

ACCEPTED VERSION

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Emotion and secrecy in Australian asylum-seeker comics: the politics of visual style

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Emotion and Secrecy in Australian Asylum-Seeker Comics: The Politics of Visual Style

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Abstract

This article examines two online comics about Australia's policies of detaining asylum seekers, one created by the Australian government's Customs and Border Protection Service, and one published by the experimental journalism site *The Global Mail*. Through an analysis of the way online readers responded to these comics, this article shows how digital comics use visual style to imply particular kinds of relationships between their authors and their audience, while generating audience engagement through abstracted emotions and narrative gaps. These features have political dimensions, as in the CBPS's comic which elides crucial details about the government's policies while suggesting (but never directly stating) its disregard for the human rights of asylum seekers, while the *Global Mail's* comic uses a hand-drawn visual style to generate reader sympathy for the detainees and opposition to the government's policies. Both comics use visual language to obfuscate key elements about the sources of their messages while also obscuring the voices of the refugees that their images represent.

Key words: Comics, visual narratives, graphic novels, asylum seekers, refugees, political communication, reader response theory, viral emotions, Australia, detention centres

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Introduction

Online comics have emerged as a sophisticated form of communicating messages about complex issues, including issues of identity, citizenship and globalisation. While commercial comic books have historically been considered a form of entertainment, the Internet has facilitated a wide distribution of comics intended for a wide range of specific purposes and audiences (Fenty, Houp & Taylor 2004), including comics journalism, graphic memoirs, academic comics and educational comics (Duncan, Taylor & Stoddard 2015; Humphrey 2014; Lazarinis et al. 2015).

The ongoing refugee crisis has recently become the subject of several online comics, with one of the first notable works in an Australian context being “At work inside our detention centres: A guard’s story” published by *The Global Mail*, which was critical of Australia’s policies of detaining asylum seekers. It was followed by other comics that similarly addressed the plight of refugees from sympathetic and humanitarian perspectives (e.g. Dix, Pollock & Toubaji 2015; Fitzgerland 2015; Le & Huynh 2015; Malek, Agtmael & Neufeld 2016; Opltaz 2016; Pollock & Froden 2016; Roche & Quinn 2014; Thurman 2016; Wallman 2015; Warner 2015). In contrast, the Australian government’s Customs and Border Protection Service (CBPS) attracted criticism in 2014 after a comic was posted to its website that the government claimed to have used overseas to deter refugees from trying to enter Australia.

This article discusses how these digital comics use visual style to imply particular kinds of relationships between their authors and their audience, while generating audience engagement through abstracted emotions and narrative gaps. Additionally, I argue that the Australian CBPS used these strategies to elide crucial details about its policies, while implying (but never stating) a disregard for the human rights of asylum seekers.

Divergent politics, divergent styles

The CBPS comic is a piece of nearly wordless propaganda that threatens potential asylum seekers with an implied promise of misery if they attempt to migrate to Australia, while “A Guard’s Story” uses first-person narration and a hand-drawn cartooning style to tell the story of an anonymous and disillusioned former detention centre employee. Although these two comics contrast both in their politics and in their visual styles, they also share some similarities. Both use the “gappiness” of comics to conceal the “voices” of their authors while also using visual depictions of asylum seekers to represent or “speak” for refugees, despite the facts that refugees themselves do not appear to have participated in the creative process.

These drawn images of refugees are noteworthy because the Australian government has strictly and systematically limited the public’s access to the images and voices of refugees, by keeping them “in secluded locations ... comparable with ‘black sites’ elsewhere” (Isaacs 2015, p. 1), charging journalists thousands of dollars to visit, and prohibiting unauthorised or “humanizing” photographs (Leach 2003, p. 29). The government’s processes of denying asylum seekers access to Australia while simultaneously denying the Australian media access to asylum seekers, can be considered “a performance of political closure” in which the “the rhetoric of border protection reified a bounded national community that defended its sovereignty despite its integration with transnational regimes” (McNevin 2007, p. 622). One of the reasons both comics attracted public attention was that they were understood as transgressing this performance of closure: ‘A guard’s story’ depicted a first hand account of the confidential work that goes on inside detention centres, while the media considered the CBPS comic an accidental backstage glimpse inside the government’s international public relations campaign to deter asylum seekers.

Both comics used drawings to circumnavigate the restrictions and problems with photographing detention centres, but also to craft emotionally affective representations of refugees without the participation of any real refugees. This is consistent with the discourse around asylum seekers in

Australia, which can be characterised as a disproportionate moral panic, with refugees are cast in the role of “folk devils” (Martin 2015, p. 310). Within this context, refugees as individuals with moral and legal rights are obscured or made secondary to the primary conversation about Australia’s national identity, which Mummery and Rodan describe as characterised by “clearly binarized attitudes as to what being Australian – or indeed being anti-Australian – does and should mean” (2007, p. 348).



In order to understand how these comics affected the Australian perception of asylum seekers, it is crucial to explore how they were read by audiences online, and in the context of social media. The CBPS comic implies that its intended audience is potential Afghani refugees, but the Australian government has not disclosed where and how the CBPS comic was distributed to potential asylum seekers, making it difficult to analyse the scope of its readership in Afghanistan, or how Afghani readers responded to the comic. However, it is clear from analysing online public discourse that the comic gained a significant audience within Australia. Accordingly, this article focuses on how Australian readers responded to the CBPS comic and “A Guard’s Story”, and the textual analysis of the comics later in this article should be understood as reflecting a perspective from within Australia, rather than indicative of how the comic might be understood by readers with different backgrounds, including refugees.

For this argument, “A Guard’s Story” is introduced first, including a discussion of its production and reception, followed by a lengthier analysis of the CBPS comic and its reception in Australia. A final brief section considers how the CBPS comic has been repurposed and reappropriated within Australian political discourse. Overall, this analysis demonstrates how visual communication online is changing the way that audiences understand, engage with and contribute to conversations about citizenship and national identity.

Authorship of “A Guard’s Story”

“A Guard’s Story” was published in *The Global Mail*, a site that was lauded for its innovative approach to journalism (Wake 2014) and is a notable example of the trend of online news outlets commissioning long-form narrative comics. Following the acclaim of ‘A Guard’s Story,’ SBS, ABC and The Guardian have all published comics on the refugee crisis, and Safdar Ahmed’s comic “Villawood”, which was directly inspired by “A Guard’s Story”, won a 2015 Walkley Award (Castle 2015). “A Guard’s Story” had many precedents, including the work of comics journalist Joe Sacco and the website Cartoon Movement. However, as *The Global Mail*’s first comic, it was a formal experiment in early 2014 (Fisher 2014).

