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## Does the subaltern speak? Migrant voices in digital Europe

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## **Does the subaltern speak? Migrant voices in digital Europe**

### **Abstract**

This article examines a number of digital initiatives where refugees and migrants speak with/to Europe in the context of the “migration crisis”. The analysis of four institutional and grassroots initiatives illustrates digital Europe’s symbolic articulations of borders that divide people and territories. As argued, the mediated visibility and voice of refugees and migrants matters precisely as the order of appearance (Arendt, 1958) in digital Europe represents a fundamental dimension of the continent’s communicative order: revealing who speaks and who is silenced, which actors are heard and which are side-lined in the context of Europe’s “migration crisis”. The incorporation of refugee and migrant voices in digital Europe shows that voice does not guarantee recognition; rather, its incorporation reveals the complex politics of digital representation: in occasions challenging hegemonic power structures but most often digitally reaffirming bordering power and its symbolical articulations.

**Keywords:** voice; refugees; migrants; borders; digital Europe; digital representation; digital politics; subaltern

## Introduction

Europe's "migration crisis" received immense media attention, especially during its 2015 peak. At the time, iconic images and powerful headlines dominated European mass media in print, broadcasting and digital platforms. While media systematically spoke *about* refugees and migrants, they rarely appeared themselves as narrators of their stories (Berry et al., 2015; Chouliaraki Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017). This hegemonic communicative order raises important questions: Where are refugees' and migrants' voices heard in Europe? When do they become, if at all, agentive participants in European mediascapes? And if they do, what kind of voices predominate, how are they framed, and what narratives of "the refugee", "the migrant" and "the crisis" do they contain and privilege?

In addressing these questions, the article examines precisely those media moments: when newcomers speak with/to Europe, when their voices are mobilised to describe their histories and journeys, but also the conditionality of their recognition upon politics of migration. Inspired by Spivak's (2010) seminar work on the subaltern, this is an exploration of the opportunities and constraints for refugees and migrants to speak of their own histories and trajectories, against the representational order that assumes a homogeneity of agency and experience. Empirically, the article focusses on a number of digital initiatives whose aims, discourses and aesthetics directly contest the representational space of mainstream media. As these initiatives emerge within digital media spaces, but outside media institutions, they provide powerful illustrations of the ways in which digital Europe symbolically challenges and reaffirms the continent's borders. I argue that this discussion is critical to understanding the politics of the "migration crisis" because the order of appearance (Arendt, 1958) in digital Europe constitutes a fundamental dimension of the continent's communicative order: revealing who speaks and who is silenced, which voices are heard and which are side-lined.

## Migrant voices in digital Europe

As shown below, digital Europe is deeply implicated in the constitution of bordering power, especially through the complex and contradictory incorporation of refugee and migrant voices. Bordering power is defined here as the hierarchical ordering of Europeans' and migrants' humanity that subjects migrants to danger, controlled mobility and conditional recognition. In the context of bordering power, voice is more than a desired outcome of mediation; rather, and as will be shown, it represents a complex symbolic process (Couldry, 2010) that occasionally challenges but most often naturalises migrants' conditional recognition in Europe.

The discussion draws on the analysis of four institutional and grassroots digital projects that narrate the story of "the crisis" through refugees' and migrants' own voices. The focus is on institutional and grassroots initiatives, precisely because these representations, unlike user generated content, constitute organised efforts to shape representational politics and influence public opinion. By counterpoising institutional and grassroots initiatives, the discussion examines the contradictory digital expression of such representational politics. The specific cases are strategically selected, constituting a small but symbolically significant set of examples among a number of institutional and noninstitutional ones that adopt similar representational strategies. As such, these are particular nodes within digital Europe's broader communicative structures.

