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The Politics of Knowledge:

an examination of the use of country information in the

asylum determination process.

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Introduction

Country of origin information (COI) is an important form of evidence used within the asylum determination process. COI details the social, political, judicial and human rights profile of a given country. This information is used within asylum decision-making to assess the risk upon return for individuals to their country of origin as well as the credibility of individual claims. COI enables decision makers to assess if an asylum seeker's subjective fear is based on objectively adverse circumstances, and therefore whether an asylum claim is "well-founded".

COI material consists of a variety of sources including reports produced by experts, news services, NGOs, government bodies and the UKBA's COI Service. Case law and Country Guidance (CG) cases also contain guidance, assessments and sources of COI, although this falls beyond the boundaries of this paper.

The production of knowledge is inherently political, embedded in social and cultural processes that involve power relations and subjectivity. This paper will explore this theme with regards to the production and use of COI. It will examine how sources gain weight amongst the diverse stakeholders involved in refugee status determination (RSD) and why certain sources, such as expert reports, are more heavily scrutinized than others. Drawing on data gathered from 20 face-to-face interviews with diverse stakeholders and 100 questionnaires completed by legal representatives and UKBA staff, this paper intends to map the information hierarchies. Finally, it will seek to unpack the criteria of what constitutes COI and question what effects this has on the RSD process as a whole.

Government Policy and Information: the simplification of decision-making

Set against a context of decreased political will to shelter asylum seekers particularly since the end of the Cold War, the British government has sought to strengthen its borders and implement stricter migration controls. This is reflected in a sharp increase in draconian legislative reforms and moves towards EU harmonization policies. Alongside this policy environment, the government has also faced significant and well-founded criticism regarding inconsistency its decision-making process.

The contemporary trend in decision-making is to adopt a more mechanical approach particularly at the initial stage, in a bid to eradicate discretionary decisions and instead to promote consistency in the RSD process. The consequence of this is heightened categorization illustrated through the introduction of a "white list", New Asylum Model (NAM) segmentation routes and also, arguably schematized COI reports such as those produced by the Home Office itself. These reports seek to present ordered information surrounding the main types of asylum claims. Furthermore, the Home Office also produces Operational Guidance Notes (OGNs), which reflect Home Office policy and guide caseowners on how to deal with the various asylum categories. Other important developments within the RSD process are the creation of the NSA (non-suspensive appeal) list and Country Guidance (CG) cases, which seek to set legal precedents on cases covering asylum categories or similar issues.

The use of objective COI in corroborating accounts or assessing risk upon return is also a means by which to avoid discretionary decisions within assessment. However, this paper argues that the accessibility to, selection and use of information necessarily involves subjective processes, which deflate any attempt at denoting such information as objective. Furthermore, as this paper will show, the frequently complex nature of most asylum cases defies attempts to force them uncomfortably into predetermined categories. In cases where there is a lack of COI on a specific issue or if the COI used conflicts with the claimant's version of events, there is a danger that "fact" will prevail over a subjective claim.

Legal and Policy Framework

The need for country of origin information has been highlighted in both policy documents and legal instruments. The 1951 Refugee Convention, for example, states that "claims are well founded, that is, sufficiently established on the facts and the available evidence". In 2004 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) underlined that '…decision makers must assess an applicant's claim and his/her credibility and place his/her story in its appropriate factual context, that is, the known situation in the country of origin'.[2] The legislative and policy framework underlining the use and importance of COI are outlined in the UK Home Office policy instructions as well within the EU Qualitative and Procedures Directives[3].

Despite the importance of COI, it remains relatively unexplored. Attempts have been made to formulate criteria for the assessment of COI.[4] However, little has been done to address the theoretical tensions that arise in its production and application, which this paper will interrogate.

The Creation of a COI Discourse and the development of a 'field' of knowledge:

Over the years, as the number of sources being used and the generation of guidelines have grown, this paper argues that COI itself has become a constructed field of knowledge.

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[2] UNHCR, *Country of Origin Information: Towards Enhanced International Cooperation*, February 2004, p1.