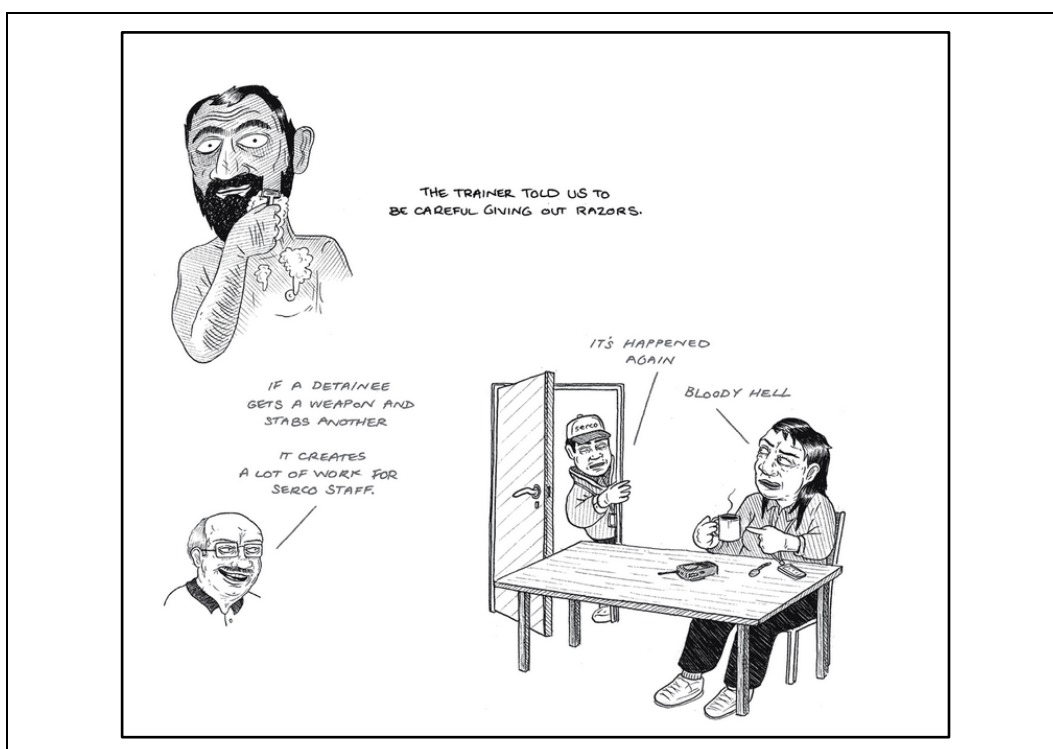


Figure 3: Excerpt from “A Guard’s Story”.

The comic was based on an interview journalist Nick Olle had conducted with an anonymous former guard of a detention centre on mainland Australia. The story tells how the guard was initially motivated to help the detainees, but found that witnessing the extent of their mistreatment caused his own mental wellbeing to deteriorate until he was forced to quit. It ends on a note of ambiguous hope, with a silent sequence depicting the ex-guard encountering two former detainees at a shopping mall.

Although nominally the story of the guard, the online comic was in fact a collaboration between a handful of writers, artists and programmers. Pat Grant, whose graphic novel *Blue* was published to critical regard in 2012 (Flynn 2012; Mills 2012; Scott 2012) drafted a visual structure for the article, and suggested Sam Wallman as the project’s cartoonist. Olle, Grant and Wallman worked to develop the comic, with Grant and *Global Mail* designer Pat Armstrong providing the final design and editing (Fisher 2014; Grant 2015). Producer Sam Bungey, developer Mark Finger and editor Lauren Martin were also credited. While the comic’s drawings gave it an emotional tenor and immediacy that resonated with readers, the amount of collaboration and interpretation involved in creating the comic means that it should be considered, at the very least, a third hand account of life in a detention centre.

Reader Responses to A Guard’s Story

“A Guard’s Story” was published in February 2014, on the day that *The Global Mail* closed and became the site’s “biggest story ever” (Fisher 2014). It was uploaded as the staff of *The Global Mail* vacated their offices in the wake of the site being defunded by its sole benefactor, Graeme Wood, almost exactly two years after the site had launched. Amidst this turmoil, *The Global Mail*’s website was not updated to mention or link to the comic. However, a link was posted on *The Global Mail*’s Facebook page. Within a fortnight, the comic was shared on Facebook more than 50,000 times (Fisher 2014); before the *Global Mail*’s website shut in early 2015, that number grew to more than 64,000. Its actual readership would have been several times larger. As a point of

comparison, *The Global Mail* had an estimated average of 120,000 unique visitors per month with a subscriber base of about 17,000 (Reynolds 2014).

Readers posted comments on *The Global Mail's* Facebook page like “That moved me to tears,” and “Print it! Print 1,000s of them I'll hand them out on street corners!” ('Serco is the private company...'). Although it is impossible to know just how precisely readers responded to ‘A Guard’s Story’, the fact that it was so widely shared online suggests that it was emotionally affecting and engaging for many readers.

Comics theorists including McCloud (1993) and Groensteen (2007) have suggested that comics are particularly effective at engaging readers and eliciting emotions due to the way they use visual abstraction and fractured narratives. These properties both rely on gaps that readers must fill in through their own emotions and memories, which is the kind of emotional engagement that researchers argue can help web content to go “viral” (Henke 2013; Nelson-Field, Riebe & Newstead 2013). For example, McCloud’s theory of “masking,” posits that that the visually abstracted drawings of faces typically used in comics can act like masks that readers project themselves onto, allowing them to feel as if they are entering the world of the comic through the eyes and emotions of the characters (McCloud 1993).

Wallman used this technique in “A Guard’s Story” to create abstracted and universalised depictions of the characters, including the detainees, the guards and anonymous narrator. He said that using the style of comics meant that

“all the workers in the centre could be reduced to one character... When you read kids’ books, the characters’ faces often have really simple, minimal features, they’re just vessels so the kid reading the book can project onto this character. Not knowing a lot about the informant meant I could make it more about what they were going through, and the experiences of the asylum seekers” (Fisher 2014).

As Wallman only had second-hand access to the ideas and emotions of the guard's story, he used the languages of facial expressions and visual metaphor to build an intimate interpretation of the story.

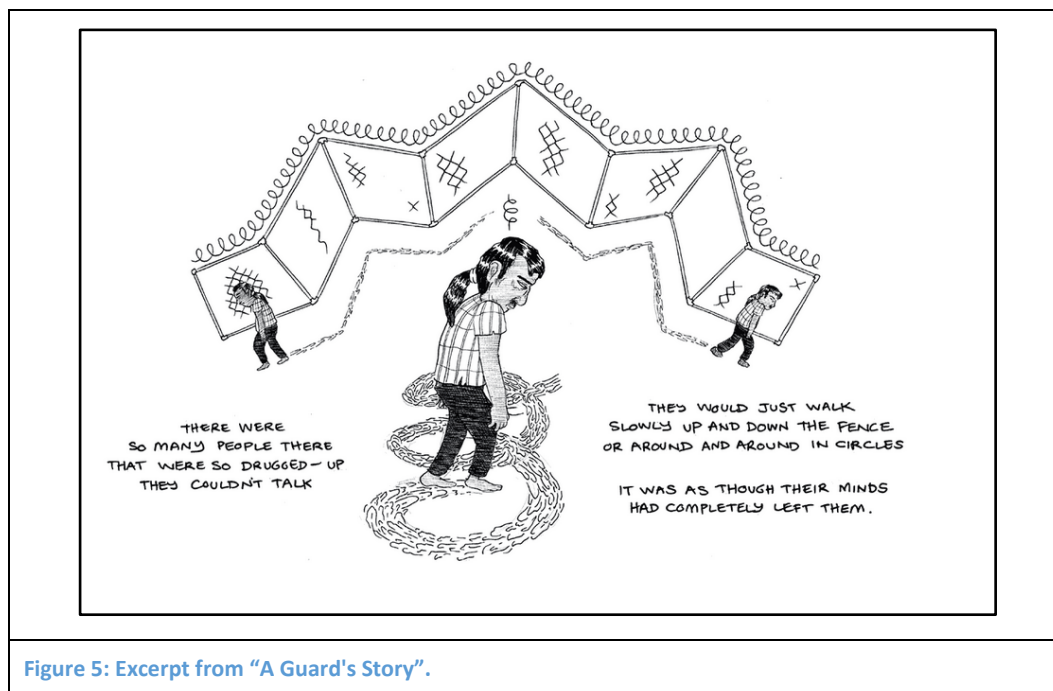


Figure 5: Excerpt from "A Guard's Story".

