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Selling displaced people? A multi-method study of the public communication strategies of international refugee organisations

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The world has seen a major increase in forced displacement since 2011. As a growing number of states implement restrictive refugee policies, public communication has become essential for refugee organisations. This study analysed, therefore, three international refugee organisations' discursive strategies towards the recent Syrian crisis, as well as their production and the social context. A critical discourse analysis of international press releases (N=122) and six semi-structured interviews with press and regional officers revealed that the observed actors largely dehumanise displaced people and subordinate them to the 'Western self' and state interests; displaced people hardly ever acquire their own voice. The study found that the medium characteristics of press releases and the importance of media attention result in a depersonalising humanitarian discourse. In addition, there were indications of a post-humanitarian discourse that reproduced the humanitarian sector's 'marketisation'. Finally, the examined organisations use the political realist cross-issue persuasion strategy, displaying displaced people as resettlement objects.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis, cross-issue persuasion, discursive regimes, displaced people, expert interviews, public communication, refugee organisations

Introduction

War, persecution, famine, and/or poverty have fuelled forced migration throughout history (Betts and Loescher, 2011). The problem has expanded significantly in recent years, with some 68.5 million people being forcibly displaced by the end of 2017 (UNHCR, 2018). Yet, several countries have implemented more restrictive refugee policies in the past few decades (Betts, Loescher, and Milner, 2012). Consequently, public communication is crucial for refugee organisations' operations (Dijkzeul and Moke, 2005), as a tool with which to inform, sensitise, and set the agenda (Atkin and Rice, 2013). A number of scholars have focused, therefore, on the news-making efforts of humanitarian organisations in general (Van Leuven, Deprez, and Raeymaeckers, 2013; Van Leuven and Joye, 2014; Ongenaert and Joye, 2016; Powers, 2016a, 2016b) and of refugee organisations in particular (Dimitrov, 2006, 2009), to tell consumers 'what to think *about*' (first-level agenda-setting) (Sallot and Johnson, 2006, p. 152).

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Only a few studies, however, appear to have examined thoroughly the discursive strategies as employed by refugee organisations to influence '*what* to think' (second-level agenda-setting). Nevertheless, their public communication activities contribute considerably to the public's perception of displaced people and related crises (Chouliaraki, 2012). Moreover, the agenda-setting capabilities of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have expanded within the changing news ecology (Dahlgren, 2005; Castells, 2008).

Acknowledging these developments, this paper assesses refugee organisations' discursive strategies towards the recent Syrian crisis, focusing on the production and broader social context via a multi-method research design. First, Fairclough's (1995) model of critical discourse analysis (CDA) is applied to international press releases (N=122) about the Syrian crisis issued by three international refugee organisations (see Annexe 1 for a list of those cited in this paper). Semi-structured expert interviews with press and regional officers at these organisations yielded additional empirical material.

The following literature review first contextualises the research subject by discussing briefly (i) the evolving refugee regime, (ii) the complex relationship between states and refugee protection, and (iii) public communication in relation to news media, before exploring in more depth the discursive strategies and underlying motivations of refugee organisations. After this literature review, the study's methodology, main empirical findings, and final reflections and suggestions are presented.

The evolving refugee regime

The international refugee regime can be envisaged as an institutionalised multilateral platform, comprising various regulations, principles, and procedures, which must shape states' responses to displacement crises (Loescher, 2001; Betts, 2010). The main component of the refugee regime is the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (hereafter the '1951 Convention'), signed on 28 July 1951 and effective as of 22 April 1954, which defines a refugee and his/her rights and obligations (Sidorenko, 2007; Loescher and Milner, 2011). This United Nations (UN) treaty describes a refugee as someone who:

> *owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country* (UNHCR, 2010, p. 14).

Several new issue areas have emerged as a result of globalisation and interdependence, such as development and security, human rights, humanitarianism, and travel and labour migration, overlapping with and complementing the 1951 Convention (Betts, 2009a, 2010). 'Some of these overlaps – such as the sources of complementary

protection provided by the human rights regime – complement and reinforce the refugee regime' (Betts, 2010, p. 13). Sources of additional protection are legal resources for refugee protection outside of the field of international refugee law (Gorlick, 2000; McAdam, 2007). For instance, Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (effective as of 3 September 1953) and Article 3 of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (effective as of 26 June 1987) protect non-refoulement.[1] Other overlaps, however, undermine aspects of the refugee system (*infra*). In sum, the refugee regime cannot be demarcated strictly, but rather, is a 'refugee regime complex' within which different systems exist in parallel, interact, and hence shape states' refugee policies (Betts, 2009a, 2010).

The next section looks at some tendencies within the refugee policies of a growing number of states that are shaped by the refugee regime complex's peculiar nature and influence significantly the public communication of refugee organisations.

States and refugee protection: a complex relationship

Within this refugee regime complex, states play a dominant role as they have the main legal refugee protection responsibilities and function both as asylum providers and international aid donors (Skran, 1992; Loescher, 2014). In recent decades, several states have become more reluctant to cooperate with refugee organisations on displacement issues (Loescher, 1996; Betts, Loescher, and Milner, 2012). Furthermore, a mounting number of countries, from the Global North and the Global South, have tightened their asylum policies, with the focus shifting from resettlement and local integration to voluntary repatriation and local protection (Betts and Loescher, 2011; Johnson, 2011).

This change can be explained by various economic, political, and socio-cultural factors, creating negative public opinion about displaced people and, partly in overlap, conflicting with state interests (Walker and Maxwell, 2009; Betts, Loescher, and Milner, 2012). Displaced people often are perceived as economic migrants (Loescher, 2001; Koser, 2001), as threats to established patterns, such as the culture and economy of the host country and local social cohesion (Ivarsflaten, 2005; Frelick, 2007), or even as (potential) security risks (Kagwanja and Juma, 2008; Betts, Loescher, and Milner, 2012). News media frequently perpetuate negative public opinion by representing displaced people as fundamentally ambivalent figures: they are both the 'victims' of a geopolitical conflict as well as 'threats' to the global order (Pupavac, 2008; Chouliaraki, 2012). The current climate regularly triggers xenophobia and increases the popularity of the far right (Skran, 1992; Frelick, 2007), potentially resulting in political 'us–them' discourses, based on stereotypes as the aforementioned (Klaus, 2017; Colombo, 2018), and more restrictive refugee policies (Betts, Loescher, and Milner, 2012).

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Various policy measures, such as the increasing demand for visas, the use of 'safe third countries', and strengthening borders, thus attempt to obstruct the arrival of displaced people and/or the exercise of their rights, in order to reduce the number of asylum applications (Koser, 2001; Frelick, 2007; Nanda, 2007). Other institutions that intersect with the 1951 Convention often enable such measures. For instance, Western countries employ travel migration restrictions, meant for the securitisation of migration, to decrease the number of incoming displaced people without explicitly breaching legal principles, such as non-refoulement (Betts, 2010).

