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# The Agenda Setting Function of Mass Media, Tampa, John Howard, Print Media and Public Opinion: How It All Came Together in Melbourne

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The Agenda Setting Function of Mass Media,  
*Tampa*, John Howard, Print Media and Public Opinion:  
How it All Came Together in Melbourne

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Project Abstract

This paper will explore the ways in which the rhetoric of the Australian news media – the print media of Melbourne, specifically – has the power to shape and construct public sentiment toward national issues. Specifically, the paper explores the crafting of public opinion toward asylum seekers in the country through the use of specific rhetoric in print media outlets. The paper will focus on the “Tampa” incident of August 2001 as a basis for exploring asylum seeker issues in Australia. With the Agenda Setting Function Theory of Media Communications as a research base, and through personal interviews, extensive research and a critical look at the language of the news, the author reveals the ways in which language choice – however minute – can create and sustain widespread and lasting public sentiment.

## Introduction

The MV *Tampa*

In August, 2001, Australia's Prime Minister, John Howard, was struggling with a re-election campaign. According to nation-wide opinion polls, Australians were tired of his politics and were ready to elect a new face to head their political sector.<sup>1</sup> Howard was seen as tired, out of touch and the architect of the unpopular Goods and Services Tax; the Coalition was ready for defeat until one issue saved Howard's campaign.<sup>2</sup>

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of that month, a ship carrying 438 mainly Afghan asylum seekers sent out an S.O.S. call; their ship, which had set sail from Indonesia, was quickly sinking off the coast of the country they had recently left. Arne Rinnan, captain of the Norwegian cargo vessel, the MV *Tampa*, who happened to be in the vicinity, answered the call from the Australian coastguard requesting he rescue the asylum seekers.

Disobeying orders from the Australian government to stay away Christmas Island – considered Australian waters – Captain Rinnan told reporters he was instead obeying “the unwritten law of the sea” by picking up the asylum seekers, and had “no option” but to defy Australia's orders to keep the ship outside of Australian waters. Captain Rinnan headed toward the remote island. Once the *Tampa* approached Christmas Island – entering Australian waters – sixty Special Air Services troops intercepted the ship's path and boarded the ship. At this, the asylum seekers on board *Tampa* threatened to riot, or jump overboard, if they received continued refusal to land on Australian soil.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Manne with David Corlett, “Sending them Home: Refugees and the New Politics of Indifference” in *Quarterly Essay*. (Melbourne, Victoria: Black Inc., Schwartz Publishing Pty Ltd, 2004), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> “Labor Blames Tampa Incident for Election Loss,” aired on PM on Radio National, 3 December 2001.

At the time, the Australian government failed to secure new emergency powers that would have given it the legal ability to return the *Tampa* to international waters. The legislation was rejected in the Senate by an opposition alliance.<sup>3</sup> All parties at the time, however, did support the government's position that the Norwegian ship not be allowed to dock at an Australian port.

The *Tampa* cargo freight was designed to carry only forty people. The 438 asylum seekers were kept on the boat for eight days, until the asylum seekers were transferred onto another ship, the *Manoora*, and placed under Australian military control.

The Australian government faced a dilemma: unwilling to take the asylum seekers, placed under Australian control when transferred from the *Tampa* to the *Manoora*, they still needed to find a place to put them as their refugee claims were judged. Indonesia refused to take the asylum seekers back, New Zealand was willing to take 150 women and children, but no more. Additionally, the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, refused to allow East Timor to become a "dumping ground" for Australia's asylum seekers.<sup>4</sup> Luckily for the Australian government – and the Howard re-election campaign – the Pacific Island state of Nauru agreed to accept the asylum seekers.

Prime Minister Howard and the Australian government, who stuck to their original and controversial refusal to let the asylum seekers into the country, agreed to meet the costs of the operation and take some of the asylum seekers, if their claims were judged genuine. In return for its services, Nauru was offered \$26.5 million, and on the island, two detention camps with plastic, wood and iron accommodations – Topside and State House – were constructed by laborers and Australian military

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<sup>3</sup> Manne, "Sending them Home," p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

personnel. In accordance with Howard's plan, women, children and families—a group which numbered about 150—were taken to New Zealand, while the other applicants were taken to Nauru to wait for their claims to be processed. This solution, which later became known as the “Pacific Solution,” was an undeniable success for the Australian government. A new asylum seeker policy – “the processing in offshore tropical-island camps of boat people Australia had been able to repel by military means but unable to force back to Indonesia”<sup>5</sup> – had emerged.

The *Tampa* incident radicalized the Australian asylum seeker system. As Robert Manne writes, “Within Australia new legislation was passed with opposition support. To prevent the use of Christmas Island and Ashmore Reefs as the landing points for boats bringing asylum seekers to Australia, both were excised from the Australian migration zone. Penalties for people smuggling were increased. The courts were all but excluded from interference in government's handling of asylum seeker cases...The temporary visa system became even more harsh. The legal definition of a refugee was made far narrower than it had previously been.”<sup>6</sup>

The *Tampa* incident continued a governmental policy trend of strict border protection laws, and became a central issue—and, as it turned out, a winning issue for the Howard government—in the 2001 election. It seemed the government officials had the overwhelming support of voters for their stand on refusing to allow the *Tampa* asylum seekers onto Australian soil. Public opinion, according to nationwide polls and focus groups was found to be overwhelmingly, even “violently” opposed to the idea of allowing the asylum seekers into Australia.<sup>7</sup> According to the media monitoring group Rehome, seventy-eight percent of talk radio callers shared the government's view that refugees should be returned to Indonesia, where they had

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

began their journey.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, more than 250,000 viewers called national television stations Channels Nine and Ten to voice their support of John Howard's *Tampa* stand.<sup>9</sup>

Prime Minister Howard, facing international pressure to allow the asylum-seekers into Australia and come to their aid particularly from Norway, but also facing mounting political pressure and aware that his decisions regarding the *Tampa* had the power to make or break his re-election campaign, refused to back down. "We don't retreat in any way from what we have done, it is the right thing to do and it is in Australia's national interest,"<sup>10</sup> he said, and to parliament, "It is the right decision to take. I hope that it sends a message to people smugglers and other around the world that, whilst this is a humanitarian, decent country, we are not a soft touch and we are not a nation whose sovereign rights, in relations to who comes here, are going to be trampled on."<sup>11</sup> The Howard government thus used the *Tampa* opportunity to secure a re-election. With the majority of the Australian populous in support of their decisions, the government refused to back down on any point and banned access to the island of Nauru by journalists, lawyers, doctors, heads of NGOs, ministers of religion and other concerned citizens, allowing for near-complete secrecy regarding the detention of the asylum seekers and the conditions under which they were living.

Additionally, the Howard campaign used *Tampa* to point to inconsistencies in Opposition leader Kim Beazley's leadership abilities and decision making history; on one hand, Beazley supported the Prime Minister in his refusal to allow the *Tampa* passengers to land on Australian soil, but on the other hand, Beazley refused to allow the government emergency powers, which would have led to the return of the *Tampa*

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<sup>8</sup> Dominic Hughes, "Australians undecided over refugee problem." BBC News, 3 September 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Bolt, "The Great Cringe" in *The Herald Sun*. 3 September 2001, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Dominic Hughes, "Australia defiant in refugee standoff." BBC News, 31 August 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Gordon, "All at Sea" in *The Age*. News Extra, 1 September 2001, p. 1

to international waters. The Labor Opposition, reflecting later on their election loss, blamed the *Tampa* incident and the Liberal government's use of the *Tampa* to display its power and point to weaknesses in Kim Beazley's leadership as the causes for Howard's 2001 re-election. Geoff Walsh, ALP National Secretary, speaking to the National Press Club in Canberra said, in terms of the ALP loss, "the *Tampa* did it. Those in any doubt about the impact of this issue should talk to Labor MPs. Talk to political veterans who say they have never seen an issue like *Tampa*. And so what *Tampa* did was effectively kneecap One Nation, and anoint John Howard...*Tampa* remade John Howard's image."<sup>12</sup>

Just over two weeks after the *Tampa* incident, the world watched as the Twin Towers in New York City crumbled in the largest terrorist attack ever on American soil. In light of the events on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the *Tampa* incident as a single issue was pushed onto the back burner, but the issues raised – border protection laws, multiculturalism and fears of Middle Eastern Islam followers among them – were hardly forgotten. Just as the arrival of the *Tampa* was "used by all already to inclined, to heighten fears about the capacity to control Australian borders,"<sup>13</sup> so too were the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. After September 11<sup>th</sup>, wrote Sara Wills, "it became increasingly apparent that many Australians are absolutely not 'relaxed and comfortable' with any notion of themselves as truly multi-cultured, multi-historied or multi-ethnic."<sup>14</sup> In the context of the recent attacks on America, the *Tampa* refusal of the Howard government to allow Afghan asylum seekers into the country seemed that much more practical to the majority of Australian citizens as "nothing less than the

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<sup>12</sup> "Labor Blames Tampa Incident for Election Loss," on PM on Radio National.

<sup>13</sup> Sara Wills, "Losing the right to country" in *New Formations*. (Melbourne, Victoria: Australian Historical Studies: 2002), p. 55.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Australian nation and ‘way of life’ was perceived now to be under threat.”<sup>15</sup> Later, legal representatives for the Defense Minister and the government wasted no time in “exploiting the terrorist attacks in the USA,” citing them as an example of “what might happen if Australia was unable to defend its borders by expelling ‘pushy’ asylum seekers.”<sup>16</sup> As David Marr and Marian Wilkinson wrote in *Dark Victory*, “They closed Australia to refugees – and won a might election victory.”<sup>17</sup>

### Media and Public Sentiment

Obviously, public sentiment at the time of the *Tampa* incident was based on individuals’ perceptions of the situation; members of the larger Australian public received their information regarding the incident, generally from news media sources, and then formulated their thoughts on the issue. The mechanism through which individuals gathered information was primarily the news media – whether that media was newspaper, television news programs, radio or online news sources – the news media played a major role in the conveyance of information surrounding the events of *Tampa*.

The power of the media to shape and construct public sentiment on various issues becomes a very important topic for investigation during this “Information Age,” a time at which the world is “saturated with images, sounds and concepts that are focused around our media consumption” and “people consume information as fast as it is produced, and we expect to be fed new information constantly, by means of as many communication channels as possible.”<sup>18</sup> This “Information Age,” the latest in a

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>17</sup> David Marr and Marian Wilkinson, *Dark Victory*. (Sydney, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Melinda Anastasios-Roberts, “Media Influence” in *Media 2*. (Port Melbourne, Victoria: Heinemann Harcourt Education, 2004), p. 67.

“series of social revolutions that have defined human history,”<sup>19</sup> has made an investigation into the power of these mass media messages an essential step in understanding the role of information in present day society and the role and responsibility of the news media as a mechanism by which those mass media messages are communicated.

The question that this paper proposes thus becomes: to what extent has the media – the print media of Melbourne, *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* specifically – shaped public opinion on the *Tampa* incident through its general reporting, editorial content and commentary on the incident. It is this paper’s contention that *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* were key players in this agenda setting process and that the language used, the editorials published and the commentary written by these two papers, played a significant role in the ability of each paper to set an overarching political agenda for its readers. The purpose of this paper, then, is to investigate this assumption that, at the time of the *Tampa* incident, these two newspapers not only reported the news, but shaped and constructed the story in ways which influenced public opinion on the issue. Furthermore, it is important to note that the media of Melbourne seems to have somewhat of a symbiotic relationship; thus, the print media not only has the power to influence public opinion through its own content, but likely has the power to also influence news television and radio. This allows newspapers such as *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* to set an agenda for the other media of Melbourne, and allowing for their power of influence to grow with their ability to reach that other media. While this paper does not investigate the effects of either radio or television on public opinion, it does claim that the power of the print media extends beyond its own content, and may

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

in fact affect the content of radio or television media outlets, thus broadening its reach and influencing an even larger audience.

Chapter One

### **Theory: Agenda Setting Function of the Media**

Communication, on a most basic level, is the process of sending a message to a receiver. There are numerous theories surrounding the concept of communication and the power of the mass media to transmit information to large audiences around the world. The theory upon which this paper is based suggests that the mass media has the power to set the agenda or terms of reference for social, political and economic issues. This Agenda Setting Function theory proposes that audiences are active and that texts are open; furthermore, the theory holds that while the media cannot tell its audiences what to think, it can tell its audiences what to think about. According to the theory, this “gatekeeping” process of selection and omission has the power to set the agenda for an audience’s political support.

The theory is based around the idea that mass media news and information have the power to reflect the content and order of priority of issues, thereby shaping public opinion regarding the issues presented and the importance of those issues. Furthermore, the theory asserts that the representation of issues in the mass media exerts “an independent effect on issue content and on relative salience in public opinion.”<sup>20</sup>

The viability of this theory has grown as the availability of various forms of media has increased. As a larger number of households receive newspapers on a daily basis, watch television news programs, read news briefs on the internet, listen to news radio programs or have news updates sent to mobile phones, the Agenda Setting Function Theory becomes increasingly more important to consider. The relationship between the power of the media to set agenda and the availability of the media to the general public is direct; as one rises, the other does the same. Additionally, as the

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<sup>20</sup> Dennis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory*. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1994), p. 357.

availability of the mass media grows, the number of hours a household spends consuming that media may also grow. So, as media saturation goes up, the Agenda Setting Function Theory becomes more viable, and the reasons behind an investigation into the theory grow in number.

Obviously, there are flaws within this theory. While the media unquestionably plays a central role in the construction and maintenance of public opinion around the world, it is certainly not the only mechanism through which this occurs; family, peer group, social class, religion, school and occupation also factor into this equation. Many communication experts have questioned this theory, citing insufficient evidence to show a causal connection between the various issue agendas. However, this paper will set aside those reservations, with the intent to begin an investigation into the idea of an agenda setting function, without attempting to show a completely conclusive connection between public sentiment and print media rhetoric.

While the likelihood that the print media of Melbourne—*The Age* and *The Herald Sun*, specifically—has impacted the formation of public opinion and lent itself to the shaping of political agenda amongst Melbournians is high, the media cannot be labeled the sole entity which influences public opinion over time. This is the case in any issue on which the public holds an opinion and the *Tampa* incident was no exception. Of course there are numerous other factors which molded general public opinion regarding John Howard's decisions during the time of the *Tampa*, but this paper will focus specifically on the role played by the media, and the ways in which the language choices made by the reporters and editors at the two premier Melbourne newspapers may have contributed to the construction and maintenance of general public sentiment at the time.

The power of the mass media to construct and maintain general public opinion has largely to do with its use of language; this is one of the areas of study within the Agenda Setting Function Theory. The theory suggests that by carefully choosing their words, “newspapers can align audiences to share a particular point of view and set the point of reference for how we think about certain issues.”<sup>21</sup> The issue of agenda setting during the time of *Tampa* has very much to do with this study of the power of language; by using certain terms to refer to the asylum seekers on board the *Tampa*, the print media of Melbourne had the power to align its readers to share a certain point of view, and give their readers the point of reference through which to understand the issues at hand at the time.

This paper will investigate these issues, and will attempt to give some validity to the Agenda Setting Function Theory as it applies to the *Tampa* and the power of both *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* to shape and maintain their readers’ opinions regarding John Howard’s decisions at the time.

## **Methodology**

It would be impossible to investigate every aspect of society which influences general public opinion regarding various issues; this paper will critically examine the print news media in Melbourne as one of the media outlets through which the Agenda Setting Function Theory of Mass Communication can be tested. The research of this paper was conducted with the objective of investigating this idea of the agenda setting power of the media, and the ways in which that may or may not have influenced public opinion during the time of the *Tampa* incident.

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<sup>21</sup> Anastasios-Roberts, “Media Influence,” p. 85.

