



Brown, A.R. and Matthews, J. (2005) 'Orchestrating the political elite? Accounting for the role of representations of public opinion in the UK tabloid anti-asylum campaign', *Fortress Europe and its 'Others': Cultural Representations in Film, Media and the Arts*, University of London, UK, 4 - 6 April 2005.

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Orchestrating the political elite? : accounting for the role of representations of public opinion in the UK tabloid anti-asylum campaign

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Paper presented to:

Fortress Europe and its “Others”: Cultural Representations in Film, Media and the Arts

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4-6th April 2005

Orchestrating the political elite ? : accounting for the role of representations of public opinion in the UK tabloid anti-asylum campaign

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Introduction

The paper that we present today reports on critical aspects of our current research into the representation of Asylum, immigration and the expansion of the European Union within the UK tabloid press during 2003. One of the central aims of this research was to test out the hypothesis that the tabloid press have had a disproportionate (and clearly negative) influence on the deliberative content of public debates about these issues and they have done so, paradoxically, because they are seen to carry a significant weight of public opinion. One of the ways to measure this negative impact is to examine outcomes such as elite statements, policy formation and the framing of legislation itself. To do this convincingly one would need to examine the periodicity of tabloid coverage of issues and its correspondence with changing political agendas over the sample period. In addition, one would need to demonstrate significant evidence of discursive 'migration' or traffic of key terms and ways of framing or defining these issues between tabloid and elite agendas. These 'proxy indicators' would certainly go some way to providing support for our claim (although we think that the period under consideration would have to be significantly longer than one year).

Even so, these measures are, in themselves, not sufficient to demonstrate what it is that we want to explain and that is *how* the tabloid press in the UK context are able to (negatively) influence political elites on these critical issues of human rights, anti-racism and the conduct of democratic debate. It is our observation that existing accounts of the relationship between the tabloid press and political elites, on the issue of asylum and immigration, are few and far between. Where they do exist (Searle 1987; Gordon and Rosenberg 1989; van Dijk 1991) they tend to look to the tabloid audience for a measure of media influence or 'effect'. This focus is based on the research assumption that tabloid audiences are disproportionately 'exposed' to a constant stream of images and representations of the racial 'other' that are irresponsibly chosen, if not deliberately setting out to incite or encourage racism.

While we agree that the content of this kind of coverage is extremely disturbing we also want to caution against simply attempting to 'read-off' the level or extent of racism, among tabloid publics, from such material. By way of support for this methodological scepticism, we point to the significance of recent debates about tabloidisation (Sparks 1992a; Bromley 1998; Stephenson 1998a), which suggest that the overall tendency of this trend is towards a depoliticisation of the content of tabloid style media and the proliferation of magazine style formatting that emphasises consumption, lifestyle and entertainment at the expense of engagement with politics and public issues (Sparks 1992b: 39; Pursehouse 1991). One answer to this dilemma is to suggest that while tabloids avoid politics and champion the everyday, ordinary and the pleasurable or bizarre aspects of human relations this 'fun' style carries with it a hidden cost: the confirmation and reproduction of deep-seated ideologies of racism, sexism, homophobia and the like which 'go with the flow' of such coverage. Such critics point to the impoverishment of the supply of information about the world outside of the confines of the tabloid as the chief reason for the inability of such popular culture to make sense of the political world that produces 'unexpected' phenomena, such as political refugees and asylum seekers.

On the other hand, defenders of popular culture formats point to the exclusion of the tabloid majority from political life and democratic participation and see in tabloidisation a re-politicisation of the everyday and the empowerment of the personal, familiar and parochial. Here tabloid culture, with its irreverence to high culture values, knowledges and institutions, creates a kind of cultural insulation that allows the popular classes to democratise their subordination and find value in it (Holland 1989; Connell 1991; Fiske 1992). While we can find something of value in each of these entrenched positions we are puzzled by the inability of either perspective to explain how the contemporary UK tabloid, while generally eschewing any coverage of the political in its day-to-day coverage, now and again lurches into a full blown engagement with a highly politicised issue, such as asylum. This would not necessarily be so problematic if such an engagement was able to demonstrate how the 'privatised politics' of popular culture could engage positively and creditably with such an issue, illustrating an engaged and partisan approach to, say, the 'human interest' angle of global refugees and economic migrants. But with the honourable exception of the Daily Mirror, this sort of tabloid politics has been in short supply. On the contrary, the impact of the tabloid incursion into this political arena has been wholly and irredeemably

negative. We would go further in arguing that the tabloid campaign, conducted by certain papers in particular, has had a strategic impact on the public pronouncements (and therefore on the public climate surrounding this issue) and the policy direction pursued by Labour, since 1997.

It is our contention that any convincing explanation of this 'elite effect' cannot simply fall back on a position that has been advocated by political scientists and psephologists, in the past, to explain the adoption of severely exclusionary legislation directed at former Empire and Colonial British citizens: fear of opinion poll data showing popular support for such exclusion. Although Studlar's (1980) model of elite autonomy and elite responsiveness has some purchase on the problem, in arguing that political elites once they take office are generally unresponsive to public opinion but over 'immigration' they have shown themselves willing to concede ground to such opinion. Studlar is less convincing in accounting for why elites would respond to this issue and not others identified with popular support? The major reason for this we would argue is that Studlar, like the majority of political scientists, has no theorisation of the role of media in structuring 'public debates' and relaying 'public opinion' and how these 'agenda arenas', in turn, offer a model of how campaigning media can provoke elite actions.

However, we would argue that in order to provide a convincing explanation for how it is that tabloid media are able to do this such an explanation would have to involve: (a) an account of how the tabloidized market structure of British newspapers creates the potential for erratic tabloid influence on elites and policy makers and (b) how the utilization of the sub-genre characteristics of the tabloid papers can, in exceptional instances, construct a politicised form of 'public opinion' which is 'represented' to political elites and (c) that in an increasingly depoliticised 'public sphere', which allows political elites ever greater degrees of autonomy from democratic accountability, the popular participation offered by such tabloid campaigns creates its own perverse and disturbing momentum.

The first part of our paper provides a discussion of the market structure of British newspapers and how this informs the corresponding *structuration* of 'public debate' and 'public opinion' between political elites, media commentators and 'the public'. In the second part, we seek to debate with a number of existing models of popular-issue mobilisation in order to develop our own model. In part three we apply this model to proxy indicators of such mobilisation around asylum and immigration and debate the adequacy of other media-elite theories of popular racist mobilisation. In part four we attempt to explain

how various sub-genre elements of tabloid 'news values' can be utilized by newspaper editors to address political issues and what the motives of such a strategy might be.

This discussion will then be illustrated through an analysis of part of our sample relating to January-March 2003. This period is significant because it highlights the start of an anti-asylum campaign conducted in one of the national tabloids and the corresponding coverage found in the others during this same period. We have decided, for a range of reasons, to concentrate on two newspapers in particular: the mid-market tabloid, the Daily Mail and the down-market tabloid, The Sun. One of the reasons for this is because we believe that these two papers are the key players in the media construction and shaping of the asylum and immigration debate in the UK context. They also help to illustrate the structuring of the tabloid press in relation to other media, which is crucial to our argument. They are also the two papers with the largest current circulation (Media Guardian 14.03.05: p.13), a factor that has, we would argue, a strategic impact on elite attitudes to their coverage and the constituencies they are seen to 'represent'.

Public Debates and the Representation of Public Opinion

Attempting to assess the impact of public debates about Fortress Europe and its 'others' (political refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants) in relation to the role and significance of 'public opinion' requires, we would argue, a model of: (a) how public debates about asylum and immigration issues are structured within and between different forums of media communications and (b) how different kinds of 'public opinion' are *represented* or invoked within these arenas. In the case of asylum and immigration it is absolutely vital to acknowledge that the key arenas of problem construction and elaboration are the press or print media and the tabloid media in particular. The division identified by a number of commentators (McQuail 1977; Sparks 1992b: 37-8; Critcher 2003: 132) between upmarket, mid-market and downmarket newspapers is appropriate as a broad structuring principle, especially in the UK.

