Racialized ‘othering’

The representation of asylum seekers in news media

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- How does journalistic practice contribute to a process of ‘othering’ of refugees and asylum seekers?
- What role do the labels such as ‘illegal’ and ‘bogus’ play in the politics of immigration control?
- What are the challenges confronting journalists reporting on asylum seekers in the context of globalization?

An incident occurred off Australian territorial waters on 26 August 2001 that had significant consequences in the Australian parliamentary elections held that year. A Norwegian ship, the *Tampa*, rescued 433 survivors, mostly asylum seekers, from a sinking Indonesian ferry and took them to Christmas Island, part of Australian territory. Categorizing the rescued passengers of the *Tampa* as ‘boatpeople’ and ‘illegal immigrants’, the ruling Liberal Party sought to appeal to sections of the electorate by having Australian Special Forces board the ship in an attempt to stop the passengers from disembarking on Christmas Island — and thus being in a position to apply for asylum. What is of interest to our present concerns, however, is the role of the press in what subsequently came to be referred to as the *Tampa* affair. Some of the popular newspapers carried stories which reproduced the language of the government, as indicated in the headline in the front page of the *Herald Sun* on 31 August 2001: ‘BACK OFF: Howard rejects UN call to take illegals’.

The complicity of the press with the government’s position has since been noted by a few scholars. For example, Ward (2002: 22) writing in the *Australian Journalism Review* sees the affair as an instance of ‘wedge politics’ from which can be learned a lesson in political journalism: ‘these events were part of a carefully calculated Liberal Party strategy to revive its flagging electoral stocks ahead of an imminent federal election.’ Despite his careful analysis of the context of the incident, however, his claim that ‘had this point been understood, the journalists may have framed the Tampa story
differently, realising that their description of the Tampa passengers as illegal immigrants assisted the Liberals’ cause’ (Ward 2002: 23) appears to place too much retrospective faith in journalistic disinterestedness. The implication here is that had journalists been more sensitive to the issue of ‘wedge politics’ they may have presented the story from a different perspective, a claim that is difficult to justify and defend.

This is not to suggest that all journalists are overtly racist or anti-refugees. What we want to argue in this essay is that, firstly, such depictions of asylum seekers, far from being isolated cases, form a pattern that demonstrates a form of racism which has become part of a commonly held vision of national security and sovereignty. This form of racism is not overt but is constitutive of an attitude to ‘foreigners’, particularly refugees, and is therefore far more insidious. Our argument is that such rhetoric of national sovereignty points to the apparent paradox within what has come to be known as ‘globalization’: that is, the celebration of ‘global culture’ and porous borders on the one hand, and the simultaneous consolidation of national borders, on the other. For example, if developments such as transport technology have contributed to more people travelling between and across countries than ever before, the tightening of immigration control increasingly imposes restrictions on the mobility of certain communities – clear indications of a ‘power geometry’ (Massey 1994). It is our basic contention that representations of asylum seekers as undesirable aliens has to be considered within the context of this paradox.

Dog whistle journalism, the ‘other’, and the politics of representation

The tightening of national border control raises questions about the categories of ‘desirable’ immigrant and ‘legal’ as opposed to ‘bogus’ refugees. The latter distinction is further complicated by the small proportion of those seeking asylum attempting to manipulate the conditions to their advantage, and whose claim on the status as asylum seekers is questionable. However, it is precisely when the practices of this small minority of those claiming asylum are used either to stigmatize all asylum seekers as ‘bogus’ and unwarranted, or to justify draconian immigration policies, that the role of the press needs to be scrutinized.

The issue of the representation of refugees and asylum seekers has two sets of related implications for journalistic practice, namely, news discourse and its relationship to power, and the framing of news on asylum seekers in a global context, transcending narrowly defined national interests. In terms of news discourse, broadly speaking media representations are seen as significant in the cultural (and therefore political) sphere precisely because they actively construct meaning, and do not merely reflect social reality. Hall (1982), for instance, has argued that the media make things mean through the active processes of selection, presentation, structuring and shaping of
events; in other words media representations ascribe meaning to events. Significantly, as he has suggested more recently, representation works through marking a difference with the ‘other’, whether the difference is on the basis of gender, sexuality, ‘race’ or nationality (Hall 1997). What this means is that ‘difference is constructed both through language, in the form of binary oppositions such as man/woman, black/white, legal/illegal, British/foreigner; and also through ‘symbolic boundaries’: ‘marking “difference” leads us, symbolically, to close ranks, shore up culture and to stigmatize and expel anything which is defined as impure, abnormal’ (Hall 1997: 237). This symbolic marking of ‘difference’ is intrinsic to unchallenged assumptions, which are commonplace in a particular national culture, on the basis of which the castigation of ‘illegal’ immigrants and ‘bogus’ refugees, for instance, is naturalized.