## Survey

In order to examine general public opinion surrounding the *Tampa* incident, I conducted a survey of a cross-sampling of members of Melbourne's general population at Federation Square and Flinder's Street Station on 23 April 2005, during the late morning and early afternoon. The survey was conducted with the intent to examine public opinion by speaking with individual members of the public – who the Agenda Setting Function Theory attempts to investigate, and about whom it theorizes. In this way, individuals were given the opportunity to voice their opinions regarding the *Tampa* incident and their government's handling of the incident at the time. Given the importance of the public in the Agenda Setting Function Theory, the survey of Melbournians was, perhaps, the premier point of investigation within the project.

Obviously, the survey was limited; due to limited time, resources and sheer ability to complete a professional-level survey, the survey consisted only of 100 people and clearly did not encompass a large portion of Melbourne citizens. Because of varying limitations, respondents were not asked about their educational background, financial situation, family situations or political leanings, factors which may have contributed to their opinions regarding John Howard's handling of *Tampa* in 2001. Despite these limitations, the survey was an attempt at gathering data from members of the Australian, or specifically Melbournian, general populous.

The survey was conducted under the condition that the respondent read at least one newspaper during the time of the *Tampa* incident in 2001; given that the project attempts to draw some connection between public opinion and print media content, this was an essential condition for participation in the survey. Without this condition, there could be no connection drawn between the individual's opinions regarding John Howard's decisions at the time of *Tampa* and the newspaper content at the time. This

condition was made with the hypothesis of this paper in mind: that the print media of Melbourne, rather than simply reporting the news, shaped and constructed the story in ways which then influenced public opinion surrounding the issue.

If the respondent met the initial condition, he/she was then asked a series of questions regarding their opinion on Prime Minister John Howard's decisions made at the time of the *Tampa* and the extent to which they believed their opinions had been influenced by their media consumption. This series of questions was asked so as to further this paper's claim that an individual's choice in print media in Melbourne may have affected his/her opinions regarding the *Tampa* incident because of the way the story was reported by their respective newspaper. Furthermore, given that the Agenda Setting Function Theory serves as the base for this research project, individuals were given the opportunity to reflect on whether or not they felt that the print media, in its reporting of the *Tampa* incident, had impacted their sentiments toward John Howard's decisions. This question was essential in discussing the ways in which the media can subtly, yet effectively, influence public opinion, without the knowledge of their consumers.

### **Content Analysis**

A critical analysis of the content of two of Melbourne's highly circulated newspapers, *The Age* and *The Herald Sun*, is also included as a part of the research involved in this project. The content analysis spans one calendar month, beginning on 27 August, 2001, the first day of newspaper coverage on the *Tampa* issue. I completed the content analysis of the two papers so as to ensure that I had a comprehensive understanding of the print media coverage given to the *Tampa* at the time the incident occurred. Given this paper's hypothesis that the print media

coverage of the *Tampa* incident was a factor in the shaping of public opinion toward the government's decisions made at the time of the incident, a content analysis of these two papers was absolutely essential.

As was the case with the survey, the content analysis was limited. Due to time constraints, the analysis spanned only one month after the incident occurred, allowing me to examine the immediate coverage of the *Tampa*, but not allowing for an investigation of the long-term coverage of the incident.

The content analysis of *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* included an analysis of various sections of each paper, including general news, editorials, commentary, feature articles, opinion pieces, political cartoons and letters to the editor. In this way, I was able to examine both the language used throughout the two papers, and the general reporting style of each paper. My examination of the language of the paper included a careful survey of various news articles published by each paper. I was particularly concerned with investigating the ways in which both papers referred to those aboard the *Tampa* with specific labels, as The Agenda Setting Function Theory argues, that language is a main factor in the creation and maintenance of public opinion. This was particularly the case in the *Tampa* situation and a close inspection of the language of the news articles was a vital part of my content analysis.

I also made a concerted effort to look at the editorial and commentary sections of each of the papers, paying close attention to the way in which the various players in the *Tampa* incident – the asylum seekers, the Australian government, the international community and the *Tampa* captain and crew among them – were portrayed by *The Herald Sun* and *The Age* respectively. I also used the editorial and commentary sections of each paper to make a hypothesis about that paper's general sentiment toward the government at the time of *Tampa*. I did this with the intent to illustrate a

connection between the readers of each paper and their opinions surrounding the *Tampa* incident and the Australian government; the existence of this connection goes to the very heart of the hypothesis of this paper, and thus, a meticulous content analysis and a speculation regarding a paper's political leanings become a very important part of this overall investigation.

Along with the survey, the content analysis of the two papers becomes an imperative piece of research for this project. The paper as a whole – made up of its content – is the mechanism through which the Agenda Setting Function Theory can be tested; therefore, a content analysis is absolutely essential when trying to draw a connection between print media and public opinion.

### **Interviews**

Finally, primary research done in the form of interviews with two key writers, Michael Gordon from *The Age* and Andrew Bolt from *The Herald Sun*, will be included as a part of the investigation into the theory of media persuasiveness and the extent to which it may have influenced public opinion during the time of the *Tampa* incident. This portion of research was conducted to ensure that the thoughts and opinions of two important members of the print media of Melbourne were included in this investigation.

While a small survey of the general population of Melbourne and a close content analysis of both *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* are essential pieces of research in investigating this paper's hypothesis, the inclusion of the thoughts and input of journalists who in fact covered the *Tampa* incident at the time it occurred, and, perhaps, helped to represent their respective papers' opinions regarding the

government's decisions at the time, seemed absolutely essential within this research project.

Again, there are obviously limitations. Michael Gordon and Andrew Bolt are just two of the journalists who covered the *Tampa* incident in 2001; there are clearly varying perspectives and points of view even within the staffs at each paper. Of course, I was unable to speak with the many different journalists and columnists who reported and wrote on *Tampa*, but, as well-known and respected writers within their papers' respective staffs and among many Melbournians, both Gordon and Bolt assumed the position of representing their papers' overarching opinions when speaking with me.

Michael Gordon, the National Editor at *The Age*, has long been considered an expert in his field. One of the first journalists allowed onto Nauru Island, Gordon has been decidedly involved in the coverage of the *Tampa* incident and the subsequent effects of the decisions made by the government at the time. Given his expertise in the area of asylum seeker issues, and his direct involvement in both reporting and writing editorial pieces on the *Tampa*, Gordon seemed an obvious choice when considering possible journalists for interview. Furthermore, as an editor at *The Age*, Gordon has the authority to speak on behalf of his paper, with the confidence that the majority of his co-workers would, at the very least, respect his thoughts and opinions regarding the paper's coverage of *Tampa*.

Andrew Bolt, a columnist for *The Herald Sun*, has long been known for his controversial opinions and unabashed right-wing roots. He has actively pursued issues of asylum seekers, refugees, migration, detention and the government's role in each of these within his column. Furthermore, he has been effective in stirring emotions and creating debate surrounding the ideas he puts forth three times each week. During the

time of the *Tampa* incident, Bolt argued against allowing the asylum seekers to land on Australian soil, writing column after column in support of the government. As a popular and powerful columnist in Australia – and in Melbourne specifically – Bolt had a major role in representing the editorial opinions of *The Herald Sun*, and broadcasting those opinions to the general public. Given his role as a key contributor to the print media rhetoric at the time of *Tampa*, Bolt was another journalist with whom it seemed absolutely necessary to speak.

While the close analysis of the content of each paper was absolutely necessary to this research project, the opportunity for journalists from both newspapers to explain their work and speak on behalf of their newspapers became a very important factor in considering the idea of an agenda setting function of the media. While, as I noted earlier, I could not speak to the many journalists who covered the *Tampa* incident in 2001, the importance of speaking with two writers, from the two major Melbourne newspapers – the two newspapers at the center of this study – seemed extraordinarily high for the success of this project.

## **Reflection**

If given the chance to begin again, it is my true belief that I would conduct my research in a very similar way. To begin with, the survey I completed seemed a very effective way to determine some public opinion toward the Howard government's decisions during the time of the *Tampa*, in the context of respondents' newspaper readership. Furthermore, the survey allowed me to question members of the public concerning their views on media influence and whether or not that influence played a role in shaping their opinions at the time of *Tampa*. Perhaps, if I had more time, I would have attempted to gather data from a larger group of respondents. It may have

been beneficial to travel outside of Flinder's Street Station and Federation Square, possibly into other parts of Melbourne, suburbs, locations of various economic statuses, or generally away from the city center.

The content analysis, much like the survey which attempted to understand and quantify public opinion on the *Tampa* issue, was an essential piece of research given that the base of this research project is a theory which states that media content has the power to create, shape and maintain public opinion. Again, if I had more time, I would have liked to include a content analysis of other newspapers across Australia. However, the papers I chose, *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* could be considered representative of other papers around the country. First, *The Age* is a Fairfax-owned newspaper, while *The Herald Sun* is a Murdoch-owned newspaper; issues of coverage differences between Murdoch and Fairfax papers existed around the entire country, and perhaps, the content analysis of these two Melbournian newspapers can be seen as a microcosm for the issues that were going on around the country. Clearly, it would have been a much larger investigation, had I included papers around the whole of Australia, and I likely would have had to include a survey of individuals around the country, as well. Given the limitations – namely, time – of this project, the focus in Melbourne was a wise choice. Furthermore, both *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* have high circulation rates, with *The Herald Sun* being the highest circulated newspaper in the country. As of 11 February 2005, *The Herald Sun* boasted a weekday circulation rate of 553,100, and *The Age* had a weekday circulation rate of 196,250<sup>22</sup>; obviously the two papers are large enough that a content analysis of the two is sufficient for a project with these sorts of limitations.

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<sup>22</sup> Freddy Kreuger, "Newspaper sales slump across Australia," 11 February 2005. Found at: [www.crikey.com/articles/2005/02/11-0008.html](http://www.crikey.com/articles/2005/02/11-0008.html), referenced 6 May 2005.

The content analysis also had to be limited to a one-month time span, again given the time limitations of the project. I chose to examine *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* for the month directly following the first coverage of the *Tampa* on 27 August, 2001. Because of my interest in the direct effects of the media coverage, and the effects this coverage may have had on the general election which followed shortly after the *Tampa* incident and September 11<sup>th</sup>, focusing on content from this span of time seemed a sagacious decision.

Finally, I believe that my interview with Michael Gordon and my correspondence with Andrew Bolt produced effective and worthwhile information, valuable for my research project. As I noted earlier, both Gordon and Bolt were key players in their respective newspapers' coverage of the *Tampa* incident. Gordon, long known for his coverage of asylum seeker issues, and Bolt, long known for his devotion to discussing asylum seeker issues within his column, are two of the premier Melbourne writers who worked on the *Tampa* story. Both made significant contributions to their newspapers' rhetoric surrounding *Tampa*, and, given the focus of this paper, I believe contact with both writers was absolutely beneficial to my research.

Again, if given more time, I would have preferred to speak with more journalists who covered the *Tampa* incident in 2001. While Andrew Bolt has written quite a bit of material regarding *Tampa*, he is not considered an investigative journalist by many of his peers. He has never reported a story; rather, he has cast his opinions about, for the consumption of Melbourne *Herald Sun* readers. It was very interesting to correspond with Andrew Bolt, especially considering he is widely known for his extreme opinions regarding asylum seekers and refugees; however, it would have been advantageous to speak with a reporter from the *Herald Sun*, to

investigate their views on “objective” reporting and agenda setting as a part of this paper’s larger investigation into both of those issues.

Overall, however, I am very pleased with the progression of my research. In reflecting back on the time I spent preparing background information, completing the survey, speaking with journalists and combing the pages of both *The Age* and *The Herald Sun*, I am positive that there was no time wasted. Of course, there are renovations that could have been made, had time permitted and had my resources been greater, but given the time frame of this project, my level of ability and my pool of resources, I believe I completed a thorough and in-depth investigation into the question of media agenda setting power, public opinion and the way this dynamic came into play in Melbourne, 2001, when the *Tampa* first entered Australian consciousness.

## Chapter Two

## **Content Analysis**

As Michael Gordon, National Editor at *The Age*, noted in an interview, the editorial stance of the newspaper tended to be one that called into question the government's actions taken at the time of *Tampa*. On the other hand, as Andrew Bolt, columnist for Rupert Murdoch's *Herald Sun*, noted via email correspondence, the editorial stance of his newspaper tended to be one that supported the government's actions taken at the time of *Tampa*. With these two statements as context, it is this paper's contention that both newspapers were influential in the shaping and maintaining public opinion at the time regarding the government's decisions at the time of the *Tampa* incident in 2001, and that the newspapers did so within both their editorial and their news sections. In order to investigate this contention, there must be a critical analysis of the content of both newspapers.

I have chosen to focus on the content of *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* for the calendar month which followed the *Tampa* incident. As I noted earlier, I have chosen this time span so as to effectively delve into the issues which immediately surrounded *Tampa* and to show the role the *Tampa* incident began to play in the upcoming general election, and the ways in which September 11<sup>th</sup> reinforced the fears surrounding immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees, particularly of Middle Eastern descent.

Furthermore, I have chosen *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* as representatives of Fairfax-owned and Murdoch-owned newspapers around Australia. During the time of *Tampa*, issues of different content within the two papers were arising around the country; *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* were no exceptions. These two papers will effectively show the grave differences between the reporting styles and the overarching editorial opinions of Fairfax and Murdoch papers during *Tampa* in 2001.

For this investigation, I have chosen a news article and an editorial piece from each paper, to do an in-depth analysis of their content. I have chosen each news article and editorial piece because they seemed to me to best represent the type of article which one might find in each of the newspapers. The news article from *The Age*, then, is one which is typical of the types of news articles which ran in the newspaper, where the news article from *The Herald Sun* is typical of that newspaper; the same applies to the editorials chosen. Furthermore, I will be examining the content of both newspapers on the whole; analyzing the content for its role in agenda setting at the time of the *Tampa* incident.

I believe Sara Wills described each paper well, saying, “Melbourne’s popular *Herald Sun* newspaper felt Australia had to ‘flex its muscle; because not to have acted with strength would have betrayed our nation.’ Opinion polls at this time indicated seventy-eight per cent of the public supported the Government’s stance,” while, on the other hand, “*The Age* described the *Tampa* incident as ‘an atmosphere of panic manufactured by the government.’”<sup>23</sup> This chapter of the paper will attempt to explore these two different papers, through their news and editorial content and the overall editorial slant within their pages.

Iain Lygo, in his *News Overboard*, writes, “the tabloid, and in particular, the Murdoch press has transformed itself in the last twenty years from campaigning for the most downtrodden in society to blaming the victims or the unfortunate for all society’s ill. Their campaign against asylum seekers, or “illegals” (the legally inaccurate, and preferred term used by the Murdoch tabloid press) is typical of this transformation.”<sup>24</sup> The news article I have chosen from *The Herald Sun* as representative of a typical news article published in the newspaper, is one which does

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<sup>23</sup> Wills, “Losing the Right to Country,” p. 56.

<sup>24</sup> Iain Lygo, *News Overboard: The Tabloid Media, Race Politics and Islam*. (Sydney, New South Wales: Southerly Change Media, 2004), p. 25.

not refer to the asylum seekers aboard the *Tampa* as “illegals,” rather, it refers to them as “boat people.” The title of the article alone, “Boat people ruling today,” immediately allows the reader to assume not that the individuals aboard the *Tampa* are searching for asylum (by labeling them as such), but rather, labels them with a generic term, often used to portray those seeking asylum in Australia in a negative light. The article is short, discussing the implications of the Federal Court’s decision on whether or not the asylum seekers were illegally detained after SAS troops boarded the *Tampa* off the shores of Christmas Island the week before.