Many of the design strategies deployed in "A Guard's Story" were also used in the Australian government's CBPS comic, especially the use of visual abstraction to universalise a story, the use of facial expressions to generate emotion, and the visual representation of asylum seekers as individuals to lend verisimilitude to the comic's version of their story. These aspects helped the CBPS comic to also go viral in Australia after it was publicised by the news media.

Authorship of CBPS comic

Where "A Guard's Story" was designed to invoke empathy in readers, the CBPS comic was intended to warn its readers of the dangers of seeking asylum in Australia. According to the Australian government, the comic was distributed in Afghanistan some time before it became widely publicised in Australia. Although Australian readers were apparently not the primary intended audience, there was a strong public reaction to the comic within Australia.

The first public glimpse of the CBPS comic appears to have been a photo that was posted in early November, 2013 on the Australian Customs and Border

Protection Service’s website with an image from a comic book intended to deter potential immigrants from travelling from Afghanistan to Australia through unofficial channels (Hale 2013), along with a photo of a child in Sri Lanka reading ‘a similar product in his native language’ (*Sri Lankan child* 2013), indicating that this sort of campaign may have been used in several countries. A PDF file of the full comic was also published on the CBPS website, although it is difficult to know if this was posted before or after the photo.

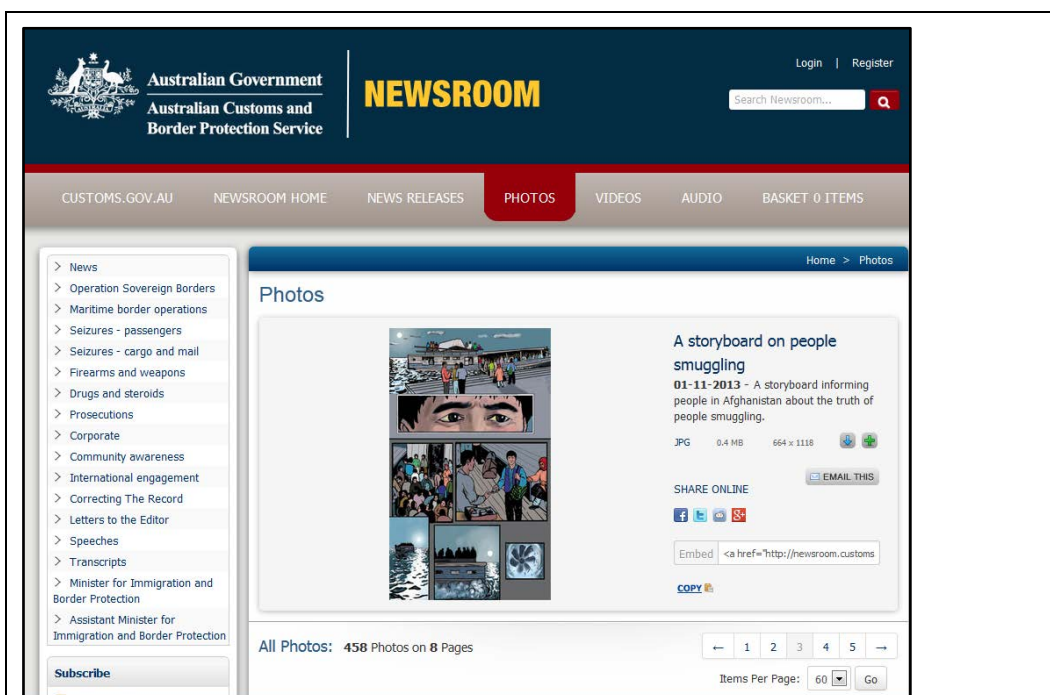


Figure 6: The Photos section of the CBPS website showed a page from their comic, which was labelled as a “storyboard.” (Hale 2013)

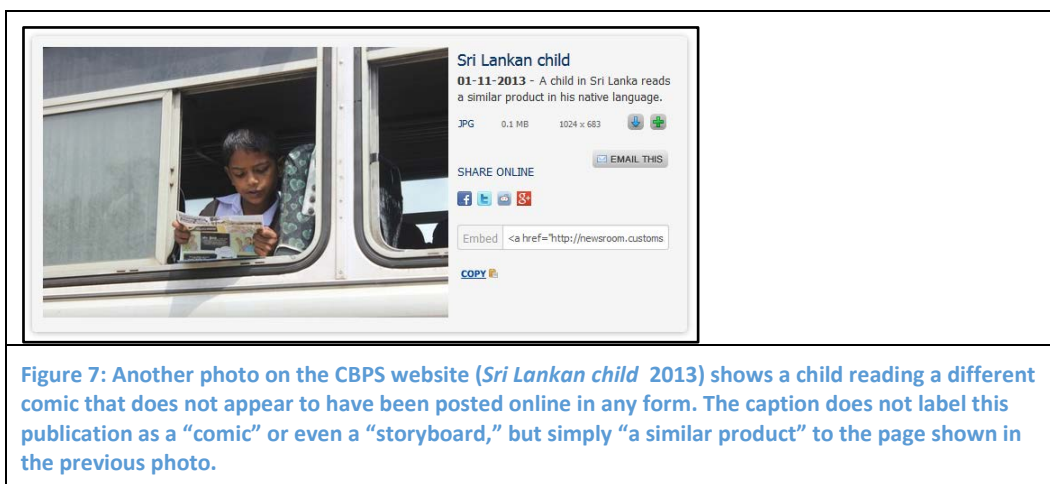


Figure 7: Another photo on the CBPS website (*Sri Lankan child* 2013) shows a child reading a different comic that does not appear to have been posted online in any form. The caption does not label this publication as a “comic” or even a “storyboard,” but simply “a similar product” to the page shown in the previous photo.

Australian Reader Responses to the CBPS comic

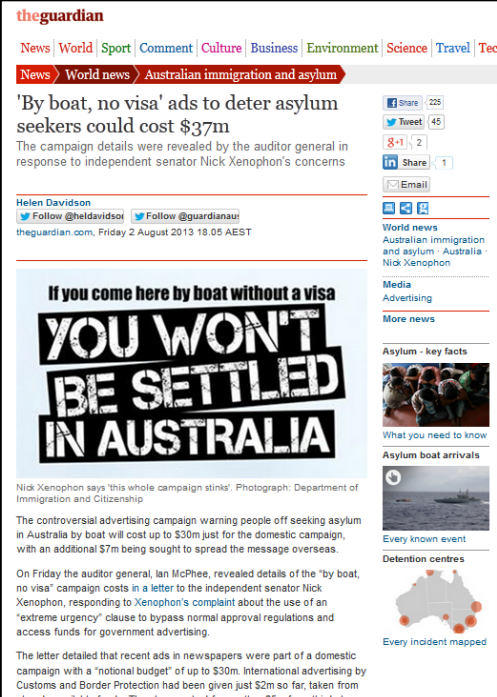

The images of comics on the CBPS website went largely ignored by the public, until February 2014 when the CBPS rolled out a media campaign on its website to support its new immigration policies, focusing on the slogan “No Way. They Will Not Make Australia Home.” Journalist Oliver Laughland reported on this new campaign for *The Guardian* in a story that also revealed the existence of the PDF version of the comic book on the CBPS website. The digital version of the comic was obscurely tucked away on the Dari language section of the CBPS’s website (Hale 2014), and Laughland suspected that its public availability was an accident, writing on Twitter that “elements of the campaign” were “seemingly accidentally launched” (Laughland 2014b), and later: “have been asking department for hours to give any comment on it & will give nothing. Has defo (sic) not been officially launched”(Laughland 2014c).



