This chapter looks at the way the media in the developed world portray refugees and asylum seekers. It is written from the perspective of a journalist working in Australia but with a view to providing some insight into the way the media function in a broader context. I argue that, in general terms, the level of concern and empathy expressed in the media for the plight of refugees and asylum seekers is in inverse relation to their proximity to the place where any given report appears. Viewed from a distance, displaced people are often portrayed as helpless victims of circumstance, deserving of compassion and assistance. This imagery changes dramatically when refugees and asylum seekers make their way to the developed world to seek protection under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Refugees and asylum seekers who display this level of agency suddenly shed the veneer of innocence and become a threat to the order and security of the receiving state. They are transformed from passive objects of compassion into untrustworthy actors who provoke a sense of fear. Without absolving journalists and editors of responsibility for the manifest inadequacies in media coverage of refugee issues, I argue that this results in part from what is, at best, a lack of political courage among authority figures in developed nations, and, at worst, cynical political expediency. However, I also argue that humanitarian agencies are themselves at times responsible for promoting unrealistic and unsustainable images of refugees that ill prepare developed nation audiences for coping with the com-
plexity of the unauthorized movement of people in the contemporary world. Finally, although there is no simple relationship between media reporting and political action on refugee issues, I propose some strategies for refugee advocacy groups who wish to promote more constructive media coverage.

Shaping perceptions

On 23 June 2001, the Saturday edition of Brisbane’s Courier Mail newspaper led its front page with the headline “Typhoid Found in Refugee Centres.” The story was branded “EXCLUSIVE” and revealed that Australian authorities had found “almost 1000 cases of illegal immigrants carrying infectious diseases such as typhoid, tuberculosis and hepatitis B and C” in the past 18 months. The overall message of the Courier Mail article was to warn of the danger posed by the outsider, the foreigner who arrives uninvited. This was made explicit in the wording of the poster promoting that day’s edition of the Courier Mail outside the newsagent (which was arguably read by more people than the newspaper article itself). It stated bluntly, “Detainees bring deadly diseases.” The article and the banner headline served to justify Australia’s harsh policy of mandatory detention for all non-citizens who arrive in the country without valid travel documents, including those who seek protection under the provisions of the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees.

The facts of the Courier Mail story were as follows. Since 1 January 2000, federal immigration department officials had notified various state health authorities of 973 instances of infectious diseases in Australia’s six immigration detention centres. The vast majority of the people identified with health problems would have been asylum seekers. Most would have come originally from the Middle East and would have arrived in Australia via Indonesia, undertaking the last stage of the journey by boat. In all, authorities had identified 10 cases of typhoid, a disease “eradicated decades ago in Australia,” as the paper breathlessly informed us. In fact this information, which formed the basis of the front-page headline, was neither new nor exclusive. The immigration minister had spoken about the discovery of typhoid in the detention centres more than four months earlier, and had used it then to convey exactly the same message of risk, hitting back at critics who called for asylum seekers to be released more swiftly from detention. Health authorities had also confirmed eight cases of active tuberculosis, requiring immediate treatment. However, the vast bulk of the “infectious diseases” identified amongst the detainees in fact posed very little immediate risk to the general community. There were around 700 notifications of inactive TB infection requiring follow-up by
chest clinics. This is hardly surprising, given that around one-third of the world’s population (including about one-third of all Australians over the age of 50) are latent carriers of TB. Few of these people fall sick with the disease and are most likely to do so only if their overall health is severely compromised by other factors, such as poor nutrition. Another 200 notifications were made for cases of hepatitis B or C, which are transmissible only by the exchange of blood or other bodily fluids and not by general human contact. There were also a handful of notifications of sexually transmitted diseases and four cases of HIV. At no point did the Courier Mail attempt to clarify the actual risk of infection to the general community from these notified diseases.

In a different context, a story about the discovery of infectious diseases in a “refugee centre” would invoke the sympathy of the audience, and might involve an implied or explicit call for humanitarian assistance by international agencies and Western governments. However, although an affliction can be cause for compassion in one instance (as in reporting of the Kosovo crisis in 1999 or the fate of displaced Afghans in late 2001, of which more below), in another it can be used to invoke feelings of fear. In this case, the editorial intention of the article was not to express concern for the well-being of the detainees but to warn of the grave threat that these uninvited visitors posed to Australian society. The message of threat was reinforced by quotes in the article from both sides of politics. “Any Australian Government would fail if it let people possibly carrying infectious diseases out into the general community before all health checks,” said the Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock from the conservative Liberal Party. His opposite number in the Labour Party, Con Sciaca, declared that “it was absolutely necessary” to carry out health checks to “protect the wider community.” The editorial intent of the article was further reinforced by a commentary piece published in the same edition and written by the same author. Of course, it is both logical and sensible to check the health status of people who arrive in Australia in an unauthorized and unregulated manner but, once these checks are done and appropriate action taken, any risk to the wider community is removed and the justification for continued detention disappears.

