

## **Manufacturing Humanitarian Imagery: Explaining Norwegian Refugee Council's Public Communication Strategies Toward the Syrian and Central African Crises**

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As refugee organizations' communication can influence public perceptions, this study analyzes the underlying motivations and practices. To explain Norwegian Refugee Council's (NRC) public communication strategies toward the recent Syrian and Central African crises, we conducted a 3-week office ethnography at its main communication department, interviewed 10 communication officers, and analyzed key communication policy documents. First, NRC's discursive strategies are molded by medium-based and/or context-sensitive routines, organizational goals and trends, and challenging institutional and societal contexts. Second, NRC's crisis foci are institutionally shaped through the "Vicious Neglected Crisis Circle effect," which is reinforced and/or limited by organizational and individual (counter) incentives, sensitive contexts, and context-sensitive routines. Third, NRC's choice of represented forcibly displaced people is influenced by various selection criteria and sociodemographic-specific reasons. Thus, complex organizational, institutional, and societal contexts largely shape public communication strategies, suggesting that reflexivity and structural institutional changes are essential to achieve more balanced, representative humanitarian imageries.

*Keywords: expert interviews, forcibly displaced people, hierarchy of influences model, humanitarian communication, neoinstitutionalism, office ethnography, public communication, refugee organizations*

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In recent decades, the number of forcibly displaced people has increased substantially worldwide (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], n.d.). Nonetheless, they often encounter restrictive refugee policies, adverse public opinions, and xenophobia. Although international refugee organizations often play critical roles in these situations by providing humanitarian assistance (Betts, Loescher, & Milner, 2012), they increasingly also inform, sensitize, and influence media, public and political agendas (Green, 2018).

However, only some studies have investigated refugee organizations' agenda-building strategies that influence "about what" and "how" we should think. Similarly, most studies have analyzed "how" refugee organizations represent and talk about forcibly displaced people and mainly found victim and empowerment narratives (Chouliaraki, 2012; Ongenaert, Joye, & Machin, 2023). Little research (Clark-Kazak, 2009; H. L. Johnson, 2011; Ongenaert & Joye, forthcoming) exists about "what" (e.g., crises, themes) and "whom" (e.g., voiced actors, sociodemographic groups of forcibly displaced people, such as gender, age, nationality) refugee organizations mainly communicate. Nevertheless, humanitarian communication can influence broader imageries, perceptions, attitudes, and policies about crises and the affected people (Chouliaraki, 2012; Ongenaert & Joye, 2019), signaling the importance of representation and representativeness.

Most importantly, the research on refugee organizations' public communication strategies is mainly text-focused and barely examines the underlying reasons. It lacks comprehensive, comparative, explanatory perspectives that consider if and how production contexts (in which the communication is created) and societal contexts (in which the refugee organization operates) influence communication strategies (Ihlen, Figenschou, & Larsen, 2015; Nikunen, 2019; Ongenaert & Joye, 2019). Nevertheless, triangulating text-focused, normative, and production-focused, practice-based approaches is essential to better understand and make evidence-based recommendations for humanitarian communication (Orgad, 2018), especially as critical junctures, such as the ongoing Syrian and Ukrainian crises, may prompt refugee organizations to reassess their communication policies and practices (Green, 2018).

Therefore, we investigate how international refugee organizations' public communication strategies can be explained by their production and societal contexts through an in-depth, comparative multimethod case study. This study aims to explain the key discursive strategies of the leading international nongovernmental organization (INGO) Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) in various media genres toward the Syrian and Central African crises (2014–2018) in which it operated and communicated about (NRC, n.d.).<sup>2</sup> These crises are protracted, large scale and complementary (e.g., scale, implications, level of media attention; Bunce, Franks, & Paterson, 2017), allowing us to analyze if, how, and why said contextual factors influence NRC's public communication. Therefore, we have conducted a three-week office ethnography at NRC's main media and communication department, 10 expert interviews with NRC media and communication officers, and a document analysis of nine key communication policy documents. We chose this novel, little-used ethnographic approach because it can expose tensions, challenges, and discussions that interviews alone cannot capture (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). By drawing on and contributing to Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) Hierarchy of Influences (HOI) model, and neoinstitutionalist theories of path

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<sup>2</sup> The Syrian and Central African conflicts, while diverse in context, are multisided civil wars and, at the end of 2018, comprised 13 million and 1.6 million forcibly displaced people respectively (UNHCR, n.d.).

dependency (W. R. Scott, 2014), we analyze the underlying reasons for NRC's main (1) representation and argumentation strategies ("how"), (2) crisis foci ("what"), and (3) represented sociodemographic groups of forcibly displaced people or sociodemographic foci ("who").<sup>3</sup> We first discuss refugee organizations' discursive strategies and production contexts and then their institutional stakeholders and broader societal contexts to identify further explanations and ground our analytical framework.

### **Discursive Strategies and Production Contexts**

We define "refugee organizations" as

a type of humanitarian organization whose main aim is to provide and/or support, directly and/or indirectly, some type of protection and/or assistance to forcibly displaced people, including refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced people, stateless people and/or other people in similar situations. (Ongenaert, 2022, p. 11)

We opt for this broad definition to not neglect organizational diversity (e.g., scale, background, structure, mission, values, thematical and geographic focus, financial, political, and public relationships; Maxwell & Gelsdorf, 2019), which potentially influences public communications strategies.

### **Representation Strategies**

Many refugee organizations generally use "negative" representation strategies, particularly in press releases (Ongenaert et al., 2023). They tend to portray "Global Southern" forcibly displaced people as passive, anonymous, victimized, voiceless masses, juxtaposed to "economic migrants," and foster savior-saved and hierarchical deservingness narratives (Ongenaert & Joye, 2019). This humanitarian imagery is part of broader crisis and emergency discourses, seems to interact with political and media trends and narratives (infra), and can be explained by pragmatic reasons, including gaining media attention, opposing threat narratives, and/or facilitating pity, guilt, and eventually fundraising (H. L. Johnson, 2011; M. Scott, 2014).