Public communication and news media

Public communication assumes a central role in the refugee regime complex. One can define it as a large-scale, frequently diversified communication genre that is directed at various audiences through an organised set of communication activities and channels (Dijkzeul and Moke, 2005; Atkin and Rice, 2013; Macnamara, 2016). Potential target audiences include members of the complex, other relevant organisations, politicians, private sector actors, media outlets, and citizens (Lang, 2012).

Public communication is predominantly 'public' in nature. Usually it proceeds through publications, advertising, and other content forms disseminated at public events and via traditional mass media and, increasingly, websites and social media (Atkin and Rice, 2013; Macnamara, 2016). Furthermore, it occurs in the public sphere and concerns public themes, such as refugee protection (Habermas, 1989, 2006; Downey and Fenton, 2003). Generally speaking, non-profit organisations use public communication to gain broader visibility, inform, sensitise, and set the agenda (Lang, 2012; Atkin and Rice, 2013; Sommerfeldt, 2013). The goal is to attract public, political, financial, and/or practical support (Dijkzeul and Moke, 2005). To do so, news media coverage is crucial for refugee organisations, as this is the general public's main source of information on distant suffering (Van Belle, 2000; Waters and Tindall, 2011).

Public communication, however, strengthens the authority of politicians, government institutions, and multinational corporations, which have extensive communication departments (Cottle, 2000; Wolfsfeld, 2011) as compared to most refugee organisations. Nevertheless, within the evolving news ecology, and given the emergence of a global public sphere, refugee organisations and particularly (international) NGOs have more agenda-setting possibilities (Dahlgren, 2005; Castells, 2008; Van Leuven, Deprez, and Raeymaeckers, 2013). Owing to digitalisation trends, cost savings, and associated higher workloads (Boczkowski, 2010; Schudson, 2011; Lee-Wright, Phillips, and Witschge, 2012), journalists also use more pre-packaged information, such as press releases (Reich, 2010). They distrust the information offered by NGOs less than that of the aforementioned actors (Reich, 2011). Consequently, NGOs provide ample and diversified content for greater news access and coverage (Castells, 2008; Davies, 2008); mostly international NGOs succeed in this endeavour (Van Leuven and Joye, 2014; Powers, 2016b).

Discursive strategies and causes

Existing research principally explores how refugee organisations use public communication to respond to the two previously identified (partially overlapping) causes of restrictive refugee policies:

- the negative opinions of the public of displaced people; and
- the perception that refugee protection collides with greater state interests.

Strategies (mainly) directed at the general public

Several studies have investigated how refugee organisations represent displaced people in their public communication. Chouliaraki (2012, p. 13) identifies a gradual shift from a 'humanitarian discourse of pity to a post-humanitarian discourse of irony'.

From a regime of pity . . .

In the regime of pity narrative, agency-lacking (hereafter: 'negative') and agency-focused (hereafter: 'positive') representation strategies attempt, each in different ways, to eliminate displaced people's perceived ambivalent character. Both use a humanitarian discourse, relying on common humanity, across political and/or cultural divides, as moral justification for solidarity in the face of human vulnerability (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2004, 2012).

Refugee organisations primarily portray displaced people from the Global South in a traditionally 'negative' manner, as anonymous, corporeal, displaced, helpless, and/or speechless masses (Demusz, 2000; Fass, 2011; Bettini, 2013). In addition, the focus often is on needy and innocent-looking women and children (Moeller, 1999; Pupavac, 2008; Johnson, 2011; Vasavada, 2016). Clark-Kazak (2009) partly contests this claim, though, as she found that adults are portrayed more than children in the photographs of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Nevertheless, children appearing vulnerable, as ideal victims, constitute the second most photographed group. Characteristic are photorealistic images that attempt to reflect the harsh reality confronting displaced people. However, these pictures dehumanise people by reducing their various complex realities to a single one of generalised helplessness and vulnerability (Chouliaraki, 2012). Furthermore, the testimonies of displaced people's experiences are reserved for Western experts. This lack of an 'own' voice reduces displaced people to inferior citizens and likewise dehumanises them (Harrell-Bond and Voutira, 2007; Chouliaraki, 2012). Overall, these 'negative' representation practices result in depoliticised, dehistoricised, and universalised images of displaced people, regardless of their specific historical, political, and social contexts (Malkki, 1995, 1996; Rajaram, 2002; Pupavac, 2006).

Owing to increasing scepticism about such 'negative' representation strategies, more 'positive' portrayals of displaced people from the Global South have emerged (Chouliaraki, 2012), although 'negative' images still seem to dominate nowadays (Johnson, 2011; Bettini, 2013; Vasavada, 2016; Ongenaert, 2019). Specifically, refugee

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organisations depict displaced people sometimes as hopeful, self-determined, talented persons—frequently in a personalised way—who fit within 'our' cultural and moral framework and must be distinguished from economic migrants (Hedman, 2009; Sandvik, 2010; Catenaccio, 2015; Rodriguez, 2016). Even this representation strategy, though, can dehumanise displaced people. Optimistic photorealistic images, for instance, regularly accord displaced people an unrealistic amount of agency (Verdirame and Harrell-Bond, 2005; Chouliaraki, 2012). What is more, often only some (especially charming, talented, and/or middle-class) displaced people acquire a voice, and usually this only pertains to 'regulated' statements that humanitarian organisations use to strengthen their own messages (Pupavac, 2008; Kivikuru, 2015; Cabot, 2016). This can result in depoliticised, homogenised, decollectivised voices of displaced people (Godin and Doná, 2016). Equally problematic is that '[a]sylum rights are thereby implicitly made conditional on qualifying as nice, talented, sensitive individuals' (Pupavac, 2008, p. 285). Hence, refugee organisations risk indirectly contributing to the undermining of these rights.

In sum, the regime of pity's discourse perpetuates—via the aforementioned 'negative' and 'positive' strategies—the public discourse's representation of displaced people as ambivalent figures. As a consequence, refugee organisations fail to justify solidarity calls to Western audiences based on common humanity (Pupavac, 2008; Chouliaraki, 2012).

. . . to a regime of irony

Chouliaraki (2012, p. 17) describes 'the emerging shift in the representation of refugees away from "common humanity" and towards the self as the new morality of humanitarianism'. In the regime of irony narrative, refugee organisations use a post-humanitarian discourse that no longer relies on common humanity, but on the contingent 'Western self' as moral justification for solidarity with displaced people. They attempt to remove displaced people's perceived ambivalence by displaying them in innovative ways and simultaneously responding to the self-reflection and -cultivation of Western audiences (Chouliaraki, 2012). Artistic storytelling campaigns, for instance, create distance from Western (prosperous) lifestyles, and hence trigger emotional alienation and urge Western citizens to reflect on global issues such as displacement crises (Chouliaraki, 2010, 2012; Vestergaard, 2010).

