

Debating credibility: Refugees and rape in the media

Introduction

Whether or not we can believe the claims made by individuals who arrive seeking protection is a matter of ongoing debate within political and media discourse in countries like Australia. In fact, a recent study of mainstream Australian media articles indicated that whether refugees are “genuine” has become the key question in public discourse (Stirling, 2015). Research has further uncovered how discourse in the global north presents refugees and asylum seekers negatively, describing them as threats or dangers (KhosraviNik, 2009), natural disasters (e.g., “flooding”, “streaming”, “influx”), invaders and pests (Baker & McEnery, 2005, pp. 210-211).

By presenting refugees in these ways, stringent and exclusionary policies are justified (see argument in Every & Augoustinos, 2008, pp. 648-649). Further, arguably, portrayals of refugees as “deviant” in these discourses encourages immigration decision-makers to question their credibility as refugees (Pickering, 2001, p. 179). Thus, these discourses have the potential to impact not only on refugee policy, but also on the outcomes of individual decision-making in refugee status determination (RSD) processes.

This paper seeks to explore the issue of credibility as it arises in a collection of Australian media articles relating to the experiences and treatment of a Somali refugee called “Abyan”, living on Nauru as the result of Australian asylum policy. It considers the way each of the key actors is presented in the media corpus: how their identities and actions are portrayed and how their credibility is constructed or challenged as a result. The paper concludes that refugee credibility is a key theme in political debates on refugee policy; while the power asymmetries that restrict refugees’ ability to challenge this discourse and defend their credibility largely remain hidden.

The paper is organized as follows: the case of Abyan is introduced and existing research on refugee credibility in media discourse is reviewed. The research questions and analytical approach are then set out. These involve an exploration of the media's portrayal of Abyan and the other key actors involved in her experiences in Nauru and Australia, reflecting on how the credibility of refugees is constructed in public discourse. After introducing the key themes arising from the corpus, the paper examines how the key actors are represented, with special attention to how they are each assigned particular roles in the debate. The paper concludes with a discussion of how these constructions help produce, reinforce or challenge Abyan's credibility and with a consideration of the resulting implications for the public discourse on refugees more generally.

“Abyan” and media discourse on refugees and credibility

The case of “Abyan”

In October 2015, the case of a refugee, who was living on Nauru as a result of Australia's offshore processing policy, caught the Australian media's attention. The individual in question, who was given the pseudonym “Abyan”, had travelled to Australia by boat to claim asylum. Under Australia's “Operation Sovereign Borders” asylum seekers who attempt to reach Australia by boat without authorization are liable to be transferred to third countries to have their asylum claims processed. Generally, these individuals have no prospect of ever being resettled in Australia (for a summary of the policy see Opeskin & Ghezelbash, 2016). Sometime after being granted refugee status on Nauru, Abyan approached the health services on the island and when it became apparent that she was pregnant, she explained that this was due to having been raped by a local person on Nauru in July 2015 (Australian Border Force, 2015). A number of other female refugees on Nauru had reported rapes in the same year, one of whom had had her claims dismissed by the police due to lack of evidence and whose

identity was then revealed to the media by the Australian PR agency representing the Nauruan Government (Allard, 2015; Doherty, 2015).

Australian Government officials arranged for Abyan to be transported to Australia to have treatment and presumably to terminate the pregnancy - a procedure unavailable in Nauru. However, within five days of arriving in Australia, Abyan was returned to Nauru by the Australian Government (hereafter, “the Government”) despite Australian lawyer, George Newhouse, attempting to seek an injunction to prevent her removal. Abyan was removed without terminating the pregnancy or having the opportunity to meet with Mr. Newhouse.

Thereafter, a debate arose over the reasons for which the Government had returned Abyan so speedily, the situation gaining a significant amount of media attention. In a number of press releases, press conferences, interviews, and in Parliament, the Government, and more specifically the then Immigration Minister, Peter Dutton (“the Minister”), claimed that she had been returned because she had decided not to have an abortion. In response to the Minister’s first press release following her return to Nauru (reproduced in Figure 1), a handwritten statement from Abyan was shared by Mr. Newhouse with the media and reproduced in various newspaper articles (including many in the current corpus) (reproduced in Figure 2). He and various refugee advocates also participated in media interviews and made other public statements on the case, contesting the Government’s claims. They argued that Abyan had had much more limited access to medical and psychosocial services than the Government had claimed, and that she had not made a definitive decision to not have an abortion before being removed from Australia, but rather needed more time and support before making a final decision. They also criticized the Government’s action in taking Abyan away so suddenly, claiming that this was done to prevent Abyan seeking legal assistance.

Figure 1: the Immigration Minister’s first press release regarding Abyan’s return to Nauru, 17 October 2015

Figure 2: Abyan's handwritten statement, 18 October 2015

A Freedom of Information (FOI) request was made by another lawyer, Kellie Tranter, to access the Government's communications and preparations regarding Abyan's case. These documents – an email chain between various Government officials - were made public (through the media) in January 2016 and appeared to mainly support Abyan's version of events (Symons-Brown, 2016). For example, on 15th October, while Abyan was still in Australia, an email from an anonymized health official to an immigration official noted:

Unfortunately despite 30 mins on the phone to [the Telephone Interpreting Service] I was unable to access a Somali interpreter. She does, however, understand and speak very basic English and was happy to proceed with the consultation. She confirmed that she does not want the termination now, but she did make it clear that she hasn't completely changed her mind (p. 77)

After Abyan was returned to Nauru and the same official was later quizzed, the official explained:

As per our previous discussions, after she declined the procedure I asked her (more than once) whether she changed her mind and no longer wanted a [termination of pregnancy (TOP)]. She consistently said that she still wanted to have a TOP, she just didn't want it that day or the following week ...(p. 93)

I explored her reasons for declining the procedure but she just stated that she felt 'too mentally unwell' and wouldn't elaborate....I asked whether she had changed her mind altogether, and she said no.... (p. 94).

There were also emails supporting the claim that the Government decision to remove Abyan from Australia was (at least partly) motivated by a desire to avoid legal action that would

keep her in Australia. For example, on 14th October, Neil Skill, the First Assistant Secretary, Detention Services, Australian Border Force, wrote:

If she decides to proceed, she will then be returned to Nauru as soon as medically fit to travel. If she decides not to proceed, we will make arrangements to have her return to Nauru ASAP. If she continues to vacillate, we will make a decision early next week about return to Nauru. I think the lawyer is buying time so he can seek legal intervention (p. 25).