Later, the article’s author, Michael Madigan, refers to these “boat people” as “asylum seekers,” saying, “But the Government’s counsel, Commonwealth Solicitor-General David Bennett, QC, says the asylum seekers sealed their own fate when the ordered the *Tampa*’s captain to head to Christmas Island.”<sup>25</sup> Madigan quotes the government’s counsel directly, but does not quote the counsel for the Victorian Council of Civil Liberties, only summarizing their argument in one sentence. “VCCL’s lawyer, Gavan Griffith, QC, has argued that the asylum seekers were illegally detained and expelled after SAS troops boarded the *Tampa* off the coast of Christmas Island.”<sup>26</sup> Bennett, on the other hand, is quoted as saying, “Normal people who come to our shores don’t hijack vessels to get there.”<sup>27</sup>

The inclusion of a quote from the counsel for the government – and not from the counsel for the VCCL – gives an automatic sense of authority to the government’s case. Furthermore, the triple reference to the asylum seekers as “boat people” – one of which appeared in the title of the article – gives the article a definite political slant in the direction of the government. In this way, the article could certainly lend itself to the setting and maintaining of a political agenda by the paper as a whole. Obviously,

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Madigan, “Boat people ruling today,” in *The Herald Sun*. 7 September 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

that conclusion cannot be immediately drawn, and can certainly not be generalized to include every news article written on the *Tampa*; however, the question is definitely there: does this article's use of language, and inclusion of authority on one side of the issue [and not the other] make the idea of a paper's role in influencing public opinion that much more tangible? Andrew Bolt, in his correspondence with me, referred to his feelings regarding his paper's coverage of the *Tampa* incident as "perfectly sanguine," saying that he tended to "think that our [the *Herald Sun*'s] coverage was more balanced than the strident and highly opinionated reportage of the *Age*."<sup>28</sup> However, this article – taken as a representation from the many other news articles published by *Herald Sun* reporters – might show that a very simple change in language [from "asylum seekers" to "boat people"] can alter the effect of the article, and ultimately, has the power to create the beginnings of an agenda setting function.

While this article in *The Herald Sun* does not refer to the asylum seekers on board the *Tampa* as "illegals," the newspaper does refer to them as "illegal immigrants" in other places. In a reader poll, *The Herald Sun* asked, "Should Australia turn away the disputed boatload of illegal immigrants?" Not surprisingly, the resounding majority of respondents [95.6 percent or 13,572 readers] said "yes," while only 4.4 percent of readers [or 615 readers] said "no."<sup>29</sup> The paper then asked, "Should Australia relent to international pressure and accept the illegal immigrants?" Again, not surprisingly, a resounding "no," was the answer, with 92.7 percent of readers supporting the government's decision not to "relent to international pressures," and only 7.3 percent of readers saying "yes," the country should accept the "illegal immigrants."<sup>30</sup> The concerning issue here is, again, the language used to

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<sup>28</sup> Correspondence: Andrew Bolt, "Tampa Incident Project," 2 May 2005. Available at: BoltA@heraldsun.com.au.

<sup>29</sup> "Voteline: Voice of the People" in *The Herald Sun*, 4 September 2001, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

describe those on the *Tampa*. Without having received any refugee status processing, no aboard *Tampa* could be considered an “illegal immigrant,” rather, each individual was still simply, and legally, an “asylum seeker.” It is absolutely unsurprising, however, that when led to believe those on board *Tampa* were in some way criminal [by labeling them as “illegal”], readers of *The Herald Sun* were absolutely against allowing them inside Australia; there are very few level-headed individuals who would respond positively to the idea of 438 criminals being let loose inside their country. Of course the percentages were in favor of the government; how could they not be? By referring to the asylum seekers as “illegal immigrants,” *The Herald Sun* set an agenda for its readers; the information given to *Herald Sun* readers was this: those on board *Tampa* were illegal, and obviously, any criminal should be kept outside Australian borders. Without saying anything other than “illegal immigrant,” *The Herald Sun* was able to sway its readers, so much so that, according to its reader poll, over ninety percent agreed with the government’s decision not to allow the asylum seekers inside.

The news article I have chosen from *The Age* is similarly representative of the other news articles published by the newspaper. The article, “Refugees stranded at sea,” published on 28 September 2001, and run on the front page of the newspaper, moved through the recent events of *Tampa* and attempted to work out the logistics behind the entire situation. In the article, the asylum seekers are referred to as “refugees” [note that this label appears in the title], “asylum seekers,” and “boat people” [“boat people” appears only in a sub-heading for the article which reads, “Boat people get refuge in containers”].<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Louise Dodson, Simon Mann and Kerry Taylor, “Refugees stranded at sea,” in *The Age*, 28 August 2001, p. 1.

Perhaps most noteworthy in this article is the cartoon which is set inside the text. The cartoon portrays a man at a desk, speaking with a family who appears to be looking at a map of Australia behind him. Also behind the desk is something which appears to be a kind of cage, in which three individuals are being kept. In it, the man is saying “Australia’s a nice place to visit, but you wouldn’t want to try and live there.”<sup>32</sup> With this cartoon as a sidebar to the article, it is hard to imagine that any *Age* reader would be expected to support the government’s decision to refuse entry to the asylum seekers.

Furthermore, the article continuously refers to the asylum seekers as “stranded refugees,” giving them the status of “refugee,” something which they had not yet achieved. So, while the *Herald Sun* referred to the asylum seekers [the correct legal term for the individuals on board the *Tampa*], *The Age* referred to them as “stranded refugees,” seeming to ask their readers to sympathize with those stuck on board.

Underneath the article, there is a timeline of events, following the asylum seekers on their journey to Australia, and a series of quotes by the key players in handling the *Tampa* incident. The first quote, from Arne Rinnan, captain of the *Tampa* reads, “We felt it was not safe to take them up to Indonesia for the crew on board the ship.” John Howard’s quote reads, “I hope that, amongst other things, it sends a message to people smugglers around the world that whilst this is a humanitarian decent country, we are not a soft touch.”<sup>33</sup> In the article, Howard continues. “We are not a nation whose sovereign rights in relation to who comes here are going to be trampled on.”<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the paper quotes both the Indonesian Foreign Ministry and the Norwegian Foreign Office as refusing to accept the asylum seekers as under their control, and thus as their country’s responsibility.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

Given the title of the article, the language of the article [referring to those aboard the *Tampa* as “stranded refugees”], the cartoon placed within the text of the article and the final quote of the article [from the Refugee Council of Australia’s Margaret Piper], it is hard to imagine that the newspaper did not have an agenda in mind when placing it on the front page, just one day after *Tampa* coverage began. This news article seems to confirm, much like the article of *The Herald Sun*, that the agenda setting function of the media may in fact exist, and that the ability of the media to influence public opinion – even in its simple news reportage – may be much more prevalent than some individuals [reference survey results in next chapter and appendix] may be inclined to believe.

The editorial I believe is most representative of a typical editorial published in *The Age* at the time of *Tampa* was called “Human misery cannot be denied.” Published on 29 August, 2001, the editorial discusses the importance of human decency, all politics set aside. “The Tampa sailed into strife at a time when the increasingly flow of illegal immigrants has become a contentious issue in Australian politics,” it says. “But, in the face of suffering on such a scale, this must be secondary to basic human decency.”<sup>35</sup> Upon first glance, the editorial seems not to lambaste the Prime Minister’s actions [whereas other editorials had done as much], but instead seems to play to an assumed human instinct to help those in need. “A container ship with a human cargo cannot be willed away. Rising above the debate was the voice of a Tampa sailor... ‘these people need help,’”

Upon closer examination, however, the editorial seems to point to a level of heartlessness in the Prime Minister, calling into question his human decency. If, in fact, it is heartless and cruel to allow such “human misery” to continue, even despite

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<sup>35</sup> “Human misery cannot be denied,” in *The Age*, 29 August 2001, p. 14.

the fact that the Prime Minister may be right to “insist that Australia cannot allow unrestricted entry,” he still lacks the heart to “help those in distress.” Beyond anything else, the human instinct to help those in need ought to triumph. “Beyond politics, beyond sending messages to those who consign refugees to the seas, is the imperative to help people in distress.”<sup>36</sup>

This editorial is typical of other editorials published by the newspaper in that it calls into question the character of the Prime Minister. Of course, the newspaper did not publish solely anti-government editorials. One column, by Bob Birrell called “Why Howard was right,” said, “while the number of unauthorised boat arrivals is not large, I believe the Tampa action reflects an underlying sense of crisis in government circles about the management of the boat people...the government is in a serious bind...Australia needs to focus its compassion on those most in need, who can establish their claims through UNHCR offices overseas.”<sup>37</sup>

Sara Wills further notes that, during the time of *Tampa*, “both the Prime Minister and Minister Ruddock [Australia’s Minister of Immigration] spoke of ‘defending our borders,’ ‘protection of our sovereignty,’ and doing ‘whatever it takes.’ What started as rhetoric was then backed by legislation to provide coastal patrols with ‘extra muscle’ to create a ‘shield of steel.’”<sup>38</sup> It would be my argument that *The Herald Sun* furthered the sentiments of the Prime Minister and Minister Ruddock within their editorial pages.

The *Herald Sun* feature article-opinion piece I have chosen ran on 30 August 2001; written by Andrew Bolt, “Cruel? No, kind,” raised the “agonising question” of “whether we do more harm than good if we let them [the asylum seekers] in.”<sup>39</sup> As

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>37</sup> Bob Birrell, “Why Howard was right” in *The Age*, 7 September 2001.

<sup>38</sup> Wills, “Losing the right to country,” p. 55.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Bolt, “Cruel? No, kind,” in *The Herald Sun*, 30 August 2001.

one of the most prominent columnists in the highest selling daily in Melbourne, Bolt certainly has sway with his loyal readers. For this reason, I chose one of his columns as representative of the editorial content typically run in *The Herald Sun*. The column opens, “Don’t be cowed. Saying *no* to the 438 people on the MV *Tampa* does *not* prove you’re heartless. Only a moral bully would say the answer to this crisis is so simple. In fact, the most compassionate thing to do is send the boat people back to Indonesia.”<sup>40</sup>

Bolt takes a hard look at what he considers to be the current situation in Australia, writing, “Already we can’t find work for hundreds of thousands of our own, or find beds for Australians who have worked all their life hoping for some security at its end. To keep saying yes is simply refusing to make a decision, and is harming Australia.”<sup>41</sup> The column staunchly backs the government in its refusal to allow the *Tampa* asylum seekers onto Australian soil and refutes six arguments made by others as to why the asylum seekers should be allowed into Australia. One argument, that the asylum seekers are “real refugees” and are in “fear for their safety,” Bolt refutes saying, “We don’t know that yet. Are they fleeing from danger, or shopping for a better offer?” Responding to another argument, that “we should just do the humanitarian thing and rescue these people from peril at sea,” Bolt says, “But what peril? The real peril we should worry about is the one faced by other people who may be inspired by our ‘compassion’ to hope onto leaky boat themselves, if we show that’s all it takes to get them in.”<sup>42</sup>

Bolt ends the article with a simple summation of his thoughts: “Sometimes we do the greatest good by being wise, not seeming kind. Sorry as I feel for those on the *Tampa*, I fear this is one of those times.” Interestingly, Bolt is able to paint himself –

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

and the government – as the true “compassionate” heroes in the situation, claiming that the wisest, hardest choice is simply to refuse the asylum seekers entry, under the assumption that it is ultimately for their own good. This is certainly an effective argument, in which Bolt asks his readers to set aside their “typical” belief of what it might mean to be compassionate, and instead examine the issue from a different perspective. How is it compassionate, he seems to ask, to allow people into a country where they will most definitely find disappointment. “Culturally, too,” he says, “we are struggling to melt into one people. More recent refugee communities risk being ghettoised and some of their children respond by forming gangs or surrendering to drugs and despair.”<sup>43</sup> It is certainly an agonizing picture, one which any truly compassionate person would never wish on another individual, whether or not they were facing peril at sea. And furthermore, Bolt argues, the asylum seekers aboard the *Tampa* were hardly in peril. Despite Captain Rinnan’s claims that the asylum seekers were unwell, that there were not enough people onboard to give proper medical attention to sick individuals, and despite the fact that the ship was built to hold a crew of forty [not a passenger load of 438], Bolt argues, “As long as we keep them supplied with food, water and medical help, they *should* be in no immediate danger.”<sup>44</sup>

Certainly this article points to the ability of the news media’s power to set agendas, at least in its editorial sections. Bolt clearly writes with the intention of convincing his readers that the compassionate action is not to allow the *Tampa* passengers inside Australia, but rather, to turn them around, and send them back to their own country. Of course, this column – and the others like it published in *The Herald Sun* – cannot be held responsible for the overwhelming support of John Howard’s decisions at the time of *Tampa* by *Herald Sun* readers; however, the fact

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

that the two have any correlation whatsoever may point to the possibility that the news media has some power to influence its readers.

Both the editorial and the news pieces run by *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* indicated some relationship between the content of a newspaper and the ability of that newspaper to influence public opinion on the government's handling of the *Tampa* incident. Certainly the editorial sections aimed to do this; by publishing an opinion piece by a writer like Andrew Bolt, *The Herald Sun* was maintaining that their overarching sentiment as a paper was one which supported the government; while on the other hand, *The Age* did the same for an overarching opinion which did not support the government. But also, within their news articles, both newspapers seemed to allow their editorial opinions to seep into the reporting of the *Tampa* story. *The Age* referred to the asylum seekers as "stranded refugees," while *The Herald Sun* referred to the asylum seekers as "illegal immigrants," and quoted only the authority from the government's side of the case on whether the asylum seekers were illegally detained on board *Tampa*. So while both Michael Gordon and Andrew Bolt held that their newspapers were fair and accurate in their reporting of the *Tampa* story, there seems to have been some concerted attempt at agenda setting within the news pages.

Chapter Three

## Interviews

As a form of primary research, I conducted two formal interviews. One with Michael Gordon, National Editor at *The Age*, at *The Age* offices in Melbourne, and the other with Andrew Bolt, columnist at *The Herald Sun*, via email.

Michael Gordon, who has covered a wide range of issues for *The Age*, has long been considered an expert journalist in the area of asylum seeker, refugee and migrant issues. An advocate for asylum seekers, he was recently one of the first journalists allowed onto Nauru Island, the Pacific island which became the unloading place for many of the asylum seekers onboard the Norwegian *Tampa* and later, the Australian *Manoora*. Gordon was among the primary reporters who covered the *Tampa* incident in 2001; as *The Age*'s National Editor, his pieces on *Tampa* often ran on the front of the News Extra section of the newspaper, and covered the many nuances at play in the often chaotic and bewildering situation. Gordon was entirely against the decisions made by the Howard government at the time of *Tampa*, and to this day, holds that the *Tampa* handling represents a “travesty in Australian asylum seeker history.”<sup>45</sup> However, Gordon also noted that, in his reporting, he stuck to the three tenants of quality journalism, “fairness, balance and accuracy.”<sup>46</sup>

Andrew Bolt, the controversial, yet extremely powerful columnist who most commonly takes the side of the Howard government on public issues, said that *The Herald Sun*, as a whole, stood in support of the government, but also followed the tenants of quality reporting. “Our editorials generally supported the government,” he said, noting, “Our news stories and letters pages faithfully reported both sides of the debate, although our readers – like the voters – tended to support the government.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Interview, Michael Gordon, “Tampa Incident Project.” Completed 29 April 2005 at *The Age* Offices in Melbourne, Victoria. Available at: mgordon@theage.com.au.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Correspondence, Andrew Bolt. Completed 2 May 2005.

On the other hand, Gordon felt that *The Age*, as a whole, stood opposed to the government's handling of *Tampa* and had reservations regarding "the treatment of the asylum seekers, Australia's relationship with its neighbors and the specific actions taken by the government, for example, the draconian legislation and the wider aspects of the Pacific Solution, which abused poorer countries such as Nauru."<sup>48</sup> In its reporting, however, Gordon said that *The Age* was clear in its separation of news and commentary. "The paper quite deliberately separates its news from its commentary," he said. "We were cognizant of the tenants of news and we stayed true to those tenants from the very beginning, despite the editorial opinions of the paper as a whole."