[3] EU Qualitative Directive (A4) – implemented in domestic law by the Refugee or Person in Need of International Protection (Qualification) Regulations 2006 (SI 2525/2006).
EU Procedures Directorate, Article 8 (2)

[4] See the following publications for further information:
ACCORD *Researching Country of Origin Information; A Training Manual,* 2004. **NB – this gives practical advice rather than exploring theoretical debates or tensions surrounding COI and its use.
UNHCR *Country of Origin Information: Towards Enhanced Cooperation* (Geneva: UNHCR 2004)
IARLJ: Country of Origin Information – Country Guidance Working Party, *Judicial Criteria for Assessing Country of Origin Information (COI): A Checklist* (a paper presented at the 7th Biennial IARLJ World Conference, Nov. 2006).
G Gyulai, *Country Information in Asylum Procedures: Quality as a Legal Requirement in the EU* (Budapest: Hungarian Helsinki Committee).
More recently, in line with the current trends of harmonizing European asylum procedures, common EU guidelines were created. See for example, *Common EU Guidelines fort processing Country of Origin Information (COI)* April 2008. ARGO Project

Indeed, with the development of the new field of COI, albeit in its embryonic form, has sprung an accompanying discourse that generates a particular system of representation and defines the objects of knowledge. The hierarchy of sources employed within compiled reports such as the Home Office COIS[5] reports and which are routinely used and relied upon by decision-makers and legal practitioners alike have become accepted as the status quo. Subsequently, the selection and use of COI have become a somewhat mechanical process with a failure amongst some decision makers, presenting officers and legal practitioners to cast a sufficiently analytical eye over presented materials.

All COI must be available in the public domain and must be objective. However, there is no coordinated approach to data collection or use. Furthermore, there is no monitoring or regulation of the information being used. Although various guidelines have been introduced, there is nothing that is binding nor are there formalised limits as to what constitutes COI.

Indeed, part of the reason for this is because COI is a newly constructed field of knowledge that incorporates knowledge from a variety of disciplines and sources, which for the most part are not written with the RSD process in mind. This provokes tension because these diverse origins present divergent modes of thought, mandates, and approaches to information production. Subsequently, attempting to create and implement criteria for an ideal standard of COI is problematic. With COI lacking a uniform theoretical or philosophical background, one observes problems with the approach to and use of COI, as well as an uncertainty about its limitations.

Due to the theoretical tensions that arise from the fact that most sources of COI are not written specifically for the asylum process, there is a heightened need for source assessment and analysis. For example, the US State Department (USSD) reports are produced for the purpose of business travellers and arguably contain a political bias with foreign policy objectives in mind. Furthermore, the reports do not reference where they get their information. One would therefore expect individuals using the

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[5] COIS, the Country of Origin Information Service, which is part of the Home Office, produces country reports. In this paper, these reports shall simply be referred to as COIS.

USSD reports to exercise a level of caution. However, instead one observes diversity in the way individuals, including Immigration Judges, understand and approach this source with some recognizing bias and others not.

In a similar vein, based on data gathered from questionnaires and interviews, it is observed that some see reports produced by Amnesty International as reliable and objective, whilst others, particularly from the Home Office, perceive it to be a campaigning tool. For example, one UKBA caseowner noted that Amnesty reports have a 'biased point of view', whilst another stated that, 'Amnesty International reports for me tend to be heavily weighted towards the larger political agenda'. Furthermore, 5 out of 13 presenting officers who completed the questionnaire felt that NGO reports in general carry less weight in the RSD process because they are seen as biased. For example, one individual stated, 'certain NGOs and other groups have a vested interest in presenting the information in a particular fashion'.

Indeed, research highlights an unhelpfully multi-varied approach to the production and use of COI within the determination process. Research previously undertaken by IAS highlights in particular the following key issues within decision-making[6]: the poor use of country information; under-use of country information; the use of OGNs in refusal letters; use of speculative argument; poor referencing; and inappropriate/ lack of relevant material in the selection of COI.

Theoretical Tensions:

As stated previously, one of the defining features of what constitutes COI is objectivity. However, objectivity is also the criteria that provokes theoretical tension. This is primarily because COI is employed within an adversarial system.

At the tribunal, the presentation of country information takes place within an adversarial system with the burden of proof resting with the appellant[7]. Through

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[6] Immigration Advisory Service (2009) *The Use of Country of Origin Information: Critical Perspectives*

[7] SSHD v Sivakumaran (1998) Imm AR 147, the House of Lords laid down that a claimant must show a 'reasonable degree of likelihood' that their subjective fear is well founded if they are returned and

attempting to assess subjectivity using this objective information, decision makers can be faced with the task of assessing competing or differing versions of 'factual' events. Used within an adversarial system, one observes a tendency to oppose – a tendency to contest 'fact' with 'fact' with different versions of the 'truth' presented by either side. In turn, this creates tension between the way the different stakeholders, often guided by their own professional duties, approach COI. There is therefore a fundamental flaw in the definition of COI because the interpretation of information, or a lack of information, corrupts objectivity in its pure form.