This market and media hierarchy is important because it is only when a social problem or issue is able to gather momentum through its coverage in the downmarket or mid-market papers that it will receive coverage in the up market ones and from there to television and radio formats. The key feature

that propels this upward passage is the volume of coverage but also the leadership of the papers themselves in apparently *representing* a significant body of public opinion. The way that the mid-market and downmarket tabloids cohere or construct this volume of public opinion is vital to understanding the contemporary treatment of asylum and immigration by political elites and this is because elites and policy makers will move to address such an issue as soon as they are convinced it carries with it a great deal of public concern, irrespective of any other kinds of counter-claims or evidence to the contrary. This is not because such public concern has actually been demonstrated but rather that 'government officials and politicians take the amount of media attention given to an issue as an indirect expression of public interest in the issue' (Dearing and Rogers, cited in Critcher 2003: 138).

However, what we also wish to make clear is that the coverage and mode of representation of public debates and public opinion are treated as entirely different and often separate kinds of entities within this structured hierarchy of news media. The type of coverage that is represented as public debate occurs almost exclusively in the upmarket papers and broadcast media, minimally in the mid-market tabloids and not at all in the downmarket tabloids. Public debate therefore does not actually involve the majority public as such but is a debate conducted between various spokespersons and elite figures in relation to public issues but where the coverage addresses the interpretation of those issues by elite groups and policy makers. Ericson et al (1987: 351) characterise the relationship between broadcast and upmarket newspaper journalists and their elite sources as a 'hermeneutic circle' which chiefly functions as a 'symbolic spectacle' in relation to the vast majority of those who watch, listen or read. It follows that there is hardly ever any sense in which such public debates respond *directly* to public opinion, understood as the *opinion of the public*. Rather such opinion is referred to and characterised in a number of different kinds of ways depending upon what the issue is that is being debated.

In point of fact, it is journalists who regularly identify those stories and issues that are considered to *concern the public* in this direct sense. Brookes et al (2004) usefully point to different kinds of representation of public opinion contained in recent UK television election coverage: horse-race polls, issue preference tallies and vox pops. Vox pops are, of course, a visual media device and their use are regulated by codes of conduct; in any case they tend to be employed as a source of leavening of news

rather than as a guide to the public mood. Party vote intentions and various measures of support for particular policy stances also form the context of upmarket coverage of politics but they hardly ever drive the treatment of issues. As Brookes et al argue about the representation of public opinion during elections in the US and UK:

(P)ublic opinion is introduced only insofar as it informs the discussion going on between political elites. The idea that politicians should be forced to *respond* to public opinion (rather than public opinion being merely a response to the politicians) may be a democratic idea, but it goes against the grain of the well-established routines of election coverage. To put it bluntly, television elections are about what politicians talk about rather than what the public wants them to talk about (2004: 70).

This summary statement underpins our point that there are hardly any instances one can point to where public debate is presented as a direct response to public opinion or to agendas put in play by representatives of the public. Still less the sense in which members of the public are able to directly take part in such debates. The innovation in the Brookes et al research is the attention to *different kinds of representation* of public opinion, although each of these is employed by reporters to invoke 'the public' or to support or contextualise a policy announcement or statement rather than to seek a direct response to survey findings. Indeed the researchers found many instances of vague references to the public mood, made by commentators, which were not supported by poll evidence or where particular kinds of evidence were drawn on selectively so as to preserve a presentational balance in the questioning of party officials and spokespersons (2004: 70-71).

Valuable as this work is we would argue that it only applies to the relationship between public debates and the various uses of 'measures' of public opinion in the broadcast and upmarket media. Our research suggests that the representation of public opinion in the mid-market and downmarket newspapers is hardly ever represented in the ways illustrated by Brookes et al. The one exception is the use of a type of vox pop in the downmarket tabloids, usually as support for a particular campaign being run by the paper on behalf of their 'readers'. The other type of representation of public opinion is that of the letters' page (Richardson and Franklin 2003). While readers' letters are a prominent feature of the upmarket papers (Bromley 1998b), often involving professional responses or informed opinion, in the

mid-market and downmarket tabloids they invoke a very different representation of public opinion and how it is seen to represent 'the people'.

Although the mid-market and downmarket tabloids do report poll results they are often (a) one's conducted by the paper themselves (as opposed to Mori or ICM) and are often structured into 'yes' and 'no' and (b) are usually run as a means of indicating readership support for a campaign or agenda being promoted by the paper itself. In this respect, it is the vox pop type of evidence of opinion the tabloids prefer. This leads us to suggest that public opinion, as it is represented in the mid-market and downmarket press, is a very different kind of measure of what the public think. For example, although tabloids may typify readers in terms of the 'person in the street' - so that their opinion can 'stand in for others' - they are less likely to categorise different kinds of groups with different kinds of opinions over an issue, as we might find in the broadcast and upmarket media. This treatment, we would argue, is entirely consistent with the particular way in which public opinion is being represented in tabloid coverage: as the authentic and genuine voice of the people. It is this sense we intend to illustrate with our analysis of the Asylum campaigns run by The Sun and Daily Mail, respectively.

What we hope we have established thus far is that public debates are actually elite events that involve a closed-circle of policy makers, politicians and broadcasters. Such 'events' or debate rituals are reported by journalists within the upmarket papers and broadcast media; selectively in the mid-market tabloids. They form little or none of the coverage of the downmarket tabloids. Given that this is the case the question begged is this: how do the downmarket and mid-market tabloids actually influence the political agenda of this self-referencing and self-regarding circle? The answer is public opinion. The downmarket and mid-market tabloids are able to cohere, characterise and present a particular type of public opinion, which is seen, both by the papers themselves and among political elites, as reflecting the actual language and concerns of their readerships.

It is this process of construction and mobilisation of tabloid public opinion that we wish to examine. Here we will argue that, at a textual level, such an impression depends upon how such papers present their relationship to their readers and the extent to which this is viewed by elites as the natural or loyal 'constituency' of those papers. This powerful sense of connection to a readership is actually conveyed through a number of features of the tabloid: its use of language, 'ordinary' discourse and slang which is

able to speak for and to its public in a way that is distinctly different and indeed alienating and brash to readers of the up-market press. Its irreverence to those in authority and celebrity and above all its sense of humour which is often driven by a deep sense of the cruelty and severity of group judgements and practices and the weakness and veniality of 'human nature'. All of these features cohere to give a sense of the tabloid package and its reading experience. But crucial to our concerns is the act of transformation that is involved in the ordinary language of The Sun and the moral language of the Daily Mail and how this involves an act of transformation of the 'ordinary' into the moral and political. The key aspect of this that we wish to highlight, in terms of our sample material, is the campaigning style and strategies of these papers and how an examination of this can reveal this act of transformation and the extent to which it relies on the senses of public opinion we have already outlined.

But before we move to the analysis of the sample we need to build up and solidify our emergent theorisation of the market structure of UK newspapers and how this establishes the basis of a political relationship between elites and tabloids, to the extent that the content and address of the different types of press are almost completely separate (all of which suits the political elites very well, most of the time). As a rule, the downmarket tabloids are supremely disinterested in elite activities and pronouncements and give them almost no coverage. When they do pick up on aspects of elite activity or politics they do so usually because (a) the issue is viewed as in their readers' interests (or more likely a 'threat' to such interests, often involving the mobilisation of sentiments of the community, the nation and 'us') or (b) where an issue or event has passed into a social or moral framework analogous to that of the paper's own moral universe (what is fascinating about the structure of this universe is that it manages to be both puritanical and prurient at the same time, reconciled ultimately perhaps in terms of the view that people are weak and open to temptation, given the opportunity for vice, but nevertheless such behaviour must be condemned and punished, preferably through some ritual of public humiliation).

The mid-market Daily Mail also has these tabloid concerns (although they are addressed in a language that is peculiar to the mid-market papers: less obviously prurient, more openly moralistic and judgemental). At the same time, the paper has loftier interests in certain aspects of elite debate and conduct. But again this is very much couched in terms of the ambit of interests and concerns of its readership. It is traditionally believed that the Mail speaks for 'middle England' but the paper's

tabloidization strategy and its recent expansion of readership and circulation figures (second in size now only to The Sun) suggest the composition of 'middle England' has changed a great deal or that the values that structure the Mail universe have a wider constituency in contemporary Britain than the clichéd view of 'little England' would suggest.

