

Title of Event: Building Bridges: Advancing Refugee Protection in a Divided World

Notetaker: Wade Radmore, uOttawa Refugee Hub Knowledge Team

Host of Event: UNSW Sydney and UNSW Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law

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Toplines:

- Panelists agreed that divisions over refugees are both politically manufactured and media-driven, with misinformation amplified by emotional narratives, partisan incentives, and fragmented information ecosystems.
- Kylea Tink urged bipartisan accountability and revitalizing local, cross-partisan, and private-sector partnerships to rebuild civic dialogue and turn symbolic refugee support into tangible policy progress.
- Dr. Sukhmani Khorana stressed that misinformation often originates from governments and official sources, calling for culturally informed media literacy to counter disinformation within diaspora communities.
- Basma Alawee emphasized that **personal storytelling and community sponsorship humanize refugees**, build empathy, and turn shared values into action.
- Saul Wodak outlined behavioural insights for countering misinformation—using “Fact Sandwich” framing, value-based dialogue, and strategic repetition of truth to offset persistent falsehoods.

Panel Session:

- Conversations Across Divides: Fostering Constructive Dialogue in the Public Square

Moderator:

- **Jane McAdam**, Scientia Professor of Law, Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law

Panelists:

- **Kylea Tink**, Ambassador, Community Independents Project
- **Dr. Sukhmani Khorana**, Scientia Associate Professor, School of Arts and Media, UNSW Sydney
- **Basma Alawee**, Deputy Executive Director, Community Sponsorship Hub
- **Saul Wodak**, Advisor, Behavioural Insights Team

Circulated Materials: [Full Conference Live-stream](#) (Session begins at 2:07:00)

Key Points:

Panel Question and Answer Session

1. **Moderator’s question:** *Why are we so divided? Are these divides real or politically manufactured?*
 - **Tink**

- Over the past four years, far-right populism has shifted from fringe to mainstream.
- Political “point scoring” in Canberra worsens polarization.
- In Australia: Only one-third of citizens still engage with traditional parties, with growth of independents and “One Nation” — the latter openly anti-immigration.
- Calls for bipartisan concern over the growing normalization of anti-immigration sentiment.

2. **Moderator’s question:** *How does media discourse contribute to public division?*

○ **Khorana**

- Recalled the “Children Overboard Affair” (2001): an early example of state-sponsored misinformation about asylum seekers.
- Warned against limiting the term “fake news” to social media; governments have historically manufactured misleading narratives.
- Urged recognition that misinformation often originates within official sources, not just fringe outlets.

3. **Moderator’s question:** *What drives misconceptions about refugees and migrants?*

○ **Alawee**

- Initial experience as a refugee: isolation and misunderstanding from locals.
- Found that **sharing personal stories humanized refugees and corrected misconceptions**, so she created WeaveTales, a storytelling initiative where:
 - ❖ Refugees share their journeys.
 - ❖ Local residents and sponsors share their motivations for helping.
 - ❖ These exchanges foster mutual understanding and empathy.
- Most people who oppose refugees have never met one.
- **Knowing a refugee doubles support for resettlement programs.**
- Misconceptions stem from distance, misinformation, and fear; bridges are built through connection and shared humanity.

4. **Moderator’s question:** *Why is misinformation about refugees so “sticky”?*

○ **Wodak**

- Co-authored a major report on countering misinformation using behavioural science.
- Identified four main factors:
 - ❖ Information overload — fragmented media environments overwhelm users.
 - ❖ Hot-state psychology — emotional arousal (e.g., anger, fear) inhibits critical thinking.
 - ❖ Messenger effect — people believe information more when it comes from trusted sources, regardless of truth.
 - ❖ Repetition and confirmation bias — repeated claims, even false, become perceived as credible.

5. **Moderator’s question:** *How do we build bridges to overcome this division?*

- **Wodak**
 - Only engage with information if it is out there and is prominent, proximate, and persuasive.
 - Explained the **“Fact Sandwich”** method for countering falsehoods:
 1. Start with a strong, truthful fact (sets the frame).
 2. Present the myth or misinformation briefly, labeling it as false.
 3. Explain why it’s wrong and reiterate the truth at the end.
 - Example: “The housing crisis is driven by limited supply. Some bad faith actors claim refugees caused it — this is false, based on selective data and oversimplification.”
6. **Moderator’s question:** *How is misinformation spreading within refugee communities themselves?*
- **Khorana**
 - Conducted research on Chinese and South Asian diaspora groups in Australia:
 - ❖ 7 focus groups, 200+ survey responses on media literacy.
 - ❖ Found that community networks play a major role in shaping information flow.
 - Many rely on multilingual platforms such as WhatsApp, WeChat, and RedBook, which lie outside Australian regulatory frameworks.
 - These spaces are frequent targets for misinformation campaigns, often designed to exploit cultural or linguistic gaps.
 - Called for culturally informed media strategies to counter misinformation within communities.
7. **Moderator’s question:** *Some disagreement will always exist, but how do we disagree better with agreement on some basic premises?*
- **Alawee**
 - Trust must come before agreement.
 - Real dialogue requires openness to hearing uncomfortable truths.
 - In the U.S., **people are tired of being told what to believe — they want to act together on shared values.**
 - **Community sponsorship programs embody this:**
 - ❖ Local groups sponsor and support refugee families.
 - ❖ Participation builds empathy and shared purpose.
 - ❖ Connection transforms abstract “refugee issues” into real relationships.
 - Once people meet refugees, humanity replaces rhetoric.
8. **Moderator’s question:** *What strategies work to forge a constructive path through disagreement?*
- **Tink**
 - Federal politics is driven by power, not consensus.
 - **True progress requires listening and cross-partisan collaboration.**
 - Her experience on the crossbench showed that genuine dialogue lowers hostility.
 - Even conversations with aggressive opponents became productive once listening replaced talking at each other.