Setting the terms of the debate – the role of political leadership

The perhaps unintended but nevertheless pernicious implication in the Courier Mail story – that (all) “refugees” carry “infectious diseases” – is further reinforced by the writer’s confused terminology. The discrepancy between the words used in the headline (“refugee centres”) and those
used in the body of the text ("illegal immigrants") is telling. Such confusion, or conflation, of terminology is not uncommon. Even on the non-commercial Australian Broadcasting Corporation, which is meant to uphold the highest standards of journalism in Australia, news stories sometimes use the term "illegal immigrant" in the first sentence (e.g. "A boat load of 123 suspected illegal immigrants has been discovered off the coast of Western Australian today"), to be followed by the term "asylum seekers" in the next (e.g. "It is expected that the asylum seekers will be taken to Pt Hedland detention centres"). The failure to distinguish between asylum seekers, refugees, and unauthorized migrants means that all are implied to be untrustworthy and illegitimate and ultimately results in patently nonsensical constructions such as "illegal asylum seekers" and even "illegal refugees," terms that have appeared with surprising frequency in recent media reports.

Political leaders must shoulder considerable responsibility for this confusion. It is inevitable that journalists will report or broadcast the words of government ministers and parliamentarians; indeed they would be derelict in their duty if they did not do so. When a politician refers to asylum seekers as "illegals" or as "queue jumpers" who are "stealing places" from the "most vulnerable" refugees, then this language is dispersed through the media and swiftly becomes common currency. The notion of the queue jumper is powerful because it offends our sense of fair play. This simple image of someone shoving their way to the front of an otherwise orderly line reassures the audience that a tough approach to asylum seekers is justified. Those who push their way into the developed world are seen as undeserving because they lack the virtue of patience. Their perceived failure to obey the rules of common courtesy reinforces the sense of "otherness," increasing the perception that such people do not belong in this society. As Corlett argues, a "more appropriate metaphor to that of a 'refugee queue' might be that of a 'refugee heap' out of which very few are plucked for resettlement" in third countries. The 1951 Convention makes no distinction between refugees who have money and those who do not, and it should be obvious that rich and poor can be persecuted alike. Nevertheless, journalists who wish to counteract the simplistic "queue jumper" image can find themselves bogged down in complex and detailed argument about the nature of global refugee flows and the definition of a refugee.

As Corlett argues in the Australian context, when increasing numbers of asylum seekers began arriving on Australia's coast without authorization from mid-1999 onwards, politicians "inflamed hostile community sentiments for their own political purposes." Although official reaction was in part a reflection of community attitudes and concerns, the government failed to offer "constructive responses" to ill-founded fears.
“What was missing was a national leadership that took seriously the nation’s concerns but which also posited productive responses.” Kaye reaches a similar conclusion in analysing media references to asylum seekers and refugees in the United Kingdom. Although newspaper reports frequently used pejorative terms such as “phoney” and “bogus,” he found that the writer rarely initiated the use of the expression:

In the majority of cases the usage was a report or a quotation of the use by someone else – most commonly a UK politician or government official. This would suggest … that newspapers are largely accepting the agenda as defined by politicians and government officials, and framing the news accordingly.\(^7\)

As Pickering notes, reporting on the unauthorized arrival of asylum seekers across national boundaries “often elides the vocabulary of war with that of crime”:

Metaphors of war justify the need to repel whatever is hostile and threatening. “Immigration controls” become matters of “national security”; a “national emergency” requires “full deployment” of the armed forces on a “prime defence mission” to “detect incursions.”\(^8\)

In times of war or crisis, the need for firm and decisive action can override concern for individual rights. However, by any objective measure Australia is not confronted by such a situation. Although onshore applications for asylum in Australia jumped by 50 per cent in the financial year 1999/2000, the total of 12,713 applications was still relatively small. Roughly one-third of those applicants arrived in the country without a valid visa (either by boat or by air) and the Migration Act required that these “unlawful non-citizens” (in the official terminology of immigration authorities) be held in detention until a positive decision was made to grant them protection, or until they were removed from Australia. Two-thirds of all asylum seekers arrived in Australia lawfully (i.e. with a valid visitor visa) and applied for asylum after clearing immigration controls. These people live in the community and are able to apply for work permits. Although these “lawful non-citizens” outnumbered detained (i.e. “unlawful”) asylum seekers by a ratio of two to one, and although they were (statistically) much less likely to be recognized as refugees under the Convention, their presence was not a matter of public concern and rarely received media coverage. In other words, as Pickering notes, the scale of the refugee “problem” confronting Australia in no way justifies the alarmist language employed by politicians and the media:
The need for “blunt warnings” to deter “queue jumpers” has very little to do with sending messages to international communities and everything to do with sending messages to domestic communities and justifying expansionist penal policies.9