Laughland and other journalists sought comments from immigration officials about why the comic had been developed and how it was intended to be used, but few details surfaced beyond a statement from a spokesperson for Immigration Minister Scott Morrison in the *Sydney Morning Herald*: “[The comic] has been part of offshore anti-people smuggling communications campaigns. It has also been distributed in the period since the federal election. It has been on the Customs website since last year.” (Whyte 2014b).

Popularity of graphic narratives online

As with 'A Guard's Story,' the visual nature of the CBPS comic seems to have played a significant role in why it attracted attention. Except for discussing and showing images from the comic, Laughland's article was broadly similar to a *Guardian* article six months earlier by Helen Davidson (Davidson 2013) which covered the unveiling of the Rudd government's own 'By Boat, No Visa' asylum seeker media campaign. However, Laughland's story was shared over ten times more on Twitter (562 compared to 45) and nearly 20 times more on Facebook (4169 compared to 225).

 <p>the guardian News World Sport Comment Culture Business Environment Science Travel Tech News > World news > Australian immigration and asylum</p> <h3>'By boat, no visa' ads to deter asylum seekers could cost \$37m</h3> <p>The campaign details were revealed by the auditor general in response to independent senator Nick Xenophon's concerns</p> <p>Helen Davidson Follow @heldavidson Follow @guardianau theguardian.com, Friday 2 August 2013 18:05 AEST</p> <p>If you come here by boat without a visa YOU WON'T BE SETTLED IN AUSTRALIA</p> <p>Nick Xenophon says 'this whole campaign stinks'. Photograph: Department of Immigration and Citizenship</p> <p>The controversial advertising campaign warning people off seeking asylum in Australia by boat will cost up to \$30m just for the domestic campaign, with an additional \$7m being sought to spread the message overseas.</p> <p>On Friday the auditor general, Ian McPhee, revealed details of the "by boat, no visa" campaign costs in a letter to the independent senator Nick Xenophon, responding to Xenophon's complaint about the use of an "extreme urgency" clause to bypass normal approval regulations and access funds for government advertising.</p> <p>The letter detailed that recent ads in newspapers were part of a domestic campaign with a "notional budget" of up to \$30m. International advertising by Customs and Border Protection had been given just \$2m so far, taken from already available funds. They have asked for another \$5m for a third phase</p> <p>Share 225 Tweet 45 +1 2 Share 1 Email</p> <p>World news Australian immigration and asylum · Australia · Nick Xenophon</p> <p>Media Advertising More news</p> <p>Asylum - key facts What you need to know Asylum boat arrivals Every known event Detention centres Every incident mapped</p>	 <p>the guardian News World Sport Comment Culture Business Environment Science Travel Tech News > World news > Australian immigration and asylum</p> <h3>Australian government targets asylum seekers with graphic campaign</h3> <p>Elements of the campaign have been launched on the Australian Customs and Border Protection website</p> <p>Oliver Laughland Follow @oliverlaughlan Follow @guardianau theguardian.com, Tuesday 11 February 2014 18:19 AEST Jump to comments (773)</p> <p>World news Australian immigration and asylum · Australia · Scott Morrison · Asia Pacific More news</p> <p>More on this story Graphic novel aimed at asylum seekers – in full</p> <p>Asylum - key facts What you need to know Asylum boat arrivals Every known event Detention centres Every incident mapped</p> <p>A page from the graphic novel apparently aimed at potential Afghan asylum-seekers.</p> <p>Australian authorities have published a graphic campaign, seemingly aimed at deterring asylum seekers. It uses the slogan: "No way. They will not make Australia home", and shows a map of Australia with a line struck through it. The campaign has also used a graphic novel depicting asylum seekers in distress in an offshore detention centre.</p> <p>Share 4170 Tweet 567 +1 16 Share 5 Email</p>
<p>Figure 9: Davidson's article, November 2013</p>	<p>Figure 10: Laughland's article, February 2014</p>

Laughland's article also attracted 773 reader comments, more than were received by 96.5% of The Guardian's 670 stories that were tagged as relevant to "Australian immigration and asylum," between May 27, 2013 and May 1, 2014, a period which saw changes to Australia's immigration policies, deaths of several asylum seekers, riots in detention centres, criticism of Australia's policies by the United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees, increased instability in the relationship between Australia and Indonesia, and a federal election where immigration was made into central issue. The article also received more comments than any of the other 300 articles with Oliver Laughland's by-line on

The Guardian’s website from the previous 24 months, with the exception of two live group blogs (Laughland et al. 2013; Murray et al. 2013).

The story was quickly picked up and disseminated by Australian news media, including SBS (Cox 2014), the Murdoch press (Piotrowski 2014), and Fairfax Media. It also received attention from viral portals like BuzzFeed (Guillaume 2014), where it garnered more than 54,000 page views, and became a topic of discussion on social media. An article in the Sydney Morning Herald, attracted 308 reader comments (Whyte 2014b).

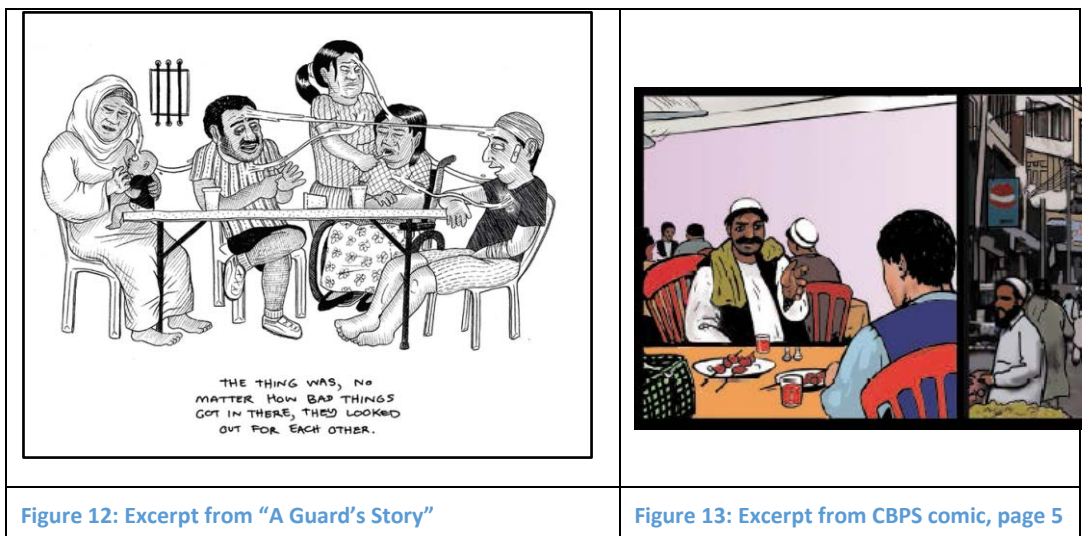


Visual authorship

In contrast to the number of words spent discussing it on Australian websites, CBPS’s comic itself is almost entirely wordless. There are two notable exceptions: the back cover includes the words “Australian Government” printed in English next to the Australian coat of arms, while the front cover contains one sentence, printed in two different languages, Dari and Pashto, which translates into English as: “If you go to Australia without a visa on a boat, you won’t be settled in Australia” (Piotrowski 2014), a slogan that aligns with the Rudd era “by boat, no visa” campaign (Davidson 2013; Kenny 2013). The wordless and

fractured narrative of the document makes it difficult to summarise conclusively. As Groensteen has observed, silent comics are often characterised by indeterminacy, and lack “the clarity of an ordinary verbal exchange, leaving the way open for the reader’s own interpretations and projections” (Groensteen 2013, p. 127). However, the CBPS comic can be described as the story of a young man who attempts to migrate from Afghanistan to Australia, and but instead ends up placed in an island detention centre.