Obviously, both men had to be very careful to stress the separation of news and commentary within the pages of their newspapers. Both journalists reacted similarly to the question of whether or not they felt that their paper allowed its overarching opinion to seep into news articles and general reporting regarding *Tampa*, noting that their respective papers did not allow any editorial content onto their general news pages. However, both journalists argued that the "other" paper [Bolt did not hesitate to name the "other" as *The Age*, whereas Gordon did not specifically cite *The Herald Sun*], was particularly biased in its reporting. When asked how he felt about the way the *Sun* covered the *Tampa* story, Bolt replied, "Perfectly sanguine. I tend to think our coverage was more balanced than the strident and highly opinionated reportage of say, the *Age*, and not surprisingly, more in line with the views or the majority of Australians. And with common sense."<sup>49</sup> On the same question, Gordon replied, "Where that paper may have referred to the asylum seekers as 'illegals' or 'Queue-jumpers' within their news pages, we would have referred to them simply

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<sup>48</sup> Interview: Michael Gordon.

<sup>49</sup> Correspondence: Andrew Bolt.

using the legal terminology, ‘asylum seekers.’ The use of legal terminology creates a much more accurate base for a story; that small change within language could mean a great deal for the tilt of the story.”<sup>50</sup>

Gordon stressed that the *Tampa* incident had been unparalleled in Australian history and that the government seemed to be improvising as events transpired, thus giving an “exceptional” quality to the story.

“This was absolutely unprecedented. The Prime Minister and his government have the power to turn this boat around, to request that it stay away from the Australian border and keep at sea until further decisions could be made, without guaranteeing the peril of all those on board. If the boat had been sinking, if it hadn’t been rescued, the Howard government wouldn’t have had that kind of power, that kind of time to react. The fact that the *Tampa* rescued the asylum seekers gave the administration much more time to respond, and furthermore, gave them the ‘right’ to refuse them access to their shores without sending them to definite death.”<sup>51</sup>

Andrew Bolt, however, saw very little “exceptional” character in the story. “What the government did,” he said, “was so unexceptional, that it’s no surprise that most people supported it, and that even Labor felt obliged to go along with the government in principle.”<sup>52</sup>

Speaking on the ability of the media – the print media specifically – to set and maintain agendas with the public, Gordon noted that he hoped the media held that power, complete with the ability to spark public debate and engage the public in political issues. “I would hope it does have that power, and certainly, on this issue [the *Tampa*], it has shown that it has.” Gordon pointed to this as an important role for the media, particularly at the time of *Tampa*. “When you have a very dominant government, an opposition that isn’t very competitive and a disengaged electorate, the role of the media becomes very important. It becomes the responsibility of the media to raise issues and generate public debate.” Generally, he said, it ought to be the

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<sup>50</sup> Interview: Michael Gordon.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Interview: Andrew Bolt.

responsibility of politicians to generate this type of conversation among the electorate; however, he said many politicians had sidestepped that responsibility. “It’s very easy for charismatic politicians to generate debate where they want there to be debate,” he said. “And it’s terrific when that’s happening. But when it’s not, then issues slip through the radar and the media has to pick up the slack.”<sup>53</sup>

Bolt highlighted the limited power of the media to set agenda, citing the republic referendum as an example of readers rejecting that which the metropolitan daily newspapers had promoted. “[The media] has a limited power, exercised best by restricting coverage of awkward facts than in explicit opining...It seems we’re not so influential...and may even have a tendency to inspire voters to do the very opposite of what we want.”<sup>54</sup>

Finally, both men responded to a column written by Andrew Bolt on 3 September, 2001, titled “The great cringe.” In the article, Bolt wrote, “How dare so many Australian journalists automatically take Norway’s side against us? Yes, once again, we see our ‘elite’ media happily presuming that in any dispute with foreigners, it’s *Australia* that must be wrong. Must apologise for being heartless. Or racist. Whatever.”<sup>55</sup> He continued on to say, “The entire elite media should be held to account—and asked how much longer they can treat the public with such obvious contempt before they finally lose any influence to do good.”<sup>56</sup> Bolt defended the statements saying, “the cringe reflex is particularly marked among our artists, academics, journalists and the like – those you’d generally class among our ‘cultural elite.’ It’s a social grouping that tends to pride itself on seeing matters more clearly

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<sup>53</sup> Interview: Michael Gordon.

<sup>54</sup> Correspondence: Andrew Bolt.

<sup>55</sup> Bolt, “The great cringe,” p. 19.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

and understanding them more deeply than do the vast majority of people.”<sup>57</sup> Bolt cited the Melbourne Museum, the allegations that Australians are particularly racist (and should apologize to Asia) and the claims that Australia had perpetuated genocide as examples of the “hysterical claims” made by this “cultural elite” within the media.

Gordon responded to the claim set forth by Bolt in “The great cringe,” saying, “It’s predictable, what he says. I just don’t think it stands up to critical analysis. This government has been in power for quite some time, and there have certainly been times when it allowed Australia to act as a good international citizen, for example, with East Timor. However, the *Tampa* incident and the country’s treatment of asylum seekers simply have not shown the world our good citizen side.” He went on to say, “We certainly must just take each issue on its merits. You’re just trying to be as objective as you can. In that way, I don’t think [Bolt] has critically analyzed his claims.”<sup>58</sup>

Most interesting, perhaps, about the two men was that while both felt that their own paper had reported the news following the three great tenants of reporting – “fairness, accuracy, balance” – both felt that the “other” paper had failed to do so, both in their editorials and in their basic news coverage of *Tampa*. Gordon cited the *Herald Sun*’s use of “queue jumper” and “illegal” within their news pages, while Bolt claimed that *The Age* reporting was “strident and highly opinionated.”<sup>59</sup> Obviously, both men had a responsibility to their own newspaper to protect its news content at the time of *Tampa*; however, both journalists seemed adamant that their paper had covered the news fairly and accurately, with no political tilt whatsoever. Does this mean that journalists have become incapable at looking at their own work with an objective eye? Perhaps. And perhaps this is one of the reasons that the media so

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<sup>57</sup> Correspondence: Andrew Bolt.

<sup>58</sup> Interview: Michael Gordon.

<sup>59</sup> Correspondence: Andrew Bolt.

quickly takes part in setting and maintaining agenda for the general public; if the journalists inside the media are unable to review their work objectively and become aware of their own ability to set agenda within the news pages [setting aside the editorial pages], how can the general public be expected to see that their political leanings may be influenced by the paper they pick up each morning? For Michael Gordon, *The Age* reported its facts with accuracy and fairness to all parties involved; for Andrew Bolt, *The Herald Sun* did exactly that, but for each of them, the other paper was tilted and biased in its reporting. Assuming that both papers had, to some degree, a political agenda within the pages of their news section, have both journalists simply lost the ability to see news reporting for what it had originally intended to be “an objective body of truth about the world?”<sup>60</sup> Perhaps both men are acutely aware that, as Keith Windschuttle writes, “[Newspapers] do not simply transmit ‘information’ or ‘data’...the ‘news’ borne by newspapers is a cultural phenomenon which reaches deep into our society and which carries traditions that are not interchangeable...culture will remain the principle determinant of the nature of the media.”<sup>61</sup>

Both journalists did support the idea of the media as an agenda setting mechanism within society, rather than deny that the media might carry such a responsibility. Gordon was hopeful that the media played such a part in raising political debate and refusing to allow issues to “pass under the radar,” while Bolt seemed to admit that the media often has an agenda to inspire voters to act in a certain way. “[The media] may even have a tendency to inspire voters to do the very opposite of what we want.” Perhaps, then, the agenda setting function of the media can be looked at in a positive light, rather than in a negative one. One must take into

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<sup>60</sup> Keith Windschuttle, *The Media*. (Ringwood Victoria: Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 1988), p. 261.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

consideration the idea that the “agenda” of the media may in fact simply be to raise public awareness on various issues, where politicians and general public interest fall short. This may be a lofty assumption on the role of the media, but it is certainly one worth considering. Gordon seemed optimistic about the ability of the media to set agenda saying that the media’s responsibility as an agenda setter seemed almost unavoidable where politicians refuse to allow certain issues onto the radar of public awareness, where the Opposition government is not well organized and seems unable to bring these issues to the fore and where a disengaged electorate refuses to demand of the politicians that they do just that.

I find particularly interesting Bolt’s statement that “we may have a tendency to inspire voters to do the very opposite of what we want.” Within this statement, there seems to be an acknowledgement of the fact that the media does in fact operate with under an agenda setting function, and may wish to influence public opinion on various issues. While Bolt may have been pointing to editorial content in saying that the print media has an agenda for its readers, this project assumes that the overarching opinion of the paper is not kept from the news pages, and rather, is heavily influential within the reporting of various stories.

In the case of *Tampa*, then, it is this paper’s argument that the editorial position of *The Age* – generally against the government’s decisions – and the editorial position of *The Herald Sun* – generally supportive of the government’s decisions – were, in fact, carried throughout the papers and into the general reportage of the incident. So, perhaps both men were wrong in denying that their own newspaper did not allow any editorial content to leak onto their news pages, and on the other hand, were correct in pointing to “the other” paper as a culprit in setting agenda outside of the editorial pages.

Chapter Four

## Survey

[See Appendix A for full survey results and comparative charts.]

The survey of 100 members of the Australian general public was conducted under the condition that the respondent read at least one Australian newspaper at the time of the *Tampa* incident in 2001. The survey was completed at Federation Square and Flinder's Street Station on 23 April 2005, throughout the late morning and early afternoon.

The survey included five questions, asked after establishing newspaper readership at the time of *Tampa* and age group. The questions were as follows:

- 1). Do you read the paper? [If yes, what paper? How often? (Choices: Everyday, 4-5 times per week, 2-3 times per week)].
- 2). In 2001, during the *Tampa* incident, where did you get your information? [Newspapers, television, radio?]
- 3). At the time, did you agree or disagree with the way John Howard handled the incident? (Strongly agree, Agree, Don't know, Disagree, Strongly disagree).
- 4). Did the media affect your opinion toward John Howard's handling of the *Tampa* incident? (Agreement spectrum).
- 5). Has your opinion changed? [As in, how do you currently feel regarding John Howard's handling of the *Tampa* incident? (Agreement Spectrum)].

In order to best ensure that a cross-sampling of Australians were being surveyed, fifty males and fifty females were questioned, and were then broken down into three different age categories with an equal sampling from each category; the

categories were: eighteen to thirty, thirty to fifty-five, and fifty-five plus. After identifying both gender and age group, each respondent was asked to answer the five questions listed above.

*The Age* and *The Herald Sun* have two very different target reader groups; the case of the *Tampa* was no exception. As Michael Gordon said, *The Age*, as a whole, tended to question the government's handling of the *Tampa* incident, while, as Andrew Bolt said, *The Herald Sun* tended to support the government. This simplification of the editorial content alone, allows for an investigation into the ability of a newspaper to influence public opinion, given the political tilt of its editorial staff. Therefore, setting all various cause-effect hypotheses aside, the assumption could be drawn that *Age* readers would be more likely to disagree with the Howard government's decisions at the time of *Tampa*, and *Herald Sun* readers would more be more likely to feel the opposite and support the Howard government's decisions at the time.

This assumption aside – the survey results speak for themselves – there is a clear correlation between *Age* readers and disagreement with John Howard's handling of *Tampa*, and between *Herald Sun* readers and agreement with John Howard's handling of *Tampa*. Looking simply at readers of *The Age* and *The Herald Sun*, readers of *The Age* were far more likely to disagree with John Howard's decisions than were readers of *The Herald Sun*. While five percent of *Herald Sun* readers *strongly* agreed with John Howard, and twenty-eight percent of *Herald Sun* readers agreed with John Howard, only seven percent of *Age* readers agreed with John Howard and zero percent of *Age* readers *strongly* agreed. On the other hand, twelve percent of *Age* readers claimed to have disagreed with John Howard's decisions at the

time of *Tampa* and twenty-one percent of *Age* readers claimed to have *strongly* disagreed, compared with four and two percent of *Herald Sun* readers, respectively. Nine percent of readers of *The Age* and twelve percent of readers of *The Herald Sun* cited “don’t know” as their response to the question of agreement/disagreement with the Prime Minister.

Obviously, there cannot be a clear and definite causal connection drawn between an individual’s newspaper choice and their political leanings during the time of the *Tampa* incident; however, these survey results can support the idea that while the media is certainly not the sole factor in creating and maintaining agenda, it may have a role in that process, but, the most telling results of the survey are the results regarding newspaper choice and opinion on *Tampa*. An overwhelmingly greater number of individuals who read *The Age* at the time of the *Tampa* incident did not support John Howard’s decisions as did those who read *The Herald Sun*, whereas an overwhelmingly greater number of individuals who read *The Herald Sun* supported John Howard’s decisions as did those who read *The Age*.

Survey responses did not point to any great variations between men and women on the issue of John Howard’s decisions at the time of *Tampa*. More men than women *strongly* disagreed with the Prime Minister; however, more women than men simply disagreed. The other categories were fairly similar with three percent of men and two percent of women strongly agreeing, seventeen men and eighteen women agreeing, and finally, thirteen men and ten women citing “don’t know” as their response.

Survey responses also did not point to great variations between age groups on the issue of John Howard’s decisions at the time of *Tampa*. All three age groups –

eighteen to thirty, thirty to fifty-five and fifty-five plus – all had the largest count in the “agree” category with twelve, eight and fourteen percent respectively.

The majority of respondents felt that the media did not affect their opinion regarding the government’s handling of the *Tampa* incident. Forty-seven percent of respondents disagreed when asked whether the media affected their opinion of the government’s decisions surrounding the *Tampa* incident, while only sixteen percent of respondents agreed that the media had. Thirty-four percent didn’t know whether they had been affected by the media, and zero and two percent strongly agreed and strongly disagreed, respectively.

Answering the final question of the survey – regarding whether or not their opinion had changed since the time of the *Tampa* incident in 2001 – thirty percent of respondents agreed that their opinion had been changed.

Among readers of *The Herald Sun*, eighteen said that, since the time of the *Tampa* incident, they had changed their opinion regarding John Howard’s decisions at the time. Within that group, six individual who had earlier “agreed” with John Howard’s decisions now said they “strongly agreed.” Among those who had earlier “not known” how they felt about John Howard’s decisions, one now “strongly agreed” and four now “agreed.” Among those who had earlier “disagreed” with John Howard, one now “didn’t know” and two now “agreed.” And finally, one *Herald Sun* reader who had cited “strongly disagree” as their opinion of the government’s decision at the time of *Tampa* cited “agree” as their opinion now. Only three people, one person from “agree” to “don’t know” and two people from “agree” to “disagree,” moved from previous agreeing with John Howard.

Among readers of *The Age*, on the other hand, twelve said that since the time of *Tampa*, they had changed their opinion regarding John Howard’s decision at the

time. Three *Age* readers who “disagreed” with John Howard at the time of *Tampa* now “strongly disagreed;” three *Age* readers said that at the time of *Tampa*, they had not known their opinion regarding John Howard’s decisions, but now “disagreed” with his actions. Of those who had “agreed” with John Howard at the time, three now “didn’t know” their opinion and one “disagreed.” Finally, only two readers of *The Age* moved from “agreeing” with John Howard, and they both now “didn’t know.”

This is perhaps the strongest evidence to show the existence of an agenda setting power within the print media of Melbourne. If one assumes that the other factors in the situation – background, upbringing, social and political statuses, economic stability, etc. – remained the same, then it is a valid to conclude that these papers, *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* succeeded in swaying their readers’ opinions of the *Tampa* incident, and thus served to set an agenda regarding the issue.

