on the decision making of asylum seekers in relation to destination countries, including the minimally researched area of the impact of ‘messaging’ on asylum seeker decision making. In order to update previous research from the perspectives of asylum seekers, the paper then reports on a small-scale exploratory study in Australia and Indonesia that was undertaken by an interdisciplinary team¹ in 2013 when the Labor Government was incrementally introducing harsh policies. The study suggests government media and internet strategies focused on deterring asylum seekers are adopted without full regard to how information is sourced before and during these boat journeys.

AUSTRALIA AND ‘BORDER PROTECTION’

Australia’s border protection policies aim to deter asylum seeker boat arrivals. To this end, governments of both major political parties have introduced measures intended to prevent or deter people arriving in Australia by boat. Some of these include attempts to prevent people exiting their own countries as well as the transit country of Indonesia. Other measures, such as mandatory detention, aim to deter future arrivals by punishing those who have already come by boat. Enshrined in federal legislation in 1992, mandatory detention means that all men, women and children arriving in Australia without a valid visa can be incarcerated in detention centres until their refugee claims are finalised. Detention takes place not only on the Australian mainland but also on the Australian territory of Christmas Island and offshore in Nauru and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (both part of the ‘Pacific Solution’), from where there is no prospect of settlement in Australia. Other extreme policy responses to the arrival of asylum seekers by boat have included push-back by the Australian Navy of boats intended for Australia to Indonesia and Sri Lanka; the provision of Temporary Protection Visas for those found to be refugees, which includes denial of family reunion; and significant delays in processing the refugee claims of many thousands of asylum seekers released from immigration detention into the community. Australian governments have also engaged in deterrence messaging in attempts to deter the arrival of asylum seekers by boat.

¹ Author disciplines include international relations, journalism, social work and human rights.

DETERRENCE MESSAGING

Deterrence messaging is an established military strategy (Quackenbush, 2011) especially in regional conflicts during peacetime or a crisis when its goal is “to sow doubt in the mind of a potential adversary about the likely outcome of his aggression” (Nichiporuk 1999, 193). It is also a crime reduction strategy, using a structured lexicon of terms and phrases which is “based on increasing risks so that negative costs outweigh positive gains” and relies on punishment being certain, timely and severe (Pickering and Weber, 2014, 1006). Criminology researchers have identified changes in the operation of this kind of messaging from one used by court processes to a newer version of incentive structures in neoliberal forms of governance which act increasingly to exclude parties making rights-based claims (Pickering and Weber, 2014).

While general deterrence theory is based on crime reduction within populations (Stack, 2010), more generally the risks, costs and punishment are all applied to the subject of the messaging, either criminals (and potential criminals) or, in the case of Australia, asylum seekers. A continuing motif of deterrence messaging, at least in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, is the prospect that the asylum seeker will become known as an “illegal alien” in his or her destination country (Sigona, 2012, 50). A consequence of this is the implied threat of deportation, the possibility alone of which is a major threat (Sigona, 2012, 51)

Deterrence messaging can be aimed at domestic audiences. Some researchers suggest that governments in Australia, and in the northern hemisphere, became trapped in deterrence messaging and increasingly defensive about it, to the extent that it was deemed necessary to hide the messaging during Australia’s first ‘Pacific Solution’ in 2001-2007, or to make it “increasingly nuanced and combative” since 2009 when the second ‘Pacific Solution’ began (Pickering and Weber, 2014, 1007). As part of the nuancing of the message, a “demonising rhetoric was redirected toward people smugglers” and was recalibrated as “preventing loss of lives at sea” (Pickering and Weber, 2014, 1009) to “intent manage” asylum seekers so that “undesired persons” are “policed out...prior to their arrival in Australia” (Pickering and Weber, 2013, 95). The pinnacle of the “nuanced and combative” messaging in Australia was the slogan of ‘stop the boats’ even though numbers of asylum seekers arriving in Australia

continued to be minimal compared with those journeying to the European Union and North America (Pickering and Weber, 2014, 1008).

Australian governments have also endeavoured to find ways to convey their deterrence messages to both asylum seekers and their 'people smuggling' agents. The use of the media and other means of communication attempt to inform asylum seekers about what policies await them should they travel to Australia by boat. Such messaging is premised around the belief that asylum seekers are lured to Australia by 'pull' factors, in other words that it is an attractive destination, as opposed to 'push' factors including leaving their country due to "a well-founded fear of persecution" outlined in the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Refugee Convention) to which Australia is a signatory.

Governments have consistently used strong messaging to convey deterrence measures, signalling a belief that asylum seekers and their people-smuggling agents utilise media sources to influence their decision-making. For example, in June 2000 former Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock released a video for distribution to consulates and embassies in countries from which asylum seekers might be expected to arrive. Its purpose was to portray difficulties of the journey and to present Australia as an undesirable destination (Stratton, 2007), revealing the 'dangers' of sharks, crocodiles and snakes.

More recent attempts have directly targeted the media. The former Labor government conducted advertising campaigns in major newspapers across Australia in August-September 2013 as well as a YouTube video in a range of languages with the headline: "If you come here by boat without a visa, you won't be resettled in Australia". In an unorthodox method of deterrence that reversed government practice of not releasing photos of asylum seekers, the Labor Government also used a pixelated image of a woman with her head in her hands, captioned: "A female asylum seeker comes to terms with the fact she won't be settled in Australia" (Metherell, 2013).