Equally characteristic is celebrity advocacy. In contrast to earlier, more formal communication, it principally involves personalised testimonies. Encounters with displaced people are thus represented as only a contribution to self-cultivation (Chouliaraki, 2012). Consequently, the audience identifies more with the celebrities than with the suffering others, who have no voice and therefore become morally distanced.

The regime of irony can be considered as a creative but less ethical response to the failing regime of pity and the related general Western aversion to institutional solidarity calls (Cohen, 2001; Chouliaraki, 2012). Regardless of negative public opinion, Western audiences are often portrayed as experiencing compassion fatigue: excessive exposure to human suffering that results in declining public concern (Tester, 2001;

Höijer, 2004). Moreover, refugee organisations operate in an increasingly competitive humanitarian landscape, characterised by increasing commodification and a struggle for media attention (Cottle and Nolan, 2007; Orgad, 2013). The employment of the aforementioned market-driven, post-humanitarian strategies must be considered in this context. Chouliaraki (2012) further relates the regime of irony to neoliberalism's consumerist morality, as the humanitarian sector increasingly acquires a business rationality, with a mounting focus on efficiency—also within public communication departments (Cottle and Nolan, 2007). Solidarity subsequently becomes a practice of self-expression, whereby private choice and self-cultivation are essential (Chouliaraki, 2012).

Strategies (mainly) directed at states

Refugee organisations also attempt to influence governments using public communication, which is a complex, pragmatic task, given states' political and financial authority over refugee organisations (Suhajda, 2008; Walker and Maxwell, 2009). Larger state interests in refugee-related domains frequently strongly determine refugee policies (*supra*). Hence, several scholars have examined how refugee organisations, by means of public communication, seek to relate refugee protection to the interests of Western countries. This strategy, enabled by the refugee regime complex's great interdependence, is called cross-issue persuasion (Betts, 2009a, 2009b, 2010). Important to its realisation is a structural (conceptual, institutional, and/or material) link between the specific regimes and the presence of refugee organisations with sufficient negotiating capacity. For instance, UNHCR has tried several times, with varying degrees of success, to relate issues concerning migration, security, development, and Western states' commercial interests to refugee protection (Betts, 2009b, 2010).

UNHCR, as well as several NGOs, used a security discourse in the early 1990s. It tried to convince governments to address displacement issues structurally by framing displacement as an urgent safety problem and then to relate refugee protection to national security interests (Hammerstad, 2014a, 2014b). This strategy stimulated a further securitisation of forced migration through which displaced people became more politically relevant. Nevertheless, UNHCR distanced itself from the security discourse after the Rwandan genocide in 1994, and even sought to desecuritise refugee protection and associate it again with human rights and humanitarianism after the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001 (and the emerging dominant perception of displaced people as (potential) security risks) (Hammerstad, 2014a, 2014b). More recently, UNHCR has argued that irregular migration to Western states can be limited by supporting refugee protection locally in the Global South (Betts, 2009b, 2010). Such a pragmatic argumentation strategy responds to national state interests and can be viewed as a reflection and reproduction of political realism (Grieco, 1999). With regard to asylum reception, references to displaced people's talent and/or potential can be seen as a technique that belongs both to cross-issue persuasion and to the regime of pity's 'positive' representation strategies.

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Methodology

Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) define a discourse as the way in which one understands the world and talks about it. It is composed of a set of ideas, images, and practices, resonating in language (Machin and Mayr, 2012) and structuring social life (Wodak and Meyer, 2016). Furthermore, discourses are inextricably linked to power and thus can support or undermine the social status quo (Bloor and Bloor, 2013). Mediated communication, such as public communication, is an important discourse genre, because it affects public opinions and attitudes (Price, 2007; Reisigl and Wodak, 2016) and regularly (often unconsciously) reproduces and reflects society's dominant ideologies (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009). After all, professional practices are embedded in the social practices of social structures, institutions, and values (Fairclough, 1992, 1995). From the social constructivist viewpoint that language is not neutral, CDA investigates how realities are discursively constructed and acquire meaning (Hansen and Machin, 2013). Given that CDA examines how actors use language to persuade people to follow their interpretation of events (Hansen and Machin, 2013), and simultaneously scrutinises the wider socio-political context (Paltridge, 2013), this method is very suitable for this study.

The CDA model of Fairclough (1995), used here, focuses on three dimensions: text; discursive practices; and social practice. CDA is, however, rather a critical state of mind with various interpretations instead of an explicit, systematic, reproducible research method (van Dijk, 2013). Thus, with regard to the reliability and validity of the results of this study, the analysis reflects transparently on research decisions and utilises an extensive set of discursive criteria (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002; Mortelmans, 2013). This set is informed by two fundamental scholarly works (Machin and Mayr, 2012; Reisigl and Wodak, 2016) and is in line with the findings of the literature review on representation and argumentation strategies. However, this study is also explorative in nature, given the limited and fragmented research on public communication of refugee organisations, and investigates the data from an open, inductive standpoint. Hence, the CDA combines deductive and inductive elements.

The case study assesses public communication on the Syrian crisis, which started in 2011 and has resulted in the largest number of forcibly displaced people currently worldwide (UNHCR, 2018). It scrutinises the press releases of UNHCR and of two international NGOs, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC). These three refugee organisations are largely involved in the Syrian crisis and communicate extensively about it. The first author, David Ongenaert, analysed, supported by Microsoft Office software, their press releases—an important genre of public communication directed at the general public and governments (Pasquier and Villeneuve, 2012; Winston and Loeffler, 2013)—from 1 January 2014 to 31 December 2015. This topical and socially relevant research period was selected because the crisis greatly expanded at that time (UNHCR, 2018). The sample constitutes a limited and logical entity, enabling relevant statements about contextual dimensions. The press releases were gathered from the organisations' online archives using the keyword 'Syr*'—some DRC press releases from 2014 were

Table 1. Overview of the respondents

Respondents[2]	Organisation	Interview date	Interview setting	Interview duration
Mr Bergkamp	IRC	22 July 2016	Skype	50 minutes
Ms Campbell	IRC	4 August 2016	Skype	25 minutes
Mr Vieira	UNHCR	30 July 2016	Skype	42 minutes
Mr Henry	UNHCR	10 August 2016	Phone	54 minutes
Ms Lehman	DRC	4 August 2016	Skype	38 minutes
Mr Ljungberg	DRC	10 August 2016	Skype	11 minutes[3]
		12 August 2016		20 minutes

Source: authors.

obtained via e-mail. To preserve the focus of the empirical research, only press releases explicitly mentioning Syrian displaced people or the related crisis were analysed. As such, a final sample of 122 relevant press releases (UNHCR: 78; DRC: 27; IRC: 17) was acquired.

