Etmaal 2017: Abstract 'Selling the refugee'

Practical information

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Abstract

The world is currently facing the worst refugee crisis since World War II (UNHCR, 2016). While millions of people are fleeing from war, terror and humanitarian disasters, refugee organizations play a vital role in protecting the rights and well-being of refugees (Gibney, 2010), although states have the basic legal responsibility for protecting and assisting them (UNHCR, 2010a, 2010b). In recent decades, however, several states have become more reluctant to cooperate with refugee organizations (Loescher, 1996; Betts, Loescher, & Milner, 2012) and/or have tightened their asylum policies with a shifting focus from resettlement and local integration to voluntary repatriation and local protection (Betts & Loescher, 2011; Johnson, 2011).

This paper focuses on refugee organizations and their public communication, as a tool for information dissemination, sensitization and agenda setting (Atkin & Rice, 2013). Despite the essential contribution of said communication efforts to the public perception of refugees and refugee crises (Chouliaraki, 2012), few studies have examined how refugee organizations attempt to influence the media agenda and broader public opinion in terms of "*what* to think" ("second-level agenda setting") (Sallot & Johnson, 2006, p. 152, original italics). Therefore, we examine the discursive strategies of refugee organizations in the event of the recent Syrian refugee crisis, with a focus on the production process and the broader social context by applying a multi-method research design. First, we apply Fairclough's (1995) model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), on the international press releases (N=122) of three deeply involved refugee organizations in 2014 and 2015. Given the empirical focus on the Syrian crisis, we opted for the 'Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)' and two international NGOs 'International Rescue Committee (IRC)' and 'Danish Refugee Council (DRC)'. Secondly, we conducted six semi-structured in-depth interviews from press and regional representatives of the above-mentioned organizations, to gain more insight into the production context.

Our findings show that refugee organizations substantially dehumanize refugees and subordinate them to the 'Western self' and national state interests. This can be explained by the use of various discursive strategies and the broader social practice of values and ideologies in which refugee organizations operate. Firstly, the medium specificity of press releases and the importance of attracting media attention result in a dominant representation of refugees as a homogeneous, passive and suffering mass. Such practices of depersonalising are further reproduced through solidarity claims based on a common humanity that create us-them contrasts between refugees and the international community, which are related to a discursive regime of pity (Chouliaraki, 2006).

Secondly, we found articulations of a post-humanitarian, market-oriented discourse that responds to self-expression and personal fulfilment of celebrities and the general public. This manifests itself on three levels: (1) egocentric testimonials from celebrities; (2) direct messages of celebrities to citizens and state leaders; and (3) references to public campaigns. Refugees are thereby only represented as secondary figures. This can be considered as the result of the marketization of the wider humanitarian sector and both constitutes as well as reflects Chouliaraki's (2012) notion of a post-humanitarian regime of irony and the broader neoliberal ideology.

Thirdly, refugee organizations also use the strategy of cross-issue persuasion in which refugee protection is linked to weightier state interests, such as migration, security, economics and humanitarianism, to persuade states to engage in refugee protection. Refugee organizations opt for this pragmatic argumentation strategy because the above-mentioned state interests often strongly determine the refugee policies of states. Additionally, the refugee organizations explicitly respond to negative stereotypes which threaten to influence public opinion and state perceptions on refugees, and highlight the (potential) benefits of refugees and refugee protection. The use of these pragmatic argumentation strategies can be seen as both a reflection and reproduction of political realism.

Although one can argue that public communication serves (the needs of) refugees, we can conclude that the use of the above-mentioned discursive strategies is not only flirting with boundaries of ethical conduct, but possibly involves broader risks. As these representation and argumentation strategies strengthen the

perceived inherently ambivalent character of refugees within public discourse, they could be rendered ineffective on the long term.

(677 words)

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