The current Coalition Government continues the use of graphic images through the internet and media releases. The deterrence message is communicated through the Department of Immigration and Border Protection's website and those of its embassies and consulates in source countries of asylum seekers such as Iran (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2014). It includes a video, with the link introduced by a poster of an asylum seeker

boat with the words: “No way by boat: You will not make Australia home”. The video further points out that the Operation Sovereign Borders Joint Agency Task Force is delivering a range of offshore communication activities to inform people considering travelling to Australia ‘illegally’ by boat of this key message. In addition, the Australian Customs and Border Protection website includes a graphic storyboard aimed at deterring people in Afghanistan considering seeking asylum in Australia, depicting images of despairing asylum seekers in an offshore detention centre (Australian Customs and Border Protection, 2014). Both of these messages have been reported in Australian and international news media reports (for example, see Gander, 2014; Whyte, 2014a). Pakistani newspapers in October 2014 carried advertisements in five languages with similar headlines, warning people against being duped by people smugglers claiming they can transport them to Australian waters (Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network, 2014).

Recent Australian governments have invested significantly in deterrence messaging. In October 2014 it was revealed that advertising campaigns of both the previous Labor Government and the current Coalition Government cost almost \$23 million in one year (Whyte, 2014b). However, researchers suggest that Australia’s deterrence messaging is “based on a flawed and outdated view of the communication process and a simplistic understanding of refugee audiences” and largely ignores research that finds “refugee audiences are diverse, unpredictable and capable of producing a variety of interpretations of the messages they receive” (Richardson, 2010, 7). More broadly, Koser (2010) states that evaluations of information campaigns in a range of countries have concluded that such campaigns to deter asylum seekers have, on the whole, a neutral impact: “If people are fleeing for their lives they are unlikely to be deterred by a flyer or a poster” (Koser, 2010, 8).

In addition, research on the decision making of asylum seekers highlights that the means of finding information about a destination country of asylum both in source countries and transit countries are highly variable and, for some asylum seekers, very limited. Even more pertinent is that even when accurate information about policies may be sourced prior to arriving in a destination country, the factors that push asylum seekers to seek refuge in another country can be profound.

UNDERSTANDING THE DECISION MAKING OF ASYLUM SEEKERS

Much of the research that has explored the decision making of asylum seekers is focused on Europe and concludes that asylum seekers know little about their destinations prior to arrival, including government policies. While much of this research does not explore deterrence messaging and its impacts, it does provide an indication of key factors in asylum seekers' decision making in relation to destination countries. For example, Valenta and Thorshaug (2012) interviewed 45 asylum seekers in Norway and found that the interviewees had not known about the recently introduced restrictions on the ability of asylum seekers to access work in that country. Research on asylum seekers in the UK made similar findings. Robinson and Segrott (2002) (who interviewed 65 asylum seekers) and Gilbert and Koser (2006) (interviewed 87 asylum seekers) found that few of their respondents had arrived with much knowledge of the UK. Five reasons were suggested: many had not chosen their destination; few had family and friends in the UK; some had been provided with misleading information; many had departed their country of origin in a rushed manner; and most were poorly educated. The role of smugglers was pivotal in determining the final destination.

Many interviewees in these studies expressed that they had been more concerned about escaping from their country of origin rather than being preoccupied with deciding on which country to seek refuge in. The main aim was to reach a place of safety (see also Barsky, 2000; Brekke and Aarset, 2009; Havinga and Bocker, 1999). While Bocker and Havinga (1998) found instances where some policy measures had influenced the choice of destination country in their study of asylum seekers in the European Union between 1985 and 1994, they concluded that overall "many measures [introduced by governments] produced only limited effects or failed to have any effect at all" (Bocker and Havinga, 1998, 264).

Some of these studies highlight that people smuggling networks played an important role in host country choices for many of the asylum seekers interviewed (Gilbert and Koser, 2006; Koser and Pinkerton, 2002; Robinson and Segrott, 2002; Valenta and Thorshaug, 2012; Zimmermann, 2009). However, Brekke and Aarset's (2009) findings highlight a greater capacity for decision making on destination choice for most of the asylum seekers they interviewed in Norway. While the majority of the interviewees had used a people smuggling network, the agents had not seemed "to play an important role in deciding the destination country" (Brekke and Aarset, 2009, 86). Other important sources of information for asylum seekers interviewed in these studies were their social networks – family and friends at home and in destination countries.

A study by Costello and Kaytaz (2013) suggests that asylum seekers coming to both Geneva and Toronto do not always have a clear idea of their destination. Some simply entrusted their flight to agents and became aware of their destinations once journeys were underway. Nonetheless there was an expectation by a significant proportion that their destination would be a country where human rights were protected. Those who did make relatively informed decisions about both countries referred to the reputation of Switzerland and Canada.

The few studies that have explored the decision making of asylum seekers who come to Australia by boat highlight that many asylum seekers knew very little about their destination prior to their arrival. Through interviews with eighteen male asylum seekers, most from Afghanistan (fourteen) with two from Iran and one each from Iraq and India, Gradstein (2006) found that while most had little information about Australia prior to their arrival, some had gained a limited amount of knowledge before they arrived. The sources of information primarily included people smuggling agents, former asylum seekers, and their families (Gradstein, 2006).