- The “gray zone” of dialogue is disappearing — communities must work to preserve spaces for civil disagreement.

9. **Moderator’s question:** *What does behavioural science tell us about fostering agreement?*

○ **Wodak**

- Behavioural science shows agreement is easier when framed around shared values.
- Strategy:
 1. Start by listening to understand the other’s priorities.
 2. Reframe issues in value-aligned language.
 3. Example: Climate change can be discussed through energy security, job creation, or future-proofing — appealing to different audiences.
- Sometimes, conversation won’t resolve disagreement — and that’s okay.
- Progress often happens in small, cumulative steps.

10. **Moderator’s question:** *Racism is often the unspoken backdrop to refugee debates. How should it be addressed?*

○ **Khorana**

- Fact-checking alone cannot fix the power dynamics that racism sustains.
- Miscontextualized information often stems from underlying prejudice, not ignorance.
- Example: A Queensland town’s Tamil refugee program showed that anti-racism frameworks can be effective at the community level — but such efforts rarely ripple into national discourse.
- Structural racism continues to shape how information is received and how empathy is distributed.

11. **Moderator’s question:** *How can we build real-world bridges that achieve lasting progress?*

○ **Alawee**

- **Community sponsorship remains one of the strongest tools for connection.**
- Since the program’s expansion in the U.S.:
 - ❖ Over 100,000 ZIP codes applied to welcome newcomers.
 - ❖ Sponsors come from diverse political and social backgrounds.
- Sponsorship builds belonging through shared responsibility and practical cooperation. Example:
 - ❖ Alawee and four friends sponsored a refugee family; the network expanded daily with new volunteers.
 - ❖ Within 10 months, the family became deeply embedded in the local community.
- Those unable to sponsor can join local initiatives or projects — trust grows first, then dialogue.

12. **Moderator’s question:** *If all political parties publicly celebrate refugees, why do regressive policies persist?*

○ **Tink**

- Australian refugee policy depends heavily on bipartisan agreement.
- Current Labour inaction is inexcusable — public rhetoric must translate into policy follow-through.
- Civil society must hold all parties accountable and reject “smokescreen” gestures of support.

Floor Question and Answer Session

1. **Audience question:** *Much of the advice today focuses on interpersonal dialogue. What about large-scale, mass communication without one-on-one engagement?*
 - **Wodak**
 - The “Fact Sandwich” strategy is mainly designed for organizations, not mass audiences.
 - Mass communication presents unique challenges:
 - ❖ Falsehoods are repeated constantly across hundreds of posts and channels.
 - ❖ Repetition reinforces credibility — one correction cannot counter 100 repetitions.
 - Key takeaway: **Strategic repetition of truth must match the persistence of misinformation.**
 - **Tink**
 - AI is heavily involved in this; **for bad messages to thrive, good people must do nothing.**
 - **Khorana**
 - Calls for more pressure to be put on social media companies.
2. **Audience question:** *Refugees often have little control over their public narratives. What role can the private sector play in reshaping perceptions?*
 - **Tink**
 - Private businesses are a largely untapped ally in refugee advocacy.
 - Most large corporations stay silent due to political risk aversion, especially in tech sectors affected by U.S. policy shifts (e.g., Trump-era bans).
 - Yet small and medium-sized businesses often show grassroots leadership, quietly hiring or supporting refugees.
 - **Khorana**
 - Highlighted the need to improve skills recognition for refugees.
 - **Alawee**
 - In the U.S., **state-level policies often succeed with strong local business support.**
3. **Audience question:** *What about municipal governments and councils — how can they help share positive stories?*
 - **Tink**
 - Local government is closer to the community pulse and more trusted than national politics.

- However, political actors respond primarily to votes — to influence councils, advocates must translate refugee support into voter engagement.
 - Political framing remains self-interested: “What’s in it for me?” — this must be flipped toward shared benefit.
4. **Audience question:** *When does racist behavior begin to surface in public discourse? How can it be countered?*
- **Alawee**
 - Shared an example from the Ukraine crisis:
 - ❖ A reporter said, “We should welcome these refugees — they are civilized.”
 - ❖ Alawee wrote an op-ed critiquing this racialized framing and educating journalists on humanizing refugee coverage.
 - ❖ As a result, local reporters requested training on how to report on refugees respectfully and accurately.
5. **Audience question:** *Misinformation and disinformation — since both truth and lies are now spread through mainstream media, how can this be addressed?*
- **Khorana**
 - The mainstream media needs to unpack and provide context.
 - **Tink**
 - There is a huge loss of trust in society, as we cannot determine the simplest of facts.
 - **Wodak**
 - Calls for journalist standards to be based on evidence.
 - If only 1% disagrees with climate scientists, it would be inappropriate to platform that fringe 1%.