Although the CDA (Fairclough, 1995) is three-dimensional, it remains difficult to examine profoundly contextual aspects related to discursive and social practices. Therefore, David Ongenaert conducted six audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with press and regional officers at the three organisations between July and August 2016, to gain more information on the production and social context. The respondents were selected according to organisation, function, and availability (see Table 1). An interview guide was used, adapted in the light of new insights acquired during the interview period. The transcripts were analysed following the method of thematic coding (Jensen, 2012) at three levels: open; axial; and selective (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). First, the most relevant data were selected and labelled with one or more codes. These open codes served to condense the mass of textual data into manageable categories. During axial coding, these codes were reduced and integrated into broader, abstract concepts that captured their essence. Finally, during selective coding, the axial codes were related and consolidated to develop a theoretical framework (Mortelmans, 2013; Bryman, 2015; Morris, 2015).

Textual analysis

To contextualise the CDA, the results section starts with a short quantitative data exploration to generate more knowledge of the relationships between the various actors in terms of space in the press releases. Informed by the literature, the study first investigated to what extent various actors represent displaced people, apropos of the number of sentences and press releases. Next, it examined on which displaced people (according to various variables (*infra*)) the focus was situated, with respect to number of references (nouns and personal names) and press releases.

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Sources of representation

Displaced people barely have a voice in the realm of public communication. The press releases' authors, logically, portray them the most, both in terms of number of covering sentences and press releases (see Tables 2, 3, and 4). UNHCR, IRC, and DRC press officers pay attention to displaced people in 63.6, 74.4, and 67.7 per cent, respectively, of their relevant phrases, spread across 87.2, 88.2, and 96.3 per cent of their relevant press releases. In addition, the authors generally quote and/or paraphrase sources who also represent displaced people, that is, high-ranking employees, affiliated celebrities (except for the DRC), other humanitarian organisations, and, to a lesser extent, state actors. Displaced people, however, hardly get a say. In relation to UNHCR, only 1.4 per cent of the relevant phrases, spread across 1.3 per cent of the press releases, come from displaced people. As for the IRC and the DRC, 'their' voices cover 3.0 and 3.8 per cent, respectively, of the sentences in 5.9 and 7.4 per cent of the press releases. This absence of displaced people's 'own' voices is an initial indication of the use of 'negative' representation strategies within the regime of pity (*supra*).

Table 2. Relevant UNHCR press releases (2014–15): sources of representation (N=78)

Actors	Number of sentences	Percentage of sentences	Number of press releases	Percentage of press releases
Organisation itself	459	63.6	68	87.2
Specific employees	191	26.5	36	47.4
Celebrities	33	4.6	8	10.3
Other humanitarian actors	27	3.7	4	5.7
Displaced people	10	1.4	1	1.3
State actors	2	0.3	2	2.6
Total	**722**	**100.1***	–	–

Note: * The total is greater than 100 per cent owing to rounding.

Source: authors.

Table 3. Relevant IRC press releases (2014–15): sources of representation (N=17)

Actors	Number of sentences	Percentage of sentences	Number of press releases	Percentage of press releases
Organisation itself	99	74.4	15	88.2
Specific employees	27	20.3	5	29.4
Celebrities	1	0.8	1	5.9
Other humanitarian actors	2	1.5	1	5.9
Displaced people	4	3.0	1	5.9
State actors	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	**133**	**100.0**	–	–

Source: authors.

Table 4. Relevant DRC press releases (2014–15): sources of representation (N=27)

Actors	Number of sentences	Percentage of sentences	Number of press releases	Percentage of press releases
Organisation itself	176	67.7	26	96.3
Specific employees	53	20.4	17	63.0
Celebrities	0	0.0	0	0.0
Other humanitarian actors	16	6.2	5	18.5
Displaced people	10	3.8	2	7.4
State actors	5	1.9	2	7.4
Total	**260**	**100.0**	–	–

Source: authors.

Represented displaced people

The study also investigated the number of references (nouns and personal names) to and the number of press releases covering displaced people according to age, social relationship, gender, and social status (see Tables 5, 6, and 7). Again, the analysis reveals indications of 'negative' representation strategies.

Table 5. UNHCR press releases (2014–15): specific representation of displaced people (N=78)

	Actors	Number of references	Percentage of references	Number of press releases	Percentage of press releases
Age	Children and infants	133	64.9	29	37.2
	Adults	72	35.1	20	25.6
	Total	**205**	**100.0**	–	–
Social category	Family (members)	191	97.0	37	47.4
	Individuals	6	3.1	5	6.4
	Total	**197**	**100.1***	–	–
Gender	Female	51	86.4	15	19.2
	Male	8	13.6	6	7.7
	Total	**59**	**100.0**	–	–
Social status	Explicitly vulnerable	55	91.7	17	21.8
	Success stories	0	0.0	0	0.0
	Highly educated	3	5.0	3	3.8
	Middle class	2	3.3	2	2.7
	Total	**60**	**100.0**	–	–

Note: * The total is greater than 100 per cent owing to rounding.

Source: authors.

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Table 6. IRC press releases (2014–15): specific representation of displaced people (N=17)

	Actors	Number of references	Percentage of references	Number of press releases	Percentage of press releases
Age	Children and infants	6	31.6	3	17.6
	Adults	13	68.4	4	23.5
	Total	**19**	**100.0**	–	–
Social category	Family (members)	21	100.0	9	52.9
	Individuals	0	0.0	0	0.0
	Total	**21**	**100.0**	–	–
Gender	Female	4	30.8	3	17.6
	Male	9	69.2	3	17.6
	Total	**13**	**100.0**	–	–
Social status	Explicitly vulnerable	2	50.0	2	11.8
	Success stories	2	50.0	1	5.9
	Highly educated	0	0.0	0	0.0
	Middle class	0	0.0	0	0.0
	Total	**4**	**100.0%**	–	–

Source: authors.

Table 7. DRC press releases (2014–15): specific representation of displaced people (N=27)

	Actors	Number of references	Percentage of references	Number of press releases	Percentage of press releases
Age	Children and infants	29	60.4	11	40.7
	Adults	19	39.6	10	37.0
	Total	**48**	**100.0**	–	–
Social category	Family (members)	56	98.2	12	44.4
	Individuals	1	1.8	1	3.7
	Total	**57**	**100.0**	–	–
Gender	Female	9	69.2	4	14.8
	Male	4	30.8	3	11.1
	Total	**13**	**100.0**	–	–
Social status	Explicitly vulnerable	27	100.0	9	33.3
	Success stories	0	0.0	0	0.0
	Highly educated	0	0.0	0	0.0
	Middle class	0	0.0	0	0.0
	Total	**60**	**100.0**	–	–

Source: authors.