Richardson (2008) explored understandings that refugees in Australia had about deterrence policies prior to their arrival. Based on interviews with 27 Afghan, Iraqi and Iranian refugees who had relied on people smuggling agents to reach Australia, Richardson found that many had been told nothing, very little or given inaccurate information. The study noted that Afghan interviewees had considerably less knowledge of Australia pre-arrival, than the Iraqi or Iranian respondents. Afghan interviewees said they had not had access to television broadcasts within Afghanistan prior to the US forces defeating the Taliban. Radio use was also limited, being dependent on access to electricity that was particularly limited in remote areas of Afghanistan (Richardson, 2008).

In a scoping study, specifically aimed at countering people smuggling (Wise Strategic Communications, 2010), information was compiled on news sources accessed by the Hazara population, the main Afghan ethnic group that has sought asylum in Australia, in four provinces of Afghanistan. Although it focused on how the Australian Government could convey messages to stop 'irregular migration', the study illuminates key sources of media use by the population. The information was gathered by conducting fifty interviews and ten focus

groups. Although it was apparent that information is primarily spread by word-of-mouth communications, use of media including specific radio and television stations was identified.

A 2015 study exploring attitudes of 199 people in Iran preparing to emigrate found a similar reliance on word-of-mouth communications by those expressing intentions to travel to Australia (Farsight, 2015). This study was conducted in the aftermath of increasing numbers of Iranian asylum seekers arriving to Australia by boat between 2010 and 2013. 26 participants expressed an intention to travel to Australia, with the most important reasons cited being to join family who were already in Australia (46 per cent) and the lack of employment prospects in Iran (31 per cent), while eleven per cent said they felt their lives were “in danger” (Farsight, 2015, 6). While a number of other participants expressed that they had decided not to travel to Australia because of its changed policies, most participants intending to go to Australia were aware of the offshore detention policy. However, they had received policy information from family and friends in Australia and/or others in Iran rather than Australian government campaigns, and all considered that they would eventually be resettled in Australia (Farsight, 2015).

The minimal amount of Australian research on information accessed by asylum seekers who come by boat, and the largely untested assumptions of Australian governments around the impacts of messaging for deterrence purposes, led us to engage in a small-scale exploratory study. This study explored the sources of information accessed by asylum seekers in relation to their destination country before and during their journeys by boat to Australia.

EXPLORATORY STUDY

Our study adopted two approaches in order to contribute to knowledge gaps in this field.

1. Interviews with a group of Afghan Hazara men who had sought asylum in Australia, a significant cohort travelling to Australia by boat.
2. Fieldwork in Indonesia focusing on predominantly Hazara men who were asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Pakistan anticipating a boat journey to Australia.

All interviews and fieldwork were undertaken during the period of the Labor Government that ended in September 2013. We investigated the types, sources and contents of information

accessed by asylum seekers who had either arrived in Australia or were in Indonesia in early 2013. The methodology adopted in the study combined interviews and observations.

The largest group of asylum seekers in Australia who arrived by boat are Hazara originally from Afghanistan. Until the recent upsurge of violence in Syria and Iraq, globally Afghanistan remained the main country from which people left to seek asylum, many of them Hazara; this was consistent for 32 consecutive years (Watson Institute International and Public Affairs, 2015). More than three decades of civil war in Afghanistan have combined with severe poverty to propel this movement (Bisaillon et. al in press). Most who have fled reside in Pakistan and Iran. There is now a diaspora of Hazara refugees and asylum seekers across Western Europe and North America, while significant numbers have been arriving in Australia since the early 2000s. Indonesia has been a major transit point for those travelling to Australia and, to a lesser extent, New Zealand. At the time of this study, Hazaras were making for Indonesia to either catch smugglers' boats from southern Java or to seek official resettlement to third countries through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) process.

Interviews in Australia

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted in January 2013 with eight men living in Australia who had arrived by boat seeking asylum, constituting a case study approach. Six were living in Perth and two in Sydney and all were Afghan of Hazara ethnicity. Six arrived in Australia in 2010, and were held in immigration detention centres for periods of time ranging from 12 to 20 months. One had arrived in 2011 just prior to the Labor Government's granting of bridging visas to increasing numbers of asylum seekers to allow them to live in the community while their refugee claims were finalised. He was in detention for four months. Another interviewee arrived in 2012 and spent seven months in detention. Six interviewees had been found to be refugees by the Department of Immigration while the other two continued to wait for their refugee claims to be finalised. All have been given pseudonyms in the following discussion.

Due to the sensitive nature of the information garnered (as it involved questions of 'people smugglers' and unauthorised arrival in Australia), the interviewees were selected through snowball sampling (Sulaiman-Hill and Thompson, 2011, 3). Four men known to us through

our advocacy work were first invited to participate. They identified four further potential participants who agreed to be recruited for the study. An interpreter fluent in Farsi was used in the interviews with four of the participants. As the vast majority of the Hazaras we had encountered were male, we did not seek out female participants; furthermore, there are very few Hazara women who make boat journeys independently.

Although all of the eight interview participants in Australia were limited to Hazaras who had travelled from Afghanistan or Pakistan, the interviews highlight their common experience regarding access to information. Seven out of the eight relied on friends in their own country and people smuggling agents for information about their journeys and Australia both prior to their journeys and on route. The other described how once he faced persecution in Afghanistan, he found out from a friend and internet sources that Australia accepted refugees, although he said he “had no idea” about the detention of asylum seekers in Australia.