Having said that, refugee organizations also use "deliberate positivist" representation strategies (M. Scott, 2014). They portray "Global Southern" forcibly displaced people as (sometimes unrealistically) hopeful, empowered individuals embodying so-called Global Northern values (e.g., entrepreneurialism, morals; Turner, 2020), especially in human interest-oriented media genres (e.g., news stories, photos, and videos; Ihlen et al., 2015). This mainly applies to Syrian refugees rather than African refugees who are often considered dependent victims (Turner, 2020). These discursive choices can be explained by intertwined ethical and pragmatic reasons. There is a growing ethical awareness about the implications of "negative" pity-oriented representations among humanitarian organizations (Chouliaraki, 2012). Further, these representations are aimed to generate empathy and gratitude and eventually sympathy and acceptance among Western audiences and donors (Turner, 2020) and to counter burden and threat narratives. More generally, they reflect private sector narratives (infra), and refugee organizations' self-

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<sup>3</sup> Although being critical of crisis vocabulary (cf. Fransen & de Haas, 2019), we refer with "crisis" to specific humanitarian crises, recognizing the involved suffering.

reliance focus in the increasingly neoliberalized international refugee regime (Krause & Schmidt, 2020). Forcibly displaced people's voices are often used to strengthen organizational discourses (Pupavac, 2008).

As previously mentioned, few studies have analyzed "who" and "what" are mainly portrayed, and "why." About "who," what is known is that women and children are often spotlighted and/or acquire "voices" as "ideal victims" (Höijer, 2004) mainly for pragmatic reasons (e.g., engagement, fundraising; H. L. Johnson, 2011; Ongenaert & Joye, 2019). Hence, refugee organizations risk supporting hierarchical deservingness discourses and eroding asylum rights (Pupavac, 2008). About "what," acknowledging important organizational differences, refugee organizations generally highlight high-profile crises (e.g., the Syrian crisis) rather than low-profile crises (e.g., the Central African crisis; Ongenaert & Joye, forthcoming), which can be potentially explained by pragmatic news-making efforts (cf. news logics, *infra*).

### **Argumentation Strategies**

Refugee organizations frequently attempt to convince states to voluntarily participate in protection by using "cross-issue persuasion" (Betts, 2009) or, more comprehensively, "cross-interest persuasion" (Ongenaert et al., 2023, p. 183). They link states' contributions to protection to (perceived) larger state interests in various areas (e.g., human rights, humanitarianism, economics, migration, security; Betts, 2009), principles, and values (Ongenaert et al., 2023). For instance, UNHCR states that providing "Southern" protection can assist in containing "North"-oriented irregular migration (Betts, 2009; Ongenaert et al., 2023).

This pragmatic, political realist argumentation strategy is enabled by and responds to broader "migration management" policy trends. These suggest that migration should be controlled in organized and consistent manners (Geiger & Pécoud, 2010). This paradigm serves state interests and mirrors policy shifts from protection (e.g., local integration, resettlement) to humanitarian-security nexus approaches (e.g., voluntary repatriation, [limited] local assistance; Betts et al., 2012). As most forcibly displaced people come from and reside in the "Global South" (UNHCR, n.d.), "southern" states have the largest legal duties but usually the least protection capacity (e.g., asylum). Resourceful "northern" states, however, are barely obliged to contribute to "southern" protection (i.e., responsibility sharing), incentivizing regional containment (Betts, 2009). Hence, many states increasingly close, securitize, and/or externalize their borders, and focus on policies in and/or with third countries, requiring various refugee organizations to use pragmatic argumentation strategies. However, there is a need for more thorough, contextualized understandings of the underlying reasons of refugee organizations' argumentation strategies.

### **Institutional Stakeholders and Societal Contexts**

Pursuing media, political, financial, and/or public support, refugee organizations interact with news media, political actors, and private sector actors, and/or engage in agenda building (Green, 2018). These actors disseminate particular "institutional messages," which are "collations of thoughts that take on lives independent of senders and recipients" and "carry institutional logics—patterns of beliefs and rules" (Lammers, 2011, p. 154).

First, in recent decades, the competition for media attention within the expanding humanitarian sector has intensified substantially. Furthermore, following journalistic, political, and advocacy transformations, INGOs have generally obtained larger agenda-building possibilities (Powers, 2018). Considering digitalization, globalization, economic constraints, and rising workloads (Schudson, 2011), journalists are generally open to information subsidies, particularly from INGOs. Given growing distrust in politics, NGOs are progressively viewed as reliable news sources (Powers, 2018). Furthermore, resulting from increasing institutionalization, competition, professionalization, mediatization, and marketization (refugee) NGOs increasingly produce professional publicity (Ihlen et al., 2015; Powers, 2018) that responds to and aligns with mainstream “news logics,” thus following the news rhythm, formats, values, and working conditions (Thorbjørnsrud, Ustad Figenschou, & Ihlen, 2014). Humanitarian journalism generally relies on particular news values (e.g., magnitude; cultural, psychological, and geographical proximity; economic, military, and geopolitical importance), and adequate working conditions (e.g., accessibility; security; press freedom; Joye, 2010). Its subjects and frames consequently often mirror “northern” interests and perspectives, spotlighting “high-profile” conflicts such as the Syrian crisis (Guidero & Carter Hallward, 2019), while neglecting others, such as the Central African crisis (Bunce et al., 2017). Further, news media tend to ambivalently present forcibly displaced people, including Syrians (Montagut & Moragas-Fernández, 2020) and Central Africans (Ceriana Mayneri, 2014), as threats, burdens, and/or, reflecting humanitarian narratives, victims escaping (oversimplified) violent political and/or religious conflicts. Representations of Syrians are often gender stereotypical (Blumell & Cooper, 2019) and ironic-focused (Bozdag & Smets, 2017).

