Fleeing as an activity of waiting: Visual representations of the world’s refugee situation on Médecins Sans Frontière Sweden’s website

THERES BELLANDER

Department of Swedish and Multilingualism, Stockholm University, SE-106 91
Stockholm, Sweden
theres.bellander@su.se

This article explores how the world’s refugee situation is constructed discursively in photographs on the website of Médecins Sans Frontière (MSF) Sweden in order to discern what discourses humanitarian aid communication draws upon to frame the world’s refugee situation as being worthy of support. The main conclusion is that the refugee situation is portrayed as an activity of waiting, where forcibly displaced people are restrained from continuing on with their lives. By highlighting personal experiences, the phenomenon of flight is humanised: Refugees are constructed in need of support, and MSF is constructed as actionable and trustworthy. The website’s visitors are invited to become a part of and to engage in the life of the refugees and the work performed by the organisation. Due to a combination of different styles of appealing the overall image of the refugee situation draws on discourses of morality, solidarity, ethnical and gender equality.

Keywords Visual representations, refugees, Médecins Sans Frontière

Around the year 2015, the notion of refugee crisis appeared for the first time in Swedish, as well as in other western media, as a phenomenon distinct from the notion of humanitarian crises (Grafstöm and Windell 2019). Record numbers of forcibly displaced people were at this time crossing EU borders to find safety as a reaction to several different disproportions worldwide. In 2016, the Swedish government, along with other EU nations, implemented tough restrictions in order to minimize immigration quotas. However, the closing of borders did not manage to decrease the global population of refugees. On the contrary, the numbers have continued to increase rapidly, according to statistics from UNHCR (2018), and the humanitarian consequences of the EU migration policies have forced humanitarian organizations to radically scale up their activities at the entry points of Europe. The world’s refugee situation is today highlighted by International
Non-Government Organizations (INGOs) as an individual humanitarian issue worthy of earnest consideration.

One of the largest donors of foreign aid in the world, in proportion with its gross national income, is Sweden (Lindström 2016). Despite a strong economy and high employment, however, the general public in Sweden, as in many other western countries, are losing trust in INGOs today (Keldsen 2015; The 2020 Edelman trust barometer report). In fact, Nordic INGOs are at present facing a large challenge collecting public donations (Tallac 2020), which risks having a high impact on the global population of refugees.

In a recent report on existential funding challenges for Nordic INGOs (Tallac 2020), the organization Médecins Sans Frontière (MSF) is pointed out as one of few humanitarian organizations that has managed to avoid extreme declines in donations. The organization’s approach to fundraising imagery, along with strongly highlighting such issues as ‘Refugees crossing the Mediterranean’, are suggested as considerable factors in giving it a more straightforward fundraising proposition than, for example, Oxfam or Action Aid (p. 23). Médecins Sans Frontières, which translates to ‘Doctors without borders’, is the organization that the Swedish people have the most trust in (Keldsen 2015). MSF is often among the first parties to reach areas of distress, and the observations they make are therefore of great importance to state departments and news agencies. Moreover, MSF has adopted the world’s refugee situation as one of its greatest focal points. The organization places the patient first, in the sense that its main task is to provide medical help. Yet, the concept of ‘patient first’ also bears the meaning of always seeking the perspective of people in need, to tell their stories and never take sides in conflicts (http://www.msf.org). MSF uses the concept of témoignage, which translates to ‘bearing witness’ and is understood as the act of reporting on observations from sites of disaster. As a reaction towards the closing of EU borders, MSF stopped accepting donations from EU countries in 2017, among them contributions from Swedish taxes. The organization is thereby highly dependent on private donations, and the website is an important tool for raising money (http://www.msf.org).

The refugee situation has had a major impact on the political debate in Sweden as well as in many other EU-countries. This is to a large extent due to right-wing populist parties gaining political influence. In 2010 the Sweden Democrats (SD) was elected to the Riksdag, with restrictions on immigration as its main issue. SD has often taken advantage of the refugee situation in order to pursue their politics (Hagren Idevall 2016). Political measures to minimize immigration quotas and the general public’s reduced reliability towards INGOs raises uncertainties concerning both who is in need for aid and who is in a position to support people in need.

Although humanitarian aid communication in general has been quite extensively explored in earlier research (e.g. Chouliaraki 2010; Dorga 2007; Frøyd 2017), no studies have yet carried out the task of investigating how today’s refugee situation is presented from the INGO perspective. Instead, print media are frequently used in studies of discursive constructions of refugees and their situation. This research often pays attention to the framings of news content, i.e. how
journalists highlight (or ignore) certain information in ways that affect readers’ interpretation of problems, their causes, and how they should be morally evaluated. A common critical viewpoint aims to reveal discrimination (e.g. Van Dijk 1991; Wodak and van Leeuven 1999; Breazu and Machin 2018). Studies of contemporaneous reporting on the world’s refugee situation in print media often focus on the negative representation of migrants based on discursive patterns of, for instance, islamophobia (e.g. Boeva 2016; Conrad and Aalstensdóttir 2017; Ghazal Aswad 2019), sometimes with attention drawn to the influence of right-wing populist parties (Kryzanowski 2018).