After Abyan's return to Nauru, the media coverage decreased rapidly, with only a few articles reporting the Government announcement that she would be returned to Australia for further treatment. An article in January 2016, discussing the FOI documents, reported that she remained in Australia and was "receiving medical care" (Tranter, 2016). No further information is publicly available about what has happened to Abyan since this time.

Media and political discourse on refugees

In Australia, refugees have been highly politicized in the media and public discourse, most notably since 2001, when Australia began implementing a suite of measures aimed at preventing asylum seekers from reaching Australian territory by boat. This has included measures such as forcing boats back to Indonesia and where this is not possible, transferring asylum seekers to the neighboring island nations of Nauru and Papua New Guinea (PNG) (see Opeskin & Ghezelbash, 2016). After one such operation, the Government claimed that some asylum seekers had threatened and then proceeded to throw their children out of their boat, apparently in an attempt to coerce the Government to take them to Australia. John Howard, then Prime Minister, used the reports of this incident, which became known as the "Children Overboard" affair, to support his government's tough stance on asylum seekers, transforming the discourse surrounding refugees from being "pitiful victims of circumstances

beyond their control, thoroughly deserving of aid and pity, to cynical and calculating invaders in search of an improved lifestyle” (MacCallum, 2002, p. 41). While evidence emerged disproving the reports, the Howard Government was able to capitalize on the new discourse of dishonest and calculating illegals, which arguably contributed to their re-election (Every & Augoustinos 2008, p. 650).

Since that time, given its broad-reaching implications for migration policy and election outcomes, scholars have been interested in analyzing Australian political and media discourse around refugees. Some have gone as far as to argue that there is a professional duty to draw attention to a situation in which a “discourse of hatred” has become respectable, and in doing so, “encourage vigilance concerning the power of language” and acknowledge its role in social justice (Clyne 2003, p. 5).

Analyses of both the written language and use of images in media coverage of the Children Overboard incident uncovered the way different groups and individuals were discursively represented, and drew links between these portrayals and the political discourse relating to refugees, noting – among other things – the way government officials discursively linked this specific event to broader claims about asylum seekers more generally (Macken-Horarik, 2003a, 2003b).

Research elsewhere has also identified credibility or trust as a key theme in media and political discourse on refugees and asylum seekers. For example, it is a common trend for those who are unsuccessful in their claims for asylum to be discursively presented in the UK media as “bogus” or “fraudulent” (Philo, Briant, & Donald, 2013, ch 3 & 4). The discursive binary of “bogus” claimants versus genuine refugees has also been used in Canada to support more restrictive legislation (as discussed by Molnar Diop, 2014, exploring the treatment of Roma refugee claimants). In the Canadian media it has also been found that constructions of “bogus” applicants tend to arise most frequently around the time of and in response to

“episodic events” relating to individual asylum seeking arrivals, which are then linked with broader policy discussions (Lawlor & Tolley, 2017).

In Australia, focusing on individual cases and incidents appears to remain popular, with both politicians and advocates reacting to and drawing on specific events and individual experiences to support competing positions on broader issues surrounding asylum seekers and refugee policy. The 2015 case of Abyan, introduced above, gained substantial attention by refugee rights advocates and the media. As with the Children Overboard incident, there was much debate over the facts of the case, with accusations of dishonesty appearing to be made on all sides. Credibility was therefore a central issue - a prerequisite to deciding on the preferred version of facts, and thus on the relative merit of the particular side of the refugee policy debate those facts supported.

The effects of this type of public discourse are significant. First, it influences or justifies migration policy on a broad scale, for example, legislation to exclude certain groups from even applying for asylum at all – as is the case in Australia for “unauthorised maritime arrivals” (*Migration Act 1958*, section 46A(1)). Second, political pressures and discourse also influence refugee decision makers’ credibility assessments and fact-finding, leading them to treat asylum claims with suspicion (Baillot, Cowan, & Munro, 2014; Hamlin, 2014). This means that credibility has also become a central issue in status determination processes (Smith-Khan, 2017a, 2017c). Therefore, the way credibility is dealt with at the macro level of public discourse is inextricably connected with how credibility is conceptualized and incorporated at the individual or micro level. Conversely, as will be seen in the case of Abyan, individual examples may also affect or be used to influence broader discussions on asylum seekers and refugee policy.

Therefore, this paper seeks to explore the media’s portrayal of Abyan, and the other key actors involved in her experiences in Nauru and Australia. In particular, it aims to uncover

the way these actors are assigned particular identities and actions and how this affects their credibility. In doing so, this research aims to make a contribution to understanding how the credibility (or lack thereof) of refugees is discursively constructed in public discourse.

The following section sets out the methods and data used to address these questions.

Exploring the discourse on credibility and communication

As mentioned above, the key issue emerging from a preliminary reading of news articles and opinion pieces discussing Abyan was a debate over the facts surrounding her treatment while in Australia and the reason for her being returned to Nauru so promptly. The case merits closer attention not only due to the level of media attention it received, but also due to the themes and arguments it prompted. Within public statements made by the key actors and in the media coverage, the issue became one of credibility: who was telling the truth about what had happened? Establishing credibility became a prerequisite to evaluating the situation and considering the implications of different versions of events, and was also significant for the broader ongoing debate regarding Australian refugee policy.

The ways in which the media and other actors “‘see’ and represent social life in different ways” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 123) comprise discourses. The field of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) aims to uncover the way these choices of representation can help reinforce a particular viewpoint and thus support a particular status quo. The understandings that become the most widely accepted (through the dominant discourse) influence and justify certain social and political structures, making control over the discourse a source of power. By uncovering these discursive choices and challenging the ideologies and social organization they promote, the field thus aims to achieve greater social justice for minorities whom they disadvantage. CDS recognizes the media as a key arena in which dominant discourses are maintained and reproduced, making the study of media discourse and the

unpicking of the ideologies it promulgates an essential goal of the field (van Dijk, 2008; Fairclough, 2001).

Discourse creation occurs through social practice – through the choices we make when we speak about and make sense of our social world (Heller, 2014). At the same time, however, discourse also represents social practice. So the way discourse creation is understood and discussed, and the extent to which different social actors can participate in creating and challenging discourse is influenced by the *discourse around the social practice of discourse creation* (Fairclough, 2001; van Leeuwen, 1996; van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999).