Although the comic does originate from the Australian government, its authorship is unclear. While “A Guard’s Story” used Wallman’s idiosyncratic style to imply a human, individualised presence, the style of the CBPS comic is inscrutable and detached. Like the drawings found on airline safety cards, it has been scrubbed clean of personal touches or artistic flourishes, and is presented essentially an un-authored document. Unlike the way “A Guard’s Story” used drawings to convey personality and subjective experience, the uncredited creators of the CBPS comic adopted a more “neutral” and “realistic” diegetic style in an attempt to depict the plight of the fictional characters as objective truth.



A close examination reveals the constructed and artificial nature of this ‘realistic’ style. In contrast to the intimacy conveyed in Wallman’s fluid pen lines, the CBPS’s garish colouring and stiff compositions give it the look of a document clearly produced with computer software. Numerous drawing errors and digital

artefacts in the CBPS comic also reinforce the feeling of a “made-by-committee” sensibility, the hand of a collective, corporate “author” who transcends individuality. This visual style conveys bureaucratic authorship and authority, reflecting the politics of its authoritarian and dehumanising message.

Clear emotions, obscured facts

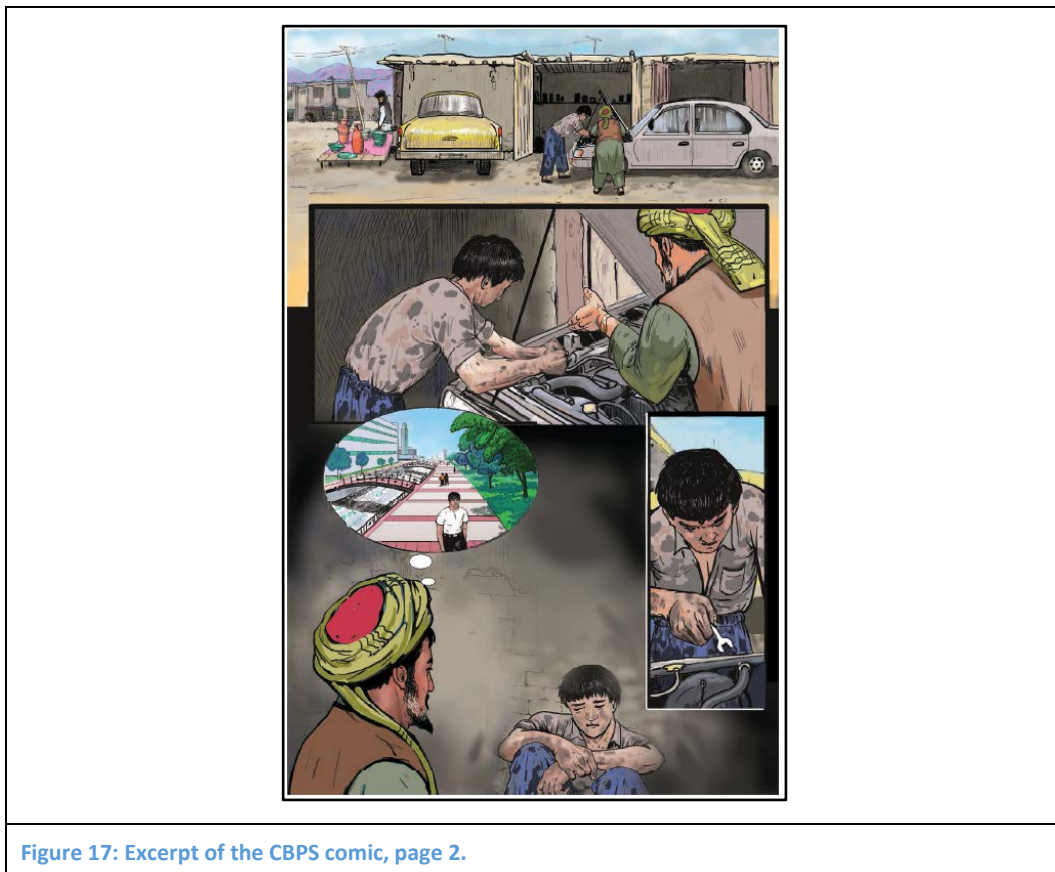
Despite using an impersonal visual style, the CBPS comic still communicates emotions and facial expressions clearly. Similarly to “A Guard’s Story,” these aspects are central to the comic. The clarity of these emotions is one of the few things readers of that comic were able to agree upon, as commentary from the Australian media involved a number of different narrative interpretations.



Much of the discourse focused on strong emotions engendered by the comic, with Laughland initially calling it a “a graphic novel depicting asylum seekers in distress” (Laughland 2014a). Other writers described it as showing that “refugee claimants will be treated like garbage by Australian authorities” (Chalk 2014), and will be “haunted by memories of home and surrounded by

people in the clutches of despair” (Cussen 2014). These emotions, overwhelmingly negative, appear in almost every news story about the comic.

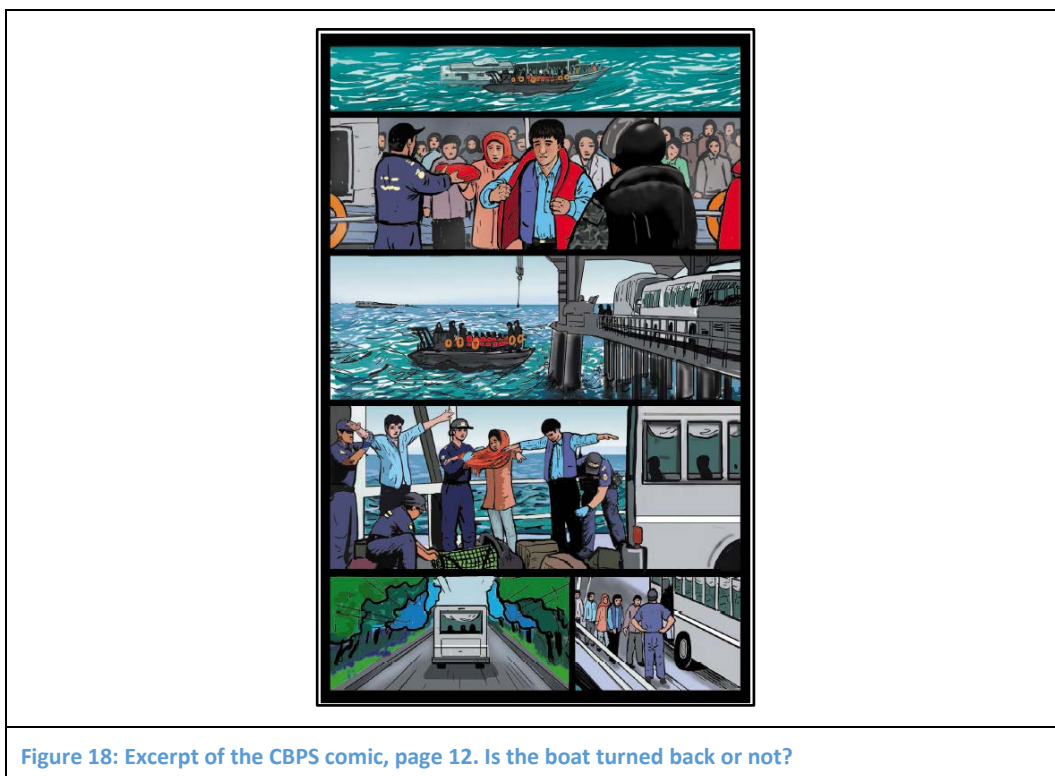
However, commentators saw many of the comic’s details quite differently. On BuzzFeed, Jenna Guillaume described the comics as telling “the story of a young man, dreaming of a better life,” but none of the thought balloons with idyllic images of Australia in them emanate from the main character – instead, they seem to be the thoughts of a father figure. Writing for *The Conversation*, Elizabeth Macfarlane’s more comics-literate interpretation of the story was that the man was “persuaded by his family to use their savings to seek asylum in Australia” (MacFarlane 2014).