As Andrew Bolt said, *The Herald Sun* took an editorial position of supporting the government, while, as Michael Gordon pointed out, *The Age* took an editorial position against the government; what this data shows is that each paper had the ability to change some of its readers’ minds regarding the incident.

Again, I note that there is not a direct, final or conclusive statement to be made regarding the Agenda Setting Function Theory of Mass Media Communications; however, there is certainly enough evidence here to prove that, all other factors unchanged, the media in Melbourne, at the time of *Tampa*, had the power to influence public opinion regarding the government’s handling of the incident. The contention of this paper, then, can be linked directly to this portion of the survey: those readers who changed their position on the Howard government’s handling of the *Tampa* incident in 2001 generally moved in the direction of their chosen paper’s editorial position. In this way, the assertion of this paper is upheld; the news media of Melbourne – *The*

*Age* and *The Herald Sun* – not only reported the news at the time of *Tampa*, but told the story in a way which created, maintained and continued to influence public opinion surrounding the issue.

During the time of the *Tampa* incident, the Minister for Immigration, Philip Ruddock argued, “I could characterise the task for both of us in familiar terms of doing good and fighting evil. The good is extending our compassion and welcome to refugees who have no other option. The fight against evil is against the exploitation by people smugglers of people desirous of a better life and the resultant abuse and the distortion of the system that has been set up to support refugees.”<sup>62</sup> *The Herald Sun* seemed to take note of this type of sentiment, as was shown in the earlier content analysis, and thus print articles and editorials which supported the government in its attempt to divide the asylum seeker debate into a question of good and evil. *Herald Sun* readers, therefore, got a very clear view of this side of the argument. It would be common sense to assume then that the readers of *The Herald Sun* might tend to agree with the government’s handling of *Tampa*, if only slightly based on the fact that the *Sun* took to the types of statements made by Howard government officials and plastered them across their editorial pages, with much of its own editorial content in line with such statements.

As Sara Wills writes, “Melbourne’s popular *Herald Sun* newspaper felt Australia had to ‘flex its muscle; because not to have acted with strength would have betrayed our nation.’ Opinion polls at this time indicated seventy-eight per cent of the public supported the Government’s stance.”<sup>63</sup> *The Age*, on the other hand, described the *Tampa* incident as “an atmosphere of panic manufactured by the government.”<sup>64</sup> Again, given this context, it would be common sense to assume that readers of *The*

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<sup>62</sup> Manne, “Sending them Home,” p. 9.

<sup>63</sup> Wills, “Losing the right to country,” p. 56.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p 56.

*Herald Sun* would be more likely to support the government, while readers of *The Age* would be less likely to do so. Given this information, it is interesting to find that the majority of individuals feel that the media had very little to do with their opinion at the time of *Tampa*, and in fact, had nearly no role in influencing whether or not they supported the course of action taken by the government.

Of course, most individuals would like to believe that the media does not affect their decision making. However, in this age of information, where media is inevitably a part of every day life, it would be a tall order to expect that an individual could be left un-influenced by the media which surrounded them, including the news. “Much of the news deserves to be seen as another form of popular culture,” writes Keith Windschuttle, “with similar origins and serving similar social purposes to television dramas and popular music.”

Is this the point we have reached in our news consumption? News organizations, now controlled by concentrated groups of individuals – who are often aligned with the government – control the news that is heard and the news that is swept under the rug. So, perhaps, the agenda setting function of the news media comes into play not only in the content of the news pages of various papers, but also in what gets left out, or highlighted, in the various daily newspapers of Australia. At the time of *Tampa*, perhaps it was not only the content of *The Age* and *The Herald Sun*, but the content that each paper respectively left out of their news pages which may have contributed to the agenda set by each.

This question aside, it would be easy to assume in looking at the survey results, that readers of *The Herald Sun* and *The Age* were, in fact, influenced by their newspaper choice. Of course, it is impossible to draw that kind of immediate connection given the small number of respondents, the lack of consideration for other

variables [educational background, professional background, financial situation] and the time constraints for this project, but it is certainly apparent that there is, at the very least, some minute connection between a reader's newspaper choice and his/her support of the government at the time of *Tampa*, even despite the fact that the majority of readers did not feel that the media had influenced their opinion, particularly given the fact that the readers who did change their minds over the course of the following four years, did tend to move toward the position of the paper they read. It is that evidence which most effectively speaks to the validity of the agenda setting function of the media. In this way, the survey respondents did show that the media, at the time of *Tampa* and into 2005 [when the survey was completed], had the power to shape and maintain public opinion. These two newspapers had the power to set a political agenda for their readers, as evidenced by those readers who moved toward their paper's editorial position as time progressed.

## Conclusion

The question of this research project seemed straight forward enough: is there some validity to the idea of an agenda setting function of the media, and if there is, did that function of the media come into play in its reporting of the *Tampa* incident in August, 2001? The contention of this paper, and the reason for which I conducted research in the manner I did, was that, yes, the media did in fact have a role in creating, shaping and maintaining public opinion at the time of *Tampa*. The media which I reference were two influential constituents of the print media of Melbourne, *The Age* and *The Herald Sun*.

On a most basic level, my limited research seems to point to the validity of this hypothesis. First, the content of each newspaper – as a whole and within its news and editorial pieces specifically – seems to point to a general point of view in reporting style. *The Herald Sun*, for example, in its news article “Boat people ruling today,” first refers to the asylum seekers aboard the *Tampa* as “boat people” and “illegal immigrants,” and second, does not quote the attorney representing their case and only quotes the attorney representing the government’s case. It seems, in this simple news piece, that *The Herald Sun* assumes a position supporting the government, using the article’s language and content as the mechanisms by which to do this. *The Age*, on the other hand, in its news article “Refugees stranded at sea,” places a cartoon prominently, in the center of the front page article, which seems to suggest that Australia is an unfriendly land, where asylum seekers are promptly locked away. Both news articles suggest a political agenda, even within their news pages.

On their editorial pages, both newspapers set similar agendas, only with the outright intention of persuading their readers to believe certain things about certain issues. In the case of *Tampa*, *The Age* asked readers to believe that the Prime Minister

had left behind his sense of human decency in refusing to allow the suffering asylum seekers to land on Australian soil. *The Herald Sun*, through the writing of Andrew Bolt, asked its readers to believe that it would “cruel” to allow the asylum seekers to land in Australia, and that the wise choice was, in fact, to send them back to Indonesia.

My interview with Michael Gordon, National Editor at *The Age*, and my correspondence with Andrew Bolt, columnist at *The Herald Sun*, also supported the idea that the media carries the power to shape and influence public opinion and, at the very least, inspire public consciousness on various issues. Gordon was optimistic in explaining his view of media influence, saying, “On the issue of *Tampa*, the media has certainly had this power, and I think that has been very important. It becomes the role of the media to raise these issues, these questions, when our politicians fail us, and when our electorate becomes disengaged.”<sup>65</sup> Andrew Bolt did not hesitate to say that the media may aim to set the agenda, but was unconvinced that it had the power to play that role. “It seems we’re not quite so influential after all,” he said, “and may even have a tendency to inspire voters to do the very opposite of what we want.”<sup>66</sup>

Just as Andrew Bolt and Michael Gordon seem to support the idea that the media could have the power to set agenda, the results of my general survey also seem to point to the validity of this paper’s hypothesis. The majority of *Age* readers disagreed or strongly disagreed with John Howard’s decisions at the time of *Tampa*, while the majority of *Herald Sun* readers agreed or strongly agreed with his actions. Interestingly, at the same time, the majority of respondents [forty-nine percent] did not believe that the media influenced their opinions surrounding this issue, thus showing that the media is doing an effective job of swaying opinion without making

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<sup>65</sup> Interview: Michael Gordon.

<sup>66</sup> Correspondence: Andrew Bolt.

clear their intentions to do so. Furthermore, these results seem to show that respondents are in denial of the effects of the media on their opinions, and on their everyday lives in general.

Even more telling are the results of the survey which seem to point directly to the role of the media in influencing public opinion. Among readers of *The Age* who said that their opinion of John Howard's actions regarding the *Tampa* incident had changed since 2001, ten out of twelve moved toward the general editorial position assumed by the newspaper [one which disagreed with John Howard's course of action]; only two moved in the other direction. The same was true for readers of *The Herald Sun* who had changed their opinions; fifteen out of eighteen respondents moved in the direction of the newspaper's editorial position [one which supported John Howard's course of action], while three moved in the other direction. This seems to be the strongest piece of evidence within my research to point to the validity of the Agenda Setting Function Theory. Among these respondents, the two newspapers had the power to sway their opinions, setting a certain agenda and influencing their readers to begin to think along those same lines.

Using the research and evidence cited in this paper, it would be reasonable to conclude that the media played a significant role in the creation and maintenance of public opinion regarding the government's handling of the *Tampa* incident in 2001. After careful consideration of all the evidence, it is reasonably safe to conclude that there exists a connection between public sentiment and the content of both *The Herald Sun* and *The Age* in Melbourne. If it seems, however, that I hesitate throughout this paper, to draw a *direct* link between public sentiment regarding the *Tampa* incident and the newspaper choice made by the citizens of Melbourne, it's simply because I have reservations about making such a large statement based on a

short project, completed in a short amount of time and with a limited number of resources. There are, of course, an infinite number of variables which have the possibility of influencing an individual's political opinion on a certain issue; family, social class, peer group, education, occupation and many other factors have the power to influence political opinion. There does seem to be, however, sufficient evidence, in the case of *Tampa*, to point to some correlation between print media content and public opinion. Given that, in my research, I was limited by time, resources and my own level of ability, I do not wish to put forth a grand statement and final statement about the legitimacy of the Agenda Setting Function Theory of Mass Media Communication. At the same time, however, it would be foolish to ignore the findings of my research, and refuse to make any conclusion. The Agenda Setting Function Theory seems to carry some validity as it applies to the print media of Melbourne during the time of *Tampa*; that is not to say that this theory can be widely applied to any other media outlet, old or new [despite the symbiotic relationship between various forms of media], such as television, radio or the internet.

This project has shown that, in some way or another, the print media of Melbourne – *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* – had an impact on public opinion regarding John Howard's treatment of the asylum seekers aboard the *Tampa* in August and September of 2001. Whether through their methods of reporting, the selection or omission of various pieces of information, or through their editorial and commentary sections, each paper seems to have impacted its readers.

The research involved in the production of this paper seems to uphold the hypothesis of this paper: the print media of Melbourne did play a role in influencing public opinion regarding the *Tampa* incident in 2001, and furthermore, it did this through its manner of telling the *Tampa* story under the guise of unbiased reporting.

This paper seems to have proven that the theory of an agenda setting function of the media is valid, and is in fact, very present in the relationship between the news media, politics and general public sentiment. Therefore, I uphold the general principles of the Agenda Setting Function Theory of the media, and say that, in their reporting of the *Tampa* incident of 2001, *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* created, shaped and maintained general public sentiment regarding the government's handling of the issue.

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Appendix A  
Survey Results  
Comparative Charts

Survey Questions

A. Male/Female

B. Age Group: 18-30, 30-55, 55+

1. Do you read the paper? [What paper, how often? (Everyday, 2-3 times/week, 4-5 times/week?)]

2. In 2001, during the Tampa incident, where did you get your information? Newspapers, television, radio? [If newspaper, which one?]

3. At the time, did you agree or disagree with the way John Howard handled the incident? [Strongly agree, agree, don't know, disagree or strongly disagree]

4. Did the media affect your opinion toward John Howard's handling of the Tampa incident? [Agreement spectrum]

5. Has your opinion changed? Do you currently agree or disagree with the way John Howard handled the Tampa incident? [Agreement spectrum]

M	Age	Read Paper	Often?	Got info?	Then, A/D?	Media opin?	Now?
1	18-30	age	b	& radio & tv	1	2	1
2		age	b		1	2	1
3		hs	a	& radio	4	2	4
4		hs	c	& tv	3	3	3
5		hs	a		4	3	4
6		age	a	& radio	4	3	4
7		age	c	& tv	3	4	3
8		hs	b	& online	4	2	4
9		age	a	& radio	2	2	2
10		hs	b		4	3	5
11		age	c	& online	3	2	2
12		age	c		1	2	1
13		hs	c	& radio	3	4	3
14		hs	b		4	3	4
15		hs	a		2	3	2
16		age	a	& radio & tv	1	4	1
17		hs	c	& radio & tv	4	2	4
18	30-55	age	a	& online	1	2	1
19		age	a	& radio	1	4	1
20		hs	b	& tv	4	2	4
21		age	c		3	3	3
22		age	b	& online	1	3	1
23		age	a		3	3	3
24		age	c		4	4	3
25		age	a	& online	2	2	2
26		hs	a		5	2	5
27		hs	c	& tv	3	2	3
28		age	c		1	2	1
29		hs	b	& radio	3	3	3
30		age	a		1	2	1
31		Sunday herald	1/wk	& tv	3	3	4
32		hs	a		4	2	4
33		hs	c	& radio	5	2	5
34		Sunday herald	1/wk	& radio & tv	4	3	4
35	55+	age	a		1	2	1
36		hs	a		4	2	4
37		hs	c	& tv	3	2	3
38		age	c		2	3	2
39		hs	a	& tv	1	4	1
40		age	a	& radio & tv	4	3	3
41		age	a	& radio	1	2	1
42		age	a	& online	1	2	1
43		hs	c		4	4	4
44		hs	c	& radio & tv	5	3	5
45		age	c		1	2	1
46		age	a	& tv	2	3	1
47		age	a		4	4	4
48		Sunday herald	1/wk	& radio	4	3	3
49		Sunday herald	1/wk		3	3	4
50		hs	b	& online	4	4	4

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Don't Know, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

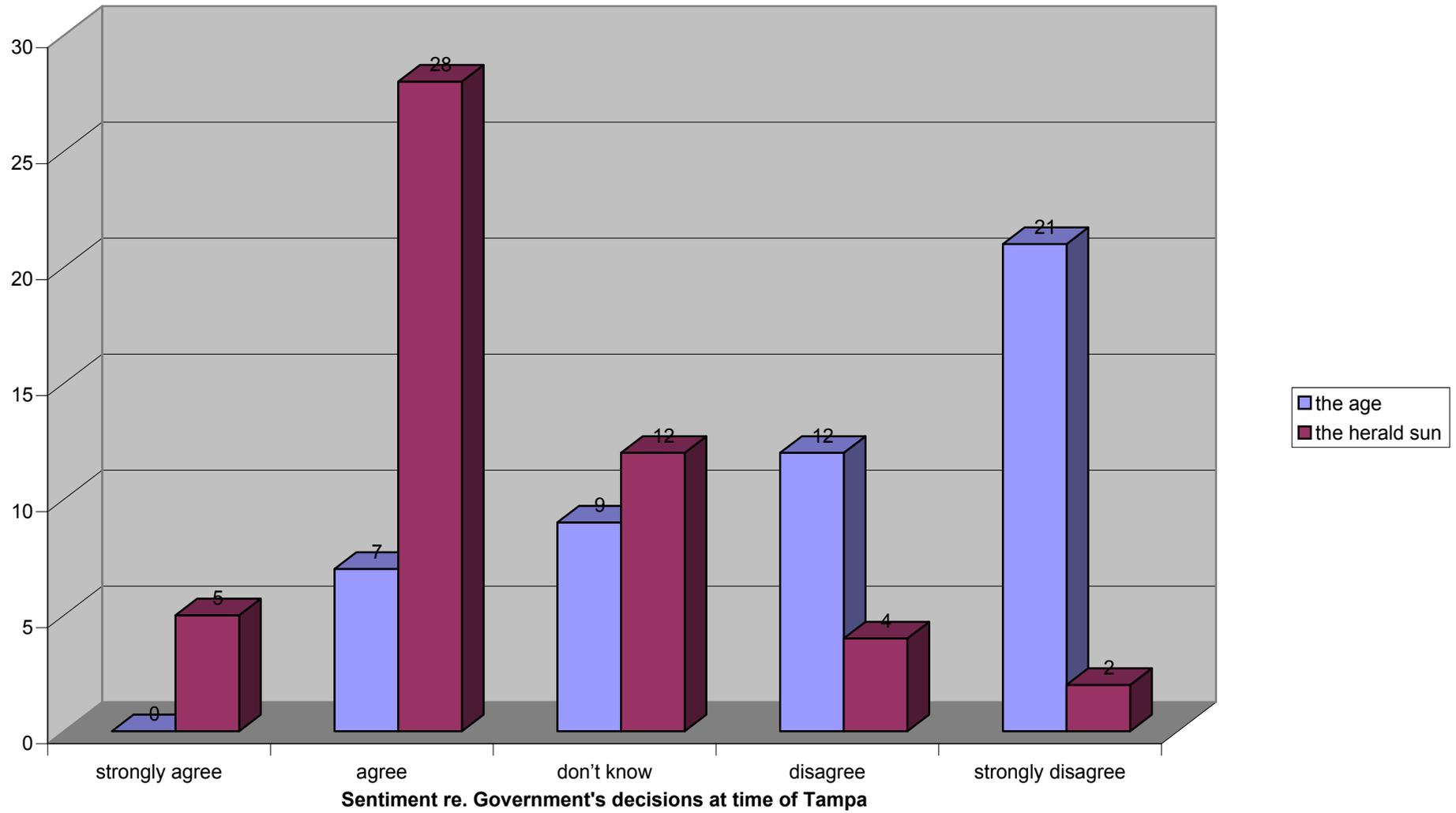
A = Everyday, B = 2-3times/week, C = 4-5times/week