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The observed organisations generally spotlight (rather) vulnerable groups. UNHCR and the DRC represent mostly children and babies instead of adults: 64.9 and 60.4 per cent, respectively, of their age-related references in 37.2 and 40.7 per cent of the press releases. The IRC, however, deviates with 68.4 per cent of references to adults in 23.5 per cent of its press releases. All three organisations focus on families and their members. Individuals without family are barely mentioned; if they are, consistent with previous results, it concerns especially unaccompanied children and/or orphans. This is connected to the stronger focus of UNHCR (91.7 per cent) and the DRC (100.0 per cent) on explicitly vulnerable displaced people rather than on social groups with usually more agency, also pointing to 'negative' representation strategies. The IRC, though, differs with an equal number of references to both categories.

Equally fitting with the regime of pity: UNHCR (86.4 per cent of references) and the DRC (69.2 per cent of references) concentrate more on women than on men (mostly as vulnerable people (*infra*)). The IRC deviates again with 30.8 per cent of references to women.

Discursive strategies

The CDA was guided by several argumentation strategies (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016, pp. 24–61) and discursive devices pertaining to representation of actors and actions (Machin and Mayr, 2012, pp. 77–136). As noted, though, the data were scrutinised from an open, inductive standpoint and the study was not limited to these preconceived categories at the outset.

Individualisation versus collectivisation

Regarding the representation of displaced people, the study investigated first whether or not they are presented as individuals or as abstract group members. Providing specific information on actors humanises them, which can generate empathy. Conversely, in collectivisations, the represented actors are part of a generic grouping, which creates distance (Machin and Mayr, 2012).

The observed organisations, particularly UNHCR, almost always collectivise displaced people, both when representing them in general and in more concrete terms. In a press release issued on 16 September 2015, UNHCR said that it:

> *was especially shocked and saddened to witness Syrian refugees, including families with children who have already suffered so much, being prevented from entering the EU [European Union] with water cannons and tear gas* (UNHCR, 16 September 2015).

Consistent with the fact that the DRC and the IRC accord displaced people with relatively more of a voice than UNHCR does, these NGOs individualise them more. Voiced displaced people are always nominated. The IRC personalises them the most: 'a carpenter from Homs, Syria who fled with his family and now lives in Georgia' (IRC, 2 September 2015).

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Nomination versus functionalisation

Second, the study explored if the press releases nominated displaced people, as this discursive strategy can personalise and humanise actors. Functionalisation, however, can provide legitimacy, but also possibly dehumanise actors by reducing them to their role (Machin and Mayr, 2012). The boundaries between these categories often are very vague and occasionally they coincide. Therefore, the study considered references emphasising the role of a refugee, asylum seeker, or a displaced or explicitly vulnerable person as functionalisations. Terms concentrating on 'humanity' are regarded as nominations.

The investigated press releases use somewhat more functionalisations than nominations or combinations of both. All examined organisations refer to displaced people using terms such as 'refugees' (DRC, 22 January 2015; IRC, 12 June 2014) or 'Syrian refugees' (UNHCR, 17 January 2014; IRC, 2 December 2015), frequently accompanied by adjectives such as '(the most) vulnerable' or 'desperate' (DRC, 23 January 2015; UNHCR, 10 November 2015). Sometimes actors are even merely presented as vulnerable: '[t]his plan [. . .] can help us [. . .] support those who are desperate and traumatized' (UNHCR, 18 December 2014).

The organisations use fewer nominations and combinations. Most of these nominations remain of a general and generic nature, associated with the high number of collectivisations. Examples are 'Syrians' (UNHCR, 4 May 2014, 20 June 2014) and 'children' (IRC, 14 July 2014; DRC, 9 November 2015). Rarely are displaced people accompanied by personal information: 'Syrians like Faez and his wife, Shaza, both of whom have been given safe haven in Texas' (IRC, 30 November 2015). Combinations, such as 'refugee families' (IRC, 30 October 2015), are also employed frequently.

Aggregation

Third, the study evaluated whether the organisations use aggregations, quantifying and treating actors as statistics (Machin and Mayr, 2012). Evidence was found to support this, in conjunction with the high number of collectivisations, functionalisations, and generic nominations. Displaced people are often portrayed in numerical terms:

> *1.6 million refugees have had their food assistance reduced this year [. . .] while 45 per cent of refugees in Lebanon live in sub-standard shelters* (UNHCR, 25 June 2015).

Although the organisations usually use numbers, sometimes they opt for abstract representations. In this way one can seek to create a scientific impression, without giving specific figures (van Dijk, 1991): 'Most of the women are struggling to pay the rent' (UNHCR, 8 July 2014). In addition, abstract terms are sometimes used that do not represent displaced people as actors but as part of a phenomenon with a very dehumanising effect. Examples are 'refugee outflows' (UNHCR, 18 November 2015), 'arrivals', and 'influx' (UNHCR, 20 September 2014; DRC, 16 June 2015).

Represented roles

Fourth, the study appraised whether displaced people are represented as doers, beneficiaries, thinkers, and/or speakers (Machin and Mayr, 2012, pp. 106–110). Doers are active and engage in actions aimed at passive beneficiaries. Thinkers are associated with mental processes and provide insights into how they experience something, which can spawn empathy. Speakers are related to verbal processes, attract media coverage, and generally are powerful actors.

The findings reveal that all three organisations represent displaced people mainly as passive beneficiaries who depend on international aid, with a spotlight on their increasing needs and deteriorating living conditions: 'large numbers of Syrian refugees are sliding into abject poverty, and at an alarming rate, due to the magnitude of the crisis and insufficient support from the international community' (UNHCR, 14 January 2015). They are also often represented as the object of resettlement (negotiations) (UNHCR, 12 March 2015, 10 November 2015).

Although displaced people are also depicted as doers, UNHCR, the DRC, and the IRC mostly highlight the actions that they perform out of sheer necessity and/or despair. These include fleeing the violence in Syria (DRC, 25 June 2015; IRC, 17 November 2015), child labour, and begging and exploitation in regional host countries (UNHCR, 14 January 2015, 12 March 2015). The focus is primarily on dangerous journeys to Europe:

> *Their living conditions are deteriorating dramatically, forcing refugees to adopt extreme measures to cope, including increasingly to return to the warzone they fled or to risk their lives crossing to Europe* (DRC, 9 November2015).