Mirroring said news narratives and practices, forcibly displaced people, including Syrians, are mainly represented as “threats” and/or “victims” in political discourses (Van Leuven, Deprez, Joye, & Ongenaert, 2018). Hence, influencing governments through public communication proves to be difficult for NGOs, especially given increasing populism (Nikunen, 2019), states’ rising unwillingness to collaborate (Betts et al., 2012), and financial and political influence on these organizations (Maxwell & Gelsdorf, 2019). Various refugee organizations depend heavily on states’ voluntary, short-term, inflexible funding (Betts, 2009), sometimes preventing extensive policy criticism (Chimni, 2000). More generally, the growing number of forcibly displaced people and the increasing criminalization of humanitarian action and solidarity forces refugee organizations to adopt a position within a wide humanitarian spectrum, ranging from political compliance (including for funding reasons and/or to be able to assist) to political opposition and resistance (including speaking out and denouncing of injustices). These diverse humanitarian positionalities imply different humanitarian and solidarity practices and discourses (Green, 2018; Stierl, 2018).

Finally, given dwindling public and individual funding, rising demands, and growing competition, refugee organizations increasingly engage in private sector collaborations, primarily for mutual financial, substantive, and branding reasons (Benton & Glennie, 2016). These alliances represent the expanding neoliberalization and technologization in the international refugee regime (Geiger & Pécoud, 2010). These trends within the humanitarian sector are primarily embodied by large global humanitarian-corporate complexes, which consist of NGOs; the Red Cross and Red Crescent; private donors (e.g., individuals, trusts and foundations, corporations); and international governing bodies (e.g., UN agencies) that coordinate, fund, and/or provide humanitarian assistance (C. G. Johnson, 2011). Private sector actors usually heroize forcibly displaced people, including Syrians, showcasing their abilities, drive, bravery, and rational behavior,

often in gender-stereotypical manners, mainly for humanitarian branding reasons (Bergman Rosamond & Gregoratti, 2020).

Thus, although there is already knowledge, to varying degrees, about the organizational, institutional, and societal contexts and trends of refugee organizations, there is a lack of understanding of whether and how these contexts influence refugee organizations' public communication strategies, hence the focus of our study. We now discuss our theoretical framework, which is grounded in these levels of analysis.

### **The Hierarchy of Influences Model and Theories of Path Dependency**

Consistent with our research focus, Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) HOI model considers media content to be influenced by the interactions between:

1. individual characteristics of media professionals (e.g., personal and professional backgrounds, roles, attitudes, ethics);
2. working routines (i.e., repeated working practices, forms, and rules, both with production-, audience-, and supplier-oriented foci);
3. organizational characteristics (e.g., organizational policies, activities, goals, target audiences, resources);
4. institutional issues (i.e., institutional trends, including mediatization, professionalization, specialization, and interactions with other institutions such as media, political, and economic institutions); and
5. social systems (e.g., political, cultural, economic, ideological subsystems).

Although technological developments have shifted and/or diffused these levels' boundaries in new media ecosystems, the model remains a valuable, guiding systematic framework to comprehensively analyze various (micro, meso, and macro) levels that explain media content in various (including nonjournalistic) contexts and to identify new elements (Reese & Shoemaker, 2016). Hence, we aim to theoretically contribute to the model. First, by examining our research subject at all levels of the model, we address its hiatuses of hardly being (fully) applied outside journalism research. Second, acknowledging the importance of institutional interactions for explaining refugee organizations' public communication strategies (supra), we complement the model with neoinstitutionalist theories, which originate from organization theory and consider communication important in understanding organizations, institutions, and society (Fredriksson, Pallas, & Wehmeier, 2013). Our analytical approach is thus both interdisciplinary and complementary: The HOI model provides a broad, comprehensive explanatory framework, while the theories of path dependency provide more depth to the assumed important institutional level.

Specifically, neoinstitutionalist theory examines how organizations interact with their social environments, and how these environments, materialized in institutions, shape, confine, and alter

organizations. Institutional logics guide organizations' actions, issues, and structures. Previous decisions and broader histories shape current actions and processes (W. R. Scott, 2014). Accordingly, theories of path dependency imply that institutional developments are path-dependent, constraining radical change. These theories typically analyze institutions' internal self-reproducing capacity.

Nevertheless, external pressures, including triggering, status-quo undermining events ("critical junctures"), can create dramatic changes (Pierson, 2000). Theories of path dependency, however, barely examine if and how external pressures reinforce path dependencies. Powers (2018) finds that "traditional" path dependencies in institutional fields are strengthened by "reinforcing" path dependencies in interacting proximate institutional fields. Specifically, INGOs persist in pursuing media-centered publicity strategies because they consider journalism as a socially proximate ally to obtain publicity. This path dependency is reinforced by political and donor fields that stimulate media coverage for informative and evaluation purposes (Powers, 2018).

Given the limited literature on this issue, the question raises whether, how, and why refugee organizations' public communication strategies are also incentivized by "reinforcing" path dependencies in proximate institutional fields, which this study aims to address.

### **Methodology**

This study multimethodologically investigates the production and social contexts of NRC's public communication strategies toward the Syrian and Central African crises. Therefore, the first author conducted a three-week office ethnography at NRC's Oslo-based main media and communication department in March and April 2019. Ethnographic research is suited to examine the importance of individual, routine, organizational, institutional, and societal levels (Hansen & Machin, 2019) by revealing daily practices that might be too self-evident or sensitive to disclose in interviews (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Hence, it can complicate and/or refine critiques of hegemonic humanitarian discourses (Markowitz, 2001). Nevertheless, this method has barely been used in examining refugee organizations' discursive strategies (e.g., Ihlen et al., 2015) and broader humanitarian communication (Ong, 2019).