In discussions around refugees and refugee policy, this means that refugees and asylum seekers may be restricted by the discourse itself in how they can participate in debate and challenge how they are represented in the public arena. Given the central role that the credibility of the different key actors appears to have been given in the media debate regarding “Abyan”, the paper therefore seeks to explore how each of the key social actors is represented discursively in a selection of online news reports and opinion pieces relating to the debate. To do this, a Social Actor Analysis (SAA) is adopted, exploring the sociosemantic choices made for how the various participants in the debate are named and described, when they are assigned agency and how they are attributed certain actions and roles (van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 32; 2008, ch. 2). As van Leeuwen (2008, p. 24) argues, “there is no neat fit between sociological and linguistic categories”: for example, an actor’s agency can be represented through a number of different grammatical or linguistic choices and the meaning created by these choices is dependent on the social and historical contexts in which they appear (see also van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 25-26 and ch. 6). The analysis will further explore how these discursive choices legitimize particular social practices and actors, particularly by linking particular sociosemantic choices with different moral positions (see van Leeuwen, 2008, ch. 6). In doing so, the analysis pays special attention how the various actors’ communication is

conceptualized and the way their identities are constructed, the impact this has on their credibility and by extension, their capacity to engage with and challenge the dominant discourse. The SAA approach has been used in other analyses involving media discourse on refugees in Australia. Notably, Mary Macken-Horarik (2003a, 2003b) applied this approach for her analysis of the Children Overboard story, examining the discourse in a corpus of newspaper articles on this event.

Articles were initially gathered through online Google searches with the keyword “Abyan”, and then using a snowballing approach by following links in these articles referring to other pieces on the topic. To ensure a broad variety of texts and opinions, other mainstream newspapers were searched online through the ProQuest database - to access articles that are usually behind a paywall. Reading through and mapping this large collection of articles led to the identification of the key issue to be explored, as introduced above: the debate surrounding whose version of events was correct. The final media corpus used in this analysis was therefore limited to news articles and opinion pieces from Australian media outlets with a high readership, and which were published within a week from the publication of the Minister’s first press release and Abyan’s handwritten statement (i.e. texts published between 19th-24th October 2015) (see Table 1). This approach to sample selection is in line with existing approaches, for example, Nguyen and McCallum’s (2016) study of Australian reporting on maritime asylum seekers, in which the corpus was similarly delimited by date and by readership. Details of the media outlets included in the current study are described in more detail below.

In the following, the media corpus is introduced and contextual information provided regarding where these texts were published. This is followed by an exploration of the way each text links Abyan’s individual case to more general arguments and opinions regarding Australian refugee policy, identifying the key themes in this broader debate. The analysis

then proceeds to an examination of how each of the actors has been represented “sociosemantically”. It concentrates specifically on how these choices contribute towards supporting or challenging the actors’ credibility.

Presenting the debate: Abyan in the media

Similar to the heavy coverage of the Children Overboard incident, the dispute over why Abyan was transported out of Australia so rapidly after her arrival became the subject of numerous news reports and opinion pieces across mainstream Australian media. Before commencing the analysis, the corpus is introduced below.

Table 1: Media corpus

The corpus represents a variety of Australian news outlets. *The Australian* and *The Daily Telegraph* are owned by News Corp Australia (News Corp Australia, 2017), part of Rupert Murdoch’s international media conglomerate. They are regarded as populist publications, inclined to support conservative governments (McKnight, 2012). *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* are owned by News Corp’s main competitor, Fairfax Media. Fairfax also owns *Daily Life*, which provides “news and lifestyle content for busy Australian women” (Daily Life, 2017). Fairfax has traditionally attempted to be “more subtle” and “moderate, fair and responsible” in its handling of politics, although it has sometimes been seen as supporting the Australian Labor Party - the less conservative of the two main political parties (Griffen-Foley, 2002). The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) is state-owned and funded. It has been accused by conservative commentators and politicians of being biased and presenting a “leftist” perspective. Its online component was launched in 1995 and includes the ABC News website (Jolly, 2014).

The remaining publications are exclusively internet-based. The *Guardian Australia*, the Australian online edition of the UK-based newspaper, launched in 2013 and presents itself as “independent” and “showing all sides of the story” (Viner, 2013) and is generally regarded as politically to the left (Wake, 2013). Established in 2004, *New Matilda* is “predominantly reader-funded and remains fiercely independent, with no affiliation to any political party, lobby group or other media organisation” (New Matilda, 2017) and emphasizes its role as an alternative to mainstream media, especially focusing on “political analysis and social justice issues” (Barnes, 2013, p. 811). *Mamamia* presents itself as “the largest independent women’s website in Australia” and includes “news, opinion, social commentary, political analysis” among other topics (Mamamia, 2017). Finally, *The Conversation’s* Australian edition also presents itself as independent, with its “news and views” “sourced from the academic and research community”, and much of its initial funding coming from universities and other research bodies (The Conversation, 2017).

Therefore the corpus includes texts from a variety of sources, attracting a diverse cross-section of Australian audiences. The following sections examine this corpus, which includes articles that were published within the week following Abyan’s return to Nauru and the release of the Minister’s and Abyan’s statements detailing the disputed facts. First is an exploration of the major themes covered in these articles, noting how Abyan’s case is contextualized within the broader debate around refugee policy in Australia. Next is an examination of how these articles represent Abyan. The analysis then explores the representation of other actors, including the Government and Abyan’s lawyers and supporters. Finally, the implications that these representations have for credibility construction are considered.

Specific to general: Abyan and the larger policy debate

As discussed below, the choice to assign the refugee at the centre of this case-study a first-name pseudonym personalizes the issue to which her experience relates and attracts the audience's interest. While the pseudonym acts to identify a single person, the whole corpus demonstrates a tendency to use this individual story as an example of the broader issues around refugee policy in Australia. As one article points out, "In the case of Abyan, she is becoming a totem of Australia's harsh offshore processing system for refugees" (SMH 24). This reflects the trend already established in the existing literature (Lawlor & Tolley, 2017), including what was observed regarding the Children Overboard incident (Macken-Horarik, 2003a, 2003b).

Regardless of the authors' respective opinions, every article in the corpus contextualizes Abyan's situation within the larger refugee policy debate in some way. The approaches taken vary across the corpus, depending on the argument the author wishes to support, but they generally fall within various common categories. First, many authors (mainly from traditionally centre/left-leaning publications) refer to Abyan's experiences to criticize the harshness of Australia's policy of sending refugees to Nauru and PNG, or for using immigration detention more generally, listing the negative consequences of these policies (AGE24, DLY19, GRD19, NM20, SMH19b, SMH24).