This paper argues that there is a need for acknowledgement of the limitations of COI, namely its ability to establish certainty or fact, which should be expressed through heightened analysis of COI amongst stakeholders.

Limitations of COI:

The limitations of COI carry several dimensions. Firstly, as briefly discussed above there are conceptual problems with COI. Whilst interpretation corrupts objectivity, there is also the argument that there is no such thing as "truth" or "objectivity" in the first place. With regards to conceptual factors, this is in particular observed amongst experts, whereby social scientists are uncomfortable with the use of COI in the legal realm. This discomfort not only relates to different conceptions of what such things as 'fact' are but also due to their differing modes of thought production, which mean they may have to 'translate' their positions. This is the case, in particular, in situations of meeting certain legal tests. For example, it is near impossible to establish the precise level of threat, the sufficiency of protection and the risks associated with internal relocation.

COI, despite coming from a variety of disciplines, is used within the legal process, which draws on the positivist tradition. The selection and application of rules is thus seen as a "value-neutral" process, which transcends human variation. However, as

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that their account is true. Thus, the standard of proof in asylum cases is lower than in civil or criminal cases. The standard in civil cases is set 'on the balance of probabilities' whilst in criminal cases it is 'beyond a reasonable doubt'. The standard is set lower in asylum cases because they concern assessments of future risk rather than past events.

Good states: 'None the less, its positivistic overtones do seem to reflect a general failure by all parties – the appellate authorities, legal representatives, and above all, the Home Office – to recognize the contextualisation and subjectivity to which all knowledge is subject'[8].

Subjectivity is not only entrenched within knowledge production but also in the approach to and use of knowledge. The role subjectivity plays in corrupting the objectivity of background evidence can be observed in some refusals that are based on implausibility. Good highlights that there are cases where this may be due to cultural misunderstanding or cultural subjectivity.[9] Claims may not seem credible when considered within one's own Eurocentric sociocultural or political context or there may be difficulties in assessing the cultural significance of facts. Indeed, Lord Bingham denounced the judicial application of the "reasonable man" based on this, because cultural differences generate different understandings of this concept.

Moreover, as Oliver Wendell Holmes, an American jurist and legal realist once stated, the Constitution is "what the judges say it is"[10]. Accordingly, interpreting the law involves a level of subjectivity – notably, the values and beliefs of the individual judges. One must account for the variables of individual values, beliefs, experience and training in order to understand the "IJ lottery". Indeed, evidence gathered by the IAS shows variance in judicial decision-making; in accepting expert evidence; in the levels of analysis of COI; and the level of scrutiny given to reports such as those produced by the USSD[11].

Secondly, there are practical issues at stake with regards to the limitations of COI, whereby COI may be lacking or may conflict with a claimant's version of events. It is essentially impossible for any given report to cover every aspect or eventuality of all individual claims. Furthermore, the temporal aspects of COI, particularly with regards

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[8] Good, A. (2004) '"Undoubtedly an Expert"? Anthropologists in British Asylum Courts' *Royal Anthropological Institute* 10, 124

[9] Good, A. (2003) *Professional Liars? Uses of Anthropological 'Objective Evidence' in British Asylum Appeals.* ASA Decennial Conference: Manchester, July 2003

[10] Linde, HA (1972) 'Judges, Critics and the Realist Tradition'. *Yale Law Journal* Vol.82, No.2

[11] This is noted in a forthcoming publication by the IAS.

to covering dynamic conflict situations or claims relating to events in the distant past, are problematic.

Finally, there are systemic and institutional reasons, which mask and in some cases perpetuate the limitations of COI. This includes the reliance on Home Office COIS reports at the initial decision making phase, the establishment of accepted sources and the information hierarchies, which have developed and are being upheld. Indeed, as Good states: 'Fostered by this greater systemisation of scientific knowledge, simplistic notions of scientific objectivity tend to be taken for granted by all parties in the courts'.

Hierarchies of Knowledge

As stated previously, COI is a newly developing field of knowledge. Within this field, one observes two notable trends: the development of a hierarchy of information sources together with the fact that there is no independent monitoring mechanism in place to assess what COI is admissible. Instead, the strength of and weight attached to documents are decided upon by initial decision makers and immigration judges. Drawing on data gathered from 100 legal representatives and UKBA staff, 83% of individuals believed that certain sources carry more weight than others.