After having obtained institutional informed consent (e.g., not disclosing confidential information), the researcher observed the media officers' work in the open-plan office and attended all daily, weekly, and monthly media meetings, a social media team meeting, various seminars, daily lunches, and two social events. After initial reluctance, by being friendly, open, and context-sensitive (e.g., high workload), trust relationships were gradually developed, many informal on-the-scene conversations were held, and confidential communication policy documents were obtained. Our participant observation approach thus involved active observation and rather limited and passive participation (i.e., attending events and interacting; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This implied a more mobile field positioning (e.g., observing various people, teams, places), an outward analytic gaze (i.e., rather participant- than self-directed), and an inscription-oriented data assembly (i.e., taking field notes during and/or after observations; Seim, 2021). The researcher pursued to be reflexive (e.g., writing field and reflexive notes) and sensitive to "ethically important moments" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 262) to avoid common ethical issues, including "going native" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) and a "tightening humanitarian embrace" (Brankamp, 2021, p. 51).

Finally, when leaving the research scene, the participants were informed about the further steps of the research process, including that permission would be asked for interview quotes.

Additionally, the first author conducted ten audio-recorded semistructured expert interviews with NRC media and communication officers, involving reconstruction (Reich & Barnoy, 2016) and oral history methods (Ritchie, 2015), to flexibly gain in-depth insights into their perspectives on the subject (Clark, Foster, Sloan, & Bryman, 2021). Reconstruction interviews allow us to systematically and in-depth reconstruct the production practices and contexts of media and communication. Oral history “collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews” (Ritchie, 2015, p. 1), including diverse, barely explored perspectives (Ritchie, 2015). Hence, we asked various media and communication officers about their perceptions and attitudes about the production and societal contexts of refugee organizations’ public communication strategies. Responding to Orgad’s (2018) call for triangulation, our questions were shaped by previous textual research, including on NRC’s public communication, which introduce our findings in the analysis. The interviewees were selected in mutual consultation on function and availability. Upon providing informed consent, the English-spoken interviews took place in March and April 2019, either face to face or remotely, and lasted between 55 and 98 minutes. We used interview guides, adapted to the interviewees’ specific functions and newly acquired insights, and sensitive interview techniques (e.g., first posing open, exploratory questions). Two research assistants typed the transcriptions; the first author checked them. For privacy and security reasons, pseudonyms are used and no identity-deriving or other sensitive information is mentioned. Finally, the first author conducted a document analysis (Asdal & Reinertsen, 2022) on nine confidentially obtained key communication policy documents (e.g., global communication strategy, branding, style), focusing on relevant production and social aspects.

Our multimethod approach is theoretically informed, but—given the limited, fragmented research—also inductive and explorative. The first author cyclically analyzed the field notes, interview transcriptions, and documents through thematic coding (Jensen, 2021) at three levels. First, the data were broken down, analyzed, compared, and assigned to one or more codes (open coding). These codes were integrated into broader, abstract concepts (axial coding). Finally, the codes were consolidated to develop a theoretical framework (selective coding; Clark et al., 2021).

## Results

### ***“How”: Representation Strategies Explained***

The data indicate the combined use of “negative” pity-oriented and “positive” empathy-oriented representation strategies, albeit to different degrees.

#### *“Negative” Representations*

In press releases, NRC usually represents forcibly displaced people through “negative” representation strategies—that is, as homogeneous, passive, victimized masses (Chouliaraki, 2012; Ongenaert et al., 2023). Although mainly high-level NRC (field) staff are quoted and/or paraphrased, including about forcibly displaced

people, the latter are barely voiced, and if so, their statements mainly correspond with the organizational perspectives.

Most interviewees argue that NRC's main goal with press releases is to briefly convey key organizational advocacy messages about urgent, newsworthy considered "hard" themes (e.g., forced displacement, protection, humanitarian needs, refugee rights) to generate media, public and political attention, interest, and support (Green, 2018). Press releases consequently tend to imply "negative" representations that support its narratives and objectives. This humanitarian imagery is shaped through NRC's intertwined medium-based audience-, organization- and supplier-oriented routines, which mainly respond to organizational, humanitarian, and/or news logics.

First, audience-wise, our observation research and interviews revealed that NRC's practice to include only concise, factual, "hard" information without (large) quotes or portrayals of forcibly displaced people is motivated by the staff's (perceived) knowledge of news logics, including (perceived) journalistic working conditions (limited time), format preferences (limited space), and norms and values (deontology, perceived newsworthiness and/or source reliability; Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014). As Mr. Mpenza elucidates:

In press releases, the priority is to find the news angle. . . . And if we have new figures, new data . . . then there is a place for a press release. . . . [A]nd that's partly also why I'm not a big fan of putting individual stories in the press release, because in a press release, I think, you need to speak to a bigger picture. . . . (personal communication, April 15, 2019)

Second, organization-wise, our ethnographic research found that this is further informed by organizational logics, including the officers' working conditions (limited time and/or access to create extensive portrayals), which need to respond to media (urgent, reactive nature of press releases) and institutional logics (strong humanitarian competition for media attention; Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014). Furthermore, NRC's focus on high-level staff can be explained largely by organizational and news logics (importance of organizational perspectives and visibility). Finally, supplier-wise, our interviews identified that NRC's main information sources are quantitative data-oriented organizational (e.g., programs, research) and other humanitarian sources (e.g., UN agencies, other humanitarian [partner] organizations). This further explains why organizational and humanitarian perspectives, including "negative" representations, prevail in NRC's communication efforts. However, sometimes NRC mediates these numerical representations' dehumanizing effects through various routines, both directly (e.g., including at least one quote of a forcibly displaced person, and/or dignified photos) and indirectly (e.g., providing multimedia packages with more humanizing media genres [infra], and/or contact details of forcibly displaced people willing to testify to journalists), mainly responding to organizational and news logics.

#### *Personalizing Representations*

In news stories, photos, and videos, the data show that NRC mainly represents forcibly displaced people more extensively through "negative" and/or "positive" representation strategies—that is, as victimized, suffering, and/or resilient, empowered active doers, thinkers and/or speakers (Chouliaraki,

2012; Ongenaert et al., 2023). Here, both forcibly displaced people and high-level staff are mainly voiced (Ongenaert & Joye, forthcoming).