The significance of this structural differentiation is that it allows the elite to manage political agendas with tacit popular acquiescence until such agendas or issues wake the sleeping tabloid dragon into fire breathing outrage. In these circumstances this market structuration can also act as a transmission belt allowing the volume of coverage to spill upwards until it receives the attention of the upmarket and broadcast media, at which point it becomes a *bona-fide* political hot potato. What we wish to move on to address now is the *circumstances which allow this to happen* and how this movement or mobilisation of public opinion is achieved. To do this we first consider existing models of issue mobilisation that attempt to show how the 'hermeneutic circle' of elite debate is breached from without, namely moral panic theory and agenda setting. We then consider those accounts of public opinion that argue that the role of newspapers is vital in securing the hegemony of elite groups by translating the views of the elite into a popular discourse. Next, we examine accounts of the relationship between political elites and the politics of immigration, as they are presented in a recognised 'standard' analytical text (Solomos 2003), in terms of what sort of theorisation of media it offers. After this we provide a critical overview of past media work and its treatment of the structuration of UK media and the reproduction of elite frameworks on immigration and asylum issues. Through a critical discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of this various work we go on to propose an account of how the campaign journalism of the tabloids has shaped and directed elite strategies towards the politics of asylum and immigration. Finally, we illustrate critical aspects of our argument through a selective analysis of our sample.

Moral Panic theory: reassessing the legacy

Our discussion of moral panic theory is enormously facilitated by the recent attempt by Critcher (2003) to re-examine the model against other versions, such as hegemony and attributional models, and to integrate aspects of agenda setting theory into this re-assessment. The relevance of Cohen's (1973;

2002) classic exposition of the moral panic spiral to our concerns is how it accounts for the sudden emergence and dramatic amplification of a non-elite defined issue to the centre of media coverage and public political agendas. But Cohen does not include immigration (or indeed asylum seekers) as one of his key series of postwar panics nor does he specify that such panics should involve a particular folk devil. However the rooting of the combustible material of panics in the moral outrage of groups and the way in which this accelerating irrationalism connects with postwar experience of social class and memories of deprivation is suggestive of how discursive ideologies translate the stuff of 'social reality' into an exaggerated moral indignation. Key to this process, for Cohen, is the role of media reporting and how news values and press treatment lead to a spiral of over-reporting, exaggeration, sensationalism and distortion. But the definition of the social problem or folk devil rests with moral entrepreneurs rather than the papers themselves who are not seen to have a particular interest in the issues beyond their news values. Cohen's theory also has no role for public opinion but assumes that the impact of the panic is measured by its depth of effect upon the public. It is also not clear what role elites play in the resolution of the episode or the extent to which this might encourage or make possible a repeat of it at a later date.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994) social constructionist 'attributional' model of moral panic, while significantly departing in crucial aspects from Cohen's account, does offer a more structured sense of how a social definition must meet certain criteria if it is to become a full blown panic, able to enter the political and policy agenda of elites. There must be: (i) a heightened level of concern over the behaviour of a group and its consequences and this must be manifest in the form of opinion polls, media reporting, etc. (ii) a folk-devil stereotype must be established to which group hostility is directed in terms of the threat to the community or societal values; (iii) a substantial proportion of the public must believe the threat to them is real if the panic is to progress; (iv) this public concern must be grossly 'disproportionate' in relation to its object (v) finally, such episodes must exhibit extreme volatility in their emergence and period of public prominence.

While Goode and Ben-Yehuda's attributional criteria allow them to distinguish a moral panic episode from that of the construction of a social problem agenda this, in itself, does not also work to provide a model of the media-thresholds a panic must pass through to receive elite recognition. One of

the crucial reasons for this is because Goode and Beh-Yehuda operate with a pluralist model of the interaction of elites, claims makers, interest groups, professionals and the media itself. This feature is brought out very clearly in their assessment of three possible explanations for the emergence of panics: (i) grassroots models of exaggerated but mistaken public concern; (ii) elite engineered campaigns designed to generate fear and concern over particular groups and (iii) organised interest groups, such as 'professional associations, police departments, the media, religious groups and educational organisations' who have a key impact on the content, direction and timing of panics (Goode and Beh-Yehuda cited in Critcher 2003: 25).

The fact that Goode and Ben-Yehuda prefer a combination of (i) and (iii) is very significant in that it assumes that a panic must be supported by some measure of grass roots public opinion rather than the *attribution* of such concern. Critcher's (2003) survey of a number of recent panics suggests that the public were often indifferent to particular campaigns or simply confused about them. It is not necessary for there to be any genuine or clarified concern in the shape of public opinion or other such measure; there only needs to be the invocation of such concern. What is crucial though is the representation of this concern within a significant volume of media reporting and the additional factor that such media are leading and promoting such concern in an attempt to gain attention from political elites. By subsuming media within their category of organised interest groups, Goode and Ben-Yehuda are unable to account for differences of economic and ideological power between such groups or how particular groups are able to promote and circulate their ideas.

Hegemony theory and the tabloids: policing the political elite?

It has been claimed by Jones that what Hall et al do in their celebrated *Policing the Crisis* text is appropriate the model of moral panic as a crisis of hegemony and thereby effect a 'wholesale transformation of Cohen's conceptual repertoire' (1997: 12). This criticism seems justified but we will consider it only as far as it allows us to develop the clarity of our own argument. Prior to this we consider the value of the Hall et al contribution. First the study offers a clear structural distinction between primary definers (Cohen's moral entrepreneurs) and secondary definers: the media. But it also offers a detailed exploration of the role of news making practices and their role in the construction of

panics, demonstrating journalist's dependence on official and institutional sources and how such statements are translated into a 'public idiom' recognisable to their readers. This press and media construction of public opinion is then fed back to 'primary definers', resulting in the manufacture of a 'signification spiral' that, in turn, feeds the life of the panic or 'crisis of hegemony'. However, for Hall et al this self-referencing relationship between primary definers and media, that constructs a topic, such as their researched example of 'mugging', as both a public issue and a matter of public concern, ultimately allows the elite to both respond to and close down the topic; thereby managing hegemony and justifying further state encroachment into civil society. We believe that this model underestimates the extent to which some issues and how they are shaped threatens the hegemony or containment strategies of the political elite. It also exaggerates the dependency of media upon primary definers and therefore does not allow for instances where the media act as primary definers in their own right. We can usefully contextualise these criticisms within Hall et al's exemplary account of how the press actively construct public opinion.

Hall et al (1978: 62-3) identify two types of press editorialising in relation to 'public opinion'. The first is where the newspaper expresses its opinion but in a public idiom i.e. where its own thoughts and judgments, arrived at by the editorial team, are reported in the same way as those of the primary definers of an issue. The second type of editorialising adds a particular kind of twist to this operation in claiming to speak *for the public* so that the sense of representation or leadership of opinion is fudged. Here speaking for the public represent a shift from *speaking in a public idiom* to claiming to actually be expressing the public's views. But what has been achieved in this slippage is a exactly a variety of 'populist ventriloquism', where the paper's *public idiom* becomes the *voice of the public* so that the distinction between the two has been lost or is no longer acknowledged as material.

This 'taking the public voice', this form of articulating what the vast majority of the public are supposed to think, this enlisting of public legitimacy for views which the newspaper *itself* is expressing, represents the media in its most active, *campaigning* role – the point where the media most actively shape and structure public opinion. This kind of editorial usually takes the form [...] of a demand that strong action *should* be taken - because the majority demand it (Hall et al 1978: 63).

This account of the mediating and connecting role of media in the formation of public opinion and the active orchestration of such opinion, while hugely insightful, is too ready to view this process as consistent with the views and interests of the powerful. This is so in two senses: (a) where the views of the powerful are translated into a public idiom and (b) in the 'playing back' of assumed public opinion to the powerful. In both instances the public act as crucial point of reference and legitimation while actually being bypassed (ibid). Despite the fact that the authors doubt such a 'closed circle' model their innovative account of public opinion formation and mobilisation does tend to suggest precisely this.