Daniel Piotrowski’s summary of the comic for news.com.au starts out more straightforwardly: “Meet our protagonist. He’s an asylum seeker. He lives in squalor and works as a mechanic” (Piotrowski 2014). However, even this simple description is difficult to substantiate from what is shown in the comic, and other accounts contradicted every aspect of this description. Indeed, interpretations of the specifics of the man’s situation have been rather varied.

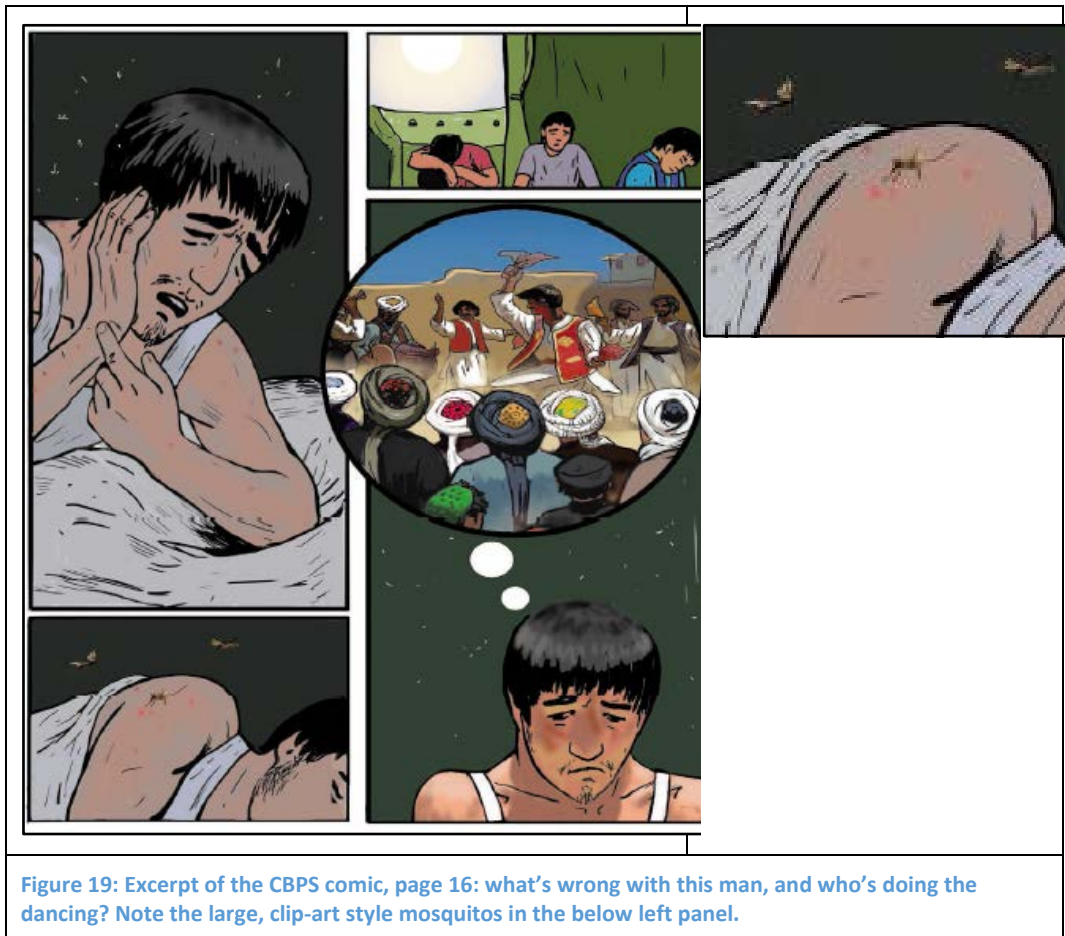
Instead of the squalor described by Piotrowski, Abdul Karim Hekmat of New Matilda argued that the comic paints a deceptively “rosy picture” of Afghanistan compared to its current instability (Hekmat 2014).

Later in the comic, the protagonist boards a boat that is, presumably, headed toward Australia. It is subsequently boarded by uniformed men who are, presumably, from the Australian Navy. The passengers are taken to an island detention centre. But descriptions of this story disagreed about just what happens to the boat: SBS reported that the comic “appears to contain the first official concession that the Australian Navy has been ordered to turn back the boats” (Cox 2014), while AusOpinion’s interpretation was that the “boat appears to have entered Australian waters and, as such, *isn’t* turned back to Indonesia” (Fletcher, M 2014) (emphasis added).



Regardless of what happens to the boat, the protagonist ends up in a detention centre. Here, readers observed him experiencing a shifting set of maladies, with one diagnosing homesickness (MacFarlane 2014), another depression (Cox 2014); where one reader saw dental problems (Fletcher, M 2014), another noted the discomfort of being “forced to live in hot, crowded

tents” (Chalk 2014), and one reader cited a single danger: “being attacked by mosquitoes” (Whyte 2014b).



The mosquitos are depicted as unnaturally large in one sequence, as if to emphasise their importance. Most commentators took this to simply signify unpleasant insect bites, but human rights advocate Ben Pynt suggested that they were connected to the fact that several cases of malaria, a disease spread by mosquitos, had been reported on the Manus Island refugee detention centre in the previous year. Pynt argued that the connotations of malaria in the comic were essentially a veiled threat and “that Australia is well aware of the risks of sending vulnerable people to be indefinitely detained on an island with endemic tropical diseases” (Whyte 2014a).

In another striking case of visual codes that were significant to some commenters but dismissed by others, blogger Eliza Cussen was one of few Australian critics to call attention to the ethnic codes in the characters, writing, “what stuck out instantly was that the man was drawn to deliberately look like a

Hazara – a member of an ethnic minority which suffers horrendous persecution in Afghanistan” (Cussen 2014). Picking up this thread, human rights activist Haider Ali in accused the comic of “Trying to depict terrorism-stricken Hazaras as economic migrants” as part of “a misleading message being propagated by Australia across the globe” (Ali 2014). The scene at the end of the comic where the protagonist sadly thinks of a dance back in Afghanistan has been interpreted by some commentators as depicting homesickness. However, a review of the comics on hazara.net noted that the dance shown in this scene is typical of the rival Pashtun tribe, something the reviewer noted was like “rubbing salt in very deep wounds of the Hazara nation” ('Refugees' 2014). Was this a cultural mix-up on the part of the comic’s editors, or a sign that the character is actually supposed to be Pashtun? Is what some Australian commentators assumed to be homesickness actually a regretful envy, a sense that the Hazara protagonist’s home is now occupied by rival Pashtun revellers? The comic’s title is in both the Dari language spoken by Hazaras, and Pashto, which is spoken by Pashtun people.

Messages in any text are always dependent on individual readers’ interpretations, but in a document that presents itself as a dramatization of actual government policies, details like this may have significant political and policy implications. It matters a great deal, for example, whether the Australian government is warning potential asylum seekers that malaria is being spread in Australian detention centres or whether the government is specifically targeting Hazara people in Afghanistan with this message.