Through the media we came to know, everyone knows Australia is accepting refugees. [I got information from] television, information available everywhere, you can listen to the radio, you can use internet if you like. It is not about getting information, it is about securing a safe place in the world. I didn't do any research (Mustafa).

When he was in Jakarta, Mustafa learnt that the Labor Government had stopped processing the refugee claims of asylum seekers from Afghanistan for six months in 2010. However, this did not deter him from getting on a boat for Australia: “I didn't bother about how long I would be in detention. I just get to Australia to save my life”. Others expressed similar sentiments when asked, in hindsight, whether they would have continued on their journeys to Australia had they known they would be detained. Gholum replied: “Just because of my security, I was looking for a safer place. Detention does not matter.”

Of the seven participants who had relied on either friends and/or agents for information, Ali described his total reliance for information about Australia first from a friend who had lived in Australia from 2000, and then from a people smuggling agent in Afghanistan recommended by a friend.

I didn't have any plan before I came [to Australia]. One of my friends had been in Australia, he had been in Australia from 2000. He told me about Australia, about the

lifestyle. I couldn't read in English well, I was not searching and planning [about coming to Australia]. The organising people in my country, agents, through one of my friends I find out. [The agent] told me a lot of things in Australia. I was told Australian Government will take you to the shopping centre and you can buy anything you want. Especially for refugees, they have deep sympathy. It's a very rich country, they can afford it easy. You will get a package – like after detention, but [the agent] polished it. He lied.

All but one of the interviewees in Perth and Sydney had very little access to information aside from people smuggling agents before leaving Afghanistan or Pakistan. None had any significant access to information except from agents and, in some cases, did not know their destination.

It was not in my hands – I paid money to a smuggler and they picked everything. I didn't know where I was going (Hussain).

Gholum had his phone taken from him in Kabul by an agent and Ali had his phone taken when he left Pakistan. They became utterly reliant on the agents for information for the rest of the journey. As Ali remarked: "From Lahore all contacts were taken from me so we couldn't do any trick. I was their property when I arrived in Indonesia". Once in Jakarta, he had to rely upon an agent for further information and to contact his family and for any further information. He used the agent's phone to contact his family back in Afghanistan. As had also been the experience of Mohammad and Gholum, Ali had been told not to leave the accommodation he had been taken to in Jakarta, and his food was even delivered by an agent. According to Mohammad: "There was one telephone at the home where [the agent] would contact us; we couldn't call out. We were in [a form of] detention". Four of the other interview participants reported having their own phone until they were about to board a boat in Indonesia (Hussain, Zahid, Jawad and Mustafa) while Hadi remarked that he saw smuggling agents take the phones from those who had them as they were boarding the boats.

None of those interviewed in Australia had spent much time in Indonesia before boarding a boat. Time in Indonesia ranged from one week to three months for these interviewees. Those who said they had been without their own phone access in Indonesia did not spend more than four weeks there before boarding a boat for Australia. Those who were more than one month

in Indonesia had secured their own mobile phones (Zahid and Jawad) or borrowed their friend's phones (Hadi). Zahid said that he had access to his mobile even while in detention in Indonesia. But these three said their mobile calls were generally limited to calling their families.

None of the eight asylum seekers interviewed in Perth and Sydney had accessed the internet about Australian policies or their journeys either prior to leaving their countries or on route. Hussain said that "I never looked at internet. I didn't know about internet until I got out of detention". Hadi commented that he only used the internet in Pakistan before leaving on his journey "for killing time, nothing special".

Three of those interviewed did access the internet once detained in Australia. But rather than looking for information on Australian Government asylum seeker policies that they could have conveyed to asylum seekers in-waiting, mostly they focused on finding information on the situation where their families were living.

I was looking for news back home, I was worried about home, looking to see if people killed. In two months while I was in Curtin [immigration detention centre] about 50 people killed in Quetta, I was worried about my family. That's why I was using the internet. Altogether I was focusing on the security situation back home (Hadi).

For these asylum seekers, little information was known about Australian policies both prior to and during their journeys to Australia. Very few sources of information were accessed prior to their arrival to Australia other than the information provided by friends or people smuggling agents.

Fieldwork in Indonesia

The second component of the study involved interviews and observations in Indonesia in December 2012. Asylum seekers in Indonesia do not have citizenship and do not have any pathway to settle permanently there, so all aspire to onward journeys. Although Indonesia generally tolerates their presence, asylum seekers there have limited rights and find informal and innovative ways of building community while in waiting.

As with the Australian respondents, the fieldwork conducted in Indonesia involved interviews with Hazara men, and some women, who were asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Pakistan and Iran. Forty interviews were conducted in either English – when the asylum seekers were able to do so – or in Dari or Farsi, with the assistance of an interpreter. The interviews were unstructured to aid the process of gathering information and to gain a better understanding of the environments in which asylum seekers live. Some interviews and observations were conducted in the Jalan Jaksa area of Jakarta, a popular backpacker area of Jakarta where accommodation is widely available and relatively cheap. There is a community of transient asylum seekers moving through the small guesthouses, allowing friendships to form and networks to develop. Jalan Jaksa is also close to the UNHCR where new arrivals often register as asylum seekers. Other interviews and observations were conducted in the Cisarua township of central west Java that has become a focus for the transient Hazara community. Interviewee Muhammed Musa estimated there were between 500 and 600 Hazaras living in Cisarua at the time of the study and that groups of men were living together in crowded, rented accommodation in the houses in the hills around the township: “We live in one villa, in one house, maybe 15 people, eight people, 10 people, and we have a problem of money here, not a lot of money for spending for the room” (Dodd, 2013). Interviewees were located through a snowballing methodology, first by observation in Jakarta, around the UNHCR and Jalan Jaksa areas. These participants guided us towards other contacts in Cisarua, who in turn introduced us to other members of the various Hazara communities.

