

‘EUPRERA PhD seminar 2018’: Abstract research project
‘Displaced people for sale?’

Practical information

Authors: David Ongenaert & Stijn Joye

David Ongenaert, Ghent University, FWO PhD fellow, Korte Meer 7-11, 9000 Ghent, Belgium, +32 9 264 68 90, David.Ongenaert@UGent.be

Stijn Joye, Dr., Ghent University, assistant professor, Korte Meer 7-11, 9000 Ghent, Belgium, +32 9 264 68 92, Stijn.Joye@UGent.be

Title: Displaced people for sale? A multi-methodological research project on international refugee organizations' public communication strategies towards the Syrian and Central African displacement crises (2011-2018).

Abstract

While forced displacement has increased sharply recently (UNHCR, 2017), many countries have implemented restrictive refugee policies (Betts, Loescher & Milner, 2012). Consequently, public communication – as a tool for informing, sensitization and agenda-setting (Atkin & Rice, 2013) – has become crucial for refugee organizations’ operations (Dijkzeul & Moke, 2005). Although international organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), and Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) significantly contribute to the public perception of refugees (Chouliaraki, 2012), few studies have examined how such organizations attempt to influence media agendas and public opinions in terms of “*what to think*” (“second-level agenda setting”) (Sallot & Johnson, 2006, p. 152, original italics).

Therefore, the general objective of this multi-method research project is to investigate if and how the textual, production and reception dimensions involved in these international refugee organizations’ public communication strategies towards the recent Syrian and Central African crises interact with each other. First, we will examine the discursive strategies of representing refugees, by applying a critical discourse analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2012) and quantitative content analysis (Riff, Lacy & Fico, 2014) on the selected organizations’ press releases, news stories, videos and photos of 2011 till 2018. Considering the magnitude of the dataset and the time-consuming nature of discursive research, we will take a sample consisting of the data of the years 2011, 2014, 2016 and 2018.

Second, we will analyse the production practices by conducting 18 expert interviews with the organizations’ communications managers and a three-week participatory observation at NRC’s press department, possibly in combination with a four-week research stay at the University of Oslo’s Department of Media and Communication. In this work package we focus on how the political, economic and socio-cultural forces and motivations behind the public communication strategies help us to explain their communication practices.

Finally, we will examine how various intended publics perceive these strategies and how this is related to political, economic and socio-cultural contexts and motivations. For this purpose, we will conduct 8 focus group interviews, each time consisting of 7 Flemish citizens (N=56), 20 in-depth interviews with recognized Syrian (N=10) and Central African refugees (N=10), and 21 expert interviews with journalists from diverse news media and who regularly report about the Syrian and/or Central African crises. All respondents will, for reasons of feasibility, live in Flanders and be selected with attention to diversity in terms of gender, age (18+) and socio-economic background.

Apart from its topical nature and relevance for a better understanding of the political, economic and socio-cultural dimensions involved in international refugee organizations’ public communication strategies, this project will provide a significant and original empirical contribution to key debates in non-profit studies and the research field of international communication.

Bibliography

Atkin, C.K. & Rice, R.E. (2013). Theory and principles of public communication campaigns. In R.E. Rice & C.K. Atkin (Eds.), *Public communication campaigns (fourth edition)* (pp. 3-20). Los Angeles: Sage.

Betts, A., Loescher, G. & Milner, J. (2012). *UNHCR: the politics and practice of refugee protection into the 21st century (second edition)*. London: Routledge.

Chouliaraki, L. (2012). Between pity and irony – paradigms of refugee representation in humanitarian discourse. In K. Moore, B. Gross & T. Threadgold (Eds.), *Migrations and the media* (pp. 13-32). New York: Peter Lang.

Dijkzeul, D. & Moke, M. (2005). Public communication strategies of international humanitarian organizations. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 87(860), 673-691.

Machin, D. & Mayr, A. (2012). *How to do critical discourse analysis: a multimodal introduction*. London: Sage.

Riff, D., Lacy, S. & Fico, F. (2014). *Analyzing media messages: using quantitative content analysis in research (third edition)*. New York: Routledge.

Sallot, L.M. & Johnson, E.A. (2006). Investigating relationships between journalists and public relations practitioners: working together to set, frame and build the public agenda, 1991–2004. *Public Relations Review*, 32(2), 151-159.

UNHCR (2017). *Global trends: forced displacement in 2016*. Geneva: UNHCR.