This paper argues that the hierarchies of knowledge that have developed have been created and are being sustained by the institutions that employ, assess and place weight on them when making decisions. This invariably means the Home Office initial decision makers and Immigration Judges at the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal (AIT).

Within this hierarchy of information, the sources most commonly used and relied upon include those produced by UKBA's COIS, the US State Department, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Of those who listed which sources were given more weight in the RSD process, the two most popular and indeed the only significant sources cited were firstly the Home Office COIS reports and secondly the USSD reports. UKBA staff commented that reasons for this include the reliability,

objectivity and accuracy of COIS reports. By contrast, some legal representatives offered a more cynical reading. For example, one individual stated that 'CIPU and other government (UK or other) are given disproportionately high weight because the process is biased'. Another person said, 'COI reports are always accepted as being the verbatim truth by IJs despite often contradictory and more recent evidence from other sources being supplied'.

In contrast to the more accepted sources, unpublished sources, reports from little known NGOs or individual testimonies are used less frequently and are subject to higher scrutiny. However, it is interesting to note that testimonies, information from local informants or reports by small local NGOs that are included within compiled published reports immediately gain status and legitimacy through their very inclusion in those reports. Thus, the credibility of the organisation rather than the original source is what is concentrated on. In turn, the necessary criteria of what constitutes "public domain" material should be examined and analysed in its full light.

Indeed, there appears to be a popular misconception that if a source is published, it is somehow more 'real'. Whilst "rationality" and "scientific" knowledge is favoured within the discourse of COI, other forms of knowledge, such as the indigenous or the unpublished become subjugated and labelled as inferior. This deterministic process of maintaining the hierarchy of knowledge thus extends a particular kind of information hegemony.

The Power of Information

The selection of sources employed and relied upon routinely can be seen as a site of power and knowledge dominated and sustained by a certain discourse. Foucault explains that 'the criteria of what constitutes knowledge, what it is to be excluded, and who is designated as qualified to know involves acts of power'[12]. One needs

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[12] Foucault (1971) cited in Pottier, J (2003) 'Negotiating Local Knowledge: An Introduction.' In: Pottier, J. and Sillitoe, P. and Bicker, A., (eds.), *Negotiating Local Knowledge: Identity and Power in Development.* London: Pluto

knowledge to exercise power and at the same time, in producing knowledge, one makes a claim for power. The discourse of COI and its inherent information hierarchies can thus be seen to have been produced by power and also reproduce power relations within the world it describes, interprets and is used.

As Foucault explains[13], discourse should be seen as a system which structures the way in which one sees reality. Some information is presented, some is manipulated, and some is simply left out. Thus, the power of producing and assessing information necessarily involves a degree of subjectivity and an authority to dictate what constitutes 'truth' or 'reality'.

Foucault's vision involved power and knowledge emanating not just from one individual power but instead is infiltrated through society, institutions and organisational bodies. In this way, what is considered to be "objective" or "fact" or "duty", is built into the institutional structures of the state, which maintains the status quo, and arguably the concept that the objective is more credible than the subjective. Through the distortion or creation of "truth", claims for objectivity can be naturalized and thereon decision-making is more easily legitimized.

As Sweeney states: 'The real difference between the asylum seekers' evidence and the Home Office reports is that the former must be assessed by the immigration judge, whilst the latter is already deemed "true". This tips the scales in favour of the "objective" evidence and, at the same time, reduces the scope of the immigration judge actively to engage with both sources. In other words, once again, the supplied "objective" evidence that immigration judges merely present is allowed to outshine evidence that requires interpretation and analysis by them.' Thus, active decision making is downplayed 'in favour of apparently allowing the facts to speak for themselves'[14].

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[13] For further information, see Foucault, M. (1995) *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. Vintage: London. Foucault, M. (1980) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Mills, Sara (2003). *Michel Foucault*. New York: Routledge.
[14] Sweeney, JA (2007) 'The lure of "facts" in asylum appeals'. In *Applying Theory to Policy and Practice: Issues for Critical Reflection*. Smith, Steven R. Hampshire, Ashgate: UK 19-35.

'Truth', for example, is thus constructed and kept in place by a wide range of strategies, which support and affirm it. For example, this is expressed through the creation of the APCI[15], through the introduction of Practice Directions and other professional guidelines, and even through the accessibility of information. All of these mechanisms influence what types of knowledge are favoured and how this knowledge should be presented. In turn, all stakeholders become necessarily involved in the production and sustaining of the discourse because they are both players and implementers.