F	Age	Read Paper	Often?	Got info?	Then, A/D?	Media opin?	Now?
1	18-30	age	b		1	2	1
2		hs	c		4	2	4
3		hs	a	& tv	5	2	5
4		age	c		3	1	3
5		hs	b		4	4	4
6		Sunday herald	1/wk	& tv	4	3	5
7		hs	a		4	2	4
8		Sunday herald	1/wk		3	3	3
9		hs	a		3	3	3
10		age	b	& tv	1	3	1
11		age	c		1	4	1
12		age	c		2	2	2
13		age	b	& radio	3	3	2
14		hs	c	& online	3	4	4
15		age	a	& tv	3	3	3
16		hs	a		4	2	4
17		hs	c	& tv	2	2	4
18	30-55	age	a		1	2	1
19		age	a	& online	1	4	1
20		age	b	& online	2	3	1
21		hs	b		4	2	2
22		Sunday herald	1/wk		3	3	4
23		age	b	& radio	2	4	1
24		hs	c	& radio & tv	4	3	2
25		hs	c		3	2	4
26		hs	a	& tv	2	2	3
27		age	a		2	3	3
28		age	c	& radio	3	3	2
29		age	c		2	2	3
30		hs	a		4	2	4
31		Sunday herald	1/wk		4	3	5
32		hs	b		2	3	4
33		age	b	& tv	4	2	2
34		age	c		1	2	1
35	55+	hs	a	& tv	4	2	5
36		age	a	& tv	2	2	2
37		hs	b		4	1	4
38		age	a	& radio	3	4	3
39		age	c		2	3	2
40		age	a	& tv	1	2	1
41		age	a		1	2	1
42		hs	b	& tv	4	3	5
43		hs	b		1	2	4
44		Sunday herald	1/wk		4	2	4
45		age	a	& tv	2	2	2
46		hs	a	& radio	4	4	4
47		age	a		4	3	4
48		age	a	& tv	4	3	3
49		hs	a		4	2	5
50		hs	a	& radio	5	2	5

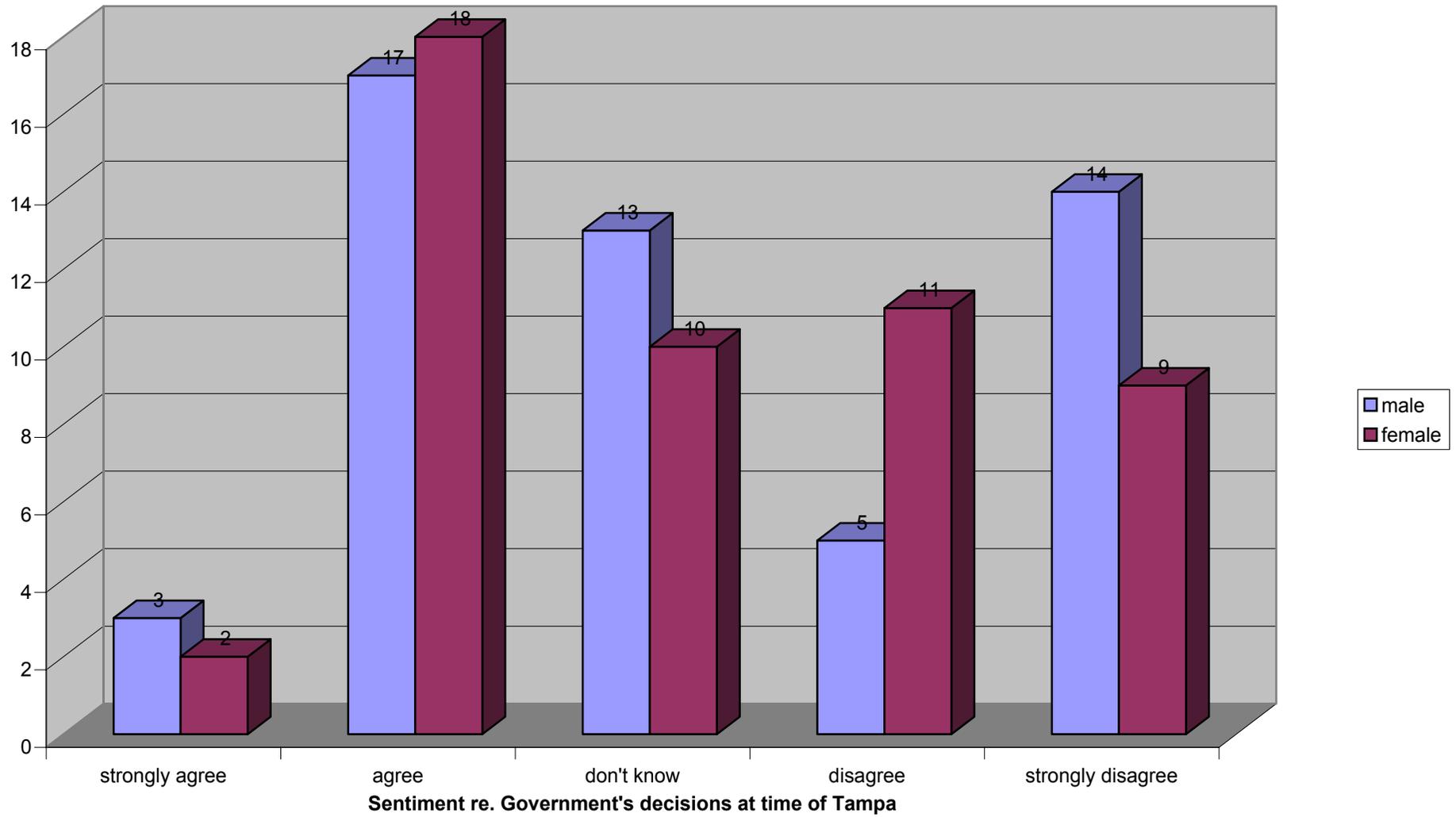
1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Don't Know, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

A = Everyday, B = 2-3times/week, C = 4-5times/week

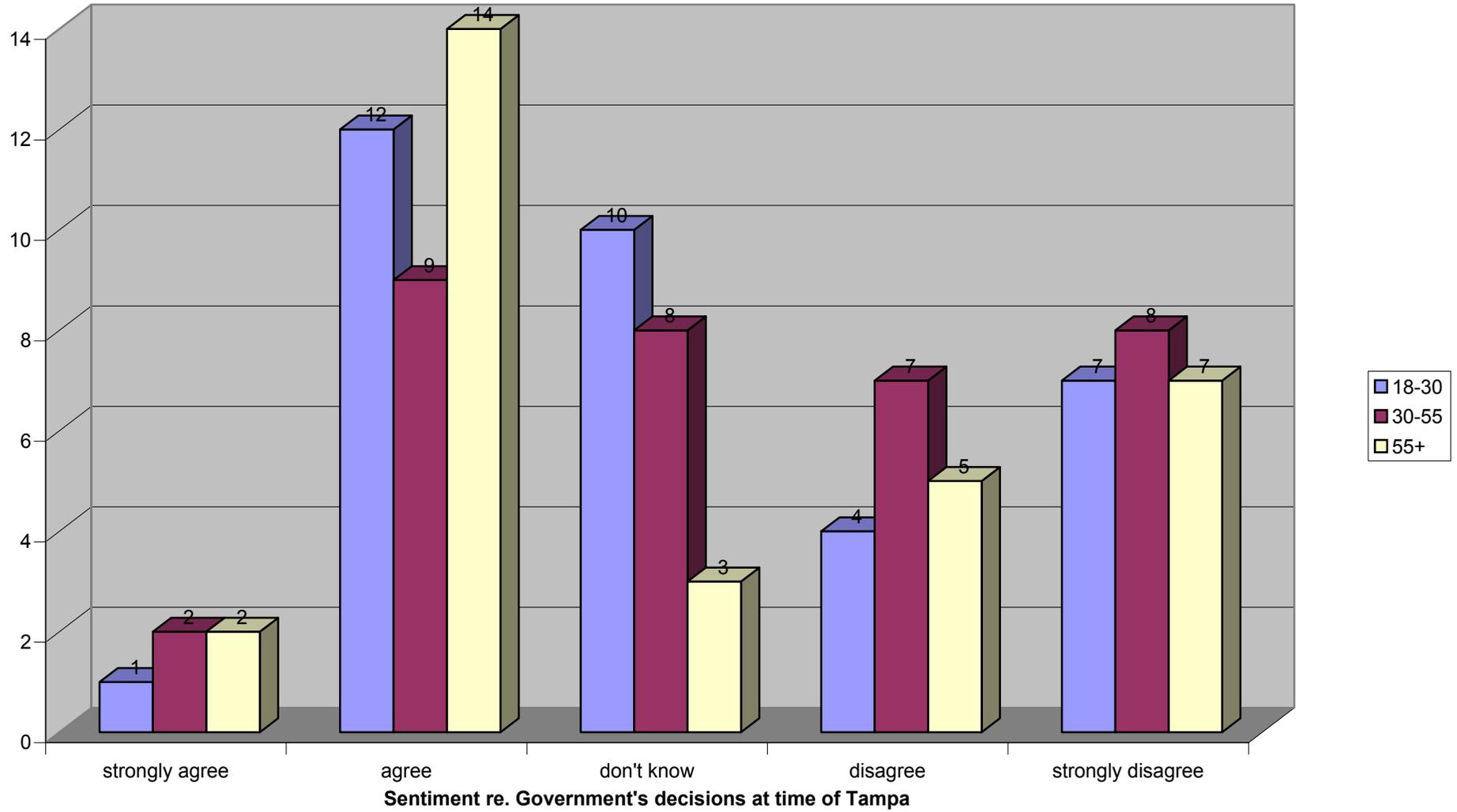
The Age/Herald Sun readers, opinion of John Howard's decisions at time of Tampa Incident



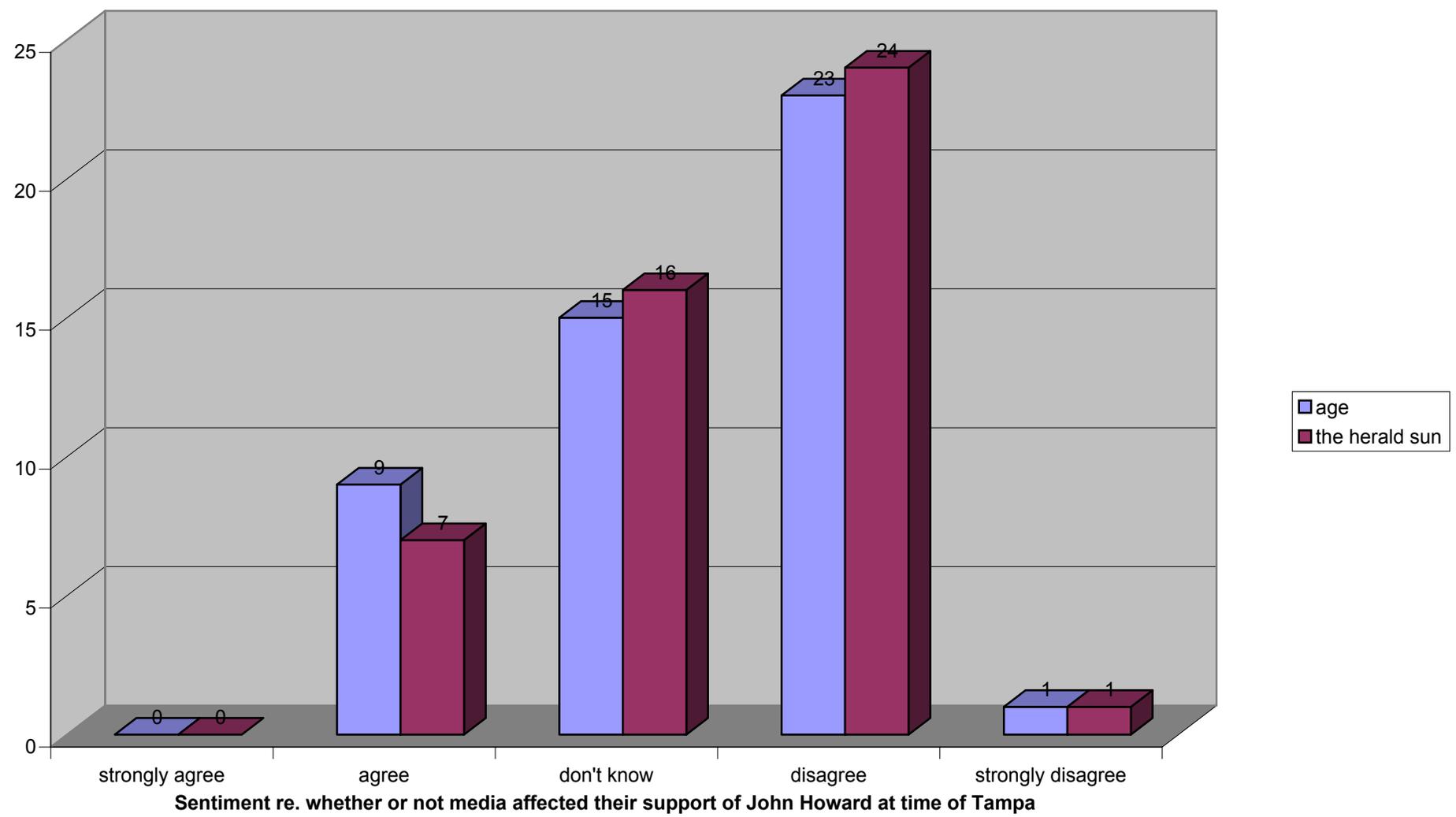
Male/Female, opinion of John Howard's decisions at time of Tampa Incident