In contrast to the lack of information that most of the above interviewees had about Australian Government policy at least before they arrived to Australia, the interviewees in Indonesia tell a different story. There was widespread awareness among the Indonesian interviewees in late 2012 that Australian Government policies were changing and that offshore processing had been reintroduced. However, this did not appear to have significantly affected their plans to travel to Australia. This is consistent with the comments of the Australian interviewees that their journeys were driven more by their need to flee the violence of their own and neighbouring countries than Australian Government policies.

There was an understanding among the asylum seekers interviewed in Indonesia that the detention facilities on Nauru and Manus Island had re-opened. In the case of Manus Island, this was notable as the facility re-opened at the time the study was being conducted, suggesting that news channels were up-to-date and that the asylum seekers were well

informed. But there was very little information about conditions on Manus Island and those interviewed were keen to know more about what the recent policy changes meant in practice for those contemplating boat journeys. While one asylum seeker explained that he had reservations about travelling by boat as a consequence of offshore processing, most reported that they would travel by boat regardless of the news. Several expressed their belief that when they get to Nauru or Manus Island they would definitely be on the way to Australia, whereas in Indonesia, as one person explained, they were “nowhere”.

Two powerful motivations appeared to be in competition among those interviewed in Indonesia for this study. Many expressed fear about travelling on board a substandard and overcrowded boat. There was widespread awareness about the dangers of sea travel and about recent events, such as the loss of 33 people in late October 2012 when a boat sank and only one passenger survived (Habib, 2013). Some made the decision to avoid the use of people smuggling agents and they expressed a fear of drowning. One interviewee explained that she knew people who had died at sea: “One girl is younger than me, her name was Taiba, one Afghan man, single also, Bassir, Rahmatulo, his name also, it is many, it’s a lot, I cannot count how many.” She explained that she knew a family of seven that had not arrived in Australia because their boat had sunk. “They were always happy,” she said. “We don’t have any news from that family” (Dodd, 2013).

However, against this fear of travelling by sea, there was another powerful motivation, namely the frustration that comes with months or years of waiting in Indonesia for resettlement as part of the official UNHCR process. There was discernible concern among asylum seekers about the slowness of resettlement and about the small numbers of asylum seekers selected by Australia for resettlement. This situation becomes “untenable” and drives many to resort to the use of people smuggling agents (Taylor, 2013).

A significant proportion of asylum seekers are obliged to spend many months or even years in Indonesia. Despite this, the study observed that asylum seekers generally opt not to engage deeply with Indonesian society. Few learn even basic Bahasa Indonesia. Asylum seekers are not allowed to work, further reducing opportunities for interaction and the development of language skills. This has significant repercussions for media usage, as almost all of the local news sources and mass media outlets are broadcast and published in the Indonesian language.

At the time there was no regular off-line media outlet in Indonesia supplying news in Dari or Farsi language for the Hazara community. The online news blogsite Hazara Asylum Seekers (HAS) “aims to provide updates regarding Hazara asylum seekers around the globe in general and about those en route to Australia in particular” (HAS, 2015). The site republishes stories on Hazara issues and links to other sites but it is in English and is thus of limited use to Farsi speakers, the majority of whom do not speak English. Satellite television was observed in only a few locations, including the home of one asylum seeker family. It broadcasts Farsi Language news programmes from Afghanistan. Other media channels include official Australian Government and UNHCR notice boards, with announcements posted in both English and Farsi.

However, asylum seekers in Indonesia are active users of social and online media. The study observed many men living in shared houses had access to a common laptop computer and had a slow but serviceable internet connection.² Networked computers could also be found in internet cafes, backpacker accommodation and fast food restaurants. Several participants owned smartphones and at the time of the study were occasionally observed connecting to the internet at wifi hotspots. In rare cases, participants had roaming access that gave them access to online information through their phones at their homes or at other locations. Facebook appeared to be the most popular social media site and many asylum seekers appeared to have active accounts. On several occasions participants were observed accessing Facebook and connecting with friends and associates inside and beyond Indonesia. In addition, mobile phones – along with new sim cards and pre-paid phone and internet packages – are readily available at street kiosks. Mobile phone ownership among asylum seekers in Indonesia is commonplace. It was clear that in late 2012, asylum seekers in Cisarua and Jakarta were connected to local and global networks and that information was freely and readily exchanged.

Although asylum seekers had access to on-line information and quickly became aware about headline changes, such as the re-opening of Manus Island, the study also found a lack of awareness about other important aspects of asylum seeker policy. Only a small number of asylum seekers reported that they used official online sites to gain information. For example, one person explained that he occasionally referred to the website of the Australian

² We suspect the fact that we did not observe women using phones and computers reflects that there were so few women present and that whenever we met with women they were preoccupied in other activities.