Examining the discourse within Australia, the meanings of these details did not seem to have been firmly established. The comic’s emotional narrative and anonymous visual style masked clear statements about specific government policies other than the linguistic threat that “if you go to Australia without a visa on a boat, you won’t be settled in Australia.” No explanation for this policy is given, and no alternatives are offered. The visual narrative exists primarily to teach its readers that the Australian government can exert absolute authority over the protagonist.

However, despite the comic's authoritative message, its depiction of characters bearing the emotional costs of the government policies generated sympathy amongst Australian readers.



Figure 20: Excerpt from the CBPS comic, page 17. This camp looks miserable, but we are given few clues to its wider context: where is it? How long do people stay there? Are there other tents outside of the frame?

Fletcher denounced the comic as “the world’s first propaganda campaign in which the country producing it is portrayed as the villain” (Fletcher, M 2014), and MacFarlane noted, “it is a strange kind of propaganda which paints its own government as such a menacing and threatening presence” (MacFarlane 2014).

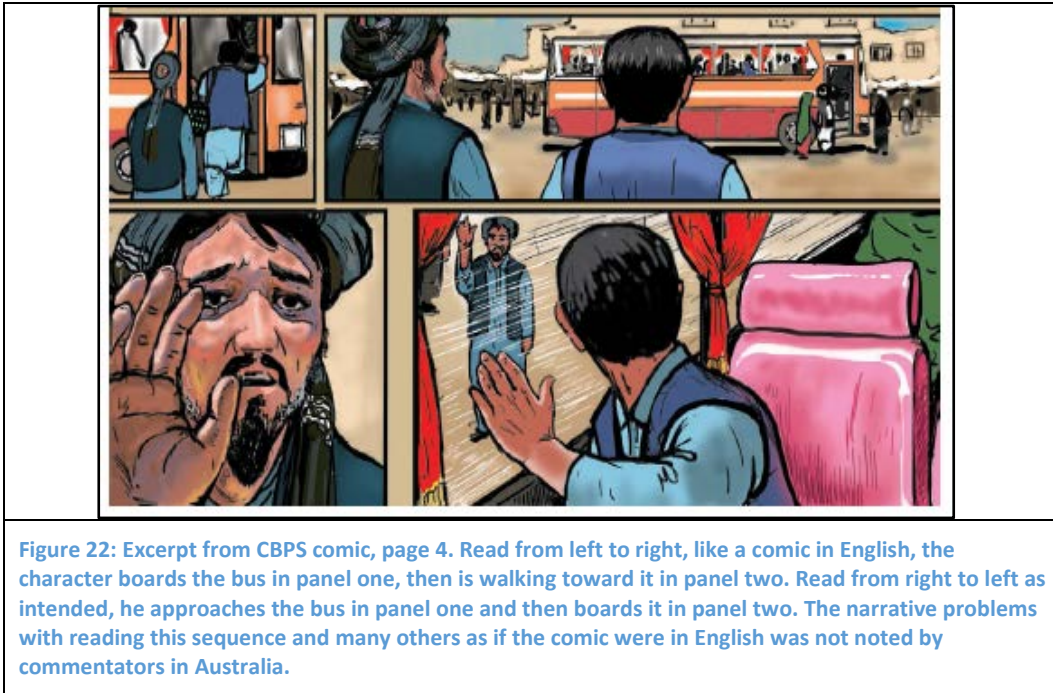


Figure 21: Excerpt from CBPS comic, page 11. A dark and sinister navy?

This is a threat from the government that cannot be quoted or repeated back in any authoritative way. Any accusations that could be pointed at the Australian government on the basis of this comic vanish as soon as they are made; there is no definitive desperation, no proof of mistreatment, no evidence for the need of asylum. Fletcher (2014) sees it as depicting a “dark and sinister navy,” but squint a bit and the dark and sinister part nearly disappears, or at least, it can’t be proven. This is not to say that the comic has no distinct meaning, but that because of the way it is presented, its meaning is one for which it is difficult to hold the government accountable. The readers are the ones responsible for saying what they have been shown.

[Backwards reading and the gappiness of comics](#)

Highlighting just how large a role personal interpretation played in Australian readings of the CBPS comic, Australian readers had no problem reading and forming opinions about the comic despite the fact that most of them were inadvertently reading it backwards. The reading order of comic panels generally corresponds to the direction that text is read. For English comics, this is from left to right, but in languages like Japanese or Arabic the reading order is from right to left. Although the CBPS comic is mostly silent, it was designed for readers of Dari and Pashto, Iranian languages that are read from right to left. Most Australian audiences without literacy in Iranian languages would have read the comic from left to right, as if it had been written in English, and thus read some sequences in the CBPS comic out of order, especially since none of the commentary within the Australian news media called attention to the direction the comic should be read in. Despite this, the wordless nature of the comic, and the way narratives in comics are read through gaps, meant that Australian readers were able to construct a story braided through the comics’ panels, without realising that most of them were technically reading the comic “wrong.”



The fact that Australian readers did not notice that they were reading each row of panels “backwards” can be explained by the way that narratives in comics, unlike text and film, do not unfold in a linear fashion. Instead, readers’ eyes travel back and forth across panels and different visual elements to construct the narrative by filling in gaps (Claytor 2015; Ny et al. 2012; Omori et al. 2004).

Lisa Freinkel notes that “comics’ narrativity depends on the ‘gappiness’ of the narration. Narrative meaning leaps across and is founded on the gutter that separates one panel from the next” (2006, p. 251). According to Elisabeth El Refaie, “many of the inherent features of comics, such as the gaps between panels and the semiotic tensions between words and images, work to encourage the critical mental involvement of the audience” (2012, p. 206). As Groensteen (2007) argues, the process of braiding meaning through these gaps inherently involves a level of interpretation and invention on the part of the reader, which can lead to a greater engagement in the work.

The abstracted visual style of cartoon drawing, along with the fracturing of narratives into panels, results in a text that is full of gaps. However, while these aspects of comics have been lauded for involving the readers’ imaginations, they can also be used to elide important information. In “A Guard’s

Story,” these gaps were used to protect the identity of the narrator, and to provide an abstracted visual representation of the detention centre. In the CBPS comic these gaps were used to avoid making clear statements that could be quoted in a spoken debate or paraphrased in parliament, to ultimately create a message that was emotional rather than declarative. Gaps are also used in both comics to create abstract representations of asylum seekers that serve as emotionally affecting stand-ins for the displaced voices, bodies, images and emotions of actual asylum seekers.

A shroud of secrecy

The CBPS’s position as an authoritative agency was upheld by the fact that the lack of a demonstrable meaning meant that Australian readers were unable to speak back to the comic. Instead, it exists to reiterate the fact that there is a relationship between its readers and the Australian government, where the government, as author of the document, has final say in the actual terms of the relationship. Perhaps this is not surprising considering that it was published around the same time that Scott Morrison, serving as immigration minister, deflected allegations that its navy had mistreated asylum seekers by arguing that it was “not for the government to disprove the negative, it’s for those who have allegations to actually prove the positive” (Farrell 2014).

By contrast, the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, can, at least in principle, carry the weight of international law because it is in print and can be translated, reprinted and referred to by most of the world’s citizens. This is helped by the fact that it uses simple language that is easy to understand, as can be seen in Article 14 of the declaration, which states that “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution. This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations” (*UN General UN General Assembly 1948, p. 2*).