The various perspectives on the refugee crises reproduced by media, right wing populism actors and INGO’s constitute diverse discourses (cf. Foucault 1980). Discourses as social practice and knowledge can affect politics and power relations, and thus the situation for refugees.

This article explores how the refugee situation is constructed discursively (Foucault 1980) in photographs on the website of Médecins Sans Frontières Sweden (http://lakareutangranser.se) in order to discern what discourses humanitarian aid communication draws upon to frame the world’s refugee situation as being worthy of support. The study contributes to the field of refugee studies by its expanded purpose to discuss what the discourses reproduced by MSF may mean to people’s general perception of the refugee situation and their attitudes towards refugees. The photograph has today become increasingly relevant as part of visual design not merely to its affordance of claiming neutrality and document actual moments in time but also to its ability to create a more complex imagery symbolizing broader ideas and attitudes (Machin and Polzer 2015; Breazu and Machin 2018). In this study, a social semiotic analysis (van Leeuwen 2005) is carried out on a total of 77 photographs. These were published in news reports on the website between January 2012 and December 2019, within a time span relating to the so-called ‘refugee crises’ of 2015. The analysis examines the overall notion of the world’s refugee situation constructed through the photographs. Specifically, it focuses on how the refugees and their needs, the MSF and its efforts, and potential donors are constructed. Results from earlier research on discursive constructions of the refugee situation in print media as well as theories on how humanitarian aid communication has developed over time are used in order to contextualize and situate the results ideologically.

The visual analysis only presents one of many potential understandings of the refugee situation—that of a specific humanitarian organization—the MSF—constructed through a single resource—photographs—and communicated to a certain group of recipients—Swedish (speaking) visitors of the website. However, the INGO perspective is valuable, together with the print media perspective, the social media perspective, etc., to an overall understanding of how representations of forcibly displaced people appear in images. Further, the results of the study may provide valuable insight useful to any INGO struggling to transform their strategies after facing challenges in terms of relevance, legitimacy and trust. Some of the results may also be useful outside of the INGO context, to anyone interested in visually communicating the need for people to act on issues.
Multimodal Critical Discourse Studies and Social Semiotics

In this study Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) (Machin 2013, 2016) is used aligned with the core aims of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fowler 1990; Hodge and Kress 1979; Fairclough 1989, 1995) to seek to reveal power relations buried in semiotic material. Power relations are viewed as context-dependent and reproduced through various social practices, in particular discursive practice performed in everyday life, by institutions and citizens. The semiotic data used in the study are photographic images from the MSF website. These are seen as social practices or instances where understandings of the world’s refugee situation are constructed.

Within MCDA the two important concepts of discourse and social practices are seen as entirely interrelated. The definition of ‘discourse’ is drawn from the concept of Foucault (1980) where discourses are known as the ways in which meanings are legitimized, normalized and, finally, accepted as reality and observed as social rules. How the world is represented in semiotic communication, is according to MCDA, related to social practices, for example, the sense that communication concerning refugees and their situation used in a certain context, i.e. a society, is related to how people in that society act and to the kinds of institutional processes and rules that have been established in that society. MCDA can be thought of as a social semiotics that is aligned with the project of revealing discourses, the kinds of social practices that are involved in them and the ideologies that they serve. Visual communication is part of these social practices and how people live their lives (Ledin and Machin 2018: 29). In this study an interrelated relationship is seen between the presuppositions of understandings of the world’s refugee situation that is made available to the visitors of the MSF website and their perceptions of the situation, their role in the situation and their opportunities to influence the situation. In other words, visitors of the website can be expected to act on the refugee situation based on how they perceive the situation and most important; their perception is dependent on which understandings are made available to them.

In this study tools from Social Semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 2020; Ledin and Machin 2018) are used for breaking down visual communication into elements, in order to systematically reveal and describe different levels of meaning, including hidden power relations between donors and receivers.

Semiotic material such as photographs are seen as carriers of discourses and as such they are part of social practices and how people live their lives (Ledin and Machin 2018: 29). Since photographs carry the affordance of claiming to neutrally, represent reality and bear witness on events, it is easy for a viewer to interpret photographs as mediating ‘the truth’. However, the frame of a photograph can never be wide enough to capture complex reality. The photographer constantly makes choices regarding, for instance, settings, participants, angles and proximity. These choices mediate ideas and values, and communicate world views. It is also important to bear in mind that text designers can make meaning making choices
by means of proximity and other photo editing techniques when placing the photographs in contexts of for example news reports.