In the case of asylum and migration coverage in the mid-market and downmarket tabloid press, it is clearly the case that neither the public idiom adopted by the papers studied or the 'playing back' of public opinion in support of particular campaigns (the Mail's Asylum Madness or the Sun's Asylum Campaign) closely corresponded to the interests or wishes of the powerful (if we take the powerful to be the government and economically dominant groups in British society). Indeed, in terms of the formal features of the model we are proposing, it is the government that is compelled to 'play back' its version of the language of public opinion in support of its proposals or policies, to the assumed public 'represented' by the voice of the tabloids. But, invariably, such pronouncements are viewed by such papers as a 'concession' or 'admission' of culpability or inactivity on the part of the political elite which is often 'too little, too late' or not nearly 'far reaching enough' to satisfy the editorial voice of the people.

Therefore, if there is some kind of self-referencing 'spiral of signification' mechanism operating here it is one initiated and recuperated by the tabloid press themselves, rather than elite groups. For it is the mid-market and downmarket tabloids who are able to define the 'truth' as it is *apparently* understood by the public and then measure other kinds of opinion against this yardstick. The result is that political elites are not able to contain or manage the issue of asylum and immigration, as it has come to be defined and redefined by the campaigning tabloid media, without some cost to its claims of ultimate political authority and legitimacy. This has effects on the kinds of strategies it is able to pursue but also gives rise to anxieties about the possible seepage of such matters into other areas of its authority.

Agenda setting theory and media access

Agenda setting theory attempts to explain 'why information about certain issues, and not other issues, is available to the public in a democracy; how public opinion is shaped; and why certain issues are addressed through policy actions while others are not' (Dearing and Rogers cited in Critcher 2003: 136). Theorists identify a number of agendas: the media agenda, the public agenda and the policy agenda. The prioritising of issues within such agendas is subject to competition conducted by claims makers, single issue groups and organisations, whose aim is to gain prominence through access to any or all of these agendas. The pluralist orientation of the approach means that agendas and claims makers interact in a free-market of ideas. The reliance of the approach on the detailed examination of particular case studies underlines this. However, such studies tend to suggest that the media agenda is the most influential, especially on the public agenda, whose priorities and concerns are reflected in opinion polls. It is this interaction, between media and public agendas, which is most influential on the policy agenda. However, the aim of policy action is not to solve but to defuse an issue by institutionalising a response to it.

This account of policy action is more realistic than hegemony theory, particularly so in accounting for how elites respond to issues that emerge from media agendas where public support is called upon to demand a policy response. Also the term 'claims maker' seems more useful than that of moral entrepreneurs, especially in accounting for when *this role is played by the media themselves*. Also the idea that all claims making activity relies on the reporting of a 'trigger event', which crystallizes attention by symbolising the properties of the issue, is useful in providing a context against which claims are offered. The fact that they may not be taken up gives the model a dynamic quality, lacking in hegemony theory. What we would want to add to this is that clearly the down and mid-market tabloids have disproportionate resources in relation to most claims makers, although they may often seek support from particular ones or take up a cause already being pursued if this suits their interests. However, 'for either role to be successful, the agenda must be accepted by other media of higher status, first upmarket newspapers, then broadcasting. Only then will the weight of opinion require response from government' (Critcher 2003: 136). This is not because such opinion is demonstrated but rather that

political elites view the degree of media attention given to an issue as a proxy indicator of the volume of public concern.

Immigration, Asylum and Political Elites: counting the cost of public opinion

We now wish to consider the implications of our analysis for contemporary debates about the politics of asylum and immigration in the UK. Authoritative surveys, such as that of Solomos (2003), argue that the current treatment of asylum seekers, refugees and economic migrants continue to be jeopardised by the ways in which these issues are subject to negative politicisation, a good deal of which involves the continued *racialisation* of terms such as immigration, asylum and refugee status, such that prospective asylum seekers and refugees are defined as 'bogus' or 'fake' and therefore, a *de facto* source of 'covert' immigration into Britain. In viewing the current situation thus, Solomos suggests that the prospects for radical institutional and political reform are extremely limited, since such trends exhibit a good deal of historical continuity in placing discourses of 'race' and racism at the centre of a changing but consistent process of conflict and controversy. Central to this contestation has been 'political and media debates' concerned with the largely negative impact of 'black' migration on the culture and institutions of British society. Thus 'major policy initiatives have been largely the result of attempts by successive governments to meet the demands of those calling for action to tackle racial discrimination and to respond to those who oppose such intervention' (2003: 93).

In terms of our analysis of agenda setting theory what needs to be added to this equation is an understanding of the relative economic and ideological resources at the disposal of these broadly opposed factions and to what extent they are supported or not by mid-market and downmarket tabloid media coverage. Over the issue of the role of media as a claims maker, Solomos is inconsistent. Pointing to particular issues he emphasises the powerful impact of media coverage, such as the racialisation of urban disorders of the 1980s; or Labour's public and policy response to the case of the 800 displaced Roma people arriving in Britain in October 1997, which he argues was made 'in direct response to widespread and hostile media coverage' (2003: 71). Elsewhere Solomos broadly claims that previous legislation introduced by the Conservative and Labour's own Immigration and Asylum Act (1999) were made 'in response to popular expressions of hostility towards asylum seekers and

refugees' (2003: 75). Throughout his wide-ranging and detailed analysis, Solomos variously identifies 'media and political agendas', 'public and political agendas', 'ideological and policy agendas' and 'political and ideological responses'. This usage suggests an agenda setting theory but not one that privileges the media agenda. Rather various state interventions (which have institutionalised 'racist immigration controls' (2003: 75) are the outcome of an interplay between ideologies and policies that both respond to and refract changing social, economic and political events.

In terms of our model, while the changing external environment provides the context against which particular policy claims are constructed the 'interplay' between them is structured by the degree of access they have to media agendas and thus public circulation. The dynamics of this process are broadly determined by the structure of the media, particularly the press. While the decisive factor in negatively structuring the range of elite action is the ability of the mid and downmarket press to influence the upmarket and broadcast media. This is most likely to occur when the coverage or leadership of the mid and downmarket press is seen to represent a significant weight of public opinion. We could argue that this is precisely what occurs within the examples Solomos provides of 'popular expressions of hostility' that result in negative elite pronouncements or policy shifts. However, an appropriate test of this hypothesis is Solomos's account of the failure of New Labour to reform asylum and immigration policy.

Solomos argues that in 1997 New Labour came to power with an extraordinary mandate which presented it with an 'historic opportunity to "think the unthinkable" and "do the undoable" by reforming state policy on immigration and race relations. The policy environment context which the new government found itself within was one divided between the claims of 'pressure groups and minority organisations about the impact of immigration policies on human rights and families' (2003: 69) on the one hand, and the issues surrounding the topic of asylum seekers and refugees, inherited from the Conservative administration, on the other. It is Solomos's judgement that Labour's Immigration and Asylum Act (1999) not only reproduces a tough stance to refugees and asylum seekers, coupled with weak reforms of racial discrimination policy, as previous Conservative and Labour regimes, but has deliberately set out to be seen as 'tough' as possible on the issue at every opportunity. Solomos concludes, 'it has become evident that rather than questioning and challenging the moral panic that has

broken out over the question of refugees and asylum seekers New Labour has, if anything, added to it' (2003: 253).

How can our media model of the structuration of the press and broadcasting explain this outcome? First, these issues are constructed as social problems requiring state intervention by 'claims makers': organisations and pressure groups concerned with minority rights, on the one hand, and the mid-market and downmarket tabloid's campaign to expose 'bogus asylum seekers', on the other. Each of these claims are communicated to the political elite by their exposure and circulation within media coverage. The issue of reform of race relations legislation and immigration finds circulation within coverage of the upmarket papers, radio and television and is subject to the process of public debate involving representatives of the minority rights organisations and various experts and commentators. This debate however receives no commensurate coverage within the mid-market and downmarket tabloid press. This is because the mid-market and downmarket press are engaged in a concerted campaign to out do each other in exposing the loopholes of existing immigration policy that allows 'bogus claimants' access to state subsidies and accommodation, etc. Such is the volume and intensity of this coverage that it spills upwards into the upmarket and broadcast media. Once it has reached this threshold then the claims involved in this coverage become part of the protocols of public debate journalism and ministers and state officials are required to account for themselves and explain their policies and actions.