It's no surprise our immigration department refused to display a shred of decency and sent Abyan to the very place that brought on such trauma without the medical care requested. The department has, after all, been led by ministers who try to outdo their predecessors in their mistreatment of asylum seekers (DLY19).

Abyan's fears are borne from personal experience, and that of others. There have been three reported sexual assaults of refugees outside the detention centres this year, including her own. Between

September 2012 and April 2015, detention centre operative Transfield Service logged 33 sexual assault incidents, including nine judged critical or major. Although Abyan has not gone to Nauru's police, two others have (SMH24).

In some cases this issue is contrasted with the Government's human rights-related pursuits in other fields (CN19, DLY19).

But apparently not when it happens to refugees in Australian care. This sort of violence did not feature in the Prime Minister's clarion call to end violence against women. This sort of violence is not only ignored but dangerously perpetuated by bureaucratic processes and political decisions (DLY19).

Some refer to the “deterrence” justifications used to support this policy approach – either approvingly or critically (AGE24, NM20, SMH24, TL20, TL21).

But the inescapable conclusion is that Abyan's story is simply further evidence that the centres on Nauru and Manus are unsustainable, and that both continue to damage vulnerable people for no other purpose than to deter boat arrivals (AGE24).

Remember, too, that many if not most in the refugee advocacy movement actually supported the so-called “humane” asylum seeker policies of the previous government policies that filled detention centres beyond capacity and left more than 1000 dead at sea (TL20).

Some criticize the “fiction” of presenting Nauru and PNG as being responsible for the refugees sent there, when in fact this process exists as a result of Australian Government policy and entails its ongoing involvement (ABC22, AGE24, CN19, DLY19, NM20).

...though the government likes to pretend, disingenuously, that it is at arms length from much of what happens in those places (CN19).

In contrast, another article that is not critical of Government policy frames the Nauruan Government as solely responsible for the refugees there:

The Pacific Island nation of Nauru will resettle hundreds of people deemed to be genuine refugees after its government opted to accelerate the processing of asylum-seekers.... and nearly all refugee determinations had been concluded (AUS19).

Further, rather than focusing on potential harms of the offshore policy, those articles that do not criticize Australian Government policy highlight the facilities provided to refugees in Nauru, referring to “Abyan’s beachside refugee housing complex” (AUS21) and explaining that:

The resettled refugees will be provided with housing, a living allowance and employment opportunities until a more permanent resettlement location can be found. The [Nauruan] government confirmed that additional accommodation, with “air-conditioning and self-catering facilities”, was being built (AUS19) (see also AUS20).

Many of the articles mention the fact that refugees transferred to Australia for medical reasons are able to access the Australian legal system while there – something that is not possible from Nauru (ABC22, AGE24, AUS20, MMA20, SMH19a, SMH19b, SMH24).

Approximately 200 asylum-seekers and refugees who were on Nauru and have travelled to Australia for medical attention remain in Australia after lodging bids for asylum. Their return to Nauru awaits rulings by Australian courts (AUS20).

A related focal point is on the lack of transparency or oversight in refugee-related operations (ABC22, NM20, SMH24):

Australia's exchange of cash for prison space with Nauru is, like any trade agreement, built on comparative advantage. Nauru's comparative advantage is an absence of the rule of law. Asylum seekers can be held in detention indefinitely (NM20).

This leads some to conclude with recommendations for oversight mechanisms (AGE24, CN19, GRD19):

The appalling saga of the pregnant Somali woman known by the pseudonym of "Abyan" shows the urgent need for some neutral watchdog in such a situation to ensure the person's interests are protected and what is done is transparent (CN19).

Therefore, Abyan's experiences are indeed used as a "totem" or channel through which the authors are able to share their opinions on Australia's refugee policy, despite these being varied and sometimes opposing. This resembles the findings of the Children Overboard analysis in that those commenting use the particular event and persons involved as a link to the broader debate on refugees and refugee policy (see Macken-Horarik, 2003a) (for a more general exploration of the linking of individual cases with broader discussions on refugees see Lawlor & Tolley, 2017). In both cases, a key theme is the trustworthiness of the refugees involved.

Therefore, the next section considers how the corpus represents Abyan, the Government and other actors. It explores the types of actions each actor is assigned, paying particular attention to how their ability and opportunities to communicate are represented in the corpus. It also examines how their identities are shaped through how they are named. In each case, the analysis considers how these constructions impact on credibility.

Abyan, woman.... refugee?

Across the corpus, regardless of the authors' opinions of the situation, the most common naming choice by far is the first-name pseudonym, "Abyan", which appears most frequently in every single text. Second-most common (with the exception of three articles – AUS20, AUS21, ABC22) is "woman".

Using a pseudonym serves a practical referential function: without a name the media would be left calling her "the woman" and would need to provide further information for the reader to understand to whom the story related. Ironically, even referring to her as "the Somali refugee who was raped on Nauru" would not be specific enough to single her out, given that another young Somali woman reported having been raped at a similar time.

The use of "Abyan" is an example of informal nomination, but also involves "name obscuration" (van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 53), as Abyan is a pseudonym. Individualization is a strategy often used to communicate the author's empathy with the subject (KhosraviNik, 2009). Ironically in this case, the first-name pseudonym appears on the one hand super-personal, yet reveals very little about the actual individual. Further, unlike in KhosraviNik's examples (2009, pp. 484-485), the nomination is not accompanied with other types of individualization, such as details about profession or education, or everyday activities. Therefore, while naming and dealing with the experience of this one individual may appear to somewhat humanize or individualize her, the lack of other details limits this. Indeed, this is a reflection of the legal, physical and presumably communication barriers between Abyan and most of the journalists whose articles are included in the corpus, as a direct result of Government policy – a challenge only a few of these authors underline (e.g., ABC22). As explored below, the actions and experiences assigned to her are largely limited to those regarding her transfer to and from Australia and experiences directly relating to those transfers, rather than personal attributes or experiences. This limits her "humanization".

Abyan is frequently named “woman” and therefore categorized by gender. This suggests Abyan does not have any other qualities or characteristics that are as relevant or noteworthy as her gender – or that any more specific characteristics are unknown to the writers. This contrasts with other actors in the corpus who are referred to by their (often professional) functions – e.g., Minister, police, lawyers, doctors etc. – which lends these actors legitimacy and authority. Calling her “woman” also echoes the Minister’s own usage in his public statements regarding the case (e.g., Dutton, 2015), demonstrating how the media draws on the Government discourse.