The use of such terms as ‘boat people’ or ‘asylum seekers’ therefore come loaded with particular sets of meaning that resonate with such naturalized sets of racially based difference when used in conjunction with qualifiers such as ‘bogus’. It should be noted that this process of naturalization leaves scope for challenging existing constructions of meaning. In other words, such representations of refugees are not ‘fixed’; they can and are being contested. What is significant for our purposes is what Ward (2002) refers to as ‘dog whistle journalism’: ‘the discussion of policy issues in an outwardly reasonable language, but one using words and phrases that are calculated to carry a different message to the target audience’ (Ward 2002: 28). The question of a ‘target audience’ raises issues that fall outside the immediate scope of this essay, but the use of ‘outwardly reasonable language’ brings up the matter of journalistic discourse and the politics of representation. In other words, is there a relationship between journalistic discourse on asylum seekers and refugee communities on the one hand, and on the other the justification of discriminatory immigration policies? Crucially, how do discursive strategies in journalism contribute to the legitimation of control, or otherwise ‘naturalize’ social relations?

Analysing the politics of journalistic representation involves examining language. As Shapiro (1989) has observed

given that our understanding of conflict, war, or more generally, the space within which international politics is deployed is always mediated by modes of representation and thus by all the various mechanisms involved in text construction – grammars, rhetorics, and narrativity – we must operate with a view of politics that is sensitive to textuality.

(Shapiro 1989: 319)

With reference to both domestic and international politics – and, in the case of asylum seekers the combination of the two – the fact that policies are mediated requires us to pay close attention to aspects of linguistic representation, and the ways in which uncritical use of available terms can reproduce and sustain naturalized forms of racism and through that the politics of exclusion. Conversely, criticism of such representations involves using
representational strategies and linguistic terms which challenge and undermine those familiar expressions.

That is a challenge in itself, but if we were to widen the argument to include debates on globalization and the representation of the racialized other, the situation becomes a great deal more complex web of several important issues. ‘Globalization’ is an amorphous and much-debated term but the specific dimension of it that we are interested in here relates to the argument that through mainly the breakdown of trade barriers and developments in transport and communication technologies, the world appears to have shrunk, and there has emerged a ‘global culture’ that incorporates and celebrates heterogeneous cultural forms and practices. Not only have such developments reorganized the relations between the national and the global, but it is argued that borders between nation-states have become porous, more permeable. Two points are particularly significant to our present concerns: the complexity that has resulted from the deepening interconnectedness between different nations, cultures and peoples on the one hand, and on the other the question of who benefits from porous borders and who is restricted (the ‘power geometry’ referred to earlier). Both these are relevant to the representation of asylum seekers and refugees.

One of the main challenges facing contemporary representations of asylum seekers in the news is addressing the particular in terms of the universal. In the present case this requires the presentation of the experiences of an excluded community of exiles in particular localities in terms of wider issues such as the question of human rights and the ethics of caring and support, and to do so without contributing to the process of ‘othering’. While academic debates on globalization have underlined the ‘politics of recognition’ that is fundamental to an acknowledgement of plural cultures and multiple identities, the politics of media representation of refugees and asylum seekers have had to contend with two complementary moves: the persistent othering and a hierarchization of cultures and ethnicities that deconstructs the logic of multicultural global and national cultures, and the invocation (in both political and media spheres) of national borders which alienate (and treat as ‘alien’) populations who do not possess the necessary symbols of national belonging.

As the Tampa affair alluded to at the beginning of the essay suggests, the process of ‘marking difference’ between the national (Australia) and the ‘other’ – asylum seekers criminalized as ‘illegal immigrants’ or alienated as ‘boatpeople’ implicitly, in dog-whistle style, mobilize discourses of desirable and undesirable immigration. For instance the Herald Sun on 3 September 2001 ran the headline: ‘SET TO GO: Voters endorse PM’s tough stand. Illegals are ready to be transferred’, referring to its own poll on the Tampa affair, and to the government’s decision to send a Navy ship to remove the asylum seekers from the Tampa.