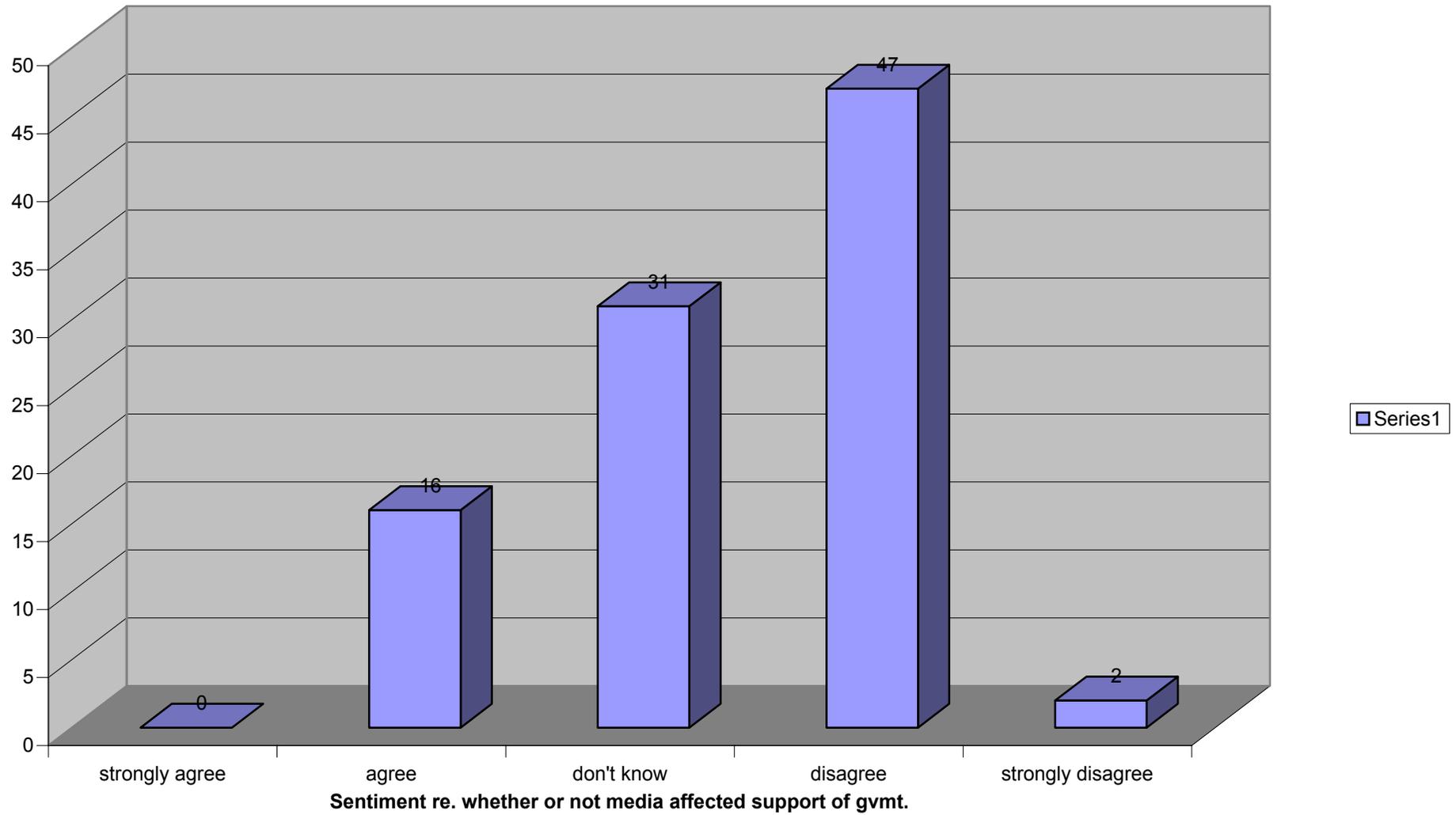
**Age Group/Opinion re. John Howard's decisions during time of Tampa**



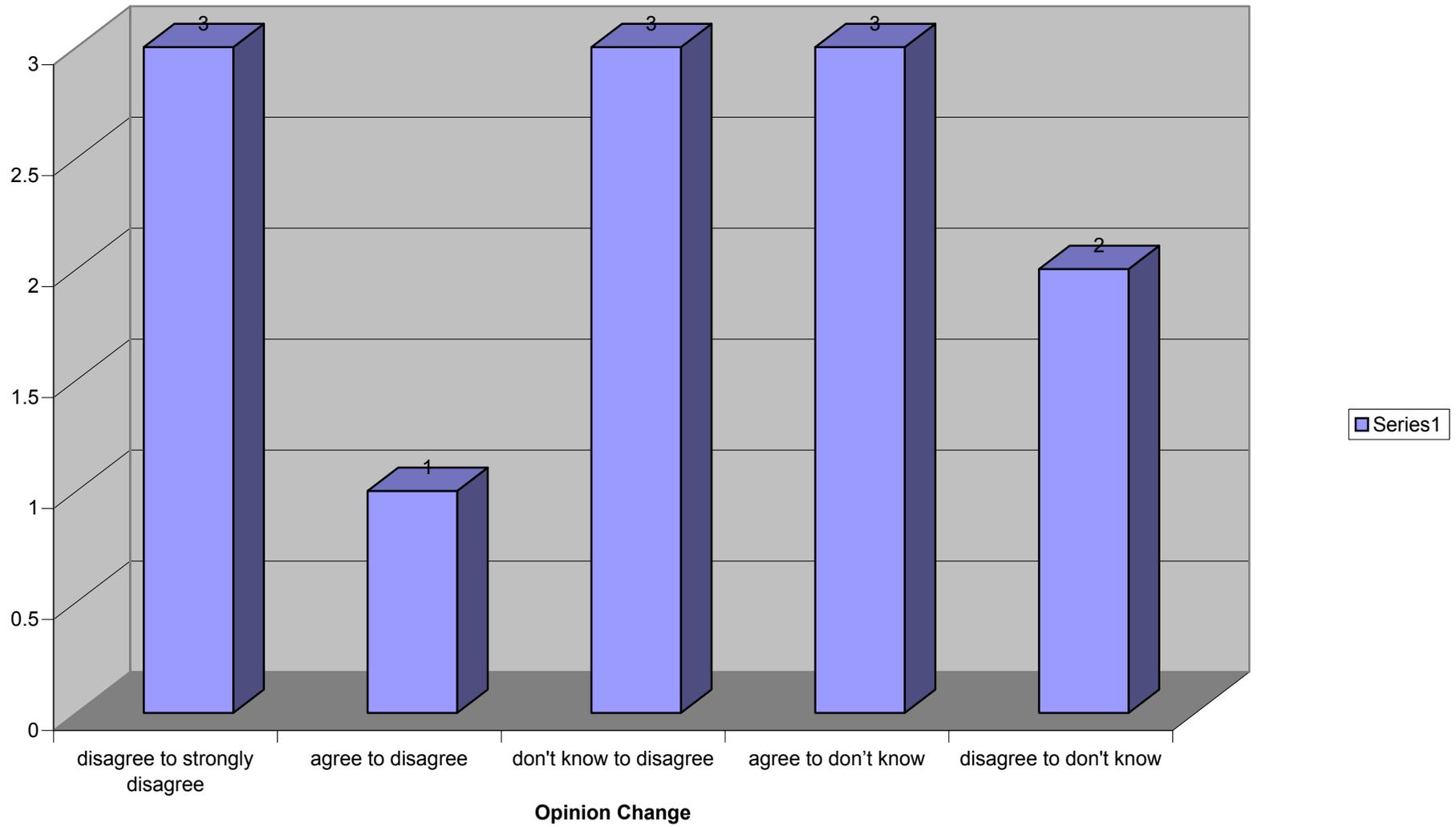
### Age/Herald Sun readers re. Whether or not media affected them at time of Tampa



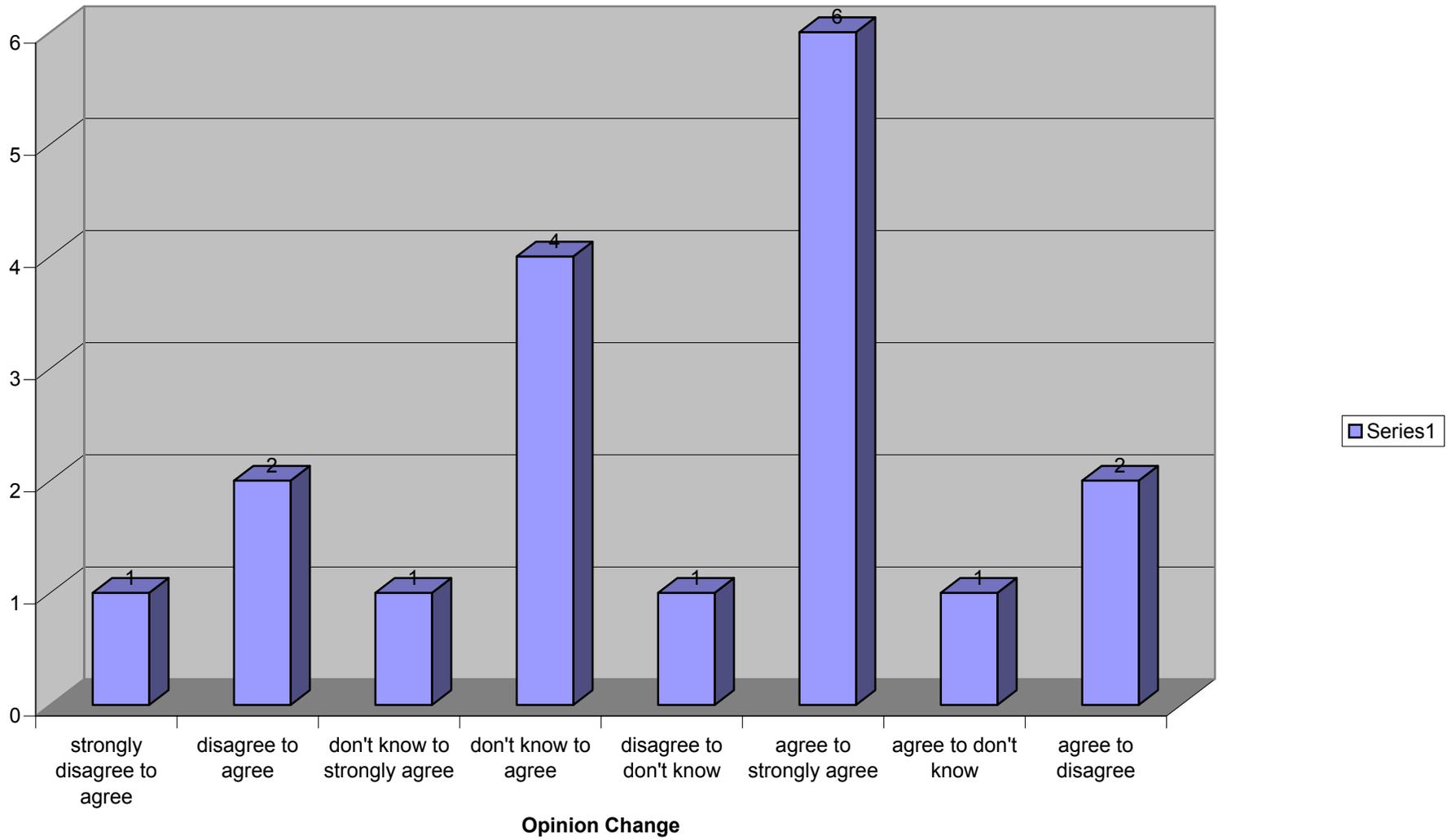
### Did media affect whether or not you supported the government at the time of the Tampa?



### Age Readers Who Changed Mind



### Herald Sun Readers Who Changed Mind



Appendix B  
Articles Referenced















Appendix C  
Interview Notes

Interview: Michael Gordon

29 April 2005, 10:00-11:00 AM

*The Age* Office on Spencer St. and Lonsdale St.

As a journalist:

1. What was your opinion of the way in which the Howard government handled the Tampa incident?

-Nothing quite like this had ever happened before...[the story] was challenging and stimulating because it was a challenge to get it right

-The government seemed to be making it up as they went along, against the backdrop of an election about to be called

-The whole thing was extremely dramatic, unprecedented and extremely political

-The government had never before been faced with this scenario, or had the power to turn a boat back without risking the lives of those onboard [because the boat wasn't sinking]: it was a political opportunity that the government quickly took

-In personal opinion, the government did not behave in an appropriate way, but I was still reporting with a commitment to the tenants of journalism: fairness, accuracy and balance

2. Do you think that your paper had an overarching opinion about the way the Howard government handled the Tampa incident?

-Our editorial position was one which had reservations about the treatment of the asylum seekers, our relationship with our neighbors, the specific actions [draconian legislation] taken by the government, the wider aspects of the Pacific Solution [using poorer countries as dumping grounds]

3. Do you think that opinion came through in any inappropriate places (e.g. the front page news articles, etc.)?

-Our paper was absolutely committed to the tenants of journalism, and we were particularly deliberate in this case to separate commentary from news

Agenda Setting Function Theory:

4. How would you respond to the idea that the media has the power to set and maintain agendas with the public? For example, what do you think of the results of this survey – while only a small portion of the Australian public – which seem to point to the idea that the media has some power of influence?

-Would hope it does have the power; on this issue, it has shown that it has.

-“If you have a dominant government and an Opposition that is not very competitive, and a disengaged electorate, it becomes the role of the media to raise issues and generate public debate.”

-Charismatic politicians are terrific at raising debate and bringing issues to the fore, but where that isn't happening, where issues are falling through the radar, it is the important role of the media to compensate for that

5. Would you say that readers of *The Age* are more likely to disagree with John Howard and thus they pick up *The Age* (as opposed to *The Herald Sun*), or would you say that the readers of *The Age* are more likely to agree with John Howard *because* they read *The Age*?

-The editorial position of *The Age* was probably close the views of a significant portion of *Age* readers

-*The Age* devoted more coverage to the broader issue of *Tampa*, giving its readers a better and fuller grasp of all the issues.

-*The Age* was dealing with those issues more fully, devoted to fleshing out the issues: so, yes, readers who were interested in getting a broader picture of *Tampa* and were more likely to disagree with John Howard probably did pick up *The Age* more often than picking up *The Herald Sun*, but certainly it was the hope of *The Age* that readers would take into consideration its editorial position when reading

Language:

6. Do you think the language used in your news articles to refer to asylum seekers was driven by the government or by the paper?

-It was definitely driven by the paper: we were conscious not to use prejudicial language

-We did not want to use language that plays to emotion [e.g. “illegal immigrants,” “boat people,” “refugees”], but rather, preferred to use the legal terminology, asylum seeker.

Other:

7. Respond to the first few lines of Andrew Bolt’s article in *The Herald Sun*, titled “The Great Cringe.”

“How dare so many Australian journalists automatically take Norway’s side against us? Yes, once again we see our ‘elite’ media happily presuming that in any dispute with foreigners, it’s *Australia* that must be wrong. Must apologise for eing heartless. Or racist. Whatever.”

-It is predictable; it’s a predictable response which lacks critical analysis

-I don’t think it stands up to critical analysis

-The media has a responsibility to take each issue on its merits

-This government has been in power for a decade: there have been some times when we have acted, under our government, as a good international citizen [e.g. East Timor], and there have been times when we have not acted in that way, and I think *Tampa*, and our overall treatment of asylum seekers, have been the case there.

-We’re trying to take each [issue] and be as objective as we can, about every issue

Correspondence: Andrew Bolt

-----Original Message-----

From: Bolt, Andrew [[BoltA@heraldsun.com.au](mailto:BoltA@heraldsun.com.au)] ]

Sent: Friday, 29 April 2005 14:20

To: Rosemary Shultz [<mailto:rshultz@gac.edu>]

Subject: RE: Tampa Incident Project

Dear Mr. Bolt,

Thank you so much for getting back to me so quickly; I am very appreciative. Here are some questions. Please don't feel obligated to respond to all of them, although, if you have the time, I would appreciate your input.

RE: The Herald Sun and the Tampa incident.