At this point of *threshold intensity* political elites must address the public concern it finds itself faced with irrespective of the value or legitimacy of countervailing claims. This is why even governments with a popular mandate to legislate for reform can be compelled to make a u-turn or drastically compromise on their promises. Clearly, the determining structural factor here is the unequal economic and ideological resources of the competing claims makers and how this translates into a different style of representation of public concern. In this respect, the relationship between the tabloids and their readership public is more like a medieval fiefdom than a channel of democratic representation.

Comparing previous media research: 'objectivity' and 'elite agendas'

As far as we are aware all previous analysis of the coverage and representation of the issue of immigration or more broadly 'race' within UK media, largely fails to note the structuration of the

downmarket, mid-market and upmarket media as significant; or that such structuration might offer the institutional mechanism by which tabloid campaigns could address political elites or hold them to account on behalf of their readerships. In point of fact, quite a few of the studies of note, discuss their analysis in terms of the role of media representations in general, illustrating this with examples derived from a variety of press and broadcasting sources; or they offer a sample of coverage across the press as indicative of the representational strategies of the media as a whole (e.g. Butterworth 1966; Halloran 1974; Hartmann and Husband 1974; Husband 1975; Troyna 1982). This is partly to be explained by the fact that such studies were seminal in opening up the field of study but is also a by-product of the research focus of such studies, in viewing the 'problem' of media representations of 'race' and immigration as one of distortion and misrepresentation of the issues, largely due to the operation of news values and journalistic practices on selection and treatment of material. The loudest complaint in these studies is that certain issues: levels of 'coloured' immigration; inter-ethnic conflict and behaviour; calls for legislation to control further immigration and control discrimination and, from 1968 onwards, excessive reference to Enoch Powell, predominate at the expense of other equally important ones: housing and social deprivation, education and employment reform, racist attacks and widespread discrimination - needed to gain a more rounded understanding of the situation.

We would argue that there are at least two set of assumptions underpinning this work that are relevant to our concerns. The first is that journalists should (despite news values and entrenched practices) strive to provide a balanced and objective account of social problems and that the model for this (if it is to be found or established anywhere) is broadsheet media and broadcasting (i.e. the upmarket media). Thus, while the studies are critical of media reporting as a whole it is the tabloid papers who are singled out for the most opprobrium and disapproval because of their 'sensationalist' and 'lurid' coverage. Second, the motive for this concern is the impact such coverage is likely to have on the 'white majority' reading public when they come, in certain situations, to form a judgement of the 'racial situation' and in their perception of their relationship to non-white others that they may not have any meaningful social contact with. Further studies suggested that the accumulated weight of such negative representations were likely to reinforce prejudiced attitudes and even stimulate racist attacks (Gordon and Rosenberg 1989: 62).

What is interesting about more recent studies, beyond the fact that they are much more methodologically sophisticated, is that they are medium specific and highly critical of upmarket media to meet the criteria of objectivity and impartiality in reporting the politics of racism, immigration, refugees and asylum. Notable examples here would be recent Glasgow University Media Group (McLaughlin 1999; Philo and Beattie 1999) work on refugees and asylum news coverage and van Dijk's six month study of the UK press treatment of the politics of anti-racism (1991). The Glasgow Group's method of analysis of television coverage of the issue of the regulation of migration into the UK and the European Union, involves comparing the details of coverage to form a 'thematic' analysis of dominant themes and interpretations against an objective compilation of the issues and context, derived from independent academic analysis. The group conclude that not only was the presentation of the issue highly partial (to the extent that it would not meet the broadcasters own criteria of balance and impartiality) but also that the treatment offered was skewed towards that version preferred by UK political elites.

This theme of the reproduction of the values and preferences of the political elite is also to be found in van Dijk's work (1991) on the UK press treatment of the politics and policies of anti-racism or what he refers to as the 'anti-anti-racism press'. It is van Dijk's argument, which is established through an exemplary combination of content and discourse analysis, that such press treatment is 'pre-formulated' by the entrenched values of a white elite, that ultimately benefits from the reproduction of racism. Thus, he argues,

although racism is in the interest of the whole white group, it will most of all benefit the (power of the) elites. Since the dominant white media and their ideologies are inextricably related to these political, social, and corporate elite groups, and mediate, legitimate, or even directly support white elite power, it is also in their interests to play their crucial, 'symbolic' role in the reproduction of the ethnic consensus and, in fact, to participate itself in its (pre)formulation (1991: 43).

While we certainly do not want to suggest that this work is not valuable in its contribution to anti-racist scholarship, it is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, it fails to recognise the pre-structuring of the press and broadcast media and how this relates to the kinds of concerns that are regularly addressed by the different types of papers and broadcasters, as well as the style of that address. This

underlies a failure to appreciate which publics are being addressed by which media and how this style of address is part and parcel of the way in which this 'constituency' is being constructed by its readership style. The implications of this are that it is not possible to apply the same kind of framework to decipher these different relationships and how they work. This is particularly the case with the mid-market and downmarket tabloids, as we will shortly illustrate.

The second point is the issue of the role of the different media and their relationship to political elites. Drawing on our earlier discussion, it is clear that the kind of informed debate that would be required to present the politics of asylum and immigration is simply not possible in the tabloid media, let alone the upmarket media. This is because the success of the tabloid media is based on the general avoidance of matters that occupy public debates taking place between elites and policy makers, regularly to be found in broadcasting and the upmarket media. What is required therefore is an approach which does not simply castigate the tabloid press for its 'lurid' and 'sensationalist' treatment of issues and its focus on the worst aspects of human private behaviour, sexual transgression and the values of the everyday escape from 'reality' but one that asks: what happens when this 'populist-authoritarianism' (to invert a phrase borrowed from Stuart Hall) is focussed on a serious social issue? What happens when this 'populism' is mobilised around the treatment of a public-political issue, such as asylum?

Tabloidisation, tabloid culture and the contradictions of 'depoliticised' news values

A number of theorists have identified the characteristic themes of entertainment-focussed or tabloidised 'news values' (sensational, superficial, prurient, down market). More specifically, Sparks (1991: 38-9) identifies a series of relative oppositions between the 'quality' and the 'popular': greater attention to sport than politics, a stress on 'human interest' stories rather than economic life, a focus on individuals rather than institutions, upon the local and immediate rather than the international and the long term, etc. Cottle (1993: 20-1) in turn, offers a typology of six thematic oppositions between 'Serious' and 'Popular' journalism: (see fig. 1). While this is clearly an ideal-typical set of oppositions (many of the popular categories, for example, have been absorbed into the increasing focus on consumption and entertainment of the quality papers) its overall dynamic is towards a de-limited 'news' focus but

characteristically enlarged concentration on what are seen to be the topics and concerns of the ordinary and the everyday. Hence, the 'structure of 'the popular' in modern journalism is' as Sparks observes 'massively and systematically "depoliticised"' (1991: 39). Given that this is clearly the case, what we want to raise is the question of how such 'news values' operate when they are occasionally called upon to 'make sense' of public-political issues, such as asylum?

Sparks' argument is useful here in identifying an explicit political content to popular newspapers but one that is 'articulated only intermittently and briefly' when the 'news values' of the popular press 'happen more or less to coincide with those of the quality press' (1991: 39). It is at this moment that 'the distinctive way in which the popular press treats issue of public concern' is revealed. For Sparks, the characteristic operation of the 'news values' of the popular press, when directed towards explaining a public issue, is to seek an 'immediacy of explanation' which is rooted in 'a direct appeal to personal experience' (1991: 41). Such appeals are not only ill-equipped to comprehend the structures and processes that lie outside of such experience but work to explain 'problem' events in terms of human-nature, moral behaviour and individual failings.

