Selling the refugee. A multi-method study of international refugee organizations’ public communication strategies on the Syrian refugee crisis.

The world is currently facing the worst refugee crisis since World War II (UNHCR, 2016). As a growing number of states have implemented increasingly restrictive asylum policies, public communication has become essential for refugee organizations (Dijkzeul & Moke, 2005). Therefore, we have examined the discursive strategies of three international refugee organizations (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, International Rescue Committee and Danish Refugee Council) on the Syrian crisis, their production practices and the broader social context. A critical discourse analysis of international press releases of 2014 and 2015 (N=122) and six semi-structured interviews with press and regional officers have shown that refugees are dehumanized and subordinated to the ‘Western self’ and state interests. Firstly, the medium specificity of press releases and the importance of attracting media attention result in a depersonalizing humanitarian discourse 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 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 political realist 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.