1. What was your opinion of the way in which the Howard government handled the Tampa incident of 2001?

*The principle behind its actions was perfectly sound - Australia has a right, even duty, to control who comes to this country, and to turn back those who arrive illegally, if it can be done safely. In this case, those who arrived had come from safety in Indonesia and were on a new-unsinkable ship they had effectively hijacked.*

*The actions it took then and in the months subsequently ended perhaps the cruellest side-effect of the policies we had pursued until then, with minimal concern from the people protesting most loudly today. Until then, by sending a message that those who touched land would almost certainly be able to stay, we lured many thousands of people into trying their luck with people smugglers, with the tragic result that hundreds upon hundreds of men, women and children drowned at sea. Since 2001, not one person is known to have died attempting to get here.*

2. Do you think that your paper--as a whole--had an overarching opinion about the way the Howard government handled the Tampa incident?

*Our editorials generally supported the government. Some columnists thought the government was wicked. Our news stories and letters pages faithfully reported both sides of the debate, although our readers - like the voters - tended to support the government.*

3. Do you think that opinion came through in places other than your editorial sections (for example, your front page articles, etc.)?

*See above.*

4. How do you feel about the way your paper covered the incident?

*Perfectly sanguine. I tend to think our coverage was more balanced than the strident and highly opinionated reportage of, say, the Age, and the ABC, and, not surprisingly, more in line with the views of the majority of Australians. And with common sense.*

RE: The power of the media to set and maintain agenda.

5. How would you respond to the idea that the media has the power to set and maintain agendas with the public?

*It has a limited power, exercised best by restricting coverage of awkward facts than in explicit opining. Remember, in the republic referendum, every single metropolitan daily newspaper bar only the Financial Review and West Australian, backed the*

*republic model on offer, and promoted it aggressively in their news pages. Petition after petition supporting the republic was also signed by huge flocks of celebrities and "opinion makers", yet the republic was rejected in every single state. It seems we're not quite so influential after all, and may even have a tendency to inspire voters to do the very opposite of what we want.*

6. Would you say that readers of The Herald Sun are more likely to agree with John Howard, and thus pick up The Herald Sun; or, would you say that the readers of The Herald Sun are more likely to agree with John Howard BECAUSE they read The Herald Sun? (This question is based on a survey of 100 Australians I completed--according to my survey, readers of The Herald Sun more often agreed with John Howard's handling of the incident).

*Our paper is generally middle of the road, but is probably the paper of choice in Labor-voting areas in particular. That doesn't mean they agree with all they read, or do what we say. In this case, what the Government did was supported, as research by katehrine Betts confirmed, by a majority of people in all social stata bar one - the teacher-preacher class. What the government did was so unexceptional, that it's no surprise that most people supported it, and that even Labor felt obliged to go along with the government in principle. Only a minority objected - one that may be particularly noisy, given its over-representation in the media, but nevertheless is small, and less influential than it suspects.*

RE: your piece.

7. And finally, in a piece you wrote, titled "The great cringe," you said, "How dare so many Australian journalists automatically take Norway's side against us. Yes, once again, we see our 'elite' media happily presuming that in any dispute with foreigners, it's Australia that must be wrong. Must apologise for being heartless. Or racist. Whatever." Who is the "elite" media to whom you refer? In what ways did they assume Australia was wrong? In what other situations has this "elite" media assumed that Australia must be wrong? What makes this media so "elite"?

*The particular article I was referring to was run in the Age. But the cringe reflex is particularly makred among our artists, academics, journalists and the like - those you'd generally class among our "cultural elite". It's a social grouping that tends to pride itself on seeing matters more clearly and understanding them more deeply than do the vast majority of people, which means they tend to set themselves in opposition to such people, too. For deeper analysis of this, read, for instance, Raymond Aron's *The Opium of the Intellectuals*. Betts, as I've said, has also done interesting research on this in the Australian context. Thus we see, for instance, the absurd allegations that Australians are particularly racist, and should apologise to Asia (see, for instance, Alison Broinowski's take on the Bali bombings). Or note the hysterical claims for a while that Australia had perpetrated genocide. Or just visit the Melbourne Museum, and examine the travesty that passes for its displays on our history.*

Thank you so much for your time, Mr. Bolt. I very much appreciate it.  
Sincerely, Rosemary Shultz

Appendix D  
Expository Essay

Expository Essay

1. What did I learn about Australia in general? What did I learn about defining “culture” and identifying its parameters?

I learned quite a bit about Australian history over the course of this project; specifically, I have much more knowledge now surrounding asylum seeker history and the events which have led to asylum seeker policies being the way they are today. The *Tampa* incident of August 2001 is a window into so many other facets of Australian society; media, government, public opinion, etc. The *Tampa* window gave me the opportunity to explore some of Australia’s history, both its asylum seeker history [including immigration history, which we have discussed during the course of this semester, but which I got to delve into] and the history of the government in Australia. I am particularly interested in bodies of government and their ways of operating, so this topic of study seemed to fit perfectly for me.

During my project, I was especially intrigued to find information about the government’s steps in response to *Tampa* and the laws they attempted to pass. Their quick need to pass laws in order to “protect the borders” reminded me quite a bit of the Patriot Act post September 11<sup>th</sup>, something which I consider to be one of the most shameful aspects to recent American history. I find fascinating a government’s desire to so quickly act to exclude and keep out, and I find even more fascinating that our governments [The US and Australia] have acted in similar ways in “the face of terror.”

Through my project, I also learned quite a bit about the Australian media and the ways in which it is organized. I also got a closer look at three news organizations

in Australia: *The Age*, *The Herald Sun* and the ABC. I actually saw the inside of *The Age* offices on Spencer and Lonsdale, and I spent quite a bit of time speaking with their National Editor, Michael Gordon. I also got a chance to correspond with Andrew Bolt, and opportunity I've been told, people don't very often get. I also met one of the anchor/reporter/producers from the ABC, Suzie Smith, who told me quite a bit about the workings inside the ABC, and gave me some ABC materials which were useful in doing background research for my project.

I am fascinated by the media organization in Australia, and I believe I will be even more fascinated to discover what happens when new cross media ownership laws are passed; despite Margo Kingston's slightly irritating manner of writing, I do have to agree when she says that as media ownership becomes increasingly more concentrated, the ability of the media [my profession of choice] to serve as a "watchdog" becomes very limited, particularly when the owners of that media are aligned with the government.

Regarding culture and its definitions: I believe that, during orientation, my group defined culture as social normatives. I don't think, however, that during my project I was particularly concerned with culture, as a whole. I was more concerned with the "culture of fear" which seemed to engulf the country [Australia] as the *Tampa* incident unfolded, and how a clever government [a clever Prime Minister, in particular] used its ability to further the culture of fear and, ultimately, seal a re-election. This culture of fear is something which has become very prevalent in American society today; during my sophomore year of college, I did a comprehensive study on the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> speech that President Bush delivered to a joint session of Congress and the American people, and I examined the ways in which his

rhetoric both set up a platform on which he could secure a reelection and furthered the culture of fear [which had developed post-September 11<sup>th</sup>, and understandably so]. I found a remarkable number of similarities between these two situations, and, it just so happened that September 11<sup>th</sup> occurred just two weeks after the *Tampa* first picked up the drowning asylum seekers off the coast of Indonesia. It also happened that the asylum seekers on board were of mainly Afghani descent, so the Howard government could effectively use September 11<sup>th</sup> to perpetuate fear amongst the general Australian public.

From both the *Tampa* incident and September 11<sup>th</sup>, there evolved a culture of fear, which ultimately served to win each country's leader a reelection. In my project here in Australia, I was struck by how many similarities I saw between my study of this incident and the rhetoric post-September 11<sup>th</sup>. While I hesitate to attempt to define culture in a broad sense, I am certainly able to pinpoint a culture of fear, and just what that culture has the power to do. The Agenda Setting Function Theory [the basis of my research] says that media has the power to shape and maintain public opinion, and moreover, it has the power to serve as the lens through which we understand the world; I would say the same is true for a culture of fear [which, remarkably enough, we only understand through the media which surrounds us].

## 2. How did my project and understanding evolve as I adjusted to field realities?

The main way my project evolved was in the narrowing of my topic. Coming into the Independent Study, I was interested in studying media rhetoric and public opinion. However, as my advisor John Schwartz quickly pointed out, "media" is an extraordinarily large concept, as is "public opinion." So, in order to narrow my topic, I had to pick a certain aspect of the media and I had to pick an issue through which to

study public opinion. I was particularly interested in the *Tampa* and Children Overboard incidents as representative of asylum seeker politics within Australia, so John and I settled on working specifically on studying *Tampa*. Furthermore, we settled on studying *print* media rhetoric – *The Age* and *The Herald Sun*, specifically – because of their ready availability [as opposed to television or radio news transcripts, which would be presumably more difficult to get].

Time limitation was the largest issue of field reality for me; given an infinite amount of time and resources to complete this project, I would have liked to look at Australian print media as a whole, but also, encompass television and radio news programs. However, given the duration of the project, I chose *The Age* and *The Herald Sun*, Fairfax and Murdoch papers respectively, as representative of the larger issues going on within the print media at the time of *Tampa*.

Entering into my project, I was fairly nervous about gathering actual news/editorial/commentary/opinion/cartoon articles. John had a sampling of articles from both *The Herald Sun* and *The Age*, but knew that I was going to need to search for more resources. While they are often available in archives online, they generally cost money and I wasn't particularly fond of the idea of paying. John suggested I head to the State Library, where they have many of the newspaper articles in their archives; however, when Fay Anderson directed me to Sara Wills, I discovered that Sara – who has long been interested in asylum seeker issues in the print media – had portfolios full of archived newspaper articles from both *The Age* and *The Herald Sun*. Sara's materials were extraordinarily helpful and I am overwhelmingly grateful for her assistance in my research.

I actually found that I did not meet many “field” challenges along the way. I was nervous about getting interviews with journalists from the two newspapers, but

with a Sara-contact at *The Age*, I was able to get in touch with Michael Gordon, National Editor, fairly easily. I was also surprised to find that Andrew Bolt, columnist at *The Herald Sun* was quick to respond to an email, and gave me surprisingly thorough answers to all of my questions.

I also didn't find many challenges when completing my survey. It did take me quite a bit of time to work up the nerve to speak with the first person, but once I got going, I finished in about three hours. When asking people, I was quick to tell them that the survey would only take "sixty seconds," which I think was a key part to my success; I actually didn't get turned down once, which was very nice and allowed me to be extremely efficient that day.

### 3. What did I learn about the process of learning in a field-based setting?

Given the fact that I did not meet many challenges in the field, I wasn't forced to change my methods of research or "roll with the punches" too often. I did however, realize, that there is much more room for self-reflection in the field-based setting, which makes the learning process very different from that of a typical classroom/lecture setting. In a classroom setting, for example, I might not learn so quickly that I am quick to become emotionally involved in the stories I read and in the stories I investigate. Classroom experiences, I believe, allow one to step back from the story, from the issue at hand, and see it as an "outside-of-me" issue; however, learning in a field-based setting, first hand investigation into an issue, gives the participant observer/investigator true involvement. This is something that I find very central to the idea of news broadcasting; while the anchors of the news very often have the ability to sit back and watch the news as it unfolds, without ever become too deeply involved, the reporters of the news are often forced into the center of the story,

and often become involved in the story by putting themselves in danger, getting to know those individuals on which the story focuses, or simply immersing themselves in the culture of the story; it is for these reasons that I both long to become a reporter [as opposed to an anchor], and also, fear the day when I do find myself at the center of one of those stories. Field-based learning, or the field experience, gives the learner the chance to sit at the center of something which they might never experience otherwise. So, while I was not physically on board the *Tampa* in 2001, nor was I even in Australia at the time, I did sit in the center of the articles, the interviews, the research and the stories of all those involved at the time, allowing me somewhat of an inside glance into the events of August 2001. At one point during the project, I found myself sitting at my desk, literally surrounded by mounds of research, newspaper clippings, articles, interview materials, and I found myself absolutely thrilled to be sitting in the center of such exciting research. This sounds corny, I know, but this is the reason I am so looking forward to work as a reporter; reporters often find themselves surrounded by material on one story [videotapes, interview notes, research], and they also often find themselves right at the center of the story [live on the air when the second airplane hits the tower, live on the air when the buildings crash to the ground, etc.], and this field based setting gives them a very different understanding of the story than, say, the anchors sitting back in the safe studio. This is how I feel about the difference between field-based learning and classroom learning; while there is an important place for classroom learning, the importance of field-based study is so important, because it gives the student [me] a truly comprehensive understanding of an issue, and allows the student to sit at the center of the storm.

4. What did I learn about myself—both personally and in my role as investigator/participant observer?

I learned several things about myself, mostly having to do with my ability to be forward and approach people. Because I want to get into broadcast journalism, I realize that I am going to have to become very adept at approaching individuals who are unlikely to want to speak with me, and I have to devise a way to do so, which makes me seem less threatening, less of a waste of time and less of a bother. This was something I pondered before going out to do my survey. I found myself extremely nervous as I stood at the top of the stairs at Flinder's Street Station, just watching as people I could have surveyed passed by; I laughed to myself because I think I was almost hoping that someone would come up and offer to take the survey, without my even asking. It took me almost forty-five minutes to work up the courage to ask the first person, but when they didn't turn me down, I felt better about continuing on. When devising my method for approaching people, I decided that the most important information to give the potential respondent was the length of time the survey would take; immediately upon approaching them, I told them that the survey would only take sixty seconds. I also decided that it would be important to tell potential respondents that I was a student working on a research project, as opposed to a representative of a company doing market research. So, when I approached people, I said, "Hi, my name is Rosemary and I'm a student working on an Independent Study. I was wondering if you might have sixty seconds to respond to this survey." I only approached people who were sitting down, so that they wouldn't be able to quickly walk off or say they were engaged, and this seemed to be very effective. The entire experience taught me that before I head into a career as a journalist working under deadline, forced to stick a microphone into an unhappy person's face, I will need to work on building up the

confidence enough to approach people right away, as opposed to standing around, hoping they'll talk to me first.

In my role as investigator, I found that I was perfectly able to ask more difficult questions, while remaining respectful and grateful for the chance to be asking the questions in the first place. With both Michael Gordon and Andrew Bolt, I didn't feel hesitant to ask them the questions to which I really wanted to know the answers; with Bolt, in particular, I felt a responsibility to give him the chance to respond to some of the allegations made by my paper [that *The Herald Sun* seemed to be effectively pushing public sentiment toward the side of the government by referring to asylum seekers as "illegal immigrants"], and he did so by replying that the paper was fair and balanced in its reporting [as opposed to *The Age*, which he argued was not]. His contention that his paper was fair and balanced, much like Gordon's contention that his paper was fair and balanced [which, of course, was not necessarily the case; *The Age* seemed to aim to push public sentiment in the other direction] was interesting information for my paper; the fact that both journalists seemed unable to see [or, at the very least, admit] that their papers had a particular point of view in their reporting allowed me to pose the question of the media's ability to act as a watchdog when its journalists are unable to see their own biases entering their news reporting.

In my role as participant observer, I found that I was utterly disappointed by Australia's handling of the *Tampa* incident in 2001. I felt as though I was forced to watch [despite the fact that it happened in the past] as asylum seekers were labeled and made to be subjects of country-wide hatred and fear. I also felt as though I was forced to watch as a clever leader took advantage of a situation and allowed his country to fall into the trappings of a fear-based nation, much like our leader did after

September 11<sup>th</sup>. I'm not arguing that the asylum seekers should have immediately been let inside the country, immediately been granted citizenship, immediately been put up in neighborhoods around the country, but their treatment seemed particularly cruel through my eyes. I found that, as I have always known, I am quick to become emotionally involved in situations, and perhaps, should develop a skill which allows me to separate myself from those involved in the story; this is something I have had to consider quite a bit while considering my chosen career path. While I do believe that emotional involvement can be effective in the telling of some stories, I also believe that in order to be successful [and effective] in my field, I am going to have to develop the ability to separate myself [the observer] from those involved in the story.