Binary oppositions constantly simplify complex situations, whether in debates about terrorism, which invokes the other as evil, or about refugees, which reach back to colonial representations of non-Western populations as duplicitous and dangerous to Western values. The argument informing this
chapter is constructed on the idea that journalism has not fully embraced the other. This seems at odds with the pressing awareness of cultural globalism, which has brought with it a necessary consciousness of the differences of the local in relation to the global – that is, the need to think the local and the global as aspects of the same reality which helps reposition each of them in more nuanced ways.

The next two sections of this chapter present a review of a few of the important studies on news and the racial other, followed by a brief analysis of a recent example of news on asylum seekers from the BBC. As we shall see, the coverage of issues such as refugees and asylum seekers, when presented in the context of the need to strengthen national borders, invoke separatist discourses that clearly distinguish between the ‘us’ within the nation-state and ‘them’, the outsider, foreigner, the ‘bogus’ refugee. A caveat is required here: the analysis presented in the following sections draws selectively from the coverage of the issue by the BBC; the sample is used here to locate conceptual issues meriting further elaboration, and not as an indication of the BBC’s stance on the issue.

‘Othering’ in journalism

The case of the ‘other’ is illustrative of the fact that journalism has not yet managed to respond fully to the challenges raised by the transnational patterns of communication and mobility that characterize our contemporary, deterritorialized world. National borders continue to figure strongly when it comes to news representations of the other, in particular refugees and asylum seekers, in which the dichotomy of ‘us versus them’ persist.

What is crucial here is the continuous process of ‘selective articulation’ by which the media literally ‘make sense’ out of the world surround us. Portrayals of refugees and asylum seekers in the news continue to separate the ‘us’ separate from the ‘other’.

It can be argued that the ‘other’ is defined by the major news media Western organizations that decide what is news, and what is normal/ordinary/expected/unexpected – the application of ‘news values’. As Ginneken (1998) argues, the quasi-consensual ideology of major Western countries contributes to the selection of news:

news production and news consumption can also be seen as a twenty-four-hour ideological repair shop for our world and our world views. Possible anomalies are identified, checked and ‘normalised’, so that the ideological machine keeps running smoothly.

(Ginneken 1998: 32)

Galtung and Ruge’s (1981) ‘news values’ model is seminal in terms of raising the issue of how events become news, especially on how overseas events become news, underlining the imbalance in foreign news reporting in their case study of Norwegian press. However, their conception of news
values was developed in a different media landscape, where the division of the world into ‘centre versus periphery’, and the sovereignty of the nation-state had a much stronger role in defining the other than in the current global landscape. Moreover, the media have implemented a worldview of exclusion in which different cultures and societies are defined as ‘foreign’. As pointed out by Volkmer (1999), ‘the modern world-view gave order to world communication and its effectiveness by employing terms like “First World” or “Third World” in designating communication structures’ (Volkmer 1999: 104). In a more recent work, she has elaborated this view in the light of the events of 11 September 2001 and their implication for global journalism. She suggests that the consequences of the attack on the US had challenged the dominant world order of the West (Volkmer 2002) based on the model of ‘core-periphery’. Volkmer’s views of a possible re-organization of the world order of the West would be more in tune with Cancini’s (1992) observation that the world cannot be understood in the rather monolithic terms that the core-periphery dualism suggests.

The issue of refugee and asylum seekers in British media has not received as much attention in the literature as race and ethnicity. However, the purported challenge to national sovereignty and identity resulting from the recent increase in the movement of refugees fleeing conflicts zones, as well as the events of 11 September have brought the issue back on the public agenda and the academic forum. Most studies on the British press coverage of asylum seekers and refugees (Tomasi 1993; Brosius and Eps 1995; Coleman 1995; Clark 1998, Ali and Gibb 1999) emphasize the common sense of the press framework for news of this ‘other’ as either ‘problem’ or ‘invisible’. For example, the most significant outcome of Kaye’s (2001) analysis of representations of asylum seekers and refugees in the British press in the 1990s is that the term ‘asylum seekers’ itself has been degraded through its use as a signifier for illegality and bogusness. Another British study (Kundnani 2001) concludes that racist ideology is generated and reproduced in relation to asylum seekers through the framing of news stories predominantly in terms of suspicion and deterrence: can we trust them and how do we keep them out?