### **Context of study: Europe's "migration crisis" and literature review**

The wars and destitution in Europe's neighbouring continents, which European states and media have acknowledged as distant events for a very long time, became visibly more proximate in 2015. On April 13, 2015, one of the most tragic shipwrecks in the

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Mediterranean, with an estimated 800 migrants losing their lives at sea, attracted widespread media and political attention (Bonomolo and Kirchgaessner, 2015). While this was neither the first nor the last of many tragedies at the border, it surged as a turning point in the exercise of bordering power in Europe: in the summer and autumn of 2015, media called for Europe's ethico-political response to refugees' plight, while security and humanitarian acts at the border attracted significant public attention. In this context, in late summer 2015, Europe conditionally and briefly opened its borders to certain groups of refugees. Yet, this phase was to swiftly come to an end with the controversial EU-Turkey deal in March 2016 for return of refugees who reached Europe from Turkey (HRW, 2016).

The fast-developing events and the arrival of almost a million refugees in Europe in 2015 (ibid.) were intensely mediated. The media became key actors in setting the parameters of the public conversation on "the crisis" and its political, ethical and security implications for Europe. While mainstream media and photojournalism became key agenda-setters, digital mediations of "the crisis" also voiced claims to Europe's ethico-political agenda. Institutional and noninstitutional actors that aimed precisely at setting the parameters of Europe's response to "the crisis" initiated powerful and often controversial online projects that brought refugees and migrants to the foreground of digital Europe. Such initiatives reveal the two sides of digital Europe: challenging assumptions about Europe as "unity in diversity" (Ponzanezi and Leurs, 2014), but also becoming "new forms of surveillance, bordering and monitoring access to Europe" (ibid., p. 7).

### *Voice and why it matters*

Europe as a communicative and ethical space was tested at the peak of the "migration crisis", especially in regards to the right of different agents involved to speak and to be heard. In this context, questions are raised on whether the voices of refugees and migrants have been part

of the public conversation. Couldry's (2010) conceptualisation of voice as *process* and as *value* is important in setting the parameters of this analysis. By voice as a process, Couldry refers to "giving an account of one's life and its conditions" (2010, p.7). This process is always socially grounded; a form of reflexive agency; an embodied process requiring a material form which may be individual, collective, or distributed; and which is often undermined by rationalities of neoliberalism (ibid.). By voice as value, Couldry refers to the act of valuing; voice "values all human beings' *ability* to give an account of themselves; it values my and your status as 'narratable' selves" (Couldry, 2010, p.13).

Taking this conversation further to examine regional and global dynamics, Tacchi (2012) argues that "voice is inadequate unless there is also a shift in the hierarchies of value and attention accorded different actors and communities" (2012: 7-8). In his analysis Tacchi (ibid.) critiques techno-deterministic approaches that focus on ICTs; as he argues, what needs attention is not just listening *of* poor people, but listening *to* them. Such approaches speak to postcolonial critique, especially as influenced by Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (2010). Spivak identifies the reproduction of colonial power in denying the subaltern voice in decisions defining their lives. As she argues, humanitarian discourse bans certain practices of repression in the name of western ethics. Yet, the West's benevolent-looking efforts silence the subaltern and reaffirm colonial differences between the "civilized" West and the "barbarian" East. Gajjala (2013) takes this conversation to digital spaces, discussing the privilege of being able to speak and to write in hegemonic spaces, which are situated "in a field of power (the West) and in the production of a particular knowledge (about the East)". By examining South Asian women's resistance to hegemonic narratives, as well as their complicity (at times) to those narratives, Gajjala (2013) observes western hegemony but also its momentary disruptions when marginalized speakers momentarily become heard in the mainstream.

*Voice and the refugee/migrant subject*

Literature on voice, refugees and migrants has examined the conditions and possibilities of subaltern voices to be heard within the existing communicative order of a “crisis”. A fundamental contradiction exists in this context: between voice and hyper-visibility of refugees and migrants in the media. Does hyper-visibility support voice? Horsti (2016), writing on the current “crisis”, notes that migrants on boats have been extremely visible, yet they remain largely silenced. She echoes Malkki’s (1996) emphasis on the narrow frames within which refugee visibility is constructed. The “refugee”, Malkki argues, is commonly represented by virtue of being a refugee, that is, a powerless subject suffering, with no political voice (1996). In Fassin’s words, refugees are not allowed to voice political rights, but to only appeal to a common humanity by showing their wounds (2005). This appeal to compassion reproduces biopolitical power (Vaughan-Williams, 2015) and reduces the refugee to a wounded body – to biological, bare life (Agamben, 1998) – that denies recognition of political agency.