Government's Department of Immigration, which makes announcements on topics such as the repatriation of asylum seekers from Australian detention centres to offshore processing sites. Overall, however, there was widespread ignorance of the then Labor Government's 'no advantage' policy, which stated that people who enter Australia by boat would not receive preferential treatment and would be obliged to spend long periods in detention. Interestingly, the interviewee quoted above reported that she became aware of the sinking of her friends' boat because it was not reported on a Department of Immigration website: "When they arrive we see on the internet, and also from Immigration, they put pictures, and then we can see." So when this news is not posted, the Hazaras tend to fear the worst. No news can mean very bad news indeed.

The study observed sophisticated word-of-mouth networks for researching, engaging and maintaining contact with people smuggling agents. Because this process is necessarily secretive it is usually conducted away from media channels, although mobile phones are required so that asylum seekers can be informed about imminent boat departures. Social media sites are also used to talk to family members in their countries-of-origin to arrange payment to offshore agents to facilitate onward travel from Indonesia. The relationships between people smuggling agents and passengers are not conducive to the free flow of information and informed consent. Asylum seekers become reliant on agents but rarely meet them for security reasons. In addition, the agents may have a vested interest in withholding information from their prospective clients. Their 'business model' depends on delivering asylum seekers to Australia alive, regardless of whether their passengers can stay, so information that puts doubt in the minds of already fearful passengers may harm their business. The word-of-mouth networks do spread news and updates, but, as mentioned above, asylum seekers are often desperate people and may choose to ignore or block out negative information.

DISCUSSION

The findings of our study suggest that asylum seekers who travel to Australia by boat, and those who wish to do so, use variable means to find information about their journeys and destination country. The study also highlights the importance of the primary reasons why asylum seekers leave their countries of origin – to find a place that is without violence and where resettlement is possible, a finding supported by the literature outlined in previous

sections of the paper. For those in protracted situations in Indonesia a further motivation arises from the frustration of months or years of waiting in Indonesia for a settlement outcome.

Our findings suggest that it is wrong to characterise all asylum seekers as either informed or not-informed about their country of destination. Certainly it appears that very few are fully informed. Asylum seekers in our study generally stated that their focus was on what are described as ‘push’ factors, the situation in the country of origin that propels forced migration. We observed that many asylum seekers do not study the nuances of rapidly changing policies that may or may not operate within foreign political systems. They are often closely connected to, and dependent on, people smuggling agents who may have vested interests in not informing them about certain developments. Although many asylum seekers have their own peer networks and converse freely, and have access to on-line information, they may choose to ignore or block out news that adversely affects their chances of reaching their destination. This contrasts with government responses that discuss ‘pull’ factors premised on the notion that asylum seekers have wide-ranging information that makes Australia a prized destination.

The results nonetheless are inconclusive about the use of media and other communication sources prior to and during journeys to Australia, including government messaging, and cannot be generalised. Although all but one of the asylum seekers we interviewed in Australia stated that they relied on friends in their own country and/or people smuggling agents for information on their destination country rather than media or internet sources, consistent with most international studies, those interviewed in Indonesia gave mixed responses. These differences may reflect, in part, that the interviewees in Australia had spent a relatively short time in Indonesia before boarding a boat – five of the interviewees had been there for four weeks or less and the remaining three for two to three months. Their plans were to continue their journey to Australia rather than rely on the UNHCR. What was significant though was that it appears that whatever the knowledge, the outcome was similar. People used whatever information they could to make their decision and summed up the balance of risk in taking the journey.

Another limitation of the research was the small number of participants and ethnicities. However, the information gleaned suggests that a wider exploration is warranted to examine

in more depth the types of information used in decision making, including the utilisation of media and internet sources, and to draw out that if this access had been available, whether it would have been influential in decision making. A sample of different nationalities would add to the knowledge base particularly in countries where a range of media options is accessible. In the light of the most recent campaigns, and the findings of the 2015 study in Iran that highlight the reliance on word-of-mouth communications for information on Australia (Farsight, 2015), further investigation of whether media and internet messaging employed by the government has been reaching its target is also warranted.

DOES MESSAGING WORK?

A question that has long perplexed those following deterrence policies is that of efficacy and, although it is not possible to provide a definitive answer, there is little evidence that deterrence strategies are effective. It is frequently asserted that when boat arrivals decrease dramatically this may be more the result of a global reduction in refugee outflows and asylum claims (Briskman, 2008). Increased border protection measures and surveillance are another reason (Crock et al, 2006) as well as the “tyranny of geography” (Gibney, 2004) and disruption of smuggling rings (Gauthier, 2005). So how influential is government messaging? Figures surprisingly released by government in 2014 would suggest that the messaging has not stopped boats leaving their destinations, but Operation Sovereign Borders ‘turnbacks’ have merely stopped boats arriving on Australian shores (Morrison, 2014).

Our exploratory research findings suggest that assessing the influence of communication sources is complex. We have made observations of the use of media and other forms of communication and can demonstrate some of the ways their use informed people in certain locations and communities at different stages of their boat journeys. We have observed in particular that media and internet usage by Hazara asylum seekers varies so it would be reasonable to infer that other ethnic communities would also have varied access to, and usage of, media channels and other forms of communication before and during their journeys.