The Order of Discourse and the Position of Experts

In the 'order of discourse', discourse is able to be controlled and regulated with individuals or groups re-classified and excluded[16]. Indeed, in the case of experts, their evidence comes under heavy scrutiny by presenting officers and immigration judges. Reasons for discrediting expert evidence often involve a failure to abide by the Practice Directions, namely for not presenting a balanced viewpoint, perceived bias, and comments relating to credibility. Furthermore, in part due to the perceived inequality of arms[17] derived from the fact that experts are ordinarily used in support of the appellant, there have been accusations against and fears amongst experts of being perceived as a hired gun.

Whilst recognizing that there exists diversity in the quality of experts, it is important to note that personal attacks on the credibility of experts are reported as being commonplace, with a feeling amongst some that they are being squeezed out of the RSD process. This has been supported by Good who highlights the accusation made by Heydon & Ockleton in 1996 that expert witnesses are "close to being professional

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[15] The 2002 Act laid out the government's plans to set up the APCI in s.142 as a monitoring facility of Home Office COIS reports. For more information, see Yeo, C. (2005) Immigration Law Digest 26-8 at 27.

[16] Foucault, M. (1971) 'Orders of Discourse' *Social Science Information*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 7-30. Foucault, M. (1981). See also, 'The Order of Discourse' (R. Young trans). In *Untying the Text: A Poststructuralist Reader*. R. Young (ed.) London: Routledge.

[17] Barnes, J (2004) explains that presenting officers do not have the qualifications to challenge expert reports and how the Secretary of State does not commission expert reports on the grounds of public cost. As such there is not equality of arms in asylum and human rights appeals, unlike in other areas of litigation, and this is why it is imperative that CPR directions are fully observed.

liars". He states that the attacks faced by experts on their integrity '… in turn can serve to rationalise their progressive exclusion from processes of judicial decision-making'.[18]

The control that the judiciary has with regards to accepting expert evidence together with the Practice Directions that define the duty of experts tips the balance in favour of the legal realm. Indeed, Good argues that the scrutiny that experts face and the pressure they are under to adopt a scientific methodological approach to presenting their information is in part in order 'to maintain its hegemony over the scientific and technical professions from which experts are drawn'.[19] Using the example of the use of hypothetical questions, Good states that experts are 'manoeuvred into commenting on a version of those facts constructed by the examiner' which means they are handing over power and control. Indeed, once there exists a professional monopoly over knowledge or an organized form of knowledge, there is a claim or an ability to exclude or subjugate other types of knowledge.

Access to Knowledge and Barriers to Justice

The methods by which the information hierarchy is sustained and reproduced is efficient partly because of familiarity and the status quo, and partly through access, ease and simplification. The more the pre-established sources are used and relied upon, the more the hierarchies of information arguably become embedded. In turn however, this can lead to a lack of analysis of the information contained therein.

As stated earlier, there is little use of reports produced by NGOs on the ground, often sources that are arguably the best placed to comment on country situations that pertain to asylum applicants. However, reasons for this often also relate to problems of access. For example, there may be a lack of reliable Internet, the area may be too unsafe to report from or there is simply not a platform from which to voice their findings. Moreover, smaller organisations may be perceived as potentially biased

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[18] Good, A. (2003) *Professional Liars? Uses of Anthropological 'Objective Evidence' in British Asylum Appeals.* ASA Decennial Conference: Manchester, July 2003

[19] Good, A. (2003) *Professional Liars? Uses of Anthropological 'Objective Evidence' in British Asylum Appeals.* ASA Decennial Conference: Manchester, July 2003

based on the size of the organisation or being located in-country. However, in many cases, their data is incorporated into compiled country reports. The consequence of this is that it reinforces the use of these "Western" produced and the pre-established reports.

Given the vast array of COI materials that are available within the public realm, issues relating to the selecting and accessing of information become of paramount importance. It is therefore important to note the means by which information is restricted or poorly accessible.

Amongst interviews with 20 stakeholders, the most commonly cited barriers to access included time, resources and funding constraints imposed by the Legal Services Commission (LSC). Facilitators for access involve reliable Internet access, database subscriptions, Internet skills, research skills and training. UKBA staff also mentioned the barrier of bureaucracy and organizational structures in firstly accessing information that may have been blocked on the Internet and secondly, when making special requests from their COIS department.

Drawing on data from questionnaires, 20% of UKBA staff cited poor Internet access as their greatest barrier to accessing COI. Furthermore, when asked what would facilitate their access to COI, the most important factor noted by far was improves and full Internet access without any restrictions. By contrast, the centralization of information through the UKBA Horizon Intranet, COIS reports, key documents and lists to external websites were all seen to facilitate access to COI.