Nyers (2013) further argues that refugees are framed within “problem-solving” approaches. This is due to a prevailing perception that refugees are the product of exceptional circumstances and thus represent an anomaly that needs a solution. Trauma and victimization discourse helps legitimize decision-making on behalf of refugees, who are considered incapable and deprived of making their own decisions, reduced again to bodies that require biopolitical management (ibid.). In the process, refugees are further silenced, while western “experts” and support organizations become the only trustworthy voices “to speak for refugees and about the experience of forced displacement, turning refugee lives into a site where Western ways of knowing are reproduced” (Sigona, 2014, p.372).

Works as those above emphasize the danger of understanding voice as mere process. Kisiara (2015) argues that representations of suffering, passivity and vulnerability may appear as giving some voice and agency to refugees, yet, these voices are largely channelled, contextually, in ways that perpetuate their image of dependency and powerlessness. Such reduction of voice to process, as Malkki (1996) reminds us, silences subjects further and hides deeper contextual, political, and institutional layers of suppression and marginalisation.

As certain mediations of voice order the subjects who speak and the ways they speak, they become fundamental acts of symbolic bordering. Symbolic bordering constitutes the representational practices of exclusion that, in parallel to the geopolitical protection of Europe's territorial borders, work to systematically keep migrants and refugees outside its symbolic space of representation and deliberation (Chouliaraki, Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017). Symbolic processes reaffirm the rhetoric of identification and control of certain people's mobility (Vaughan-Williams, 2015) and the fact that borders' constitution is increasingly differentiated, invisible and diffuse (Balibar, 1998). In fact, symbolic borders, alongside the biopolitical order of territorial bordering practices have come to constitute the two dimensions of bordering power, i.e. the regulation of mobility and the conditionality of the rights of migrants.

The exercise of bordering power increasingly depends on mediated communication, especially the technological and symbolical infrastructures that produce the border: through surveillance, digital identification and datafication of cross-border mobility, but also through narrations of the border, of refugees and migrants. Thus, like other forms of symbolic power, bordering power naturalises certain order through its ever-presence and repetition (Bourdieu, 1991). In the case of migration, this order deems certain subjects as worthier of voice than



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others and certain (digital) spaces as more legitimate to set the rules of engagement between citizens and newcomers compared to others.

This order is challenged but also rehearsed and legitimised in digital Europe. As Deibert and Rohozinski (2010) emphasise, digital technologies have been used for liberation and voice, as in the case of the Arab spring. But the same technologies have become systems of control (ibid.), both directly through surveillance and indirectly through the representational regimes that digital media incorporate. Digital media here refer to digital platforms and networks used for communication and information production and exchange between individuals but also between institutions and individuals. In the case of digital Europe, these platforms and networks mediate Europe's diversity, as most Europeans digitally exist next to, and sometimes *with*, each other. But digital Europe also creates certain order of appearance (Arendt, 1958): not everyone speaks and is heard in the same way, not everyone is equally represented, even if most are digitally present. With these uneven and contradictory communication opportunities as a starting point, the discussion below analyses the ideological frames and moral challenges of voice that digital Europe presents when newcomers speak and citizens, presumably, hear.