What our findings do suggest, backed up by Richardson (2010) and Koser (2010), is that government media and internet strategies focused on deterring asylum seekers from their boat journeys to Australia are adopted without substantial knowledge of how information is sourced before and during these journeys and, when ‘messaging’ knowledge is utilised, how

influential it is in decision-making. Consistent with our research, international studies have revealed particular reliance on smuggling agents (for example, Costello and Kaytaz (2013) in Switzerland and Canada and Gilbert and Koser (2006) in the UK). Given the existing evidence that challenges the effectiveness of messaging as a deterrence mechanism, we end this paper by posing questions for further research. Not only would the field of refugee studies benefit from extensive research on a range of ethnicities, but research on implicit messaging would further advance the field. This would create space for not just examining what appears to be the sole audiences for messaging – asylum seekers and their agents – but to establish the covert effect on the wider Australian population. With ‘stop the boats’ messages appearing with regularity in the media, further exploration is required, we suggest, on the more indirect question of whether the messaging is equally intended for an Australian audience to signal that national security and borders are intact, including to seek election favour.

REFERENCES

APRRN

2014 Email communication, October 11, 2014, Australian government warns Pakistani asylum-seekers against illegal entry.

Australian Customs and Border Protection

2014 “A Storyboard on People Smuggling”, Australian Customs and Boarder Protection Service Online Newsroom, accessed November 20, 2014. <http://www.customs.gov.au/webdata/resources/files/Storyboard-Afghanistan.pdf>.

Barsky, R. F.

2000 *Arguing and Justifying: Assessing the Convention Refugees’ Choice of Moment, Motive and Host Country*, Ashgate, Aldershot.

Bisaillon, L., Shamsi Gooshki, E. and Briskman, L.

2015 in press “Medico-legal Borders and the Shaping of Health Services for Afghans in Iran: Physical, Social, Bureaucratic and Public Health Conditions of Care”, *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies*.

Bocker, A. and Havinga, T.

1998 “Asylum Applications in the European Union: Patterns and Trends and the Effects of Policy Measures”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 11 (3): 245-266.

Brekke, J-P. and Aarset, M.F.

2009 *Why Norway? Understanding Asylum Destinations*, Oslo: Institute for Social Research.

Briskman, L.

2008 “Detention as deterrence”, in *Asylum Seeker: International Perspectives on Interdiction and Deterrence*, edited by A. Babacan and L. Briskman, 128-142, Cambridge Scholars Press, Newcastle.

Coalition

2013a “The Coalition’s Policy to Clear Labor’s 30,000 Border Failure Backlog”, August, accessed February 10, 2015.
<http://www.nationals.org.au/Portals/0/2013/policy/ClearLabor30000BorderFailureBacklog.pdf>.

Coalition

2013b “The Coalition’s Operation Sovereign Borders Policy”, July, accessed February 10, 2015.
<http://www.nationals.org.au/Portals/0/2013/policy/The%20Coalition%E2%80%99s%20Operation%20Sovereign%20Borders%20Policy.pdf>.

Costello, C. and Kaytaz, E.

2013 *Building Empirical Research into Alternatives to Detention: Perceptions of asylum-seekers and refugees in Toronto and Geneva*, UNHCR Legal and Protection Policy Research Series, Division of International Protection, UNHCR, June.

Crock, M., Saul, B. and Dastyari, A.

2006 *Future Seeker 11: Refugees and Irregular Migration in Australia*, The Federation Press, Sydney.

Department of Immigration and Border Protection

2014 “No Way. They Will Not Make Australia Home”, accessed November 20, 2014.
<http://www.immi.gov.au/Live/Pages/refugees/no-way.aspx>.

Dodd, A.

2013 “Hazara people in Indonesian legal limbo”, The Law Report, ABC Radio National, 26 March, accessed 26 October 2015.
<http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:8JH0o9Y8qMQJ:www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lawreport/hazaras-in-indonesia/4589070+&cd=4&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=au>.

Farsight

2015 “Iranian Refugees: An Exploration of Irregular Migration to Australia”, accessed May 15, 2015. <http://seefar.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Farsight-Working-Paper-Iranian-Refugees-and-Irregular-Migration-Australia.pdf>

Gander, K.

2014 “Australian Government Releases Cartoon in Campaign Warning Asylum Seekers not to 'Waste their Money on Smuggler Boats' into the Country” The Independent, February 11, accessed September 28, 2014.
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/australasia/australian-government-releases-cartoon-in-campaign-warning-asylumseekers-not-to-waste-their-money-on-smuggler-boats-into-the-country-9122490.html>.

Gauthier, K.

2005 “Presentation to the People’s Inquiry into Detention”, Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work Sydney hearing.

Gibney, M.J.

2004 The Ethics and Politics of Asylum: Liberal Democracy and the Response of Refugees. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Gilbert, A. and Koser, K.

2006 “Coming to the UK: What do Asylum Seekers know about the UK before Arrival?”
Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 32 (7): 1209-1225.

Gradstein, L.

2006 Questioning Deterrence Policies in the Mandatory Detainment of Asylum Seekers,
Doctorate of Psychology (Forensic) thesis, School of Psychology, Deakin University.

Griffith, E.

2014 “Immigration Minister Scott Morrison confirms 12 asylum seeker boats turned back since the start of Operation Sovereign Borders”, ABC News, 18 September, accessed February 10, 2015. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-09-18/immigration-minister-confirms-12-asylum-seeker-boats-turned-back/5752262>.