Referring to Abyan as “woman” may also bring her credibility into question. Where authors wish to stress the innocence of a female crime victim, it is common practice to favor qualifiers or personalizing elements. Victims may be described with reference to valued social roles they play, for example, “loving daughter” or “new mum” (Lloyd & Ramon, 2017, p. 126). The use of the term “woman” alone contrasts with this and creates a more questionable victim, free of any valued legitimizing social roles. Further, research suggests that female victims of crime are more likely to be negatively depicted if they are poor or part of a minority group, and the crimes to which they are victim rationalized through suggestions that they were in the wrong place or that the crime had occurred as a result of decisions they had made (Collins, 2016).

Abyan is also categorized – although less frequently – as a refugee. She is also sometimes described as an asylum seeker (AUS19, DLY19, TL21). Under international law, a refugee is any person who:

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country (*Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, 1951, Article 1A(2)).

At a national level, however, the term “asylum seeker” is used to denote someone who has yet to pass through domestic procedures for determining whether they meet the refugee definition. Thus, describing someone as an asylum seeker or a refugee indicates their stage in this process at a given point in time. As some of the other articles point out (GRD19, SMH19b, ABC22, AGE24), Abyan had already been assessed in Nauru and was found to meet the refugee definition, meaning that the three articles describing her as an asylum seeker are factually incorrect. The use of “asylum seeker” in these articles therefore suggests that first, fact-checking around her legal status was regarded as unimportant to the issue at hand and that these aspects of her personal experience were not interesting or pertinent. Second, the term “asylum seeker” holds even more negative associations than “refugee” does (see for example, the findings in a large corpus study in Baker & McEnery, 2005, p. 222), meaning it is thus unsurprising that it is used in two articles in News Corp-owned media. The use of this term therefore suggests that Abyan has not yet proven her credibility or merit as a refugee.

Overall, explicit references to Abyan being a refugee (or asylum seeker) are low, although this is likely due to this being understood within the broader context of the articles. Still, the confusion in some articles over her status perhaps helps to demonstrate how her refugee status is not considered of particular importance: her pre-asylum-seeking experiences or genuineness as a refugee are only infrequently used to contextualize or validate the seriousness of her experiences in Nauru and Australia. Where this is mentioned, it is only done so in texts that more generally support her credibility and criticize Government policy. For example:

It is hard to imagine a more anguished predicament for any young woman, let alone someone who fled the terrorist group al-Shabaab in her war-torn homeland and has spent two years in detention on Nauru with no prospect of a new home (SMH24).

Examples like this are limited in the corpus, perhaps understandably due to the restricted access the journalists have to Abyan and her life and experiences. They only have Abyan's one written statement and statements made by others to glean any information about her.

What is clear from the above is that in naming and describing Abyan, the corpus is restricted to creating only the most basic outline of an individual. Very little is known about her other than her gender, age, nationality and residence. As discussed above, the limited information available about this unknown person creates a significant obstacle for the creation and maintenance of trust and empathy in the reader.

Beyond the names she is given, Abyan is also assigned a number of roles through the way she is positioned as an agent or patient in the texts. These are explored below.

Abyan, speaker and decider

Most of Abyan's acts involve verbs relating to either saying or asking, or deciding or wanting. In contrast, in other types of actions, she appears as a patient in passive constructions where the agent is unidentified or absent.

Actions related to communication are most common (161 out of 447 of Abyan's actions (36%)). Abyan "says", "claims", and "reports" and "requests". The second most common category of actions revolve around thinking and feeling - primarily making decisions or wanting something (106/447 (24%)). Every article also assigns agency to Abyan in terms of having an abortion, usually linked with these other verbs – e.g., wanting or asking for one, or deciding (not) to have one (61/447 (14%)). Most commonly, these actions of thinking and speaking involve no other actors: Abyan asks or decides, without direct reference to the actors with whom she is communicating or interacting. There is variety in terms of which particular verbs or nouns are used to reflect these actions (i.e., more or less colloquial, value-laden – e.g., "alleged" versus "says").

Regardless of this variety, in all except one article (ABC22), communication and thought actions comprise over half of the actions assigned to Abyan. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the journalists must rely nearly solely on the one written statement from Abyan when discussing her actions. However, Abyan is often misleadingly presented as explicitly accusing her “adversaries” in the debate of telling lies. Apt examples of this construction include statements like “Abyan has said Mr. Dutton's description of events - backed by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull - were false” (SMH19b) and “Abyan said the government was not telling the truth” (GRD19). In reality, her written statement includes no mention of the Minister or any statements he has made, focusing simply on her experiences, with statements like “I was raped on Nauru. I have been very sick. I never said that I did not want a termination”.

The overall result misconstrues the reality. Readers are left with the impression that the journalists are in a position to report on what Abyan wants, thinks or says, despite the fact that there is very little direct contact with her. In fact, only one journalist, Chris Kenny, had the opportunity to travel to Nauru and speak with Abyan and their interactions became the subject of a separate debate, including Abyan reporting media harassment (Allard, 2015).

This emphasis on what Abyan has said or thinks creates the impression that Abyan’s actions are key to how the events unfolded: that she was in control. Her one written statement is transformed into her having a fair opportunity to present her side of the “debate”, putting her on the same level as the Minister and Government. This is despite the great inequalities in her opportunities to speak, her access to information and her communicative and identity-building resources (for an in-depth discussion on these inequalities, see Smith-Khan, Forthcoming). This asymmetry is only acknowledged in a few exceptions in the corpus. The inclusion of “the rape claim” in many cases only goes to further bring into question the credibility of Abyan’s claims, as explored below.

“The alleged rape”

The articles vary in how they refer to the rape. The veracity of the rape claim is significant in this case because it contributes towards the discussion of whether or not we accept Abyan as a credible witness more generally. Understandably, in the context of news reporting, pieces dealing with accused persons will use language like “alleged” as a way of acknowledging the principle that people are innocent until proven guilty, and to avoid interfering with ongoing court cases or investigations. However, in this case, the articles do not focus on any alleged perpetrator, but rather on the victim, and there are no active investigations or cases related to her claims. However, as Healicon (2016) argues, when a woman reports having been raped, this immediately puts into process an assessment of her credibility.

This perhaps goes some way to explaining why most articles in the corpus (nine) present the rape as an allegation or claim rather than fact, for example, “pregnant as the result of an alleged rape” (GRD19), “her rape claims” (AUS20). Only three of the 15 articles (DLY19, ABC22, SMH24) consistently use language that presents the rape as fact, and these are articles in which the author takes a position in favor of Abyan more generally – criticizing Abyan’s treatment and Australian asylum policy. Construing her report of being raped as a claim rather than fact acts to draw Abyan’s credibility into question more generally.