**Visual Constructions of the Suffering Other**

Chouliaraki (2010) describes humanitarian aid communication as being under a constant threat of delegitimization and claims that no manner of representing distant others as a cause of public action seems to do justice to the moral claim of suffering. Drawing on earlier research on fundraising images, she presents a nonlinear trajectory of humanitarian aid communication, from the use of ‘shock effect’ and ‘positive style’ appeals towards a ‘post-humanitarian style of appealing’. The first two appeals are both described as relying on photorealism and a belief in the power of grand emotions. But while ‘shock effect’ communication focuses on the receiver as a victim of the benefactor’s contemplation, ‘positive style’ communication instead emphasizes the receiver’s agency and dignity.

Virtually all fundraising appeals by INGOs until the 1980s showed ‘shock effect’ imagery characterized by helpless, passive, suffering victims devoid of biological and social individualizing features, such as age, sex and clothing (Dogra 2011). Chouliaraki (2010) notes that the contrast between the life of the depicted and the viewer establishes a social relationship of maximal distance with traces to colonialism. The distance captures an ambivalence that: “makes the West the benefactor of a world that it itself manages symbolically to annihilate” (p. 111). Further, she identifies two pragmatic risks reflected by the ‘shock effect’ style: a “bystander” effect that may leave viewers feeling powerless, and a “boomerang” effect that may leave them feeling indignant toward the guilt-tripping message of the campaign itself, rather than toward the situation it seeks to ameliorate.

‘Positive style’ appeals developed as a response to ‘shock effect’ campaigns during the Ethiopian Famine in the mid-1980s. Characteristics are individual receivers depicted as actors, for example, as participants in development projects. Close shots of smiling faces are common as well as eye contact between depicted and viewer. Chouliaraki (2010) describes the social relationship between the sufferers and the viewers as being grounded in emotions of empathy. However, ‘positive imagery’ campaigns have been accused of glossing over the misery of suffering and considered as narcissistic by focusing on the benefactor’s generosity. Further, the images tend to conceal crucial aspects of the complexity of global divisions. There is a risk that it will lead to inaction on the grounds that ‘everything is already taken care of’ or on the grounds that depicted receivers ‘are not really people in need’.

The third style of humanitarian aid communication suggested by Chouliaraki (2010), the ‘post-humanitarian style’, is described as a response to the critique against the ‘shock effect’ and ‘positive style’ imagery, as well as to the intensely mediatized global market in which humanitarian agencies operate today. As opposed to ‘shock effect’ and ‘positive style’, it does not draw on universal discourses of morality. Instead it is inspired by practices of corporate branding and communicates “the organizational brand itself” (Chouliaraki 2010: 117). This
style focuses on the viewer rather than on the recipient and asks viewers to reflect on their own attitudes, lives and behaviour. The ‘post-humanitarian style’ is characterized by textual games, the use of irony and optical illusions. Chouliaraki (2010) argues that the ‘post-humanitarian style’ makes possible a new public sensibility that disengages public action from the activation of grand emotion towards suffering and instead invites viewers to rely on their own judgement as to whether public action is possible or desirable (p. 115).

Frøyd (2017) studies how the organization Operation Day’s Work (ODW) appeals to Norwegians students by analysing examples of booklet covers from 1984–2016. From 1984 until the millennium, ‘positive style’ images were used, while ‘post-humanitarian style’ imagery was common from the millennium until 2016. But rather than referring back to the brand, which Chouliaraki (2010) describes as typical for ‘post-humanitarian style’ appeals, Frøyd (2017) claims that the ‘post-humanitarian’ aesthetic expression refers back to the organization’s ethos within the communicative situation. She points to the ethos as not just related to the suffering other, but also to the addressee—the students who are supposed to participate in ODW. By using ‘post-humanitarian style’ imagery, Frøyd (2017) suggests that the organization is saying: “Look, we are a cool organization. We share your sense of humor” (p. 567). Further she claims that the ‘post-humanitarian style’ responds to an overall individualization and therefore has to acknowledge that people evaluate problems and their potential solutions differently. Hence, a discourse of goodness may lead to a large part of the student body feeling resentful and alienated (p. 571).

Dogra (2011) studies the construction of ‘woman’ in public messages of INGOs in national newspapers of the UK during the period 2005–2006. Although she doesn’t use Chouliaraki’s (2010) concepts of humanitarian aid communication, the images she studies can be categorized as resembling the ‘positive style’ of appealing. Her results show that women in the developing world are often portrayed as engaged in hard work, which makes them worthy of help. The dominant female characters evoke implicit binaries of ‘good’ women versus ‘bad’ men, and refugee camps are feminized as settings where only women and children reside. Men are only rarely depicted in the camp sites. Further, Dogra (2011) identifies humanitarian workers and donors as female. They are portrayed as ‘good’ and ‘moral’, as they are often depicted as being engaged in traditional female caring tasks and as living according to religious (Christian) values.