Habib

2013 “Habib, Sole Survivor of Boat Tragedy Writes His Memoirs”, Hazara Asylum Seekers, March 7, accessed January 28, 2015.

<http://hazaraasylumseekers.wordpress.com/category/unhcr/page/2/>.

HAS

2015 Hazara Asylum Seekers, accessed January 28.
<https://hazaraasylumseekers.wordpress.com/about/>.

Havinga, T. and Bocker, A.

1999 “Country of Asylum by Choice or by Chance: Asylum Seekers in Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK”, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 25 (1): 43-61.

Koser, K.

2010 Responding to Boat Arrivals in Australia: Time for a Reality Check, Lowy Institute for International Policy, December, accessed October 26, 2015.
http://www.lowyinstitute.org/files/pubfiles/Koser,_Responding_web.pdf

Koser, K. and Pinkerton, C.

2002 The Social Networks of Asylum Seekers and the Dissemination of Information about Countries of Asylum, Migration Research Unit, University College London.

Metherell, L. and staff

2013 “Immigration Department Under Fire for Photos of Asylum Seekers Being Told of PNG Policy”, ABC News, July 23, accessed February 10, 2015.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-07-22/government-under-fire-for-asylum-seeker-photos/4835940>.

Morrison, S.

2014 “A year of stronger borders”, accessed November 4, 2014.
<http://www.minister.immi.gov.au/media/sm/2014/sm217927.htm>.

Nichiporuk, B.

1999 “US Military Opportunities: Information-warfare Concepts of Operation”, in Strategic appraisal: the changing role of information in warfare (Vol 1), edited by Z. Khalilzad, Z., J.P. White and A.W. Marshall, RAND, Santa Monica, CA.

Pickering, S., and Weber, L.

2013 “Policing transversal borders”, in The Borders of Punishment: Migration, Citizenship, and Social Exclusion, edited by K.F. Aas and M. Bosworth, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Pickering, S., and Weber, L.

2014 “New Deterrence Scripts in Australia's Rejuvenated Offshore Detention Regime for Asylum Seekers”, Law & Social Inquiry, 39(4): 1006-1026.

Quackenbush, S. L.

2011 Understanding General Deterrence: Theory and Application, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

Richardson, R.

2010 “Sending a Message?: Refugees and Australia's Deterrence Campaign”, Media International Australia, Incorporating Culture & Policy (135): 7-18.

Richardson, R.

2008 “Sending a Strong Message? The Refugee’s Reception of Australia’s Immigration Deterrence Policies”, PhD thesis, Charles Sturt University.

Robinson, V. and Segrott, J.

2002 “Understanding the Decision-Making of Asylum Seekers”, Vol. 12, Home Office, London.

Ruddock, P.

2000 “Advertisements to Dissuade Would-be Boat People”, 7.30 Report, ABC Television, 15 June.

Sigona, N.
2012 “‘I have too much baggage’: the impacts of legal status on the social worlds of irregular migrants”, *Social Anthropology*, 20(1): 50-65.

Stack, S.

2010 “General Deterrence Theory”, in *Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory* (Vol. 1) edited by F. T. Cullen and P. Wilcox, Sage, London.

Stratton, J.

2007 “Dying to Come to Australia: Asylum Seekers, Tourists and Deaths”, in *Our Patch: Enacting Australian Sovereignty Post-2001*, edited by S. Perera, 167-196, API Network, Perth.

Sulaiman-Hill, C. and Thompson, S.

2011 “Sampling challenges in a study examining refugee resettlement”, *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, 11: 1-10.

Taylor, J.

2013 “Hazara People in Indonesian Legal Limbo”, *The Law Report*, March 26, produced by Andrew Dodd, ABC Radio National, accessed February 10, 2015.

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lawreport/hazaras-in-indonesia/4589070#transcript>.

Valenta, M. and Thorshaug, K.

2012 “Asylum-seekers’ Perspectives on Work and Proof of Identity: The Norwegian Experience”, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 31(2): 76-97.

Watson Institute International and Public Affairs

2015 “Afghan Refugees”, Brown University, Rhode Island. accessed 30 October, 2015.
<http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/refugees/afghan>

Weber, L. and Pickering, S.

2011 Globalization and Borders: Death at the Global Frontier, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire.

Whyte, S.

2014a “New Asylum Seeker Campaign 'Distasteful' and ‘Embarrassing’”, Sydney Morning Herald, February 12, accessed February 10, 2015. <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/new-asylum-seeker-campaign-distasteful-and-embarrassing-20140212-32h04.html>.

Whyte, S.

2014b “Campaigns to deter asylum seekers cost \$22m”, The Age, October 6, 6.

Wise Strategic Communications

2010 Afghanistan Counter People Smuggling Scoping Study, Final Report, Australian Customs and Border Protection Service.

Zimmermann, S.

2009 “Why Seek Asylum? The Roles of Integration and Financial Support”, International Migration, 48(1): 199-231.

Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

Fleay, C;Cokley, J;Dodd, A;Briskman, L;Schwartz, L

Title:

Missing the boat: Australia and asylum seeker deterrence messaging

Date:

2016-08-01

Citation:

Fleay, C., Cokley, J., Dodd, A., Briskman, L. & Schwartz, L. (2016). Missing the boat: Australia and asylum seeker deterrence messaging. *International Migration*, 54 (4), pp.60-73. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12241>.

Persistent Link:

<http://hdl.handle.net/11343/290957>