The processes associated with accessing and using information thus relate primarily to time and resources. These variables impact on so many areas: the quality of court bundles; the potential lack of use of new sources; the analytical and theoretical approach to attaching weight to sources; and overall, the quality of use of COI.

Compiled Country Reports

One cannot deny the benefits of compiled reports that detail the social, political and human rights situations in a given country, particularly with regards to their accessibility. In a world where scientific, rational knowledge gains precedence, the impact is reflected in simplified and ordered information. For example, the paragraphs in compiled reports such as COIS lend themselves to the application of decisive legal principles.

However, with the majority of UKBA caseowners mainly or in some cases solely relying on the UKBA COIS reports, this paper seeks to critique the concept of a definitive report on a given country. Organising knowledge in such a way as to make it the most "legible" form of information for UKBA caseowners, not only ensures the use of one-dimensional knowledge, but also allows for the increased possibility of the centralized management of decision-making. However, despite attempting to cover the majority of asylum claims, this paper highlights that these reports do not allow the level of complexity necessary to gain a holistic understanding of a country or an individual claim.

Using the sample of 100 questionnaires, it was found that 54% of UKBA staff believed that an individual report can cover all specific research needs "for the most part", compared to only 14% of legal representatives. By contrast, 54% of legal representatives believed that such a report can "rarely" or "never" cover such specific requirements, compared to only 10% of UKBA staff. This trend, particularly amongst initial decision makers, is of concern.

The production of knowledge is inherently political. In theory, the Home Office has implemented changes that seek to close down space for discretionary decision-making. However, in practice, with the Home Office producing its own reports, one could argue that its own subjectivity is entrenched within the so-called "objective" evidence.

Whilst the COIS department of the Home Office espouses that their research does not aim to analyse, one cannot deny that in the mere selection of material, an interpretative step is required. Through selection and the 'cutting and pasting' process, nuances are made and 'objectivity' is compromised.

It is important to recognize that the information contained in the COIS reports beholds a perception of the world shared by those producing it. Thus, in the world of simplifying the RSD process and categorizing claims of asylum seekers, the report presents information in a highly schematized fashion, with all encompassing section headings such as "women". Through reductionism and objectification, (in addition to the categories of risk laid down in CG cases), certain "types" of refugees are produced – ones that fit directly under the headings and whose claim matches the background evidence and predetermined categories.

Collier explains the impact these reports have in the case of women. She states that 'information on women's human rights in country reports often constitutes only a paragraph unless the report is specifically focussed on women. This paragraph does not adequately reflect the fact that women represent 50% of most populations and are frequently subjected to forms of persecution different from men'[20].

Pierre Bourdieu in his book, *On Television*, explains how fragmented images create a vision that is at once dehistoricized and dehistoricizing, fragmented and fragmenting[21]. In a similar vein, one could argue that the information within compiled reports, when selected for and used within the determination process present and represent a distorted snapshot view of reality that fails to capture historical contingencies and multiple identities. This highlights a key limitation of compiled reports in the systemisation of COI and categorization of asylum seekers.

This paper therefore argues that the asylum system and in particular any given country report does not allow for a level of complexity. The schematized reports have instead eroded the more qualitative holistic angle necessary to fully understand one's asylum claim and establish whether it is well founded.

Conclusion

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[20] Collier, B. (2007) *Country of Origin Information: Researching gender and persecution in the context of asylum and human rights claims.* Asylum Aid: London
[21] Bourdieu, P. (1998) *On Television.* The New Press: New York

One of the central tenets of COI is objectivity. However, as this paper has highlighted all knowledge is inherently political, embedded in social and cultural processes that involve power relations and subjectivity.

Indeed, the hierarchies of knowledge that have developed have been created and are being sustained by the institutions and stakeholders that employ, assess and place weight on them when making decisions.

This paper argues that there is a need for the acknowledgement of the limitations of COI, namely its ability to establish certainty or fact, which should be expressed through heightened analysis of COI amongst stakeholders. It calls for the recognition of the subjectivity involved in knowledge production, interpretation and use.

Whilst recognizing the difficulties of implementing guidelines on the production and usage of COI, there is a need to give meaning to the criteria for verification at present and a responsibility amongst stakeholders to engage with the theoretical tensions arising from the application of COI. This could in turn promote heightened consistency in the approach to, interpretation and use of COI in the RSD process.