Various interviewees state that NRC's key objectives with these media genres range from gaining audience awareness, to engagement, brand awareness, accountability, and fundraising to donor visibility (Orgad & Seu, 2014). Therefore, they mainly cover engaging "soft" themes, including human interest, basic facts about humanitarian situations, and NRC's impact, staff, and organizational core tasks (e.g., education, water; Ongenaert & Joye, forthcoming). This usually implies more extensive, personalizing representations. Likewise, we observed that these are shaped through medium-based routines, which mainly respond to organizational, general public, and/or donor logics.

First, audience-wise, various interviewees argue that these media genres and the representations are strongly shaped by various audience parameters involving elements of production (e.g., appealing story angles, narrative structure, representations, emotions, values), distribution (e.g., strategic, sociodemographic, "Global Northern"-targeted social media communication), and audience evaluation (e.g., web and social media metrics, particularly on engagement). With "strong," personalizing stories, NRC tries to create identification and relatability and engage audiences (Chouliaraki, 2012; Orgad & Seu, 2014). Although "positive" representations often enhance awareness, accountability, and donation motivations, "negative" representations are believed to generate more fundraising. As Mr. Mpenza explains:

One form of story that we tend to look for is the story of hope . . . to push contrary to the idea that refugees or displaced people are just a burden. . . . Of course, when there are moments of crisis . . . we tend to focus more on the immediate needs that we need to provide. That is mostly also a story for donors, for governments, to tell them, "look, there is this happening." (personal communication, April 15, 2019)

With some news stories, NRC tries to meet donor visibility requirements for funded projects, essentially to thank donors for their contributions and to highlight the actual achievements, encouraging the use of "positive" representations.

Second, organization-wise, our ethnographic observations and interviews found that these representation strategies are further molded by organizational logics, particularly about working conditions (e.g., more production time than for press releases given their less urgent and time-bound nature but still limited; Thorbjornsrud et al., 2014). As Ms. Tihinen argues: "[D]epending on [the] security situation and driving time and where we are, we have half an hour, an hour maximum with each case story. One hour is pure luxury I would say" (personal communication, April 4, 2019).

We found that NRC mainly uses these media genres to disseminate its organizational perspectives for self-promotional and visibility reasons (Ongenaert & Joye, 2019; Pupavac, 2008). This explains the prominence of organizational sources (mainly NRC country staff) and "suited" organizationally related forcibly displaced people (infra).

Finally, our observation research reveals various explanatory organizational tendencies. Following internationalization and expansion trends, NRC's media and communication work has become professionalized and specialized, including different media, advocacy, and communication sections with distinct logics (Powers, 2018). Further, NRC's focus has shifted over the years from media-oriented to general public-oriented media genres partially explaining NRC's personalizing representation strategies. Similarly, given increasing ethical awareness about representation, NRC's communication policy emphasizes that forcibly displaced people should not only be portrayed as victims but also as voiced, self-determined people (NRC, 2019).

### ***"How": Argumentation Strategies Explained***

The interviews reveal various key argumentation strategies, including pity-, needs- and solutions-oriented strategies and cross-interest persuasion (Ongenaert & Joye, 2019, Ongenaert et al., 2023). NRC's use of these argumentation strategies can be largely explained by its broader pragmatic, context-sensitive, proactive communication approaches, incentivized by organizational, institutional, and societal factors. Most interviewees argue that NRC does not allow any actor to censor or dictate its public communication (NRC, 2019). Nevertheless, NRC's public communication—about what, how, and when it communicates—is mainly indirectly shaped by its (perceived) institutional relationships with, and receptions of its key target groups and/or stakeholders (e.g., political actors in [non]conflict areas, donors, other humanitarian organizations), and broader societal contexts, for pragmatic political, security, financial, and/or humanitarian reasons.

First, NRC pursues a rights-based communication approach (NRC, 2019). However, references to international legal frameworks and their obligations are perceived by various officers as insufficient to convince the international community and/or individual countries (Ongenaert & Joye, 2019). The international political climate has become very hostile toward forcibly displaced people (Betts et al., 2012). This sometimes results in tensions between NRC's advocacy positions and its (targeted) Global Northern political donors' positions and policies. As Mr. Mpenza elucidates:

[J]ust reminding them that they signed up to this convention is not gonna make them reopen their borders. So you need to very smartly try and find ways without . . . making the problem bigger. . . . But again, I think one big challenge is obviously to reach out to those who are . . . directly opposed to our work, directly opposed to our message, how to convince them? I don't think we are, it's extremely difficult . . . (personal communication, April 15, 2019)

Second, we observed that officers tend to communicate generically about humanitarian, less political (sensitive) themes (e.g., needs, funding gaps), particularly about the Syrian crisis. The document analysis and interviews found that information that might endanger staff, forcibly displaced people, access to regions, and/or programs are identified as so-called red lines (cf. defensive working routines; NRC, 2019; Ongenaert & Joye, 2019). As Ms. Kompany explains, referring to NRC's organizational humanitarian nature:

[A]t the end of the day we're aid providers, we're not human rights activists. So our first priority will also be to deliver aid, and if a press release where we mention needs that we know can have us kicked out of the country, then we won't do it. (personal communication, March 27, 2019)

Therefore, NRC will frequently first exhaust pragmatic private communication strategies (e.g., private advocacy, off-the-record briefings with journalists) before covering such sensitive issues in its public communication.

Third, since donors usually provide inflexible funding (i.e., earmarked grants for specific geographical and/or thematic projects), they influence both directly (i.e., through donor visibility requirements) and indirectly (e.g., importance of organizational visibility, access) about "what" (e.g., geographic and/or thematic foci, *infra*), and, to lesser extents, "how" NRC can or will (not) communicate (cf. first- and second-level agenda building). Similarly, NRC will not communicate oppositional or more critically about humanitarian responses than humanitarian partner organizations.