Strüver’s (2007) investigation of marketing images from the MSF organization indicates that images of African landscapes conform to the stereotype of Africans as hopeless, inactive and dependent on humanitarian organizations. She argues that definitions of global disparities between regions are an outcome of such representations. Lindström (2016) investigates how aid is constructed as a moral activity in Swedish INGO fundraising for the Somalia famine, 2011–2012. She identifies a central discourse in which INGOs present themselves as givers of charity and finds provided aid being depicted as a commendable, non-obligatory act for which INGOs take moral credit. This view reaffirms the existence of moral hierarchies of power between givers and recipients of aid, and signals a discourse
moving aid from a conception of charity conception to that of entitlement. Lindström’s (2016) results are in line with what Chouliaraki (2010) calls “the de-emotionalization of the cause” (p. 117) that is typical for the ‘post humanitarian style’ appeal in humanitarian aid communication.

The results of research on photographs representing the refugee situation in printed news stories (e.g. Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017; Druèke et al. 2021; Georgiou and Zaborowski 2016; Wilmott 2017) reveal that press photographs often seem to present refugees as occupying one of two positions: on the one hand, as silenced victims of geo-political conflicts in need of protection, and, on the other hand, as evil-doing terrorists who threaten national order and need to be avoided or defeated (Moore et al. 2012). Victimhood is constructed through massification and passivation, depicting refugees as multitudes of indistinguishable individuals and, often, as bodies-in-need. The notion of evil-doing draws upon two attributions of features of refugee agency: sovereignty and malevolence. While sovereignty clearly signals refugees as being active and hopeful individuals, the attribution of malevolence defines their sovereignty narrowly as their will to harm. Further, the attribution of sovereignty conceals the truth of refugee lives by depicting them to be in control of their destinies (Chouliaraki and Stoic 2017). Massification and passivation, as well as attribution of sovereignty and malevolence, contribute to a de-humanization of refugees (Malkki 2015). The use of long-distance shots with lack of eye contact reinforces distance between viewers and depicted, and consequently sharpens the dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Wilmott 2017).

Data

The data used for this study includes a total of 77 images published on MSF Sweden’s website (http://lakareutangranser.se) between January 2012 and December 2019, i.e. within a time span relating to the so-called ‘refugee crises’ of 2015. In order to explore how the refugee situation is constructed discursively in the photographs on the website of MSF Sweden, the analysis aims to reveal the semiotic choices being made and also how the choices shape the way the actual events are represented to the viewer, for example, what kinds of ideas, values and processes are being foregrounded or backgrounded.

The data was collected by using the search engine on the website. A single term guided the search, the Swedish word fly, which represents fly in English and is also used in the words flykt meaning flight and flykting meaning refugee, as well as an element in compound words such as flyktningläger (refugee camp) and flyktingkris (refugee crises). In total, 332 texts were located, whereby 78 included the term fly in the text headline. Of these, 69 included photographs, for a total of 77 images, and these were chosen for this study. While nine news stories did not include any images, five had multiple images. The images are all photographs taken by internationally active photographers. Their names and associations are, for the most part, given in captions beneath the photographs. About one-third of the photographers were women and two-thirds men. While about a third were explicitly
associated with the MSF, the remaining two-thirds were either associated with a news bureau or no association was provided.

Figure 1 presents one of the analysed images placed in its context on the website. The headline of the news story, published on April 19, 2018, is translated into English as ‘The daily struggle of refugees in Uganda’. All news stories in the data include a large image placed directly below the headline, followed by a brief pre-amble, as in Figure 1. The image immediately catches the eyes of the viewer as it fills most of the screen area. The communication can thus be considered as mainly visual and the photographs as having great importance to the news telling. The image in Figure 1 includes a caption that says, ‘Areti and her children, who have fled to Uganda from the neighbouring country Kongo-Kinshasa’. The caption also includes the name and affiliation of the photographer: ‘Mohammad Gahnam/Medicans Sans Frontiers’.

Figure 1.
One of the images in the data placed in a news story on the website.
Method

Concepts used for coding and analysis are based on the social semiotic approach (van Leeuven 2005; Kress and van Leeuven 2020) as presented by Ledin and Machin (2018). The method was chosen for its ability to through qualitative and systematic examination of photographs reveal hidden patterns of power relations presumably difficult to notice in e.g. quantitative content analysis of large corpuses of images. Here the concepts of denotation and connotation (Barthes 1977) represent two phases of the analysis. The denotation phase consists of a description of what is being depicted, while the connotation phase applies to what the depicted scenes connote, i.e. what ideas, values and wider discourses are communicated. In order to carry out a content analysis, the software Atlas.ti (see Paulus and Lester 2015) was used. Here, what was seen in the photographs was systematically described, and each photograph was coded in terms of the predefined categories settings, participants, actions, angles and proximity. Excel was used to create coding sheets and to calculate quantitative results. The same categories were analysed as carriers of connotation. Results from earlier research on discursive constructions of the refugee situation in print media as well as theories on how humanitarian aid communication has developed over time (Chouliaraki 2010) were used in order to interpret the content in terms of what it connotes.