One article even takes the “rape claims” for primary focus, and reports that Abyan “declined” to make a statement or lodge a complaint with police (AUS21, also referred to in TL21). The author further notes that Abyan did not provide information about the identity of the perpetrator(s).

In her interview with *The Australian*, Abyan repeated her claim that she was raped but declined to provide any details about when, where or by whom. She refused to say whether the alleged assault was committed by another refugee, a Nauruan or someone else (AUS21).

Abyan is presented as actively choosing not to provide details, rather than acknowledging the possibility that she either lacks knowledge about this information or else does not wish to share it with the specific interlocutor, journalist Chris Kenny. In an earlier article, the same journalist contextualizes Abyan's "claim" with that of another young woman whose complaint was set aside due to limited evidence, suggesting that the two cases may be similar.

Abyan's case comes after another rape allegation made by a Somali refugee on Nauru, reported by the ABC's 7.30. Police have investigated that complaint and determined that it was fabricated (AUS20).

This construction acts to further undermine her credibility and contrasts with other articles where references to other refugees' similar experiences were used to support criticisms of the situation on Nauru and Abyan's treatment (AGE24, SMH24). Another article from *The Australian*, not included in the corpus (but cited critically in ABC22) describes how refugees "Get pregnant and dump it on [the] Australian conscience in the hope...lawyers win you a free ride that includes residency". This suggests that far from being the result of rape, Abyan intentionally got pregnant as a means to gain access to an Australian permanent visa. Further, the headline of TL21 carries a similar theme – "When human life is a political football" (the human life is a reference to the embryo). This construction echoes the claims made about the Children Overboard incident, that asylum seekers were using their children as pawns and risking their lives to manipulate the Government into granting them a visa.

Suspicion around the "rape claims" in this case resembles the well-documented difficulties of women seeking to have their reports of sexual violence believed in criminal settings or RSD processes. Baillot et al. (2014, p. 131) describe how "targeted scepticism surrounding women's claims of rape" can lead decision makers to employ interrogation-style, insensitive approaches and undermine access to a fair hearing. Existing research demonstrates

that when asylum seekers' narratives include a "failure" to report sexual violence to authorities in their home country they may be disbelieved. This is even the case where the reasons for not reporting the rape seem strikingly compelling, for example where an applicant did not make a report to the police after she was raped by an army corporal (Anker, 1992, p. 519). Delays in disclosing rape during the RSD process have also been found to harm general credibility, despite research and procedural guidance urging caution (Baillot et al., 2014).

A construed failure to share details about the identity or motivations of persecutors may also harm credibility (Bohmer & Shuman, 2007, p. 610). Responsibility is transferred to the victim for information that they understandably may be unable to obtain from their persecutors. Bohmer and Shuman (2007, pp. 614-615) note a further knowledge-related risk: that those tasked with assessing credibility may find a person's story too recognizable or familiar compared to past cases, and make a negative finding on this basis. In such situations, the very fact that experiences of sexual violence are pervasive in certain settings act against its victims. Both these issues appear to work against Abyan in the approaches of some of the articles' authors.

The veracity of Abyan's claim is particularly important to the debate given the fact that it happened in a setting created by Government policy. Effectively, the experience of rape is an added layer of the "charges" of bad treatment made against the Government, along with the issues regarding Abyan's access to appropriate medical support and transfers to and from Australia. Yet, unsurprisingly perhaps, the connection between Australian policy and Abyan's experience of rape on Nauru is generally only explicitly highlighted in the articles most critical of Government policy (e.g., DLY19, GRD18, SMH24).

What is evident from the above is that the "rape claim" is just another opportunity for commentary for or against Abyan's credibility. Moreover, Abyan is arguably in a

comparatively difficult position: her gender, nationality, linguistic, and migration background mean that she faces intersectional challenges to defending her credibility (see argument in Baillot, Cowan, & Munro, 2009, comparing asylum seekers with claims of sexual violence to local persons navigating the criminal justice system). Further, Abyan's credibility is tied to the credibility of other actors. Whether they are politicians, advocates or journalists, the very limited information publicly available about Abyan and her experiences means that these speakers have broad scope in their choices for how they present her and whether they support or challenge her credibility.

The Minister, the Government and the debate

There is a clear division in the media corpus in the roles assigned to Peter Dutton, the Immigration Minister, and those assigned to the "Government" as an actor. Once again, this closely resembles the Minister's own approach. In his first public statement following Abyan's return to Nauru, passive, agent-less structures are used when describing what happened to Abyan. For example, he states that "A woman was flown by charter flight from Nauru to Sydney" and "The woman was chartered back to Nauru". The only active grammatical structure involving the Government relates to its general policy position - "The Government remains absolutely resolute that people who have attempted to come to Australia illegally by boat and are on Nauru or Manus will not be coming to settle permanently in Australia."

Likewise, in the media corpus, while the Minister is referred to frequently across the texts, his primary role is nearly uniquely one of speaking or commenting, rather than being assigned any actions directly related to Abyan's experiences. The Minister "says", "claims" and "lists details".

Mr. Dutton said the government would not have gone to the expense of flying the woman to Australia if it had no intention of giving her the medical treatment she had requested (SMH19a).

Mr. Dutton insists she changed her mind about the termination (AUS19).

Further, as in the Minister's statement, when it comes to actions for which Abyan is the patient, there is often no agent mentioned and the phrases are passivized, or the agent is the "government", rather than identified or named individuals.

Abyan was rushed back to Nauru on Friday despite her lawyer filing an urgent injunction to stop her removal (MMA20).

The government brought her here, but after several days she was flown back on Friday without having had the procedure (CN19).

This resembles findings in Baker and McEnery (2005, pp. 214-216) where the news corpus had descriptions of "forced returns" and asylum seekers being "rejected" without mention of an agent. In the same study, descriptions of people being "displaced" were usually agentless, or the agent was a non-person, for example "fighting" or "conflict" (pp. 210-211, referring to corpus of UNHCR texts).

The effect of such constructions is to foreground Abyan and her choices, minimizing the responsibility, power and influence of other individuals in the events that occurred. It creates the impression that the Minister has similar power and opportunities to speak. He and Abyan are both described as communicating in similar terms, meaning his power as the Immigration Minister is broadly under-acknowledged. Further, the choice of the "government" as actor rather than specific individuals largely takes the attention away from the role that particular individual interactions and individuals' communication styles and decision-making would have played in the way the events unfolded. The "government" is

impersonal and anonymous. The fact that the corpus largely adopts similar constructions to those used by the Minister further demonstrates the power of the Government's statements in influencing the media discourse.