With regard to research on television news and asylum seekers, most studies demonstrate the persistence of stereotypes similar to those in the press (Hartmann and Husband 1974; Gordon and Rosenberg 1989; Van Dijk 1991, 2000). For example, the Glasgow University Media Group’s research on the language and visuals of a sample of news reports on migration and race in February 1995 showed that ‘news was sometimes xenophobic in tone, which reinforced our identity and their exclusion and, perhaps more importantly, provided a rationale for the apparent need for exclusion’ (Glasgow Media Group 1997: 46). A similar framework of portraying of asylum seekers and refugees in an ‘anti-foreigners’ agenda can be observed in studies of asylum seekers and media representation elsewhere. Examples abound but for our purpose we refer to two studies from Australia media, which, combined with the analysis of British media, suggest that a ‘transnational’ racialized regime of representation is in place.
In an examination of the discursive construction of asylum seekers in Australia Saxton (2003), suggests that media reports and public discussions of asylum seekers draw on nationalist discourses along themes of familiarity, security and a sense of community of ‘us’ and our ‘home’, which exclude asylum seekers. One of the main conclusions of the study is that ‘nationalist discourse prescribes the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion for “others”, and is employed to legitimate oppressive and marginalizing practices towards minorities’ (Saxton 2003: 122).

Similarly, Klocker and Dunn’s (2003) analysis of Australian media releases in 2001 and 2002 points out that, although there were periods in the study in which the media were sympathetic towards asylum seekers, the overall view was that the media represented asylum seekers in a rather negative form. He also implies that at times the media relied on government discourse to construct asylum as a threat to the interests of readers and viewers, linking the issue to crime, violence and ‘difference’.

**Asylum seekers and ‘the immigration headache’**

The current study on the representation of asylum seekers and refugees in the BBC and Channel Four news programmes has shown that the framing of news granted a negative meaning to this ‘other’, relating them to criminality, problems and as a threat to the ‘fortress Europe’. Moreover, the two channels analysed put strong emphasis on a frame of reference centred on the legal and political aspects of the issue, which seems to follow the government agenda rather than challenging it. That is, most news on this issue centred around government policies and regulations for border control and deterrence of asylum seekers.

This research suggests that news about refugees is often limited to few events: social problems (housing, employment, welfare); political opinions (politicians commenting on new policies or suggesting solutions); government policy (new laws restricting asylum seekers’ access); cultural difference (mostly in terms of deviance and criminality); public perception (in general based on misconceptions of welfare support for asylum seekers and refugees) and incidents of violence. This list confirms the findings of Van Dijk’s (2000) discursive analysis of British newspapers representation of asylum seekers. Overall, one could argue that the conclusions drawn by these studies suggests that there is an ‘inferential racism’ at work in the news representation of asylum seekers which can be seen as a form of ‘sanitized’ racist discourse.

Let us briefly consider a concrete example of the use of linguistic terms in a television news text to illustrate the framing of asylum news. The news report analysed is an extract from BBC1’s *Six O’clock News* on 27 October 2003. The news item is about new asylum laws, and given the audience of the programme, millions of British viewers may have watched this piece.
The news is presented with the headline ‘Asylum Law’, followed by the newscaster’s voice: ‘When asylum seekers reach Britain they will face criminal charges under new measures announced today’.

The headline is combined with images of clearly ‘non-European’ passengers arriving at Heathrow airport and being watched by cameras monitored by migration officers in a separate room. The officers are closely looking at the screens and checking the images with photos of foreign individuals as if looking for someone specific. This is followed by images of people having their passports checked as they leave the plane, and then a young black couple showing their passports at the migration desk. It could be argued that this attempt at ‘othering’ through the combination of words and images already sets in motion the frame of criminality within which the apparent asylum seekers are placed, both institutionally and discursively. In addition, it is possible to read the construction of a subliminal message of the ‘fortress’ England: there are several ‘doors’ to be crossed before one can ‘arrive’ in England, implying that the ‘soft touch’ of British asylum laws are about to end.

This possible interpretation is reinforced, in our view, by the Immigration Minister, Beverly Hughes, who states, when interviewed by the reporter, that the measures ‘Aim at reducing the number of bogus asylum application. Other possible measures include a new limit on appeals and a tighter control on those who give unscrupulous advice to asylum seekers.’

The reporter using a specific military register then establishes the metaphor of a ‘war’ on immigrants:

There is a new weaponry in the armoury of the immigration service at Heathrow intelligence unit. CCTV now allows them to track passengers all the way from the gate. Many asylum seekers hand false travel documents on arrival or dispose of them to hide their through nationality.