Evidence of the way in which the asylum seeker/refugee issue is exploited for short-term political gain is not hard to come by. In July 2001, several months out from a federal election, candidates from the conservative Liberal Party in Australia had produced leaflets warning that the opposition Labor Party was “soft on illegal immigrants.” The “illegal immigrants” referred to in the pamphlets were in fact refugees.10 They had initially arrived in Australia without authorization and were detained. However, after being assessed through Australia’s rigorous refugee determination system, they were found to face a risk of persecution if returned to their homeland; they were released from detention and permitted to reside in Australia on three-year “temporary protection visas.”11

The demonization of refugees and asylum seekers for political gain reached its apotheosis during the campaign for the Australian federal election that was held on 10 November 2001. Rather than focusing on traditional domestic issues such as taxation levels or spending on health and education, the election campaign was fought on issues of national security and border protection. The international backdrop to the campaign was the US-led military offensive in Afghanistan (for which Australia volunteered troops) following the 11 September 2001 terror attacks in New York and Washington. Within 48 hours of the September 11 attacks, Australia’s defence minister, Peter Reith, made an explicit link between terrorism and asylum seekers, warning that the unauthorized arrival of boats on Australian territory “can be a pipeline for terrorists to come in and use your country as a staging post for terrorist activities.”12

The irony that Afghan asylum seekers were fleeing the very same “terror” regime that Australia was helping to fight did not appear to concern him. Neither did it worry Australia’s “shock-jocks,” the prime-time millionaire talkback hosts who dominate the airwaves on commercial radio. On September 12, Alan Jones, the top-rating breakfast host on radio 2UE in Sydney, declared that the terror attacks had been carried out by “sleepers” – terrorists who had been living quietly in the United States for years. Turning to the Australian context, he then posed the following rhetorical question: “How many of these Afghan boat people are ‘sleepers’?”13 Prime Minister John Howard revived the theme just a few days before polling day, telling Brisbane’s Courier Mail newspaper that “[y]ou don’t know who is coming [on the boats] and you don’t know
whether they do have terrorist links or not.” However, his conservative Liberal/National coalition was not alone in making the link. Addressing parliament just before the election was called, the immigration spokesman for the opposition Labor Party stirred similar fears, albeit in a less direct manner:

We know, of course, about what happened in the United States only last week. People become far more aware of the matters involved in illegal immigration and the integrity of border issues when they see the sorts of unspeakable horrors which occurred in the United States.

The campaign for Australia’s 2001 federal election also followed in the wake of the so-called Tampa affair, when the Australian government used the navy to prevent a Norwegian container ship, the M.V. *Tampa*, from landing 434 asylum seekers at the Australian Indian Ocean territory of Christmas Island. On 26 August 2001, the M.V. *Tampa* rescued the asylum seekers from their sinking wooden ferry after being alerted to their plight by the Australian search and rescue organization. However, the Australian government insisted that the captain return the asylum seekers to a port in Indonesia, rather than the closer port of Christmas Island. The captain of the M.V. *Tampa* maintained that it was not safe for him to transport so many passengers back to Indonesia, and the Australian government countered with an order that his vessel must not enter the 12-mile exclusion zone around Christmas Island. After a stand-off lasting several days, the captain of the *Tampa* defied the ban and steamed towards Christmas Island, arguing that his rescued passengers required medical treatment. Australian authorities responded by sending elite SAS troops to board his vessel.

The Tampa affair marked a fundamental turning point in Australia’s refugee policy. Prime Minister John Howard declared that asylum seekers rescued by the M.V. *Tampa* would not set foot on the Australian mainland, and instead naval vessels were used to transport them to Nauru and New Zealand. Australia then adopted the same approach to all subsequent vessels attempting to carry asylum seekers to its territory from Indonesia. The vessels were boarded by Australian naval personnel and told that they must return to Indonesia. In some cases warning shots were fired over the bows. If boats persisted in entering Australia’s exclusion zone, then they were boarded at sea and the asylum seekers were transferred to detention centres in Nauru or, subsequently, Papua New Guinea.