Setting is the environment where the depicted scene is taking place. Salient, detailed settings of destroyed houses and smoke might connote ideas of disaster and insecurity, while blue skies and grass hills might connote ideas of openness and freedom. Reduced settings or decontextualized images are generally used to symbolize ideas or concepts (Ledin and Machin 2018). In humanitarian aid communication, salient settings communicate authenticity and remind the viewer that the depicted scenes are taking place for real (Chouliaraki 2010).

Participants are the people depicted. When a single participant is depicted or highlighted, the viewer is drawn closer and invited to consider the participant’s experience. Visual individualization is reduced when participants are depicted in the distance and increased in close ups. Collectivization is found in photographs of groups or crowds and has a depersonalizing effect. Large groups can also be homogenized to different degrees, for example, by clothing, actions and poses. From research on both print media and humanitarian aid communication, we know that the effect of massification can connote both victimhood and evil-doing (Moore et al. 2012; Chouliaraki 2010).

Actions and behaviours in images are read through so-called indexical signs. Indexes are things that correlate to or infer other things. The pose and facial expression of a participant can index what a person feel or think. Reading physical actions in photographs is about reading the photo as depicting something that unfolds over time (Ledin and Machin 2018). Images depicting participants running and shouting may connote ideas of danger and insecurity, while dancing and singing may connote ideas of happiness and festively. Activity can signal power relations. If for example men are presented as participating in activities or talking...
more often than women this could reveal cultural understandings that men have more power than women.

Angles are of special relevance to the analysis of how the viewer is positioned in relation to what is depicted. Vertical angles are associated with superiority/inferiority and strength/vulnerability. Looking down on a participant creates a sense of vulnerability. Looking up at a participant from below conveys the strength of that participant. Someone sitting on the ground appears more approachable than someone standing up. Front angles involve the viewer more than oblique angles from the side, where the viewer becomes just an onlooker. A scene of a queue taken from behind someone’s head gives the impression that the viewer too waits in line.

Proximity is studied in the form of distance and gaze. Close-ups enable viewers to have more intimacy with the depicted, since it represents a participant in greater detail than a long shot. As for gaze, the photographs are studied with regard to whether the participants are looking at the viewer or not. Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) suggest thinking of the difference between eye contact and lack of eye contact in terms of “offer” and “demand”. If the depicted is looking at the camera, they are acknowledging the presence of viewers and demand something of them. Looking off-frame can give an impression of thoughtfulness. Peering upwards off-frame connotes positive outward-going thoughts, such as ambition or looking toward the future, while looking downwards suggests introspective thoughts.

The Overall Notion of the World’s Refugee Situation

By primarily studying settings, participants and actions in all the images in the data, three main findings emerge: 1) the images depict highly contextualized settings, 2) the images depict refugees and humanitarian workers, and 3) flight is illustrated as ‘waiting still’ rather than as ‘physically moving forward’.

The first result means that the images provide contextualization to the news piece. By being clearly documented in a context that contains visible settings and objects, the participants depicted are presented as authentic and engaged in actions. Most images depict outdoor settings where a landscape is visible, e.g. participants are in the presence of trees, dirt roads or desert mountains. Many images depict camp environments that feature tents or simple housing. Depicted indoor settings are mostly hospital environments containing objects like beds and medical equipment or dormitories holding madrassas and personal belongings. By showing highly contextualized settings, the MSF imagery meets the part of the critique against the ‘positive style’ appeal (Chouliaraki 2010) that has accused humanitarian aid communication of concealing crucial aspects of the complexity of global divisions. The MSF imagery clearly presents environments containing suffering people in need for support. The depicted environments also signal temporality. They are not permanent homes but settings where refugees can stay temporarily on their journey to security.

The second result signifies that the majority of the images depict humans and that two kinds of participants are shown among them—refugees and
humanitarian workers. As many as 73 out of the 77 images, that is, about 95%, depict humans, and this declares them and their actions as important. The participants are either posing in front of the camera and looking towards its lens, or involved in various kinds of actions. The refugees, identified by their wearing civil clothing, are centred as the main characters, and the MSF staff, identified by their wearing white vests, t-shirts or medical uniforms with the MSF logo, appear as supporting characters. By showing individual participants, the MSF imagery meets the critique against the ‘shock effect’ appeal (Chouliaraki 2010) of massifying and passivating people in need that is also seen in contemporary news reports on the world’s refugee situation (Malkki 2015). No other characters besides refugees and MSF staff are depicted except for a single soldier in one image. This means that antagonists are presented as unimportant. This is in line with the MSF Chantilly principles, which declare that MSF does not take sides in conflicts and adheres to the principle of neutrality (www.msf.org).