Most actions consequently acquire a negative connotation that implicitly reinforces the perception of displaced people as desperate and needy. This is also supported by similar explicit references (UNHCR, 18 December 2014, 26 February 2015) and calls to assist displaced people (and their host countries) (DRC, 9 July 2015, 10 September 2015). Furthermore, the observed organisations often concentrate on the major impacts that displaced people have on the economies of host countries and their societies. Frequently, they are then ascribed a potential agency, which can only be realised after the provision of some form of support, such as resettlement (IRC, 2 September 2015) or humanitarian and/or development aid, and, as such, they are not a constant 'burden':

> *We need to help the host countries give refugees the opportunity to live dignified lives and make a positive contribution to the communities hosting them* (DRC, 9 November 2015).

The organisations portray displaced people less as thinkers. Their mood is usually indirectly articulated by other actors, who describe them mostly as desperate and/or traumatised (UNHCR, 18 December 2014; DRC, 10 September 2015): 'Children are telling our staff in the field, daily, that they've had enough' (UNHCR, 15 March 2014).

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At times, an immediate insight into the internal self of displaced people is provided: 'their' voices regularly imply vulnerability and mostly fit with 'our' moral framework, including a recurring concern for their children (UNHCR, 8 July 2014; DRC, 9 November 2015). Seldom are they represented as truly 'positive' thinkers (DRC, 16 August 2015).

Lastly, the organisations sometimes characterise displaced people as speakers, both 'positive' and 'negative', or paraphrase them as a speaker: 'One woman told UNHCR she moved no fewer than 20 times before finally crossing into Lebanon' (UNHCR, 29 August 2014). Nevertheless, their opinions always correspond with the main messages of press releases. Displaced people testify about difficult living conditions (UNHCR, 24 February 2014, 8 July 2014), call explicitly for international assistance (DRC, 6 March 2014), or represent themselves as model citizens, implicitly to ensure a larger resettlement:

> *Faez said: 'I've been here for a short time, but even in this short time you notice that America is a better place than many other countries [. . .] I know I can do something here'* (IRC, 30 November 2015).

Argumentation strategies

This subsection focuses on how the three organisations attempt to convince the general public and states to engage in solidarity and refugee protection. First, the study analysed 'normative rightness claims' (related to what should [not] be done, and ethical and moral standards) regarding common humanity and the 'Western self'. Second, it investigated 'truth claims' (connected to degrees of knowledge and certainty and theoretical insights) concerning cross-issue persuasion (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016, p. 35).

Normative rightness claims

The observed organisations, especially UNHCR, explicitly seek to foster solidarity, primarily by emphasising common humanity. What is important here is the argumentation technique's two-sided objective. First, the organisations attempt, often subtly, to generate solidarity, by focusing on needy displaced people living in poor conditions (UNHCR, 14 January 2015). Second, they call for solidarity and (general or specific) refugee protection commitments: '2015 should be the year when we finally provide protection and relief for those caught in the cross-fire' (UNHCR, 18 December 2014).

Displaced people are mostly represented 'negatively' within these claims. High-ranking employees respond to common humanity by making implicit us-and-them contrasts. 'They' and 'we' refer respectively to needy displaced people and the (perceived solidary) international community. The purpose is to blur conflicting state interests within the international community and to unite states in alliances centred on international refugee protection (UNHCR, 14 March 2015). For instance:

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This moment is an opportunity to unite us all. To come together in a common approach that is based on truly shared humanitarian values (UNHCR, 31 March 2015).

However, UNHCR, the DRC, and the IRC also look to create affinity with displaced people. First, they are represented as victims of a shared (terrorist) enemy: 'But we need to remember that the primary threat is not from refugees, but to them' (UNHCR, 26 February 2015, 12 March 2015, 8 May 2015). In addition, solidarity is sometimes spawned by referring to similar displacement crises in the past (UNHCR, 8 May 2015).

Some solidarity claims are based on the 'Western self'. Celebrity and UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie has a leading role, although she seeks principally to develop solidarity based on common humanity. One can distinguish three strategies in this regime of irony discourse. First, Jolie stipulates repeatedly what the crises and meetings with displaced people mean to her, so as to involve the public (UNHCR, 25 January 2015, 20 June 2015): 'Meeting these children was a heart-rending experience' (UNHCR, 24 February 2014). Second, she tries to embed the crisis in the personal sphere of citizens (UNHCR, 20 June 2015) and state leaders by speaking explicitly to them, to arouse empathy: 'I ask you to imagine your children going through the horrors in Syria' (UNHCR, 14 March 2014). Third, some press releases focus on self-cultivation, related to participation in campaigns (DRC, 6 March 2014). The following reference to compassion fatigue and consumerist morality also indicates the regime of irony:

[W]e cannot let the world become fatigued by the situation. The Everyday Heroes of Syria is a Facebook campaign that seeks to inspire and remind all of us that [. . .] we all can be part of the solution for Syrian refugees [. . .] Please join us at Everyday Heroes of Syria and share your Everyday Hero story' (DRC, 9 June 2015).

Truth claims

Organisations, particularly UNHCR, link refugee protection to states' broader economic, human rights, political, and security interests and refute negative public perceptions, in order to persuade them to engage. Cross-issue persuasion serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, the organisations connect displaced people and/or the crisis to various state interests:

The Syrian crisis has also had major social and economic impacts on host countries, which remain at the forefront of the crisis and are going through political, economic, social and security instabilities [. . .] [T]he Syrian crisis is also having an impact on development and global security (UNHCR, 25 June 2015).

This example illustrates how these organisations connect the Syrian crisis directly and indirectly to state interests worldwide (UNHCR, 17 January 2014, 15 March 2014, 7 August 2015). The aforementioned regional problems are also connected, indirectly,

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to the international community's interests owing to globalisation and interdependence. This could have global political and/or trade implications.

On the other hand, UNHCR refers in the fragment to the negative effects on development and global security, which are of direct interest to states worldwide. By repeatedly making such a connection, the organisations create opportunities to link refugee protection, in different forms, implicitly and/or explicitly to state interests (DRC, 10 September 2015; IRC, 2 December 2015). In the words of UNHCR:

> *'Imagine the crushing social and economic consequences of this crisis on Lebanon and other countries in the region', [UN Secretary-General António] Guterres said. 'They need much stronger international support than they have received so far, both financially and in terms of commitments to receive and protect Syrian refugees in other parts of the world'* (UNHCR, 14 March 2014).

Furthermore, several press releases implicitly and/or explicitly react to aspects that constitute the basis of negative public opinion and, partly overlapping, perceived conflicts with state interests. For instance, various press releases explicitly counteract common perceptions of displaced people as economic migrants (UNHCR, 20 June 2015), threats to local economies and lifestyles (UNHCR, 26 February 2015), or security risks (UNHCR, 18 November 2015). This is frequently accompanied by a focus on benefits for local communities (UNHCR, 12 March 2015):

> *[T]he small numbers of Syrians who have been admitted have shown an ability to contribute to the US economy and society* (IRC, 2 September 2015).