### ***"What": Crisis Foci Explained***

In forthcoming research (Ongenaert & Joye, forthcoming), we found that NRC mainly communicated about the Syrian crisis but, contrasting other organizations, also relatively much about the Central African crisis. Let us now explain these crisis- and/or organization-specific communication differences.

#### *The Vicious Neglected Crisis Circle*

Our observation and interview research reveals that NRC's crisis foci are linked to various institutional "traditional" and "reinforcing" path dependencies that incentivize what we term the "Vicious Neglected Crisis Circle (VNCC) effect."

All participants acknowledge the imbalance in international media, public, political, and/or donor attention between the Syrian and Central African crises. During on-the-scene conversations and interviews, they foremost refer to common news values, such as the international and geopolitical significance of the events (e.g., economics, security, migration), magnitude (geographic, psychological, and cultural), and proximity (Joye, 2010), clarity, topical value, and follow-up (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). Additionally, they feel that media attention and interest are also shaped by audience parameters (e.g., public awareness, engagement, memory, attention span), journalistic working conditions, and the influence of agenda-building actors. Hence, humanitarian organizations, including the NRC, generally obtain far more inflexible funding, including for media and communication, for covering high-profile crises (e.g., the Syrian crisis) than for neglected crises (e.g., the Central African crisis), which remain underfunded (Hawkins, 2011). Humanitarian organizations consequently adapt to and adopt this logic in their operations and communication practices, resulting in more communication about high-profile than low-profile crises. Hence, they contribute to widening attention and funding gaps between both, or the VNCC effect. As Ms. Kompany argues:

[W]ith this international neglect . . . , it almost turns into a vicious cycle, because we might not then have the same teams on the grounds, because we don't have the same money to put into media and advocacy resources. . . . So, we talk about the international neglect, but in reality a lot of that reflects back to organizations ourselves perhaps neglecting these crises because of these factors. (personal communication, March 27, 2019)

However, this can seriously affect the people involved in neglected crises (Hawkins, 2011).

#### *Organizational and Individual (Counter) Incentives, and Context-Sensitive Routines*

Our observations and interviews revealed that various organizational and individual factors strengthen and/or limit said VNCC effect. First, the Syrian crisis forms an organizational priority for the NRC, implying that large organizational resources being deployed to cover the Syrian crisis, including for media and communication and higher internal expectations. Relatedly, the NRC is one of the few agencies operating throughout Syria (NRC, n.d.), and wants to exploit this unique position, both operationally and communication-wise. Finally, NRC's Secretary-General was from 2015 to 2018 simultaneously Special Advisor to the UN Special Envoy for Syria, which facilitated more communication efforts about the Syrian crisis.

Countering the above, one of the NRC's key communication objectives is to increase public, political, and financial attention and support for neglected crises through public communication (NRC, 2019). The interviewees are aware and attentive to not ignore neglected crises themselves. For instance, NRC's supporting head office consciously tries—including by relying on flexible funding—to prioritize the Central African crisis communication-wise by creating public communication and annual neglected crises lists, and by making sporadic media visits to the Central African Republic. Nevertheless, our interviewees admitted that international media and public attention remain generally limited.

Finally, the VNCC effect is also reinforced and/or limited by intertwined societal contexts and routines. Various interviewees state that the societal contexts of the "Syrian host countries" (e.g., Lebanon, Jordan) and of the Central African Republic facilitate (relatively) good working conditions, hence fostering (relatively) much communication about these countries (Ongenaert & Joye, forthcoming). However, delicate political and security contexts complicate NRC's routines (e.g., obtaining access, traveling, information gathering) and communication from and about Syria.

#### ***"Who": Represented Forcibly Displaced People Explained***

Although the NRC (2019) aims to "include a diversity of voices from displaced people" with different sociodemographic characteristics, our study identified mediated sociodemographic imbalances in NRC's public communication, following several criteria and parameters (p. 5).

#### *General Selection Criteria*

First, we examined NRC's general selection criteria to portray forcibly displaced people, especially in its web and/or social media communication. Our ethnographic observations and interview data identified that these people should

1. be organizationally related (mainly project participants), for routine (e.g., access, preexisting relationship) and organizational reasons (e.g., organizational visibility; Ongenaert & Joye, 2019),
2. have a strong, relevant (personal) story and/or profile (e.g., interesting, identifiable, relatable),
3. be willing to share their story, ideally as openly and visually as possible,
4. fulfill ethical requirements (e.g., informed consent, do no harm), and
5. optionally speak English or any other language that facilitates communication, for respectively pragmatic, ethical, and practical routine reasons.

These criteria influence NRC's mediated sociodemographic representativeness in various ways. Ms. Wilhelmsson (personal communication, April 19, 2019) argues that project participants with a strong story and/or profile are often (very) vulnerable people with (very) low sociodemographic positions. However, the ethical requirements mostly exclude (vulnerable) people in insecure contexts (e.g., [female] internally displaced people in Syria). Likewise, the language preferences indicate high(er) sociodemographic profiles. NRC's routines, organizational goals, and societal contexts thus already strongly influence its mediated sociodemographic representativeness. Let us now discuss some of these sociodemographic reasons.

#### *Gender and Age*

As mentioned, previous research (Chouliaraki, 2012, H. L. Johnson, 2011, 2011) focused merely on issues of gender and age, and mainly identified humanitarian foci on women and children, for pragmatic reasons. Forthcoming research (Ongenaert & Joye, forthcoming) found that NRC also mainly covers children but differs in terms of gender, reporting slightly but not significantly more women than men. This study revealed several underlying reasons.