The third result reveals how the action of flight is depicted. Only nine images, or 12%, show participants actually fleeing (one of these is seen in Figure 2). Rather, refugees are depicted sitting, standing or even laying down on tarpaulin or pieces of fabric. Processes indexing situations of waiting are visible in 21 of the 64 images. For the most part, no actual goal for this waiting is visible, but nine of the images depict lines of refugees waiting for medical consultations, registration or water. On the surface the notion of ‘waiting still’ might appear as a contradiction to the action of ‘fleeing’. But the clear occurrence of waiting, in the data, instead implies a need for the refugees to move on with their lives.

Figure 2.
Photo: Dominic Nahr.
The Notion of Refugees and Their Needs

The analysis of how the notion of refugees are constructed was mainly carried out by examining angles and proximity in images where refugees appear. Analysis of the refugee’s needs was carried out by examining settings and actions. The main result shows that 1) most images depict refugees, 2) that refugees are depicted in close-up angles, 3) that women and children are more often depicted than men, 4) that refugees of African descent are most common and 5) that the refugees need, in addition to medical care, opportunities for settling down and moving on with their lives.

The first finding shows that refugees are depicted in 64 of the 77 images, while MSF staff are only depicted in 26. Further, the majority of the images of refugees, 43 images, show refugees alone, while only five of the photographs of MSF staff show them while not in the company of refugees. This means that focus in the presentation of the world’s refugee situation on MSF Sweden’s website is clearly drawn to the people in need rather than to the organization’s staff and their work. By mainly showing the people in need, the MSF imagery meets the critique against the ‘post humanitarian style’ appeal (Chouliaraki 2010), where “the organization-al brand itself” is communicated and as such disengages from pity and morality.

The second finding reveals that as many as 45 of the 64 images, or approximately 70%, were of refugees depicted through close-up shots (See Figures 3, 6 and 7). This contributes to a construction of the world’s refugee situation as something that affects individuals personally. The use of close-up angles portrays the refugees as individuals with personal experiences of flight. In contradiction to western news media, where the lack of portraits of individuals has been pointed out as de-humanizing refugees (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017; Drüeke et al. 2021), the website’s frequent use of close-up angles instead helps humanize the notion of forced migration.

The third finding shows that women and children are more often depicted than men. Three-fourths of the images of refugees depict single or small groups of women and/or children, while only one-fourth depict men. This is in line with news reports specifically on the work of INGOs (Dogra 2011), but is in contrast to western news media in general, where men are more often depicted than women and children (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017).

The fourth main finding reveals that African refugees are represented more often than refugees of other ethnic origins such as Syrians or Rohingyas (29 of the images show refugees of African origin, and 16 show refugees from other parts of the world). This suggest that the refugee situation is a serious matter on the African continent. It also implies that African refugees is of special concern to the viewers of the Swedish version of the MSF web site due to Africa’s proximity to EU-boarders.

The fifth finding shows that outdoor camp environments are the most common setting in the data, and that tents or water stations are more common settings than field hospital environments. This suggests that the needs of the refugees include more areas than just the medical. Most images of camp environments depict
nearly identical white tents neatly arranged in rows, which might, in what is considered a great risk of ‘positive style’ appeals in humanitarian aid communication (Chouliaraki 2010), lead the viewer to misinterpret the message as being that ‘everything is already taken care of’. However, that risk is minimized in the MSF imagery, since it also contains images of sheds made of tarpaulin placed on muddy ground and exposed to hard winds and rain (see Figure 4). These appear as an extremely temporary form of accommodation, and the need for a more permanent housing is here made clear.

The Notion of the Humanitarian Organization and Its Efforts

The analysis of the MSF and its efforts has mainly been carried out by examining angles and proximity, settings and actions. The main result shows that the workers 1) are tightly linked to the organization, 2) are both male and female, of different ages and different origin, 3) appear as approachable and 4) are depicted engaged in medical as well as other types of work.

Although attention on the website is clearly drawn to the refugees, the MSF staff are visible alone or together with refugees in 26 of the 77 images. The first main finding shows that MSF logos are, with few exceptions, only visible on the staff’s clothing. This links the logo, and the message that it represents—‘doctors without borders’—tightly to the people working for the organization and thereby to the work that they perform.

The second finding shows that the MSF staff are about equally male and female and of different ages. They appear to have their background in various parts of the world. They have different skin tones and carry attributes associated with different
religions and regions. Hijabs or African patterns on clothing are seen among the staff as well as jeans and sneakers. This stresses the MSF international profile and the refugee situation as a global issue that people from near and far with diverse cultural, ethnical and religious background engage in. The presence of MSF workers of different national origins and of different sexes contradicts colonial discourse, where the receiver as the “foreign other” is portrayed as a victim of the “white, western, female” benefactor’s contemplation (Dogra 2011).