### **A note on methodology**

The discussion below draws on the analysis of two institutional initiatives and two grassroots initiatives. The institutional initiatives are: IOM's project *I am a refugee/I am a migrant* (refugeemigrants.org) and the Italian-led project *Awaremigrants* (awaremigrants.org). The grassroots initiatives include the digital *Refugee Radio Network* (RRN) and *Migrant Voice* (migrantvoice.org). Institutional and grassroots initiatives have important commonalities and

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differences. Both kinds put newcomers' voices at the centre of a politics that contests representations of the silent *Other*. Yet, their points of departure and aims are different. Institutional initiatives are the result of formal decision-making that deems certain representations as most effective in meeting institutional aims; thus images and narratives are means to institutional ends. In the case of grassroots initiatives, representations themselves constitute a politics; they are not a means to an end, but a political outcome in its own right. In their differences, the specific cases are chosen because they share three characteristics. First, they represent examples of "best practice", where refugees and migrants are seen but also heard. Second, they reflect practices that aim, or claim, to put in action some of Europe's most celebrated values: equality, integration, respect of human rights. Third, these are projects that, for different reasons, attracted wider attention among supporters and critics (Carling, 2016; Musarò, 2016).

The four cases were selected after reviewing dozens of institutional and grassroots' digital initiatives across Europe, which claim to give voice to refugees and migrants; thus, many others could be analysed through the same approach. The chosen digital projects are analysed with the use of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), which focusses on how meaning is made through the use of multiple modes of communication, including images and narratives (Jones, 2012). As all four domains of study are open websites, analysed data is publicly available. Three main questions drive the analysis: What and whom do we see in these digital spaces? Who do we see too much of and who do we see too little of? Who speaks, who listens and who is silenced in digital Europe?

## **Refugee and migrant voices in digital Europe**

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The discussion that follows examines two sides of digital Europe. The institutional campaigns *I am a refugee/I am a migrant* (refugeesmigrants.org) and *Aware Migrants* (awaremigrants.org) represent archetypical institutional examples, while *Refugee Radio Network* (RRN) and *Migrant Voice* (migrantvoice.org) are characteristic of grassroots initiatives. As digital media affordances allow for cheap, fast and, to an extent, effective communication across borders, they offer organisations certain communication autonomy to share politics and values outside the control of media institutions. While they converge around voice, these initiatives have rather different orientations in their construction of the newly-arrived subject, as well as of Europe as a convivial and (un-)hospitable space.

### *Institutional initiatives*

The *I am a refugee/I am a migrant* (refugeesmigrants.org) and *Aware Migrants* (awaremigrants.org) campaigns are initiated by public institutions that are accountable to citizens and which also have a remit of care for refugees and migrants: more specially, the International Organization of Migration (IOM) and the Italian government's migration and civil rights department. In fact, these projects emerged in the context of humanitarian securitisation (Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2017): the double and contradictory moral requirement of care towards (vulnerable) newcomers and of protection of citizens against risks that those newcomers might present. IOM and government departments, among many national and international organisations, increasingly mobilise digital tools to communicate their response to this contradictory moral requirement. The two cases discussed here do precisely that: both initiatives bring to the foreground the voices of refugees and migrants to narrate their individual stories but to also articulate *through* these subjects' voices institutional politics of migration.

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As noted on the *I am a refugee/I am a migrant* website, its aims are twofold: to give voice and to put a human face on the personal stories of migrants and refugees (<http://refugeesmigrants.org>, 2017); *Aware Migrants* similarly uses the format of short video testimonies of (intended) journeys to Europe from Africa. In the first instance, the two initiatives appear as constructing contradictory representations of refugee and migrant agency. *I am a refugee/I am a migrant* projects a dynamic and positive story of individual success and resilience. As the digital project explains on its front page, it contains “tales of extraordinary personal achievement in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds...aim[ing] to counter the misperceptions that categorize migrants and refugees as opportunistic and not interested in integration” (refugeesmigrants.org, 2017). This message directly contests *Aware Migrants*’ narration of stories of failure, death, and regret; in this case, migrant voices and agency are defined through stories of trauma and remorse about migration.

As agentive voices appear rather differently in the two projects, questions are raised about the conflicting moral and political intentions of migration institutions in Europe. Yet, as the analysis below suggests, the apparent differences hide convergent acts of symbolic bordering. Each project’s representational frames are briefly introduced below; this discussion is followed by an analysis of the political and moral dimensions of both projects’ representations.