Advocates, lawyers and the debate

While references are made in all texts to Abyan's "lawyers" or "advocates", they appear less frequently than the Government or Abyan and are referred to in varying ways. Abyan's lawyer, George Newhouse, is referred to most frequently, with ten texts mentioning him by name (AUS19, CN19, GRD19, SMH19a, SMH19b, AUS20, AUS21, TL21, AGE24, SMH24). The way he is described varies. For example, the *Guardian* article refers to him as "A special counsel for Shine Lawyers, George Newhouse" (GRD19), compared with the *Telegraph*, where in one case he is not named and referred to only as "advocates" (TL20) and in another, when mentioned by name, is described as "Advocate George Newhouse" (TL21).

The term "advocate/s" occurs in eight texts (AUS19, GRD19, NM20, SMH19a, SMH19b, SMH24, TL20, TL21), and "lawyer/s" appears in all except one text (DLY19, which refers to Abyan's "legal representation" and "legal and support team"). Although these terms are often grouped together, the presence of both generally suggests two separate types of actors. Therefore, naming George Newhouse an "advocate" carries different meaning to choosing to call him a "lawyer". The Macquarie Dictionary defines "advocate" as: "someone who defends, vindicates, or espouses a cause by argument; an upholder; a defender" ("The Macquarie Dictionary Online," 2017). While this definition is suitable for a lawyer, it carries broader meaning, which is obvious in the fact that it used to describe other actors who are not lawyers. Being described as an advocate rather than a lawyer emphasizes Newhouse's lack of neutrality, reinforcing his depiction as a "politically-motivated" actor.

Once again, this lexical choice also reflects the language choice in the Minister's statement, which initiated the debate around credibility:

Comments from some advocates to the contrary are a fabrication, while others appear to be using this woman's circumstance for their own political agenda. They should be ashamed of their lies.

Research on advocates in the Australian refugee policy debate suggests that they can play a powerful role in challenging and influencing public discourse (Every & Augoustinos, 2008) and supporting individual refugees' communication (Smith-Khan, 2017b). Given this context, it is unsurprising that the "advocates" involved in this debate may be seen as aiming to influence this larger discussion. What is not clear in the texts is what this means for Abyan personally. Frequent use of the terms "advocates" and "lawyers" gives the impression that Abyan has a team of experts at her disposal: valuable resources in terms of communicative power in the debate. Yet we cannot discern the exact nature and extent of Abyan's relationship with these actors. There is tension between this portrayal, on the one hand, and the fact that it appears she had limited access to these persons, on the other. This suggests that the role these actors played in shaping the debate and their ability to defend Abyan's credibility is limited. Or, at least, the real level of interaction between Abyan and these actors and the level of agency or knowledge Abyan has in these interactions remains unknown, and the audience must largely rely on the advocates' (and the media's) choices in how they present this. Once again, our lack of direct contact with and information about Abyan means that we must rely on these third parties to present her and their interactions according to their own perspectives and motivations. Yet this generally remains unclear in the media discourse.

Despite their depiction by the Minister as "politically-motivated", and the fact that their presence in the articles gives the impression that Abyan has resources and support, the advocates' role in the debate over who is telling the truth is backgrounded in most of the corpus. Nine articles present the debate as either primarily or solely between Abyan and the Government (and its various spokespeople). For example:

The Somali refugee who says she was raped and impregnated on Nauru has flatly denied claims by the Minister for Immigration that she changed her mind about ending the pregnancy after being flown to Australia for an abortion (SMH19b).

Only four present the advocates as the primary counter-claimants rather than Abyan.

For example:

The announcement comes amid a clash between refugee advocates and Immigration Minister Peter Dutton over whether a 23-year-old Somali asylum-seeker and alleged rape victim transported from Nauru to Sydney changed her mind about having her pregnancy terminated (AUS19).

As mentioned earlier, one article does not directly refer to the debate, instead focusing on Abyan's "refusal" to report the rape to Nauruan police (AUS21). Apart from this outlier, the majority of the corpus presents advocates and lawyers as, on the one hand, a powerful resource for Abyan, thus creating the impression of a level of equality in the debate; while on the other hand, portraying Abyan as primarily responsible for communication in the debate. This portrayal conflicts with the fact that we know little about how much support or contact Abyan has with these persons, or her decision making power or knowledge in these interactions, and the only "direct" communication we have from Abyan – her handwritten statement – is not really direct, but rather was delivered to the public by her lawyers.

The fact that these actors are considered as representatives of Abyan, despite the shortcomings this presentation entails, means that their speech and actions are interpreted primarily as her own. It thus becomes a logical step that the media should present Abyan as a key competitor in the battle for credibility, rather than focusing on the advocates who were the original target of the Minister's accusations and the ones who actually made several

public statements challenging the government's stance and encouraging the debate (Newhouse; Refugee Action Coalition Sydney).

A level playing-field?

In contrast with most of the corpus, one article explicitly challenges the presentation of Abyan as a primary actor in the debate:

Abyan. She is missing from the picture. She is silent, silenced and removed. This is not a clever lawyer's artifice. Abyan's physical absence from the Abyan argument breaches the most basic protection that our rule of law affords us: the right to access the courts of this country and have them determine our fate (ABC22).

Another also highlights the power imbalances in the debate, arguing:

We cannot meaningfully judge who is telling the truth between the Minister who refuses to discuss "operational matters", and a 23-year-old who, having restricted access to media or lawyers, must communicate through a brief handwritten note (NM20).

As indicated in these outlying articles in the corpus, some of the barriers to communicating with Abyan result directly from Government policy. This has included the introduction of punitive laws aimed at deterring Australian Government employees and contractors from publicly disclosing information about the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers in detention (Gartrell, 2017. See: *Border Force Act 2015*, section 42). Changes to the Nauruan visa system have also largely restricted access to foreign journalists, with Chris Kenny being a notable exception in this case (The Government of the Republic of Nauru, 2017).