While this kind of analysis is useful in identifying how a 'depoliticised' news format can produce a 'reactionary populism' in its encounters with an intruding political world, we think that seeking to explain the way in which *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* embarked upon a campaign against asylum requires a more specific attention to the operation of tabloid news values as 'genre and sub-genre conventions' (Cottle 1999:198) which figure in the process of selecting and framing how news stories are 'told'. What this means is that particular newspapers operate with particular 'sub-genre' variations on the tabloid news values that inform the tabloid genre style as a whole. Identifying the particular selection of variants that are called into play by the different papers as they relate to the 'framing', selection and treatment of the asylum issue can tell us much more about the textual dynamics of the coverage as a whole and its representational 'politics'. In particular, they can go some way to demonstrating how, within particular story treatments, the particular inflection, direction and angle that is taken connects that treatment to an emergent ideological framework. This, we would argue, is the moment when the 'depoliticised' tabloid private sphere is 're-politicised'.

Fig. 1. A typology for the analysis of the tabloid press

'Serious' Journalism	'Popular' Journalism	
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1. From the Public to the Private Sphere

Public Sphere	Private Sphere	x
Institutional/Legal Order	Moral Order	x
Parliament/Parties/Political Process	Deviance/Scandals	x
	Personalities/Private Lives	
	Celebrating Consumption	
	Leisure, Family	
	Sexuality	

2. Hierarchies of Access

Political and social elites	Personalities/Celebrities	
	Ordinary people	x

3. Functions of Information and Affirmation

Information/Representation	Affirmation/Celebration	x
Watchdog	Moral guardian	x
Opinion formation	Injecting fun and spectacle	x
	Everyday Life	x
Rationalistic	Ritualistic	x

4. News Epistemologies

Objectivist	Subjectivist	x
Marshalling facts/figures and data	Involving experiential accounts	x
Expert/ authoritative	First-hand testimony	x
Comment	Reaction	x

5. Modes of Address

Authoritative/impartial	Championing/Partisan	x
Detached	Engaged	x

6. Words and Images

Written text	Visual text	x
Deliberative	Immediacy	x
Detached	Engaged	x

Adapted from: Cottle (1993: 20-21).

Moral Order/Deviance: The category of the moral is arguably the most already pre-political because it operates to identify the normal and the deviant, the boundaries and borders of acceptable behaviour and the 'consensus' that is being affronted by the 'actions' of individuals (Cohen 1973; Hall et al 1978; Critcher 2003). The characteristic treatment of morality in the downmarket and mid-market papers is though, actually divergent. Downmarket papers reveal the moral structure of condemnation from 'inside' what at first instance appears to be a celebration of the sensational, such as deviant/immoral sexual behaviour of celebrities or public figures (Connell 1992: 73). The mid-market papers are more likely to lead with the moral condemnation but insinuate the 'sensationalist/abhorrent' interior in the treatment of the story.

Application: When this framework is employed to frame the actions of political actors or disturbing 'others', outside the borders of the ordinary and expected, then there is an explicit attempt to translate the story into actions that can be judged/condemned 'in the name of commonsense and the ordinary person's intuitive sense of 'what is right' (Cottle 1993: 21). But in order to achieve this the story must present those actions as deserving of this condemnation. This is where the treatment is politicised: in the editorial decision to interpret the actions of asylum actors as 'devious' and 'dishonest'. It follows that such a framing is not an inevitable function of the news values in question.

Ordinary people: this category is central to the news treatment and its transformation within the asylum coverage. Application: This so in terms of the shaping of the issue as one that concerns and should involve the views and opinions of ordinary Sun and Daily Mail readers, who are the ones who are most affected by the impact of asylum. But, of course, this framing of the issue requires a tremendous ideological partiality in not also recognising and giving prominence to the fact that asylum seekers and refugees are ordinary people who are massively affected by their category status within this process. So what is taking place is a politicisation of the ordinary in very ideological ways.

Affirmation/Celebration: this category usually operates to subject the powerful/celebrity caste to the condemnation of the ordinary when they transgress the boundaries of the acceptable. While this clearly involves the mobilisation of a discourse of moral outrage it can also involve the invocation of irreverence in the shape of fun and laughter at the expense of the pilloried. Application: the personalisation of the failure of asylum legislation to protect the Sun and Daily Mail readers allows the

papers to poke fun and derision at the 'incompetence' and 'incomprehension' of the political elite, such as (former Home Secretary) David Blunkett. It also allows The Sun to co-opt its 'fun' and 'sensation' set-up scenarios to poke fun at hate figures, such as the Muslim cleric, Abu Hamza. Such seemingly 'reactionary populism' clearly also has a ritual function.

Subjectivist/experiential accounts/first hand testimony/reaction: 'It is the emotional and affective 'reality' of a story, its human consequences as lived, felt and understood by ordinary (and therefore broadly representative) individuals, that brings home the reality of a particular event to its readership' (Cottle 1993: 22). Application: what is revealing about the modification of this cluster of news values is how they are repositioned within The Sun's asylum appeal as vox pops that, while supporting the campaign in a language very similar to the papers own, offer anecdotes and vignettes that 'bring home the reality of the consequences'. As above, this treatment involves a massive shift of attention from the actual victims of this ongoing event, who are denied any status within this category, which might allow the telling of their stories. There seems to be no determining generic element that would not make this compatible with the papers usual treatment of victims of crime, disorder and tragedy.

Championing/Partisan: The tabloids, as champions of commonsense and guardians of the moral order, actively proclaim themselves as partisan on issue that are in the interests of their readers (Cottle 1993: 22). The characteristic mode of address is a strident, often raucous appeal to readers to engage with the topic in a spirit of a shared 'emotionally charged' response (op cit). This is about empathetic, gut responses to the framing of an issue and its terms of address, that Cottle (1993: 23) argues, frequently involve tapping into 'pre-existent but mostly unarticulated, ideologies in which structures of feeling are deeply implicated'.

Application: The Sun's anti-asylum campaign is clearly motivated and framed in terms of this set of news values and requires the reader to emotional engage with the issue. But our analysis reveals that in order for the campaign to involve 'the people' it must demonstrate an alignment which is unified across the existing ethnic and religious ways in which the people are differentiated. Clearly the editorial strategy informing the selection of representative vox pops is guided by the anticipation of charges of racism and xenophobia and inadvertently presents a much more heterogeneous readership to support

its 'tough but fair' stance. Yet, within this selection, the clear anxiety of the disproportionate selection of Asian British respondents, is to negotiate a position on the 'inside' of the ideological border-conflict.

Visual text/images: Clearly the tabloid is a visual text that 'works' to communicate through an interaction of words and images. Treating the page as a site for the grabbing of the reader's attention often means that such papers will bend the rules of verisimilitude in doctoring, altering and cropping photos or images. Application: one of the overriding impressions of the asylum coverage in The Sun and Mail is pictures of shell-suited young men, waving to the camera, smiling or giving peace signs or alternatively, scaling fences or walking in 'gang-like' groups. One of the revelations that arose from our continuous sample analysis was that it was the same set of photos being used over and over again!

Analysis

In this section we present examples from our sample which identify content/treatment under the following themes/areas of representation, consistent with our hypothesis :

- Access: Ordinary people – 'public opinion' – vox pops and letters.
- Affirmation/celebration of tabloid culture: - irreverence shown to elite figures, authority and other organisations, etc. Use of slang, colloquialisms, puns and humour.
- Representation of 'others': folk devils, bogus refugees and asylum seekers, spongers, scroungers and devious manipulators, etc.
- Moral and political framework: community/commonsense/common values/us and them/moral discourse:

Representing public opinion: vox pops and reader's letters.

The page 6 leader 'YOU SAY: END THIS ASYLUM MADNESS, Thousands join our campaign' (21/1/2003) reports on the take up of The Sun's invitation in their 'Read This and Get Mad' article, run the previous week, which began the campaign. The campaign line that the coupon signers are being asked to endorse is the following: that

the Government acts NOW to stop Britain becoming a soft touch for illegal asylum seekers. While I support legal immigration and have no problem with those who face genuine persecution or bring a

skill to the economy, I want a harder line taken on illegal immigrants. I call on Prime Minister Tony Blair to protect Britain before it is too late. END THIS ASYLUM MADNESS NOW.'

Of course, the ideological formula lodged at the heart of this appeal is that for every asylum seeker that is found to be bogus there is an illegal immigrant finding entry into Britain. This is how it is possible to slide from asylum to immigration within the language of this appeal. Immigration, as the Sun's editors know full well, means: person not wanted in Britain.