Amidst the fears and uncertainties unleashed by the September 11 terror attacks, the tough line on the “boat people” proved enormously popular with voters. As the *Australian* newspaper commented, it repre-
presented “one of the Government’s chief claims to national leadership” and was the “main preoccupation” of the election campaign. The government used the rhetoric of “border security” at every available opportunity, often demonizing vulnerable people in the process. For example, on 7 October 2001, in the first full week of the election campaign, Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock announced that a group of asylum seekers trying to reach Australia had thrown children overboard “in a clearly planned and premeditated” attempt to force their way into Australia. The story made immediate headlines and two days later, on October 9, Prime Minister John Howard declared on radio, “I certainly don’t want people of that type in Australia, I really don’t.” On October 10, Defence Minister Peter Reith released photographs of children in the sea wearing life jackets, which he presented as documentary proof of what had happened. He told ABC radio 774 in Melbourne that “[w]e have a number of people, obviously RAN [Royal Australian Navy] people, who were there who reported the children were thrown into the water.” Yet serious doubts had emerged about the veracity of the original reports, and, in fact, the “evidence” on which the immigration minister, the defence minister and the prime minister had based their public statements was third-hand gossip, which they made no attempt to check. After the election, it was revealed that the photographic “evidence” of children in the water was from a separate incident, the following day, when the children were rescued after their boat sank. Military officers and senior public servants were aware that the reports of children being thrown overboard were untrue and that the photographs did not depict such an event. They had tried to correct the public “mistake” of their political masters before the election. However, the three relevant ministers – the prime minister and the ministers for defence and immigration – claim this advice never reached them. (At one point the defence minister even blamed a bad phone line for his failure to understand this information when it was delivered to him directly by the acting commander of the Australian Defence Force.) By the time the story was corrected, the election was over and the government had been returned to office. No apology was made to the asylum seekers for the way in which they had been so publicly wronged.

Binary logic: Citizens versus non-citizens

Said has noted that “the insidious form of binary oppositions” has “infected” the public domain. Pickering identifies the binary logic that dominates media reporting on asylum seekers and refugees. She gives the examples of bogus/genuine or legal/illegal to describe the ways in which
asylum seekers are constructed as “a deviant population in relation to the integrity of the nation state, race and disease.”

I would add citizen/non-citizen (the bureaucratic pairing used in the official terminology of Australia’s immigration officials) to Pickering’s binary oppositions in order to underline the way in which the moral panic directed at the boat people and refugees on talkback lines and in letters to the editor is driven by notions of entitlement. Citizens are entitled to have their rights protected and to enjoy the full protection of the law. The rights of non-citizens are restricted; they can be detained indefinitely without trial and are accused of abusing the system if they seek to use the courts to advance their claim to refugee status. Citizens pay taxes and are therefore entitled to government services. Non-citizens have no such entitlements and are seen as competitors for scarce public goods such as health and education. As Thomas writes,

[Displaced people] are not an acknowledged part of any society, and therefore, cannot claim even the basic right to life itself because they are not citizens of a legitimate “nation.” Furthermore, their position is weakened by the sometimes “real” sometimes “imagined” impact that their presence has on the livelihood of “legitimate” nationals inhabiting those areas close to a refugee camp.

Notions of entitlement came to the fore when the federal government began releasing from detention those Afghan and Iraqi “boat people” who arrived in Australia in the latter half of 1999, and who had subsequently been recognized as refugees under the Convention. The Today Tonight programme on the commercial Channel 7 TV station broadcast a story on the arrival of the first such group to be sent to the southern city of Adelaide. The men had been held for several months in remote detention centres in the far north-west of Australia. They arrived in Adelaide after a bus trip spanning three days and nights and were taken to a suburban office of the state welfare agency Centrelink for initial processing. The Centrelink office had opened early, at 7 a.m., to allow the refugees’ business to be conducted privately and without disruption to other clients. But to Channel 7 this was evidence of a “covert conspiracy.”

In tones of righteous indignation, and with backing music evoking shadowy intrigue, Today Tonight described how a bus had been “laid on” to “secretly” bring 30 “illegals” halfway across the country “to be granted visas, benefits and Medicare entitlements, all behind the locked doors of an Adelaide Centrelink office.” The report even claimed, completely erroneously, that the refugees were being given A$2,500 to “fight any attempt to remove them” from Australia. Today Tonight also called on an “outspoken” senator (well known for his opposition to immigration) for an opinion. He declared that the refugees were “criminals . . .
with no right to stay here,” and mischievously (if bizarrely) implied that they were receiving preferential treatment because they were Muslims. It was left to Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock to add some balance to the story, by pointing out that people are released from detention only if “they clearly meet the Refugee Convention definition.” This did not cut much ice with *Today Tonight*, which referred to Australia’s obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention as “the UN loophole.”

As people without entitlement, refugee non-citizens are acceptable only in a certain guise – as the passive and grateful recipients of the generosity that we, as citizens, might choose to bestow. The media are comfortable with images of refugees and asylum seekers as helpless and bedraggled. In the schema of binary opposition, politicians contrast the “queue jumper” with the stereotyped image of refugees “waiting patiently” in squalid refugee camps. These deserving refugees are portrayed as passive. We (the entitled citizens) can choose to bestow our generosity on them (the unentitled non-citizens), or we can choose to withhold it. In other words, they are subject to our control. By contrast, “boat people” arriving on Australia’s shores display a disagreeable degree of self-will. They are willing to take action to address their situation, arrive uninvited, and are consequently perceived and represented as a threat.