ABC22 and NM20 provide a useful reminder that the angle and focus of the majority of reporting involve a choice to present Abyan as an active participant, with a voice and

opportunity to speak, on par with that of other powerful actors, such as the Immigration Minister. As the authors of those articles argue, this is far from the reality. Indeed the public – the audience of the media corpus, and the journalists who have produced it (with the only one exception) – have no direct access to Abyan. We do not even know her name. Even if we were physically and legally able to meet her, it is likely there may also be linguistic barriers to direct communication. Yet, in the corpus, Abyan is presented as a principal actor and speaker, and one with reasonably good resources to participate in the debate, including having a team of lawyers at her disposal.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has introduced the case of Abyan, a young Somali refugee whose experiences seeking medical assistance in Australia captured the attention of the media. She became the centre of a heated debate, used as an opportunity to support various sides of the broader ongoing discussion around refugee policy. As explored above, the media's attention in the period following Abyan's transfer to and from Australia focused on contested facts, with the government claiming that Abyan had decided against having an abortion and that she was rapidly returned to Nauru for that reason. Abyan and those claiming to speak on her behalf denied that she had made a definitive decision. During this period, Abyan had one chance to communicate somewhat "directly" with the Australian public, through a short handwritten statement.

While it is assumed in the debate and reporting that preference of competing accounts should be determined through the credibility of their proponents, credibility is far from being an inherent, personal quality. Rather, the above examination demonstrates that social actors' credibility is constructed in and through the discourse. In reality, Abyan, has limited power to present a trustworthy identity to the audience: we know little about her beyond very basic facts like her age, gender, and nationality. We do not even know her real name. Compared

with the Minister, the Government, and the advocates, Abyan has very limited opportunities to speak. Significantly, many of the barriers she faces exist as a direct result of concerted Government policy to restrict asylum seekers' and refugees' access to the Australian public, media and legal system (and vice versa).

Yet, in the media coverage of this situation, this is not always clear and the way Abyan is discursively presented overall has a negative impact on her credibility. The way she is named only goes to demonstrate the limited information we have about her identity. This results in a depiction of her which lacks the humanizing effects which would be gained from more personal details, as in the examples presented in other research on refugee discourse in the media (eg KhosraviNik, 2009). Therefore, much like in the Children Overboard case, even though the story here involves a particular refugee, the lack of information about Abyan means she is not humanized: we lack details about her that could contribute to credibility production. The inclusion of information about the reason she required medical attention – that she became pregnant as a result of rape – adds an extra threat to her identity construction as a credible speaker. Those claiming to have been raped immediately set in motion a process of credibility assessment. The fact that she is a refugee acts in a similar way: a key element to RSD processes is the assessment of the credibility of the individual seeking asylum. In both situations, the fact that there is often very little corroborating evidence means that the trustworthiness of the person making the claims often becomes a central point of focus and prerequisite to accepting their narratives.

This lack of detail about Abyan's identity also means that it is open to other actors to choose how they present her. She can be presented as a calculating migrant or an innocent victim or something else altogether. The limited information available and Abyan's limited ability to respond leaves it open to the media and other commentators to choose from a broad

range of angles, with very little likelihood of being contradicted by Abyan herself – in any credible way.

Despite the very limited information on which the articles are based, especially in terms of Abyan's own communication, Abyan is largely portrayed as an active and vocal participant. She is most commonly presented as speaking and making decisions. This is perhaps unsurprising considering we have very little information about anything else she may do. Moreover, it leads to a problematic outcome. When viewed beside the commenting and debating role given to the Minister, the overall impression created is that Abyan and the Minister are two parties engaged in a reasonably equal or balanced debate.

Further, even where it is clear that the persons presenting themselves as lawyers or advocates for Abyan have had more opportunities to speak than she has, the discourse in most of the corpus still constructs her as the principal actor and speaker. This is despite what we know about Abyan's very limited opportunities and resources for communication. While the advocates' responsibility in the debate may be presented as secondary to Abyan's, their presence creates a – perhaps – exaggerated impression of Abyan's resources: we cannot know the level of agency or access she has in her interactions with them. Therefore, with the exception of some outlier articles, identified above, most of the corpus thus overlooks or backgrounds the significant power asymmetries in this supposed debate.

Some three months after the contested events, government emails regarding Abyan's treatment were made public, largely supporting Abyan's version of events. Abyan had been rapidly returned to Nauru to avoid any legal action to keep her in Australia, despite the fact that she had said that she had not made a final decision for or against an abortion, but rather needed more time. However, this outcome did not attract anywhere near the same amount of coverage as the earlier debate itself. The media had moved on.

Once again, the parallels with the earlier Children Overboard case are striking: there, information also became available that the government knew from early on that the asylum seekers had never threatened to throw their children from the boat, but had chosen to present the “facts” in that way. However, in that case as in this one, by the time this information became public it was too late: the damage had already been done. In both cases, what would remain in the minds of the public would be the questionable credibility of refugees, rather than the Government officials’ fallacious accounts.

As the above analysis demonstrates, the choices of how to represent the various actors in the media corpus appear to have been directly influenced by the Minister’s own discourse on the matter. The issue of credibility raised by the Minister shifted away from focusing on the advocates to a contest between the Minister and Aryan – through her presentation as a principal actor and speaker. However, it was arguably the Minister’s choice to flag credibility as an issue in his first statement that led it to being a key focus at all.

Both this case and the Children Overboard incident were thus based on contested (and ultimately disproven) facts, stemming from restricted access to information as a result of explicit government policy. The media and public discourse that arose in both stories linked the specific with the general, using these individual episodes to support various positions on the more general debate over refugee and asylum seeker policy in Australia, thus contributing to the development and evolution of the broader discourse. In both the current paper and in those examining the Children Overboard incident (Macken-Horarik, 2003a, 2003b), applying a SAA also helped uncover how the discourse constructed credibility and made it a key point of focus when discussing asylum seekers and refugee policy in Australia. It further found that this discourse is self-reinforcing: refugees’ credibility is brought into question, all while the difficulties they face defending it are made invisible through an apparent overemphasis or exaggeration of their communicative resources.

The current study thus demonstrates the value of critical discourse analysis in problematizing how dominant discourse portrays refugees' (or other minority actors') political participation and their ability to influence and challenge discourses that impact them. The findings of the current paper thus underline the importance of further sociolinguistic investigation into the respective communicative resources of the actors represented in "Abyan's debate", as a means of clarifying their respective capacities and roles within discourse creation and presenting a more concrete challenge to the problematic assumptions uncovered in the public discourse (see my analysis in Smith-Khan, Forthcoming).

This paper has demonstrated that credibility remains an important factor at the level of public and media discourse on refugees and that the way media discourse portrays refugees significantly affects how their credibility can be constructed and defended. Given the powerful influence this discourse can have in both policy and decision making, it merits ongoing critical examination in both research and beyond.

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