The third finding shows that except for vests, t-shirts or medical clothing, the MSF staff seem to wear their personal clothing, e.g. jeans and sneakers. This makes them appear approachable, and in a more equal power relation to the refugees than if they would have worn formal clothing or strict uniforms. Figure 5 shows an image of a male worker with the same skin tone as the women and children in his care. The MSF logo is shown on the front and the back of his white shirt. He is kneeling down and smiling towards the viewer from a level below the women and children for whom he is caring. He is also holding one of the children in his hands. His position on the ground below the refugees signals that he is approachable and there for them.

The fourth finding shows that the staff are actively getting things done. They are often depicted engaged in medical work. The medical discourse is thus prominent in the analysed data. In 15 images, they are giving vaccines, taking care of wounds or examining pregnant women. When not engaged in medical work, the workers are depicted rescuing refugees from boats, handing out packages of supplies, or just greeting or chatting with refugees in the camp environments. The images that depict the MSF staff not in the company of refugees show them leaving in land cruisers or boats, having discussions with each other, and organizing political
actions by putting on life vests in central Stockholm, Sweden, to attract attention to people dying in the Mediterranean. The latter applies to discourses of political activism. According to Tallac (2020) the organization’s active engagement in single humanitarian cases, in this case ‘Refugees crossing the Mediterranean’, is a successful method of attracting donors, especially young donors.

The Notion of the Potential Donor

The notion of the potential donor is analysed by examining the relationship established between the viewer and the refugees and the humanitarian workers through the photographer’s choices of proximity and angle. The main results show 1) that the majority of images are close-up shots, and that these enable the viewer to come close to both refugees and humanitarian workers, 2) that existing long shots in the data enable overviews that make the refugee situation appear real to the viewer, 3) that the depicted refugees and humanitarian workers often gaze at the camera lens, which creates a symbolic demand or offer of contact between them and the viewer, 4) that most images in the data use an angle that involves the viewer in the depicted scene.

The first finding shows that the majority of the images, 66 images, or 85% of the total amount of images, are close-up shots. The common choice of a close-up frame constructs an impression for the viewer of knowing the depicted well. Most of the close-up shots, 38 images, depict the participants in full body length, while a fairly large number, 26, come as close as depicting them from the waist up. In two of the images, the viewer comes as close as only viewing the faces and the upper part of the shoulders of the depicted (see Figure 3).
The second finding shows that there are also a group of long shot images in the data. In contrast to other social-semiotic research, where long shots are interpreted as distancing the viewer from the depicted and making the viewer see the depicted as ‘others’ (cf. Ledin and Machin 2018), the long shots in this data instead perform the function of providing the viewer with overviews of geographic landscapes and quantities of tents. The wind and rain over the poorly pitched tents in Figure 4 most likely affect the viewer emotionally. The emotional effect may encourage an engagement in the refugee situation and apply to a discourse of morality. The refugee situation appears real to the viewer, although without, as is often the case in ‘shock effect’ imagery (Chouliaraki 2010), showing the disaster in such a horrifying way that leaves the viewer feeling powerless towards the depicted situation.

The third finding shows that refugees as well as humanitarian workers often gaze at the camera lens. About a third of the images are considered demanding images, since clear eye contact is made between one or several of the participants and the viewer. The eyes of the refugees in the images talk to the viewer, saying things like ‘I exist’, ‘I have needs and you can help me’ (see Figures 6 and 7) and thus affect the viewer emotionally like the images of tents in poor weather apply to a discourse of morality. In another third of the images, it is not possible to register gaze since the images are either taken from too great a distance or do not depict participants. The remaining third of the images expresses offers. One image depicts a Swedish MSF worker holding up a life vest with a sign on it saying ‘Borders kill’ (Gränser dödar). She is offering the life vest, which symbolizes a refugee’s life, to the viewer. The campaign she is promoting, where life vests are used as suffering people and the slogan is intended to provoke and engage the readers, is a good example of what Chouliaraki calls the ‘post humanitarian style’ appeal in fundraising. However, the image that is analysed does not represent the campaign itself. Instead, it depicts a co-worker engaged in daily work. With her action, she is clearly communicating with the viewer saying ‘you can help saving people’s lives’. The eye contact established between the depicted and the viewer applies to the viewer’s emotions and adds to a discourse of morality.

The fourth finding shows that as many as 44 out of the 73 images, i.e. 60% of the images that depict participants, use a horizontal frontal angle. This means that the data provides good conditions for the viewer to feel involved in the depicted scenes. In ten of the images, though, the participants are depicted from an oblique angle, and here the viewer is distanced from the depicted and placed in a position of someone registering a scene that is taking place far away. Figure 2, which depicts refugees walking and carrying belongings, positions the viewer as an onlooker watching refugees flee their homes, without being part of the migration personally.