The experience of the “safe haven” refugees is illustrative here. The Australian government created the safe haven visa in 1999 to offer temporary sanctuary to people fleeing the war in Kosovo. Special legislation was rushed through parliament with regulations that initially allowed for only one kind of visa – subclass 448 (Kosovar safe haven (temporary)) visa. The legislation offered the Kosovars entry into Australia, but prevented them from applying to reside in the country on any other grounds, including as refugees under the Convention. The safe haven visas can be extended, shortened, or cancelled by the minister for immigration, but there is no right to appeal such a decision before any court or tribunal. In short, the safe haven legislation was designed to circumscribe the extent of Australia’s generosity towards the Kosovars by extinguishing their legal rights.

Prime Minister John Howard and his wife were on hand personally to welcome the first Kosovars to arrive in Australia. But when one Kosovar family later led a protest about conditions at the Singleton camp, 230 kilometres north-west of Sydney, they were portrayed as ingrates. With an invalid grandmother to care for, the family objected to the lack of privacy in shared facilities and to the fact that bathroom and toilet facilities were hundreds of metres away from the wooden huts where they were to sleep. Government officials described the complaints as “totally unreasonable” and suggested that they could send the family back to
Kosovo if they were dissatisfied with Australia. As David Brearly com-
mented in *The Australian*, the charity on offer to the refugees was condi-
tional: “A beggar’s gratitude is the prescribed response; anything less
renders the whole deal suspect.” 

Nevertheless, the safe haven experience proved that an openhearted
response to refugees is possible. Many Australians got to know the
Kosovars and remarkable links were established with the refugees, par-
ticularly in country towns, defying the image of rural Australia as a place
antagonistic to new immigrants. Tasmanian author Richard Flanagan
described the response of his home state to the Brighton refugees
(so named because of the place they were housed) in moving terms:

> It might be expected that Tasmanians would ignore, or even show hostility to the
government-sponsored refugees, since the island is routinely portrayed as red-
necked and reactionary. Yet when one beleaguered community looked into the
eyes of another worse off, it perhaps saw something familiar…. The Brighton
Kosovars were flooded with offers of help and gestures of friendship. Business
provided free clothes, free food, free meals, free tours. Cinemas offered free
weekly tickets…. The Hobart newspaper, the *Mercury*, ran articles in Albanian.
A commercial television news broadcast began with an introduction in Albanian.
Far from being outcast, the Kosovars were taken in.

When it came time for the Kosovars to leave Australia, many were
understandably reluctant to return to their devastated homeland. They
found vocal supporters amongst the Australian population, including
state premiers in South Australia and Tasmania, who argued that the
refugees should be allowed to settle permanently.

**Good and bad refugees**

So why were the media, and the general public, so much more sympa-
thetic to the Kosovar “safe haven” refugees than to the “boat people”
refugees who were arriving in Australia at around the same time? Why
were the Kosovars portrayed as “good” refugees and Afghans and Iraqis
as “bad”? As indicated above, I argue this had in part to do with the
level of agency displayed by the refugees themselves and the degree of
control exerted by Australian authorities. The more passive and under
control the refugees appeared, the more sympathetic the response.
Clearly it was also influenced by official attitudes toward the refugees;
government leaders welcomed the Kosovars but remained hostile to
onshore asylum seekers. At another level, detailed and very immediate
reporting of the Kosovo conflict had given Australians some understanding of why people had been forced to seek refuge outside their home country. The media presented the war as a contained narrative with a clear aggressor (Serbia/Milosevic) and obvious victims (the Kosovars). By comparison, the tragedy of Afghanistan, when it was reported at all, was portrayed as a long-running saga with no obvious beginning or end point. The country was generally presented as an intractable site of conflict, in which individual actors could not easily be identified or ascribed with motives. Even after 11 September 2001, when the barbarity of the Taliban regime received more detailed coverage – in particular the oppression of women – sympathy for Afghans themselves was constrained by the identification of their country as enemy territory and the home of terrorists. Similarly, although coverage of Iraq tended to portray Saddam Hussein as the arch-villain (the equivalent of Milosevic), one enduring legacy of the Gulf War is that sympathy for people suffering under his regime is tempered by the identification of the country as a whole as an aggressor and an enemy.