Various interviewees confirm that pragmatic routines lead to more output on women and children. Given their more vulnerable and/or innocent images, they are generally more engaging and fundraising effective. This gender-based focus is reinforced by journalists and donors for engagement reasons and/or donor visibility requirements (cf. "reinforcing" path dependencies). Other interviewees referred to the fact that, societally, there are relatively more female refugees in the Central African crisis and young refugees in both crises than any other gender or age group (UNHCR, n.d.). Moreover, they are often more vulnerable, implying both humanitarian and pragmatic communication motivations. Organizationally, NRC strongly focuses on youth and education programs. Ethically/individually, various NRC officers stated to prioritize and pursue—in culture-sensitive ways—female and/or child voices, responding to the (perceived) prominence of adult men in media and humanitarian coverage of various crises. As Ms. Tihinen argues:

[I]n some more conservative countries, . . . if you don't do your groundwork and prepare, you will have more access to men. Because men will be the one visible in the public space. Then you need to make an effort to access the women, and we will do that a bit, if you plan. (personal communication, April 4, 2019)

Although acknowledging this reality, various interviewees believe that NRC generally focuses (too) much on mothers and children (Clark-Kazak, 2009; H. L. Johnson, 2011; Ongenaert & Joye, 2019), and attempt to balance this by covering age and gender more diversely. Finally, production-wise, covering children is believed to be easier than reporting on adults, both production-technically (i.e., children are mostly happy and smiling), affective-emotionally (i.e., involving less affective-emotional commitments than with traumatized adults), and ethically (i.e., men of fighting age are usually not eager to speak [openly]).

#### *Geographic Location*

NRC mainly communicates about people in refugee camps and displacement sites, while it covers fewer urban, peri-urban, and/or rural areas, and barely migration sea and land routes (Ongenaert & Joye, forthcoming). Our data suggest various reasons intersecting with NRC's foci on crises, project participants, legal statuses, countries, and nationalities. Interviewees mention that NRC primarily communicates about its work locations, mainly refugee camps, for routine (e.g., access, visibility of needs, preferences for simplified narratives), organizational (e.g., organizational visibility), institutional (e.g., funding), and societal (e.g., political and/or security) reasons. However, as most forcibly displaced people live in urban areas (UNHCR, n.d.), there is a risk for selective, simplified humanitarian imagery, which can indirectly have detrimental societal consequences. As Ms. Zitka states: "[S]ometimes I think the people in displacement camps are overrepresented in articles and media, and also in terms of the assistance they receive" (personal communication, April 1, 2019).

#### *Legal Status*

International refugee organizations, including NRC, represent significantly more forcibly displaced people who have crossed an international border than other legal groups (Ongenaert & Joye, forthcoming). Again, somehow going against the flow, NRC portrays the largest legal diversity, including significantly more internally displaced people (i.e., forcibly displaced people who have not crossed an international border) and returned internally displaced people (i.e., who returned to their areas of habitual residence) than the other organizations.

NRC spotlights the countries where it mainly works and its project participants (supra). About the highly covered Syrian crisis, NRC both operates in and communicates much more about important host countries (e.g., Lebanon, Jordan) than in and about Syria (supra), and vice versa for the less covered Central African crisis. Hence, concerning the Syrian crisis, NRC mainly communicates about internationally forcibly displaced people, and about the Central African crisis about internally displaced people and returnees. As mentioned above, NRC operates in and communicates much more about the Central African Republic than other organizations, largely explaining these organizational legal differences. NRC's diverse legal foci are especially relevant given public misperceptions about forcibly displaced people's legal statuses and/or current countries and continents. Most forcibly displaced people are internally displaced and/or remain in their countries and/or broader regions (UNHCR, n.d.).

*Current Country and Continent*

We found earlier that NRC refers significantly more to Jordan, Lebanon, and the Central African Republic, and slightly (but nonsignificantly) more to Syria, as current countries of its represented forcibly displaced people. Correspondingly, it also covers Asia and Africa significantly more often as current continents than other refugee organizations (Ongenaert & Joye, forthcoming). Our ethnographic and interview data demonstrate this can be explained by intertwined organizational and routine reasons. NRC mainly works in these "Global Southern" host and crisis countries, while barely with forcibly displaced people in the "Global North." Further, political and security contexts influencing NRC's routines (e.g., obtaining access, traveling, information gathering) also largely explain the broader output on the "Syrian host countries" than on Syria (supra). Although NRC plays an important role by highlighting neglected crises and countries, we should equally be aware that its geographically concentrated communication focus only partly reflects where forcibly displaced people are located. Although NGOs increasingly function and attempt to profile themselves as "news makers" (Powers, 2018), NRC's geographic foci emphasize the importance of organizational communication perspectives and the differences with news logics and scopes.

*Nationality*

We discovered previously that refugee organizations, including NRC, mainly portray majority nationalities (i.e., forcibly displaced Syrians or Central Africans) and, despite both crisis countries' long migration histories (UNHCR, n.d.), barely (explicitly) represent minority nationalities (Ongenaert & Joye, forthcoming). We can partially explain this by societal, organizational, and routine reasons. First, NRC does not (often) (consciously) work with and consequently (explicitly) communicate about nationality minorities in both crises. Second, this is reinforced through medium-based audience-oriented routines, particularly in press releases (figures and numbers mainly cover majority groups), and social media communication (importance of concise simplified communication). Third, production-wise, minority nationalities may not be mentioned for narrative (e.g., perceived as less relevant or unknown), and political and security (vulnerable positions of minorities in these crises) reasons. Although this nationality focus is thus shaped by several legitimate aspects, it contributes to relatively selective, simplified humanitarian imageries.

*Life Stance and Sexual Orientation*

NRC barely or not (explicitly) mentions life stance and sexual orientation. People with (minority) life stances and/or sexual orientations are barely (explicitly) represented and/or voiced. Our observations and interviews explain this through intertwined organizational reasons (no life stance or sexual orientation organizational foci), and ethical (personal, sensitive topics in both crisis and host countries), narrative (mostly irrelevant), media genre (conflicting with social media logics of simplified communication), humanitarian (potentially conflicting with humanitarian principles, e.g., neutrality, impartiality), and/or pragmatic routine (avoiding the perception that humanitarian assistance favors certain religious groups) reasons. However, we noted reflexivity about this output's indirect implications among some interviewees. While acknowledging these reasons, Ms. Wilhelmsson (personal communication, April 19, 2019) argues that NRC consequently indirectly reinforces heteronormative structures and traditions in non-LGBTI community-recognizing areas.