It is also fairly common for the viewer to take part of the depicted scene from a position behind that of the depicted. This is the case in 13 of the images. The viewer is both positioned behind MSF staff (in eight of the images) and refugees (in five of the images), and is thereby taking part in the scenes both from the MSF’s and the refugee’s perspective. When placed behind the back of MSF staff,
the viewer is given the role of someone who is, for instance, helping out by taking care of patients (see Figure 7). When placed behind the back of refugees, the viewer is positioned in a line for water or health care. The data also contains images where other perspectives from behind someone’s back gives the viewer the impression of being placed in the middle of the depicted scene. This is the case
in five of the images, and in four of these the viewer is given the role of being one of the refugees, for example, sitting on a cardboard floor painting together with a group of children or crowding with other refugees on a boat. The good conditions for the viewer to feel involved in the depicted scenes apply to a discourse of morality where the viewer is asked to meet the refugees’ needs by donating money to MSF. But instead of feeling guilt, as is often the case when ‘shock effect’ style imagery is used (Chouliaraki 2010), the MSF imagery empowers the viewer to feel involved and to be approached as a valued actor.

Discussion

This article contributes to the field of refugee studies by presenting a visual analysis of how the world’s refugee situation is constructed discursively in photographs on the website of Médecins Sans Frontière (MSF) Sweden. The study is carried out in order to complement and question the often negatively representations of refugees encountered by for example right wing populism and news media. The Social semiotic approach (Halliday 1978) used in the study provides knowledge of how depicted settings, participants and actions as well as choices of angles and proximity might apply to the viewers emotions and how they constitute discourses drawing on different ideas.

The overall notion of the refugee situation as presented in depicted settings and actions reveals an understanding of flight as consisting of long time periods of subsistence in temporary shelters. Physical movement such as walking and carrying belongings or riding in boats are rare in the data. Instead of presenting refugees as masses of people approaching western boarders, as is common in print media (Moore et al. 2012), MSF Sweden promote the image of forcibly displaced people as being stuck. The analysis of participants shows that only refugees and humanitarian workers appear in the photographs. This draws attention away from antagonists and the reasons for the refugee’s forcible displacement and thus present the refugee situation as worthy of support regardless of underlying causes.

It is not surprising that the discourses revealed are clearly different to the discourses of nationalism, racism and islamophobia, which earlier research has pointed to in studies of news media (e.g. Boeva 2016; Conrad and Aalsteinsdóttir 2017; Ghazal Aswad 2019). However, even though the INGO perspective always aims to represent distant others as a cause of public action, Chouliaraki (2010) claims that no manner of representation seems to do justice to the moral claim of suffering. In news stories on the world’s refugee situation on MSF Sweden’s webpage, all three styles of humanitarian aid communication identified by Chouliaraki (2010) are visible: the ‘shock effect’, the ‘positive style’ and the ‘post-humanitarian style’ of appealing. A winning concept in motivating the world’s refugee situation as worthy of support seems to be the combination of different types of appealing. Besides the medical discourse that is highly expected because of the organization’s medical profile, MSF also succeeds in drawing on discourses of morality, solidarity, and ethnical and gender equality.
Images showing highly contextualized settings makes the refugee situation appear authentic and real. They likely affect the viewers emotionally which may encourage their eager to engage in the refugee situation. The highly contextualized settings thus apply to discourses of morality. This meets the part of the critique against the ‘positive style’ appeal (Chouliaraki 2010) that accuses humanitarian aid communication of concealing crucial aspects of the complexity of global divisions. Refugees are often depicted individually or in small groups, and from front and close-up angles. This contributes to an understanding of refugees as individual humans with the same physical and mental needs as other human beings. It awakens awareness of shared interests and sympathies and applies to discourses of solidarity. By showing individual participants, the MSF imagery meets the critique against the ‘shock effect’ appeal (Chouliaraki 2010) of massifying and passivating people in need. This critique also concerns contemporary news reports on the refugee situation where the lack of portraits of individuals is pointed out as de-humanizing refugees (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017; Drüeke et al. 2021).

A discourse of ethnical and gender equality is highlighted in images showing the organization’s both male and female workers of varying ages appearing to have diverse backgrounds, indexed through attributes such as skin tone and clothing. This contradicts the colonial discourse, where the receiver as the “foreign other” is often portrayed as a victim of a “white, western, female” benefactor’s contemplation (Dogra 2011). Choices of angles and proximity in the images make the humanitarian workers appear approachable, actionable and trustworthy.

The good conditions by which the viewer gets to feel involved in the depicted scenes apply to discourses of morality and solidarity, where the viewer is asked to meet the refugees needs by donating money to MSF. But instead of feeling guilt, as is often the case when ‘shock effect’ style imagery is used (Chouliaraki 2010), the MSF imagery empowers the viewers to feel involved and approached as valued actors. The MSF imagery reminds the website visitors that refugees are not just some people to feel sorry for or to have opinions for or against. They are real individual persons whose perspective the viewers are allowed to partake of.


MÉDICINS SANS FRONTIÈRES SWEDEN. https://lakareutangranser.se/ (accessed October 30 2019)

MÉDICINS SANS FRONTIÈRES INTERNATIONAL. https://msf.org/ (accessed May 4 2020)