Australia was not the only developed nation where Kosovo refugees were “popular” whereas refugees from elsewhere remained “unpopular.” Gibney identifies a number of reasons for this. The first is regionality. The proximity of the Kosovo crisis required countries in Western Europe to develop a more organized and coherent response to the refugee outflow. Established measures simply to block the movement of refugees (such as visa restrictions and carrier sanctions) were unlikely to succeed. As a consequence, rather than risk the spontaneous, large-scale movement of refugees spilling across the continent, it was in the political and economic interest of states in Western Europe to develop an alternative and more ordered response to the outflow. This required the support of domestic populations. In other words, host governments had an interest in convincing their citizens that the Kosovars should be welcomed. Secondly, Gibney notes that “the situation in Kosovo also threatened to detract from the prestige of those organisations charged with protecting European security.” The NATO alliance had used the language of “humanitarian values” to intervene in Kosovo in the first place. In this sense, developed states were “implicated” in Kosovo, just as, for example, the United States, Australia, Canada, and France had been implicated in the Vietnam War, and consequently displayed a degree of responsibility and compassion to refugees who fled after the communist victory in 1975. Finally, Gibney identifies the issue of “relatedness” (which others have more bluntly described as “race”). He argues that the response to the Kosovars was sympathetic because they were European – “people sharing a common civilization and culture.”
Whereas African refugees remain “alien” and “enigmatic” to European audiences, here were “forced migrants who looked and dressed like them . . . and who, through the use of articulate and well-educated translators, could express their suffering in terms that resonated with Western audiences.”

Media and policy

The Kosovo case provides some insight into the relationship between media reporting and policy formation. Some writers tend to posit a simple relationship between media coverage and government action. For example, Arnot argues in relation to Somalia that television reporting drove both the US intervention in Somalia in 1992 and the ignominious withdrawal of US forces some months later. The marines arrived “after a veritable media blitz” of images of starving children denied food by armed warlords, but were soon forced to retreat again because, in “the most horrendous example of ‘pack’ journalism,” the media drew the simple conclusion that US forces “don’t belong in Somalia.” A more dispassionate weighing of the evidence suggests that the case is not nearly so clear-cut. Mermin shows that the interest of US television networks in Somalia in fact coincided with the concern about the situation in the country voiced by influential actors in Washington:

In other words if the television inspired American intervention in Somalia, it did so under the influence of governmental actors – a number of Senators, a House committee, a presidential candidate, and figures within the Bush administration – who made considerable efforts to publicize events in Somalia, interpret them as constituting a crisis, and encourage a U.S. response.

Mermin shows that coverage of Somalia on US television networks “was in proportion to the interest Somalia had sparked in Washington.” Neuman points out that, if “TV pictures alone compelled Bush to intervene in Somalia, then they should also have had a similar impact in the Sudan, where the starvation was equally devastating, the pictures equally horrific, and, at first equally in evidence on CNN.” Equally, she argues that the US withdrawal from Somalia (under a different president) was not the inevitable result of television reporting:

If Clinton had wanted to use political capital to explain to the American public why the United States was in Somalia, if he had used the bully pulpit of high office to make a case that the United States had an obligation to stay, he could have countered the weight of those pictures from Mogadishu. By choosing not to
expend his political capital for a cause not of his own choosing, the legacy of an earlier administration, Clinton allowed the pictures to dominate. It is not inevitable, or even desirable, that leaders cede this power to television.\textsuperscript{32}

Mermin and Neuman do not deny that the media exert an influence on policy formation, nor do they present journalists as simple tools in the hands of politicians. Rather, they argue that the relationship between media reporting and government decision-making is more complex and textured than simple models of action/reaction would suggest.

In an attempt to reach a more accurate understanding of the interplay between media and government, Robinson seeks to identify the conditions under which reporting can have a decisive impact on policy.\textsuperscript{33} Under his model, media influence is greatest in situations in which there is “policy uncertainty” and in which there is “critically framed media coverage that empathizes with suffering people”:

In this situation, policy-makers, uncertain of what to do and without a clearly defined policy line with which to counter critical media coverage, can be forced to intervene during a humanitarian crisis due to media-driven public pressure or the fear of potential negative public reaction to government inaction.\textsuperscript{34}

This model certainly accords with events surrounding the Australian government’s decision to offer temporary “safe haven” to refugees from Kosovo in 1999. Australia had never previously confronted the difficult questions posed by the Kosovo crisis – whether or not it should participate in an international effort to provide short-term sanctuary to those fleeing an immediate crisis – and initially the federal government was reluctant to act. On Easter Sunday, 4 April 1999, the minister for immigration, Philip Ruddock, flatly declared that “flying planeloads of refugees into Australia would not be an appropriate response” to the Kosovo crisis.\textsuperscript{35} The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had not asked Canberra for assistance and the minister was holding fast to established policy: that Australia offers places for the permanent resettlement of refugees rather than for “temporary outcomes.”\textsuperscript{36} The media chastised the government for being mean and hard-hearted. Talkback lines ran hot with criticism. Over the Easter break, senior government ministers were even pressed to act by members of their own families; after watching distressing television footage from the Balkans, children asked their politician parents why Australia was doing so little to help.\textsuperscript{37}

When cabinet convened on the Tuesday after Easter, it was clear that something had to be done. Mr Ruddock took a rough briefing paper to
the meeting, canvassing a range of options. One option was to offer permanent resettlement to a large number of Kosovars by “borrowing” places from the future annual refugee resettlement intake.\textsuperscript{38} This posed two problems. First, refugees from other regions would be unfairly squeezed out. Secondly, permanent resettlement could play into the hands of the Serb leader, Slobodan Milosevic, by inadvertently supporting his ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. On the other hand, providing short-term refuge for the Kosovars presented its own difficulties. There was no legislative basis for the measure and no established procedures for dealing with such an intake. It would put a huge strain on the bureaucracy and it would be very costly. The cabinet debate was protracted and passionate, but, in the end, temporary refuge appeared to be the only option and Australia offered to provide “safe haven” for 4,000 Kosovar refugees.