*Family Situation and Marital Status*

Findings show that NRC mainly and significantly more often represents family members than people without an explicitly mentioned family situation (Ongenaert & Joye, forthcoming). Our observations and interviews found that this can be mainly explained by routine and societal reasons. First, audience-wise, families and unaccompanied (particularly minor) individuals with explicitly mentioned distant families are often more engaging and/or can counter increasing public skepticism (Höijer, 2004). Our interviewees also refer to some routine and societal reasons. Production-wise, it proves to be much more difficult to identify individuals on their own than families, especially as most of the studied people flee with their (nuclear, extended, and/or nonblood) family.

Relatedly, NRC mainly represents forcibly displaced people without an explicitly mentioned marital status rather than nonsingles and particularly singles (Ongenaert & Joye, forthcoming). This can be explained by similar narrative and ethical reasons as uttered in the interviewees' discussions on life stance and sexual orientation. NRC's focus on nonsingles rather than on singles can be explained mainly by similar routine (e.g., engagement) and societal reasons (e.g., many early marriages in the analyzed countries) as for family situations.

*Profession*

Finally, we found that refugee organizations often do not mention the represented actors' professions (Ongenaert & Joye, forthcoming), because of narrative (nonapplicable or irrelevant) and defensive routine reasons (often not legally allowed to work in host countries). However, when NRC does, including for narrative (relevant) and ethical (humanizing) reasons, these mainly concern educational professions and, to lesser extents (low-skilled) agrarian, manufacturing, and construction professions and unemployed people, while barely or not highlighting high-skilled professions.

Our observations and interviews demonstrate underlying routine, organizational, and societal reasons. First, NRC staff mainly highlight people with clear, relatable, visual, and/or socially relevant considered professions (e.g., shop owner, teacher, mechanic), sometimes involving other appealing subjects (e.g., pupils, students) for engagement reasons, rather than high-skilled professions (e.g., clerk). Second, NRC has many programs related to these professions (e.g., education programs, livelihood assistance in rural areas), which makes it more accessible and understandable from its organizational goals to report on these cases. Intertwined therewith, these professions largely reflect the socioeconomic profiles of NRC's project participants (supra).

In sum, although NRC's public communication is thus mainly shaped by various (relatively fixed) routine, organizational, institutional, and societal factors, it usually only partly reflects the sociodemographic reality of both crises, hence contributing to a selective and/or simplified humanitarian imagery with potential broader policy and societal consequences. While acknowledging the underlying reasons, we believe that more representative, balanced imageries could provide opportunities to enhance public awareness and engagement for, and more nuanced knowledge about various (including less visible and/or popular) sociodemographic groups and crises.

### Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the production and social contexts of NRC's public communication strategies toward the Syrian and Central African crises and extended and refined earlier research.

First, the data showed that NRC's representation strategies can be mainly explained by medium-based routines, organizational goals and trends, and institutional "traditional" path dependencies. Similarly, NRC's argumentation strategies are encouraged by its intertwined context-sensitive routines, organizational (humanitarian) nature, delicate institutional relationships, and challenging societal contexts. Hence, this study contributes to existing literature (e.g., Betts, 2009; Chouliaraki, 2012) that (limitedly) explains international refugee organizations' discursive strategies through general pragmatic institutional and societal factors.

Second, NRC's crisis foci are largely molded by various institutional "traditional" and "reinforcing" path dependencies that incentivize the "Vicious Neglected Crisis Circle (VNCC) effect," which is further reinforced and/or limited by organizational and individual (counter) incentives, and sensitive societal contexts and context-sensitive routines. We partially found similar institutional news logics-oriented aspects as identified in journalism research (Hawkins, 2011; Joye, 2010) but also discovered the importance of organizational and individual (counter) incentives, sensitive contexts, and context-sensitive routines.

Finally, we observed that NRC's sociodemographic foci are motivated by routine-, organization-, society-driven selection criteria, and various contextual sociodemographic-specific reasons that go beyond the often-cited pragmatic reasons (H. L. Johnson, 2011; Ongenaert & Joye, 2019). The study thus provides more insights into the underlying factors of "what" and "who" are mainly represented in humanitarian communication.

In general, this study shows that research should attempt to grasp the complexity and diversity of humanitarian communication strategies and underlying factors, rather than limiting itself to generic, decontextualized, and/or one-dimensional findings. Furthermore, by applying Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) full HOI model and neoinstitutionalist theories of path dependency to a largely neglected subject, we demonstrated the added value of such an original interdisciplinary and complementary approach to research on humanitarian communication and the broader fields. International refugee organizations often function in complex, delicate, largely influencing routine, organizational, institutional path-dependent, and societal contexts. As their public communication can potentially influence the imageries, public perceptions, attitudes, and policies about forcibly displaced people and crises (Chouliaraki, 2012; Ongenaert & Joye, 2019), reflexivity about the involved representations and representativeness and social and ethical implications is critical. Imbalanced communication could otherwise potentially complicate and/or undermine their organizational objectives (Ongenaert & Joye, forthcoming). However, to fundamentally change humanitarian imagery, structural institutional changes seem to be essential. The data suggested that more flexible donor funding could (partially) counter institutional path-dependent effects and facilitate more balanced representations.

Given the time-consuming nature of the applied research methods, we opted to focus on one international refugee organization. Acknowledging the organizational diversity within the working field, we

cannot generalize the organization-specific findings. However, as various international refugee organizations have similar routines and objectives, function in similar institutional and/or societal contexts, and are characterized by similar institutional trends of professionalization and specialization, including about media and communication (Powers, 2018), we assume that various results largely hold true.

Nevertheless, further research should adopt comparative interorganizational perspectives and conduct more long-term, multisite ethnographic research. Larger diversity in observed crisis areas and/or host countries would further benefit our understanding of crisis-specific individual, routine, organizational, institutional, and/or societal dimensions.

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