The opening paragraph, highlighted in bold type, reads: 'Thousands of angry Sun readers rushed to join our campaign to save Britain from asylum madness' and continues 'Our office was flooded with emails, faxes and petition coupons demanding the Government acts now to stop the country from becoming a soft touch for illegal immigrants'. The rest of the article presents a series of vox pops from members of the Sun reader public, who are identified in the following manner: Julie Purdham, of Reading, Berks; Rob Jones of Manchester, James Coster from South London, and so on. This series of edited quotes from individuals offers a range of responses, all of which support the overall framing of the issue by The Sun: that most of the asylum seekers 'let in' are bogus claimants who wish to exploit the current system, which is unable to identify who is a genuine case and are therefore able to take advantage of tax payers resources that they are not entitled to. This 'madness' has been allowed to continue because of incompetent officials and the lack of firm action taken by the Government, all of which is an insult to the tolerance and good nature of British people who are being taken for a ride. Thus, 'Enough is enough. The vast majority of the British public is sick to the back teeth of the ridiculous situation' or 'When is Blair and Blunkett going to stop these parasites from entering our country. The only reason they are coming here is to get as many free handouts as possible'. These hardline views are accompanied by others which argue, 'The labour government have made such a mess of the asylum system. I have no problem in sincere and honest asylum seekers making a better life and getting jobs to better themselves. Get it sorted, Mr. Blair' . Here we can see the elements of the argument and how it is represented by this range of views. A notable feature of the comments has to be the sense in which readers address themselves to the government directly or to representatives of the government who are seen to be responsible for 'sorting it out'.

Another very prominent feature of The Sun's campaign is the representation of the views of Britain's ethnic minorities, the vast majority of which are seen to support The Sun on this issue and are therefore included in the majority 'commonsense'. It would perhaps be cynical to suggest that the representative of this group, the only people pictured in the article, Asian newsagents, were something of a captive audience for Sun reporters! A representative quote here would be: 'The Government has been too soft on this issue. Are these people genuine asylum seekers or are they bogus? I totally agree with the Sun's campaign'. Genuine asylum seekers are also said to 'back' the campaign because bogus asylum seekers 'make it much worse for people like me'.

The day after the above feature The Sun runs its 'Join Our Asylum Campaign' as a pg. 6 feature (22/01/2003), which is unsupported by any news reporting. The centred petition is circled by ten vox pop panels, quoting 'ordinary' Sun readers, supporting the campaign (each pictured with a copy of the Sun in their hands or singing the petition). What is striking about this feature is that, out of the ten vox pops, seven of them are Asian British citizens, expressing their indignation about bogus asylum seekers. Again, it has to be said that it is very rare to see this many Asian Brits featured in the pages of The Sun in a single issue. Again the vox pops are clearly meant to express the view of the ordinary person in the street. Each of these vox pops not only supports The Sun's central claim but adds the flavour of a personal observation or anecdote. For example, a 21 year old Asian student is quoted as saying, 'From what I can see these so-called asylum seekers just get money given to them – whereas I've got to work for mine'. Or a 57 year old Asian taxi driver offers the following: 'I know one English lady who applied for council housing and had to wait six months but asylum seekers get houses straight away without giving any reason'.

In a double page feature (28/01/2003: pp. 5-6) The Sun follows up the irreverent front page, 'YOU ALL RIGHT DAVE?' (see below), responding to Home Secretary David Blunkett's attack on its Campaign (although the details of what Blunkett actually said are not quoted), by printing an 'open letter to Tony Blair, urging him to take action on the asylum crisis'. The letter, headed 'Dear Mr. Blair' claims 3000, 000 readers have 'signed up' and - since many envelopes contained more than one petition, because readers have been copying the form and 'passing it around their neighbourhoods, workplaces, shops and pubs' the number received might be 4000, 000 – represents 'without doubt the biggest

response to a newspaper petition in history'. This allows The Sun editors to feel justified in asking 'on behalf of 10 million Sun readers' for an answer to its demands. This is backed up by the following, weighted justifier: 'Most of our readers probably voted for you last time round. Today they feel betrayed by you. They deserve answers. On their behalf, we demand answers' (p. 4).

Here is an example of The Sun's speaking on behalf of its readers and defining them as a constituency that had previously supported the government and now demands action on their behalf. The threat of withdrawal of that support is clearly there as is the sense of a direct-democratic demand to act on the behalf of the British population. The letter then refers to Blunkett's characterisation of its 'crusade [...] against uncontrolled immigration' as racist, arguing that this is the behaviour of a man who has 'lost the confidence of the people'. It is clearly the case that The Sun is speaking directly here to the political elite and claiming to be a publicly appointed channel of popular democracy.

The following day (29/01/2003) under a page two headline, 'ONLY ONE IN 10 ARE SENT BACK', 'Blunkett sham over fake refugees' The Sun runs its campaign panel under a banner: 385, 000 SAY NO, claiming 'Sackloads of coupons arrived at our offices urging the Government to act over the tide of bogus refugees'.

On the Saturday, The Sun offered a centre-page spread (01/02/2003: pp. 36-7) that epitomises the tabloid vox pop style of representation of 'public opinion'. The double page feature features five representative couples, who have been selected according to their religious faith and defined by their marital status, period of residence in Britain, age and occupation. Each couple, in response to a set of questions asked of them – one of which was 'whether they were worried about the influx of bogus asylum seekers' – express their views. If we take that question we can find it reflected in the content of each of the responses – as fact or probability. Couple one: 'The number of bogus asylum seekers being allowed into Britain is a worry because it amounts to a drain on resources'. Couple two: 'We are very worried that tens of thousands of bogus asylum seekers are being allowed into Britain'. Couple three: 'Britain is very tolerant of immigrants [...] But people are beginning to feel the country is letting too many in.' Couple four: 'The Government is failing to deal with the issue of people coming here from all over the world. They are getting in too easily and it is taking its toll on the country's resources'. Couple five: 'if people are entering England who don't generally need our help then there's obviously a big problem.'

On the following Thursday (06/02/2003) The Sun runs a photo 'set-up' of Sun PR and journalist, accompanied by three Sun readers, delivering '40 more sacks of petition letters to No 10' (although we can only see ten). One of the readers is quoted as saying, 'Now the Government must sit up and listen' (p. 14). Under a sub-leader the paper claims it now has 586, 844 responses.

On March 1st The Sun played the numbers game, under the banner headline, 'ASYLUM ARMY' the paper claimed that more asylum seekers entered Britain in one year than there were soldiers in the British Army. At the same time, on pp. 4-5, the paper claimed that asylum was officially 'Out of control' at a time when more than 1 million Sun readers supported their campaign to 'get tough on asylum cheats'. They also suggest that this number is 'double' the 1997 toll when Labour were voted in

Affirmation/celebration of tabloid culture: - *irreverence shown to elite figures, authority and other organisations, etc. Use of slang, colloquialisms, puns and humour.*

A feature of the tabloid campaigning style is the particularised treatment of authority figures within the asylum issue. In holding a general stance of irreverence toward the government position the newspaper directs criticism not only towards immigration policy but also towards senior Government individuals who are seen as directly responsible for policy and therefore the people who can rectify it, such as (then) Home Secretary, David Blunkett and Prime Minister, Mr. Tony Blair. The Sun's front page story of the 28 January 2003, under the damning headline 'ASYLUM MADNESS', provides an example of the latter, introducing a pseudo concern with the mental state of the home secretary, David Blunkett, in a familiarised way with the question 'YOU ALL RIGHT DAVE?'

The by-line 'Sun fears for home secretary's sanity' introduces this particular story's emphasis on the supposed irrational behaviour of the Home Secretary in 'slamming' the paper's asylum campaign. Describing the Home Secretary's criticism of the campaign as 'an astonishing rant' the story frames his actions as irrational and sets this understanding against the campaign and the rational opinion of readers, that it represents.