Discursive practices

As noted, representations, such as press releases, are the product of the social context. Hence the paper now examines, based on semi-structured interviews with press and regional officers, some explanatory professional and institutional practices.

The rationale behind representation strategies

The textual analysis revealed that the three organisations represent displaced people as predominantly homogeneous, suffering, and dependent groups. All respondents agreed that press releases often portray displaced people in a 'negative' manner, and they offered several reasons for this. First, they referred to the specific features of press releases and the importance of news media. Ms Campbell asserted that press releases, unlike other forms of public communication, serve 'as a reactive to the story of the day, to a specific event or report'. The main purpose is to attract media coverage, which is important for building public support. As news media are mainly interested in facts and figures, refugee organisations use quantitative data in press releases. She added: '[r]arely, in those press release type communications do we have the space to individualise people.'

Almost all respondents stressed, however, that in other public communications, such as 'case stories', they attempt to depict displaced people more 'positively' by spotlighting their agency, dignity, and ordinariness. Only displaying 'negative' or shocking pictures does not reflect the reality and is morally inappropriate, most of them argued.

Strategic reasons also play a role here. Several respondents pointed out that 'positive' representations are essential to building long-term social commitment, and that 'positive' images are important in reducing the impact of the prevailing negative news coverage on displaced people. Mr Henry stated that: 'numbers on their own can often come across as negative [. . . and] alarmist and don't themselves contain a narrative'.

Nevertheless, opinions differ on which representation strategy is most effective in gaining financial public support. Mr Bergkamp, Ms Lehman, and Mr Ljungberg pointed to 'negative' representation strategies because urgent needs usually are required for donations and because news media are more interested in 'negative' than 'positive' stories. Mr Henry, however, said that 'positive' representations generally are more effective, as this elicits greater involvement, although he admitted that '[t]here have been some negative images which all had an extraordinary positive effect on mobilising public support'. These positive effects usually are short-lived, though, he noted.

Selecting displaced people and opinions

The textual analysis revealed that the examined organisations focus more on vulnerable 'categories'. This appears to be due primarily to strategic and practical factors. Several respondents claimed that stories about women and children are more successful, because typically they appear (more) sympathetic and vulnerable. Mr Bergkamp stated that, for the abovementioned reasons, the general field of NGOs focuses on these categories. Furthermore, Mr Vieira contended that many displaced people are women and children, so it is more likely that they are represented.

Most respondents confirmed that, in line with the regime of pity, displaced people's opinions usually correspond with the main messages of the three organisations. Testimonies should especially strengthen their own public communications. Ms Lehman said: 'I am not an objective journalist. So, I can't see why I would accept views which counter the views of the organisation'. Furthermore, the organisations refuse political statements so as not to endanger displaced people and humanitarian personnel and to jeopardise access by the organisations to certain areas. Mr Ljungberg added that such statements also conflict with the principles of neutrality and impartiality.

Compassion fatigue, celebrities, and marketisation

The literature revealed that compassion fatigue plays a relevant part in the reception of humanitarian public communications. Respondents confirmed this, but disagreed about the current extent of compassion fatigue with respect to the Syrian crisis. Mr Bergkamp, Ms Campbell, and Ms Lehman believed the main reason to be an overdose

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of negative news, particularly on humanitarian crises, and the duration and perceived insolubility of the conflict. Mr Vieira, Mr Henry, and Mr Ljungberg, however, experienced no (substantial) compassion fatigue, whereas Mr Vieira referred to many positive comments on social media, donations, and requests to volunteer.

There is, though, a consensus regarding the importance of celebrities in public communication. They are seen as essential in dealing with compassion fatigue and in building broad public support, both in terms of social and financial commitment. Celebrities are 'media magnets', said Mr Vieira, through whom one can, in combination with social media, reach a wider audience that traditionally is not interested in displacement crises. Several respondents also confirmed the shift in celebrity advocacy from a humanitarian to a post-humanitarian discourse. Mr Henry and Mr Ljungberg asserted that the general public is mostly interested in celebrities' personal experiences and emotions. Ms Campbell, however, thought that the use and success of such a discourse depends mainly on the individual.

Related to this are different opinions about the possible (further) marketisation of the humanitarian sector. Mr Vieira did not believe in marketisation and highlighted that most donations in the humanitarian sector come from solidary citizens. Mr Henry and Mr Ljungberg, though, have experienced marketisation. Humanitarian organisations are primarily funded by voluntary contributions from a few large donors, resulting in fundraising determined by marketing principles to mobilise public support, according to Mr Ljungberg. This marketisation is reflected in the fact that refugee organisations now have specialised communication departments concentrating on public engagement and fundraising, emphasised Mr Henry. Mr Bergkamp and Ms Lehman doubted whether there is further marketisation, as the humanitarian sector has long used marketing tools. Mr Bergkamp noted that '[i]t's more the marketing that continues to develop as the world around it changes'.

States and cross-issue persuasion

Although all respondents agreed that refugee policies vary from country to country, some perceived a certain amount of donor fatigue among states. Ms Lehman said: '[t]here is a huge gap between the means and the funds and the willingness to deal with this'. Other respondents doubted whether this phenomenon is new, pointing out that (humanitarian) aid for the Syrian crisis has increased. Mr Bergkamp underlined that '[w]hat is not popular, is helping refugees in your own country. So the same budget is connected to that reality'. The main reason for this opposition to asylum-seekers is usually negative national public opinion.

Almost all respondents confirmed that their organisation uses cross-issue persuasion. Refugee organisations link refugee protection principally to economics, human rights, humanitarianism, migration, and security. All respondents stressed the importance of international refugee law and claimed that their respective organisations remind states of their obligations. To persuade authorities, however, the organisations must also respond to other state interests. As Mr Ljungberg put it: '[i]f you

only [. . .] say states have obligations to protect refugees, it would be a very naive message'. Ms Campbell contended that, for electoral reasons, refugee policies are largely determined by weightier state interests, whereas Mr Bergkamp underscored that one can hardly find evidence of asylum-seekers genuinely fleeing to evade persecution and not for other reasons.

Social practice

Professional practices are embedded in structures and values, and public communication regularly reproduces society's dominant ideologies (*supra*). Consequently, this section explores whether and how UNHCR, the DRC, and the IRC constitute and reflect dominant worldviews.

First, the CDA showed that the three organisations represent displaced people as homogenous and passive masses. If they are somewhat nominated, the focus is on rather vulnerable 'categories'. Furthermore, displaced people rarely have their own voice, which must even correspond with the organisations' key message. Such depersonalising practices are further reproduced through solidarity claims based on common humanity that create discursive us–them polarisations between displaced people and the international community, which are related to a discursive regime of pity (Chouliaraki, 2012).