The project *I am a refugee/I am a migrant* is developed by IOM but it has controversially expanded its scope beyond the organisations’ official mandate of dealing with migration, to also include refugee stories (Jorgen Carling, 2016). The website’s contents are constituted by individuals’ narrations of cross-border journeys and settlement. Dozens of stories are introduced through photographic portraits, accompanied by speakers’ first name and the number of kilometres separating them from their origin. Clicking on individual

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profiles, one can read stories of approx. 350-450 words that, as a rule, describe a linear narrative of origin-journey-destination.

One of the impressive, yet typical on the website, refugee stories, is that of Malakeh. Malakeh, who appear to be in her 30s, is a reporter from Syria, currently living in Germany. The close shot image accompanying her narration positions her at the front right side of the frame, with her eyes facing directly and horizontally into the camera, projecting a confident but unthreatening presence that directly engages with the viewer's gaze. The professional photo positions Malakeh on a rooftop of an unidentifiable location: it could be in the Middle East or in Europe. From her longer narration, these words are chosen and superimposed on the picture: "In Germany the old cathedrals remind me of our churches in Syria...There are no words to explain how much I miss my country." These words emphasise a universal humanity with cross-border links sustained through Christianity; Malakeh clearly belongs somewhere else – Syria – but Europe offers her a refuge.

Another profile is that of Carlos, who is classified as a migrant. Carlos is an Indian man in his 50s who has lived in Italy since 1980. The mid-range photographic profile that accompanies his personal story positions him in the middle of a street between two houses, possibly in Italy. He is well-dressed, has a gentle smile and faces directly into the camera. Above his head, circular streetlights softly lighten the street; one of the lights is positioned directly over Carlos' head, giving an impression of a halo. The phrase superimposed on the photo is: "In Italy I always felt more than welcome. People were intrigued by my differences, I was 'the Indian', a mythical figure." As in the case of Malakeh, the speaker's foreignness is emphasised alongside his gratefulness for Italy's hospitality.

Against visual and textual representations of migrants and refugees as confident, well-integrated but also grateful agents, *Aware Migrants'* agentive subjects appear desperate and

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regretful. This project is funded by the Italian Ministry of Interior's department of civil liberties and migration, but implemented by IOM ([awaremigrants.org](http://awaremigrants.org) – link: the project). *Aware Migrants'* main page includes eight tabs: one of them offers information about “legal channels to enter” a number of European countries; the remaining seven tabs focus on different elements of the dangers involved in “illegally” migrating from Africa to Europe. Those dangers are primarily narrated by (potential) African migrants, including, in one case, a music video titled *Be aware brother, be aware sister*. The website's dominant format is video testimonies of 50-90 seconds – usually narrated in English or French, with English subtitles. Each photo is accompanied by the first name of the individual and the headline of their story; all stories describe despair, death and regret for migrating.

Among the many stories, that of Cesar is uniquely painful but characteristic of almost all other narrations on the website:

We were lost in the sea and there was no hope. I stayed three days without eating...those who succeed to come here...it's a destiny. It's a tombola. You may arrive in Italy alive or rest in the sea forever.

Cesar's testimony is filmed in a dark studio – a close-up of his face is the only image on the screen. He stares into the camera as he speaks and the pain is clearly visible in his face. With the same studio dark background, another migrant, Ajus, narrates horrid stories of a migration journey. Describing death and loneliness, he looks straight into the camera, addressing other migrants:

Let me ask you: You are trying to come to Europe to live a better life. If you do not make it you cannot live the life you want to live. You are dead. What can you do?  
You cannot do nothing.

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It is clear that these initiatives speak to migrants, refugees and to Europeans – to a varied audience of different communities. How is the refugee and migrant represented in these digital initiatives? What kind of voice and what kind of agency do refugees have in this side of digital Europe? While appearing as rather dissimilar in the voices they represent, *Aware Migrants* and *I am a refugee/I am a migrant* share some fundamental commonalities when it comes to the represented subject, voice, and kind of recognition newcomers can seek through their voice in digital Europe.