The item moves on to the issue of reducing numbers of appeal, making the point about the inefficacy of the government in dealing with the situation by interviewing a black man seeking asylum who, we are informed, went to 14 asylum hearings and two appeals.

The images move on to an ‘immigration court’ where the news item comes to an end with the reporter, again, presenting the asylum issue as a problem, by the use of words such as ‘headache’ and his emphasis on the number of government bills in a short period. ‘The immigration issue still a headache for politicians. If there will be another asylum bill, it will be the third in just five years.’

The analysis suggests that the news frame is constructed in a scenario where Britain is being invaded and ‘we’ need ‘weaponry’ to stop the flow of immigrants. In a similar fashion to the ‘dog-whistle’ treatment of the Tampa passengers, this framing of asylum seekers as a ‘headache’, and as requiring strict policing is, on one level, an account of the measures adopted to protect borders. The ‘othering’ at the beginning of the news story, along with the term ‘bogus’, however, combine to racially criminalize a group of individuals,
while ‘weaponry’ and ‘armoury’ invoke associations with the guarding of national space from foreign invasion.

This both confirms Saxton’s (2003) argument, and supports findings by other studies on television representations of immigrants (Philo and Beattie 1999; Van Dijk 2000), which point out to alarming similarities in the ways the media, in the last decade or so, have been ‘manufacturing’ news on immigrants. The use of similar news frames over the years, such as the use of statistics on immigration, and specific terms such as ‘bogus’ and ‘illegal’, is quite frequent in television news. Even more damaging is the lack of engagement with the experiences of refugees and other communities of exile, that is, the consistent absence of reports presenting the refugees’ case. The wider context is rarely explored: issues such as the reasons for seeking asylum, the everyday difficulties encountered by refugees in their ‘host’ countries are mostly ignored, contributing to the dehumanization of refugees (Manning 2003). As we have seen, there is little distinction in the news analysed in the literature, between ‘asylum seekers’, ‘illegal immigrants’ and ‘refugees’. The real motivation of the people attempting to seek asylum is lost, and while the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘asylum seeker’ suggest that these people are seeking protection from threat, terms such as ‘illegal’ and ‘bogus’ undermine their legitimate requests for asylum by criminalizing them (Saxton 2003). The news media then seem to create an unfair construction of asylum seekers who are not ‘bogus’ or of those who have not being warranted permission to stay, putting under the same negative ‘umbrella’ all different types of migrants, including economic and highly skilled ones.

It is important to acknowledge that the outcomes of the studies discussed here are ‘snapshots’ of reality. They not necessarily reflect an essentialist position of the media in representing asylum seekers. Putting it in a different way, the news construction of asylum seekers as ‘other’ takes place in a changeable political and social landscape where the struggle and negotiation of meaning is always under scrutiny by different social actors. Therefore the processes of ‘naturalization’ of migration news is contradictory and, in many ways, contested which may alter the production of asylum seekers meaning in the news outcome at different times and contexts.

It is a truism to suggest that the media play a critical role in providing information to people about the world surrounding us, and that they help to shape our perception of social and political issues. Given that members of the public, in all likelihood, will have little direct contact with asylum seekers the mediated nature of public discourse concerning asylum seekers as the ‘other’ assumes a special significance, which in turn implicates the linguistic and visual construction of such representations. As often argued, the result of this constant process of ‘othering’ in the news is the promotion and consolidation of ‘a racist “commonsense” which serves to justify and help maintain racial inequalities’ (Gordon and Rosenberg 1989: 38). Although this does not imply that the audience necessarily accepts such representation uncritically, there is
enough support to claim that dominant representations play a significant role in influencing people’s perceptions of minority groups and that dominant news frameworks in particular help to structure perception of the key issues in race relations.

(Pilkington 2003: 185)

In this context, it is important to recognize that some progress has been made in representational practices in the media (Ross 1996; Van Dijk 1991). The positive media representations of minorities underlines the possibility of establishing a more balanced media representation of asylum seekers, as a way forward to break the dichotomy of ‘us versus them’, hence providing the public with less stereotypical, naturalized versions of immigrants. In this respect, BBC Television is well aware of its responsibilities as a public service broadcaster that has a strong commitment to fair and balanced representation of minorities.