In this case the conditions of Robinson’s model appear to be satisfied. In the absence of clear policy on an issue, cabinet deliberations were influenced by a barrage of media criticism that portrayed the government as hard-hearted in the face of human suffering. In this sense, the policy outcome was a “victory” for the media and for those ethnic community organizations and refugee advocacy groups that had lobbied hard for government action. In terms of public policy, however, it was not necessarily the best possible outcome. Australia spent at least A$100 million on the Kosovar safe haven programme in 1999, or a minimum of A$25,000 per refugee. In the same year, Iran received less than US$20 worth of UNHCR assistance for each one of the almost 2 million Afghan and Iraqi refugees living within its borders.\textsuperscript{39} It can be persuasively argued that Australia’s “safe haven” money might have been better spent supporting refugee camps in Macedonia and other front-line states in the Balkans, or indeed in other trouble spots around the world.

The limits of media influence on the Kosovar issue became apparent when it was time for the safe haven refugees to return home. This time, the first of the two conditions in Robinson’s policy–media interaction model was absent: there was no uncertainty in government policy. From the outset the Australian government had stated firmly that the “safe haven” programme would be temporary and that refugees would be returned once the conflict was over. Again, the media were generally very critical of the government, arguing that the refugees should be given more time and that no one should be pressured to return before they felt ready to do so. But, apart from offering concessions to a small number of people suffering serious illnesses or displaying severe psychological problems arising from their experiences of trauma, the government was unwavering in its determination to remove the Kosovars. Those who resisted were placed in immigration detention alongside asylum seekers who had arrived in the country without authorization.\textsuperscript{40}
Conclusion: The limits of influence and the responsibility of advocates

From the above discussion it becomes apparent that media reporting can shape public perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers. Compassionate and sympathetic coverage can help to promote public understanding and encourage generous assistance to refugees and others in need. Negative reporting can generate and intensify feelings of fear. Without absolving journalists and editors of responsibility for the tone and style of their reporting, it must be recognized that political actors play an important role in setting the terms of the debate. The media can influence public policy on refugee issues, encouraging a humanitarian response to people in need, but are more likely to do so when government policy is uncertain.

What lessons can be drawn from this for refugee advocates wishing to use the media to influence government action? First, it should be recognized that the media are not monolithic: at the same time and in the same “market” different outlets will take different approaches to a story. For example, on the same weekend that the *Courier Mail* ran the front-page typhoid story discussed above, *The Sunday Age* newspaper in Melbourne carried a full-page spread sympathetically detailing the stories and personal experiences of Afghan and Iraqi refugees who had made it to Australia.41

Secondly, it must be recognized that the media are as much a source of entertainment as they are a source of news and information. Although the philosophical starting point of many journalists is that they work to serve the public interest, there is a commercial motive at the base of most (although not all) media enterprises that does influence editorial policy. It can, and often does, encourage a tabloid approach to issues – dumbing down, over-simplification, stereotyping, and sensationalism. For example, it is not unusual for a newspaper to run an inaccurate but attention-grabbing picture even though it has no real connection with the story. Photographer Howard Davies recalls that a UK broadsheet used one of his pictures of a Vietnamese refugee in a Hong Kong camp to accompany an article about the poor living conditions of Filipino maids. He recounts how another editor, viewing his pictures from Somalia, asked “for a few prints for the ‘famine file’.”42

One response to these problems is to train refugee workers in media skills, to increase their chances of delivering appropriate messages, rather than feeding into pre-existing and often narrow media perceptions of the story.43 If refugee advocates understand the way in which the media work – the pressure of tight deadlines, the hunger for a new angle, the need for ready quotes and picture opportunities – then they can exert greater influence over what finally gets published and broadcast. A com-
A complementary approach is to seek meetings with senior editors in an attempt to influence the overall shape and direction of editorial policy. Elizabeth Ferris, Executive Secretary for International Relations at the World Council of Churches, claims some success in this regard:

> Some of the best cases I've seen have been when representatives of churches and other non-government organisations have met with editorial boards or with groups of correspondents or have organised sessions where they can really talk in some depth about issues which the media are covering.\textsuperscript{44}

Ferris argues that such a dialogue can help to reduce the sometimes adversarial relationship that exists between advocates and the media. She notes that, within the non-government sector, opinion is divided on how best to handle the media. Some refugee workers argue that there is a need to work more closely with journalists “to show them the situations, to get the kind of coverage that will engender an outpouring of humanitarian response.” Others are more cautious and emphasize the need to educate the media “on the causes and complexities of the situation to encourage more responsible kinds of reporting.”\textsuperscript{45}

At the heart of the issue is the double-edged response that media reporting on refugee issues can invite: compassion and pressure for the protection “of” refugees on the one hand, and fear and the desire for protection “from” refugees on the other.