This allows a Sun spokesperson, to describe the paper's 'disturbed' reaction to this behaviour, particularly Blunkett's 'inability' to accept the points of view of thousands of Sun readers that the petition campaign clearly reflects. The paper concludes that the Home Secretary is clearly 'rattled' and

mischievously suggests that 'perhaps it is all getting on top of him'. The story presents a scenario where no compromise or agreement can be reached between government and the people on the issue of asylum and this further justifies the newspaper's stance over asylum.

Another feature of tabloid news treatment of asylum, particularly found within downmarket tabloids and adequately represented in the above discussion of David Blunket, is the technique to use humour to trivialise the serious news issue. Newspapers use puns, slang, stereotypes, caricatures, exaggerated personalisations, manipulate images, concoct attention-grabbing scenarios and 'fake-documentary' photo-shoots, to heighten sensation and provide reader entertainment. All of these techniques are applied to aspects of the Asylum campaign coverage. To illustrate this news treatment we can examine a story situated within a long running campaign against the radical Muslim cleric, Abu Hamza.

Page 5 of The Sun (22/01/2003), reports on the newspaper's attempt to encourage the radical cleric, Abu Hamza to leave the UK. Describing Hamza simply as 'HOOK' or 'Evil Hook', the caption reads: ' HOOK GETS A ONE WAY SUN TICKET'. Under the subheading ' We buy Hamza £375 trip home', the story charts the details of the papers purchase of the ticket (which is pictured as an enlarged insert) and the efforts of a Sun reporter, holding the cheque to camera, to attract the attention of the cleric, at his front door. Referring to its previous day's headline, inviting Hamza (who is described as a 'fanatic') to, 'SLING YOUR HOOK', the story talks of the 'demands' for Hamza to leave, 'reaching a crescendo'. The demands, assumed to come from the public, reflect the newspaper's campaign against the cleric. (In fact, this characterisation of the 'Evil Hook' is also to be found in the Daily Mail, who also describe the cleric as the 'Sheik of Finsbury').

This story, in general, provides another version of the asylum story. Wrapped up within a concocted scenario, is the newspaper message of dangerous immigrant within the UK. The accompanying text on the same page, charts allegations levelled against Hamza of encouraging terrorism and preaching religious hatred as well as his 'immigrant' status. But at the same time the story is clearly a photo stunt and is treated with a good deal of Sun 'fun'.

Representation of 'others': folk devils, bogus refugees and asylum seekers, spongers, scroungers and devious manipulators, etc.

Constructing representation of immigrants as 'the other' or as Cohen's 'folk devil' is a prominent feature of the tabloid coverage of this issue. Tabloids build representations through abstract group descriptions which almost never introduce case study details of actual individuals. Thus, in the absence of 'real' people they construct representations of immigrants as a group having (a) a particular unified mentality and showing (b) particular intentions and actions. Stories recount the immigrants wish to enter Britain to benefit from the countries wealth/ resources, described as the welfare and health system, and as acting as a group to drain such resources, placing a financial strain on the country.

However, newspapers do single out particular individuals and their circumstances for attention when they want to personalise the issue. Abu Hamza a radical cleric based in London is a particular individual that downmarket and mid-market tabloid newspapers focus on in their coverage, making a connection between his 'dangerous' views and status as an immigrant within the UK. In doing this they focus on his appearance. Both The Sun and Daily Mail visually and verbally characterise Hamza in terms of his disability, describing him as 'hook' and mentioning that he has a loss of sight in one eye. This visual and language strategy allows easy parallels to be made between the representation of Hamza and that of evil characters, within popular fiction, such as Captain Hook.

In one example, The Sun, (04/02/ 2003) leads with the front-page headline 'EVIL HOOK GLOATS OVER SHUTTLE'. The actual story modifies the descriptor of Hamza from 'Evil hook' to that of 'monster' to reflect the reported 'outraged reaction' to comments about the NASA space shuttle disaster allegedly made by Hamza. He is described as having 'gloated' over the space shuttle disaster, offering remarks on the astronauts as ' thugs in space', ' a trinity of evil' and their accidental death as being 'punished by Allah'. The newspapers reaction to these alleged view is given as a caption under the main photograph: ' Sick. Hamza called the crew space thugs'. The caption completes the caricature of the fanatic and evil cleric, adding weight to the paper's view that indiscriminate immigration and asylum allows dangerous individuals refuge within the UK.

Moral and political framework: *community/commonsense/commonvalues/us and them/moral discourse.*

Tabloid newspapers also use a moral framework when discussing issues of immigration. They present a common sense economic understanding of the issue, that have two interconnected parts. The first assumes that the population of the UK is at the correct level and that its resources are meet, second that immigrants will draw from the pool of resources without means to contribute to the exchequer. Set against the common sense understanding of the issue, newspapers also personalise the issue to the readership. Connections are made between the common sense understanding of a countries resources and peoples lives, sometimes bluntly claiming that peoples experiences of services will worsen, but always putting forward a simply moral logic that increased immigration contravenes a basic idea of 'fairness', and disadvantaging those already living within the UK.

Take, for example, the Daily Mail headline 'ASYLUM: THE JOKE'S ON US' (01/03/ 2003) and by-line 'those Sangatte refugees given work permits three months ago are refusing jobs, living in plush hotels and costing YOU £100,000 a day'. This story combines the common sense economic understanding of immigration with outrage over the alleged claim that refugees are not only draining resources but also not taking opportunities to work. The story personalises the claims to the reader, making a connection between refugees actions (to refuse jobs, live in plush hotels) with the imputed cost to tax payers, described as £100, 000 a day. The paper goes on to describe the UK as a 'soft touch' compared with the rest of Europe. The import of the Mail's feature is that the Government's adoption of a liberal-attitude to asylum and immigration makes them a soft touch for potential flouters of the system who will target Britain. The victims of this situation are the British tax payers.

Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to address the problem of how the tabloid press in Britain is able to disproportionately influence the political elite over the issue of asylum and refugee policy. Given the insulation of the political elite from appeals made by those outside the 'hermeneutic circle' of 'public debates', it seemed implausible that such an outcome could be predicted. Despite this we have argued that certain tabloids, The Daily Mail and The Sun, have managed to do just that, in particular, by politicising the categories of 'asylum seeker' and 'political refugee' and by indicating a considerable

weight of 'public opinion' behind a 'tough stance', reflected in their anti-asylum campaign coverage. Our response to this has been to argue that any convincing explanation of how this has occurred cannot simply point to a process of 'orchestration of public opinion' or 'incitement to racism' as an explanation because such explanations are unable to explain how these measures of 'public opinion' are translated into political influence. Such a process requires an understanding of the media environment within which 'public issues' are constructed and given access to 'political agendas'. We have argued that the most useful way of understanding how such agendas work and gain access to political elites is through a modified theorisation of moral panic, attribution, hegemony and agenda-setting theory (Critcher 2003). The value of such theories is that they are able to explain how non-elite defined issues are able to gain disproportionate attention and political impact, as well as how tabloid-style newspapers can be the primary 'claims makers' of such campaigns. One of the reasons for this is to do with the market structuration of British newspapers and media, which essentially serve different consumer groups, downmarket, mid-market and upmarket. Effectively, what this means is that mid and downmarket papers will only gain elite recognition if they are able to gain access to upmarket media; the minimum requirement for this is that they are able to demonstrate a weight of public opinion behind their campaigns. Such opinion is clearly constructed as much as reflected.

Against this structural account, the fact of this market structuration has led a number of commentators to suggest that the tabloidization strategies of the mid and downmarket papers has resulted in a 'depoliticised' content which is reflected in the 'news values' of this sector. Our response to this has been to demonstrate, through the adoption of a model of 'genre and sub-genre' news values (Cottle 1993), that such a framework can illustrate how such news values can be employed, in certain circumstances, to engage with 'public issues'. However, unlike some commentators, we do not conclude that this strategy must inevitably produce 'inferior' or 'reactionary' accounts of the social and political world. The fact that they have done so, in the case of the British anti-asylum campaign, is due less to the determining textual-properties of such frameworks and more to do with the motives and strategies of editors. We conclude by suggesting that there is a role for tabloid media to play in public debates and that a partisan, engaged and emotive campaign, designed to highlight the 'real-life' stories

of people *very much like us*, is just what is needed right now. What a shame we don't have a newspaper to run it.

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