Conclusion

Studies such as Van Dijk (2000) and Saxton (2003) suggest that, despite the coverage of a range of events, both local and international, before and after the events of 11 September 2001, the portrayal of ‘asylum seekers’ is remarkably consistent. Rather than be presented as people who are trying to escape threat, they are, in most cases, represented as the threat. It is a representation based on fear of ‘them’ as a threat to ‘our’ national security and ways of life. The persistence of such divisive frames contributes to racialized ‘wedge’ politics and to the justification of policies that approve or deny entry into countries on the basis of narrowly defined ‘national interests’. To reiterate an earlier point, it is important to note that such representations are not unchallenged or uncontested. What we have attempted to show in this chapter is the need for sensitivity in journalistic practice when reporting on asylum seekers, and by extension, other ‘foreigners’.

As mentioned earlier, rapid developments in communication satellites and computer networks since the early 1990s have reorganized global space, ‘shrinking’ it through near instantaneous communication, one consequence of which has been the much trumpeted permeability of national borders. As we have seen, however, news reports on asylum seekers and refugees constantly resurrect national boundaries, portraying such exilic communities as a threat to the sovereignty and security of the nation. Journalistic practice has had to re-orient its approach to the new environment in which the relations between the national and the global have been reordered. This new position for journalists should ideally re-establish journalistic frames of reference from the national and the local level – which sustain discourses of foreignness that ride on binary oppositions between ‘us’ and ‘them’ – to the global, in which the ‘other’ takes on a different significance. As Volkmer rightly argues
while news framed in the modern paradigm used to consist in the distribution of national affairs within the borders of a defined nation-state, globalization has led to a more complex counter development – disappearance of national state interests within a global ‘news’ community – while at the same time increasing the perspectives of domestic news.

(Volkmer 1999: 93)

It is this ‘disappearance of the national’ that provides journalists with the opportunity to challenge existing patterns of representation by addressing the issue of asylum in terms of universal rights of individuals and communities, and by accommodating within the frames of reference the localized experiences of such communities of exile. This requires journalism as a practice to transcend the rhetoric of nationalism, and be prepared to seriously consider the reporting of such issues as addressing the global theme of rights and values, and not as threats to national interests.

I Notes

1 The category of the ‘other’ embraces a wide rubric of racial, cultural and ethnic and linguistic groups, including the legal reference to terms of asylum seekers. Here ‘other’ refers to its use in the binary opposition of the ‘us versus them’, specifically regarding misrepresentation of ‘asylum seekers’. The term asylum seeker will be used as a collective term for a person who comes to another country in order to claim legal status as a refugee. The person seeking asylum may or may not meet the requirements for refugee status. This is a crucial point in relation to news representation, as ‘asylum seekers’ become a reified category equated to ‘bogus’ asylum, which obscures the differences that exist between genuine and non-genuine asylum seekers.

2 The ‘structure of foreign news’ was a study carried out by Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge (1981). They were interested in how major crises (in the Third World periphery) were reported in Norway (First World periphery). In order to find out they developed a content analysis of how the Congo (Zaire), Cuba and Cyprus crises of the early 1960s have been reported in the Norwegian capital. List of news values: frequency, threshold, meaningfulness, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elite nations, elite people, reference to persons, and reference to something negative (Galtung and Ruge 1981: 64–91).

3 The research aimed to analyse the texts of news television report on issues related to asylum seekers regarding the construction of a frame of ‘inferential racism’. For a period of one year (2003) most news that appeared on the three main BBC and Channel Four news programmes related to asylum seekers were recorded (BBC1: 1 o’clock news (lunch time) 6 o’clock news (evening), 10 o’clock news (evening); BBC2 Newsnight, at 10.30 p.m.) and Channel 4 (7 o’clock evening news). The method employed in this study was discourse and thematic analysis, looking at the language and journalistic strategies used to construct ‘asylum seekers’.

4 The BBC1 news coverage ‘aims to stand out for the quality of its analysis and
original reporting. Its goal is to help people make sense of what is going on in the world, by covering a broad agenda and using clear narrative and plain English' (www.bbc.co/statement of programme policy 2003/4). It is important to note that the BBC and Channel Four, which have an ethos of public service, operates a policy of ‘more balanced media content, and a code of practice designed to avoid ethnic stereotyping’.

‘Inferential racism’ is in place when ‘coverage is seemingly balanced but premises are inscribed as a set of unquestioned assumptions’ (Pilkington 2003: 185).

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