Second, the textual analysis revealed the relevance of the Western self within solidarity claims, which manifested itself in three respects: (i) celebrities' self-directed testimonials; (ii) celebrities' direct messages to citizens and state leaders; and (iii) campaign references. Solidarity is thus considered to be a form of self-expression and -cultivation; displaced people are only secondary figures. Likewise, the analysis of discursive practices pointed to the emergence of a self-centred discourse and to the marketisation and celebritisation of the humanitarian sector.

Third, the organisations also employ the cross-issue persuasion strategy. The study demonstrates that they link strategically refugee protection to weightier state interests. They connect initially the displacement crisis to certain direct and/or indirect state interests to connect subsequently refugee protection to state interests with a greater chance of success. Furthermore, the organisations respond explicitly to negative stereotypes that influence public opinions and state perceptions, by highlighting the (potential) benefits of displaced people and refugee protection.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper focuses on the public communication strategies of refugee organisations. In general, the findings show that the observed organisations substantially dehumanise displaced people and subordinate them to the 'Western self' and national state interests. This power inequality can be explained by the use of various discursive strategies, as well as the production process and the social context.

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The findings demonstrate that displaced people are often portrayed as a homogenous and suffering collective, confirming the dominance of the regime of pity's traditional 'negative' representational strategies (Johnson, 2011; Chouliaraki, 2012; Bettini, 2013). However, unlike existing fragmented research, this analysis also found evidence of the use of other discursive strategies, and explored the production process and the social context. The aforementioned depersonalising humanitarian discourse can be considered to be the product of the specific features of the press releases; the importance of the news media and commercial reasons are other contributing factors.

In addition, the study found signs of a simultaneously existing post-humanitarian discourse. The interviews revealed that the humanitarian sector has evolved from a non-economic to a market-oriented sphere within which private choice and self-expression are central. One can relate this post-humanitarian discourse to the regime of irony and see it as an expression of neoliberalism (Chouliaraki, 2012). While post-humanitarian discourses respond to personal fulfilment, the oft-deployed cross-issue persuasion strategy responds to state interests, and reflects political realism (Grieco, 1999). Both strategies are self-directed and reduce displaced people principally to secondary figures.

One can definitely argue that public communication essentially serves (the needs of) displaced people and that informing news media in a numerical (and thus homogenising) way is necessary. Although well-intentioned, the use of the aforementioned strategies does not only have ethical implications, but also could have broader consequences. Media representations can influence perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours, both at the micro (beliefs about and interactions with displaced people) and macro (refugee legislation and policies) level. Consequently, these strategies could be rendered ineffective in the long term, as they reinforce displaced people's perceived ambivalence in public discourse (Chouliaraki, 2012). Further research is needed on the interaction between refugee organisations' public communications on crises and aiding national economic, political, and socio-cultural contexts, and particularly on the potential impact on the evolution of public and political perceptions and imperatives.

An important nuance is that the examined organisations also produce other forms of public communication (as well as press releases). According to some of the respondents, a 'facts-and-figures' approach is replaced by a more personal (humanising) approach. Hence, this study's results cannot be simply generalised. Nevertheless, it seems important that, to the extent possible, every public communication genre humanises displaced people, especially because not everyone consumes various formats.

To offer some concrete suggestions for more moral and practical communication strategies, which can be used for press releases, but not exclusively, we draw not only on the findings of this study, but also on the reflexive solidarity paradigm of Chouliaraki (2012). This refers, contra irony, to a politicised public, reflective form of solidarity rather than one based on private preference. Contra pity, it can rely on various social values rather than on a limited number of delineated 'universal' truths. Chouliaraki (2012, p. 29) further argues that one should consider a displaced person

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to be 'an "other" with her/his own humanity', who obtains a voice and 'is represented neither through stereotypes of destitution [or] (. . .) individual sovereignty', but 'in a more complex and, perhaps, a more discomforting [way]'.

With this in mind, various concrete suggestions are presented below for refugee organisations. First, the use of an adjusted humane language, whether or not combined with further information (such as displaced 'people', 'person[s]', '[wo]men', 'children', et cetera, 'on the run/move', 'fleeing', or 'who have fled'), appears important to overcome in part the dehumanising effect of generic terms. Instead of the commonly used term 'refugee(s)', referring to a legal status, this paper employs, where appropriate, the more correct and humane term 'displaced people'. In connection therewith, offering (diverse) displaced people who are willing to pronounce in a significant (uncensored) voice upon various relevant topics, creating stories with a human angle, providing broader background information on the crisis in question, and assisting news media in creating and finding such stories, information, and people, could increase mutual understanding and knowledge in the long run. Similarly, new media and storytelling genres, hypertextuality, and other digital opportunities could enhance (online and face-to-face) interaction. On a more general level, training, informing, and debating constructively with various social actors (such as civil society, citizens, companies, educational institutions, governments, and news media) on the importance of using correct and humane representations of displaced people could support these goals.

It is neither realistic nor socially desirable to think that 'facts-and-figures' approaches, which have important informational functions, can replace more 'humane' approaches. However, both narratives could potentially reinforce one another when combined: facts and figures could be humanised, whereas human interest stories could acquire more relevance. Future comparative, longitudinal, and multi-method research on the text, and especially the almost unexplored production and reception dimensions, is needed, therefore (Ongenaert, 2019). This should be targeted not only at various public communication media, but also at an assortment of media platforms, organisations, and crises.

Annexe 1. Press releases by UNHCR, the DRC, and the IRC cited in this paper

UNHCR

UNHCR (2014) 'Turkey hosts ministerial coordination meeting of major host countries for Syrian refugees'. Press release. 17 January. https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2014/1/52d9555d9/turkey-hosts-ministerial-coordination-meeting-major-host-countries-syrian.html?query=Turkey%20hosts%20Ministerial%20Coordination%20Meeting%20of%20Major%20Host%20Countries%20for%20Syrian%20Refugees (last accessed on 10 April 2019).

UNHCR (2014) 'UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie visits Lebanon, urges aid for Syria's children, expresses gratitude to Lebanon, and welcomes new UN resolution on Syria'. Press release. 24 February. https://www.unhcr.org/530b5c686.html (last accessed on 12 April 2019).

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UNHCR (2014) 'Three years Syria conflict: UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie's appeal to world leaders'. Press release. 14 March. https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/press/2014/3/532370a26/three-years-syria-conflict-unhcr-special-envoy-angelina-jolies-appeal-world.html (last accessed on 24 April 2019).

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Endnotes

[1] The essential non-refoulement principle (Article 33 of the 1951 Convention) states that displaced people may not be returned to an area where their life or freedom would be threatened (Zimmermann, Dörschner, and Machts, 2011).

[2] Pseudonyms were used to preserve the respondents' anonymity.

[3] The first interview ended after 11 minutes owing to technical problems with Skype. A second interview was held two days later.

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