In the wake of the Australian government’s controversial “Operation Sovereign Borders” policies relating to asylum seekers, this article and other international treaties, including the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of

Refugees, and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, were cited by legal scholars as evidence that “Australia's reported conduct under Operation Sovereign Borders clearly violates international law” (Watson 2014).

In contrast to the clear, concise language of these treaties, the Australian government for its part has issued few definitive statements of its policies and procedures regarding asylum seekers. A 2014 Human Rights Law Centre report on Australia’s treatment of Sri Lankan asylum seekers criticised Australia’s refugee policies as “conducted under a shroud of secrecy” (*Can't flee, can't stay: Australia's interception and return of Sri Lankan asylum seekers* 2014, p. 9). This critique can be extended to the CBPS comic, which presents fragmented emotions in the place of statements that, if articulated clearly, might have been at odds with international human rights treaties.

Reappropriations of the CBPS comic

However, the Australian government did not have the final word in how the CBPS comic was understood. The CBPS comic was repurposed and re-authored by Australians in a variety of ways. For example, Green Left Weekly used an image from the comic to illustrate a story about the plight of asylum seekers that had nothing to do with the comic (Fletcher, J 2014), and the blog Crossborder Operational & Matters, used a picture of the comic’s distressed protagonist to ask who was profiting from not just the creation of the comic, but the distress of refugees (xbpress 2014).

The screenshot shows a webpage from Green Left Weekly. The main article is titled "Refugees denied legal rights and deported" and is dated Saturday, February 15, 2014, by Jilly Fletcher. The article text discusses the government's re-detaining of people who had been denied refugee status and the removal of 46 Tamils to Sri Lanka. A photo shows a boat with people on board, captioned "Part of Australian Customs' anti-refugee comic ship, which gained attention last week." To the right, there is a sidebar with "RECENT COMMENTS" and "ARCHIVES". Below the article, there is a large image of a distressed man's face, which is a still from the CBPS comic. The image is captioned "Did STATT profit from this?" and has the Australian Government logo in the bottom right corner.

Figure 23: Green Left Weekly

Figure 24: Crossborder Operational Matters blog

Some readers used image-editing software to add text or re-mix the comic. Panels from the comic were edited into parodies with satirical captions (DeptofAustralia 2014; Pantsdown 2014), a way of readers exerting their own authority over the comic. These recontextualiations extended the reach and influence of the CBPS's comic's visual representation of asylum seekers.



Figure 25: Excerpt from DeptofAustralia parody comic

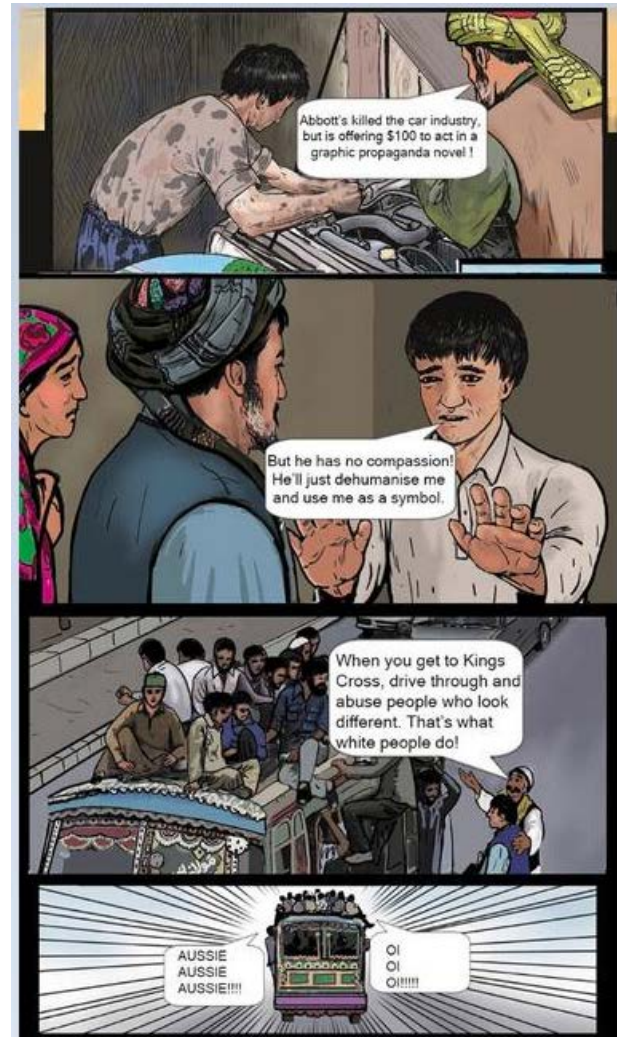


Figure 26: Excerpt from Pauline Pantsdown parody comic

Street artist CDH did not add or change the content of the comic, but printed it at a large size and pasted it up in a Melbourne laneway and claimed that this action “recreated the comic as a street artwork for an Australian audience” which was meant as “a criticism of the federal government” (CDH 2014). In this way, CDH “re-authored” the comic by simply changing its context. The CBPS comic was especially susceptible to these kinds of reappropriations

because the comic made few claims about its own authorship. Its anonymous visual style and the ambiguous nature of how and when it was published allowed Australian readers to easily reappropriate it and claim their own authorship over its meaning.

In this light, it becomes apparent that although this comic cannot easily be debated with, argued against or called into account in the same ways a written statement or verbal declaration, it can still be used in dynamic ways within the national discourse. Within the national dialogue about asylum seekers, this comic opened up new meanings, framed dialogues and started discussions. Some of these discussions, have not been linguistic, but have been conducted silently, as the wordless images of the comic are reframed and recontextualised. However, these discussions were largely conducted without the involvement of the refugees themselves, perpetuating the way Australians have used asylum seekers as signifying “folk devils” to discuss what it means to be Australian or un-Australian.



Figure 27: Melbourne street art by CDH reprinted the CBPS comic in full as a paste-up.

The visual future of political discourse?

This analysis of the ways that both the CBPS comic and “A Guard’s Story” were received by Australian readers online has shown how these comics work to

draw on their readers' existing emotional and interpretative resources to fill in the many "gaps" in the comics. The visual "gappiness" of these comics and their ambiguous authorship are qualities that are shared by many forms of online communication, including emoticons, memes and some webcomics. These increasingly visual modes of communication may be changing how political discourse functions.

McLuhan implicated print historically as a catalyst for modern systems of government, writing that the technology of repeatable print "led to nationalism and the religious wars of the sixteenth century" and later to the American and French revolutions in the late eighteenth century (1964, p. 23). Similarly, Benedict Anderson has argued that print, combined with capitalism, "laid the bases for national consciousness" (1997, p. 62). Print is certainly a foundation of modern democracies, with their constitutions, bills, treaties and declarations. If the medium of printed text, "cried out for nationalism" (McLuhan 1964, p. 49) different responses are authorised by the medium of comics, along with related forms of visual culture like memes, emoticons, and animated GIFs, as our culture moves from a print-centric society to one more focused on networked, multimodal digital displays.

As Internet technologies and communities increasingly turn to visual communication, these comics represent a trend that will continue to shape political debate and propaganda. While this can result in creative and humanising discourse, as in the case of 'A Guard's Story,' it is important to be aware that, as in the case of the CBPS comic, it can also be used to support or shroud dehumanising actions, even while evoking strong human emotions. Furthermore, both comics are examples of how drawn visual representations of marginalised groups of people can be used without the involvement or consent of those groups. These cases highlight the ways that the gaps used in comics and other forms of digital visual communication can generate reader engagement, while also eliding clear statements and obscuring both authorship and authenticity. Understanding the political nature of these gaps, and of the ways

that they are used in within visual style should be central to the study of online visual communication.

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