When relief agencies take journalists to sites of conflict, they often do so with the aim of raising cash to fund their operations. But this noble intention can go astray. If the outcome is a report that shows a situation of despair and desperation, it can engender “compassion fatigue.” Alternatively, it might result in short-term gain – donations – but long-term damage. Greer has described how, in Ethiopia in 1984, “photographers searching for the most harrowing pictures stuck their cameras in the faces of children who were actually breathing their last, and won prizes for doing it”:

> In the images that were flashed around the world the children had no names or, worse, made up names. They were no longer people but emblems designed and redesigned to stimulate the charitable impulse.\textsuperscript{46}

Greer refers to this type of reporting as “the pornography of charity.” Vaux makes a related point when he argues that aid agencies (including, presumably, refugee agencies) sometimes lack introspection:

> In order to express concern for other people, we have to believe that they are good. In effect aid agencies have preserved the concept of the “deserving poor.” The idea is that poor people deserve help because they are innocent victims.\textsuperscript{47}
As noted above, the media have an inherent tendency to cast events in binary terms – to look for “goodies” and “baddies,” “victims” and “perpetrators,” the “innocent” and the “guilty.” This does little to encourage the development of a sophisticated understanding of complex situations or to promote the development of nuanced policy responses. But, as Ferris notes, this approach is often encouraged by relief agencies themselves:

It’s very effective . . . in fund-raising to show images of children, who are suffering, who are hungry, with the unspoken and often spoken message that by contributing money you can ease the situation of this child. And yet what partners in many regions want to be portrayed is not just the suffering, although that is there as well, but also the fact that people can take charge of their future, that they do have resources that they can bring, that they are strong.

If relief agencies persist in encouraging representations of refugees as passive innocents, as “smiling and very grateful and quiet,” then audiences in the developed world will continue to be disconcerted when they discover that real world refugees do not fit that stereotype. To portray refugees as passive innocents sheltering in squalid camps is to fulfil one half of Said’s “insidious” binary opposition. On the flip side of that coin is the stereotype of the queue jumper. As Ferris argues, perhaps it is time to portray refugees as survivors rather than victims:

Even in some of these most desperate situations you find incredible stories of hope. You find stories of . . . people hiding members of a persecuted ethnic group, or people risking unpopular decisions of standing up for others . . . [Refugees] are strong people, these are determined, resilient people who can escape from unbearable situations and often times carry their children through weeks of walking through the bush to reach safety . . . [T]o look at the way in which we present the people that we are trying to help, is an important part of a response with integrity to desperate situations.

Notes


6. Ibid., p. 31.


9. Ibid., p. 32.


11. Prior to October 1999, people assessed as refugees in Australia were granted permanent residency. After that date, however, the federal government introduced a system of three-year “temporary protection visas” for refugees who had originally arrived in Australia without a valid visa. These temporary protection visas (TPVs) are not to be confused with the temporary “safe haven” visas discussed below, which were granted to displaced people from Kosovo and East Timor in 1999.


22. The “safe haven” visa was later extended to allow Australia to offer sanctuary to people from other regions. A detailed discussion of the safe haven experience in Australia can be found in Mares, *Borderline*.


27. Ibid., p. 29.


31. Ibid., p. 389.
34. Ibid., p. 614, emphasis in original.
38. In addition to the “onshore” processing of refugee applications by those who arrive uninvited on its shores, Australia offers permanent resettlement to a number of refugees and other displaced people identified by the UNHCR or sponsored by relatives already in need. The size of this “offshore” or “humanitarian programme” is determined each year by government. However, in recent years the government has reduced the number of “offshore” visas by the number of “onshore” visas issued in a given year.
39. As of 31 December 2000, there were 1,482,000 Afghan and 387,000 Iraqi refugees and/or asylum seekers sheltering in Iran. *World Refugee Survey 2001*, Washington DC: US Committee for Refugees, p. 3.
40. For a more detailed treatment of the safe haven experience, see Mares, *Borderline*, p. 162 ff.
44. Elizabeth Ferris, interview with the author, Melbourne, 5 July 2001.
45. Ibid.
46. Germaine Greer, “We Are Big Brother,” *The Australian (Media Section)*, 12 July 2001, p. 8 (reprinted from the *Observer*).
48. Elizabeth Ferris, interview with the author.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.