First, the subjects narrating cross-border migration primarily appear as human: in both cases, refugees and migrants are individuals and as they all face their viewers' gaze from an even, horizontal position, they reaffirm their agency. In their agentive presence, refugees and migrants speak with voices that project warmth and vulnerability, while their photos are smooth representations of unthreatening humanity. Yet, while they speak with their own voice, their words respond and correspond to European/western imaginaries, speaking familiar stories: dreams of individual success, hard-working ethos, punishment for illegality. Second, and while speaking through familiar stories, their experiences are usually inferior to European experience. For example, Malakeh is amazed by Germany's cathedrals and they remind her of churches in Syria – is the listener assumed to only be able to “see” and understand Syria through the familiarity of Christianity? How much does the emphasis on Christianity allow Malakeh to identify as distinct individual and how much does it subject her to the order of Christianity's symbolic power? Carlos is grateful for Italian hospitality and embraces his Otherness, the fact that he is considered as a “mythical” figure precisely because he is Indian, an Orientalised subject. Even more captivating are the words of Cesar and Ajus who respectively speak of “destiny” or about the migrants' lack of power. Furthermore, refugees' and migrants' identification through first name only reduces their agency to endearing and vulnerable, certainly not an agency of complex dimensions that

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deserves recognition as equal to the European gazing subject. Been seen as mobilising an agentive language, migrants and refugees gain respect without recognition. Third, refugees and migrants on the institutional side of digital Europe appear as non-political agents. The actor who is seen is a smiling or crying adult, who speaks of gratefulness towards Europe or of pain associated with (undeserved) access to it. In their different appearances, newcomers lack political agency: no one speaks politics of anger, especially politics that target Europe's inadequacies in dealing with migration. On the contrary, the anger – appearing in many *Aware Migrants* testimonies – turns to migrants themselves, who are spoken as being reckless and undeserving. As these voices are contained within humanitarian narratives of need and demand of care alone, refugees' and migrants' rights become limited to humanitarian aid, not to the acquisition of political or legal rights (Parekh, 2017).

### *Grassroots initiatives*

Alongside, and partly in opposition to institutional initiatives, a series of grassroots' projects bring refugee and migrant voices to digital Europe. These initiatives vary in their political and aesthetic dimensions, yet, they share a politics of conviviality, most importantly as this politics is *constituted* through newcomers' voices. The initiatives introduced here represent two exemplary cases: The transnational *Refugee Radio Network* (RRN - <http://www.refugeeradionet.net>) and the UK-based *Migrant Voice* (<http://migrantvoice.com>). The former was originally established in Germany by Larry Macaulay, himself a refugee, and has now successfully expanded its online programming across Europe through a three-language website – in English, German, and Italian; on its front page, RRN introduces itself as “A voice of freedom, equality and justice”. While established and run as a refugee initiative, RRN is supported by different radio stations in



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German cities for its programming and by German foundations for its “education and integration understanding” (<https://refugeeradionetwerk.wixsite.com/rran>, 2017). As such, it is a powerful example of sustained collaborations between refugees and European actors, even if driven by the former. Emphasising its commitment to voice as value, similarly *Migrant Voice* defines itself as a migrant-led organisation:

established to develop the skills, capacity and confidence of members of migrant communities, including asylum seekers and refugees. We work to amplify migrant voices and secure representation in the media and public life ([www.migrantvoice.org/about](http://www.migrantvoice.org/about), 2017).

As with RRN, this initiative puts migrant voices on the lead of media action and engages both newcomers and established European/UK populations in communication and migrant rights campaigning. Both are simple and interactive digital spaces that lack sophistication and sleek design, and which address audiences but also engaged users. From refugee testimonies to music productions; from online migrant rights’ campaigns to offline media and political action, this side of digital Europe brings forward a variety of voices that disrupt and deconstruct assumptions of a united Europe (Ponzanesi and Leurs, 2014). Rather, the voices heard in the grassroots’ side of digital Europe are stark reminders of inequalities and injustices that privilege certain subjects against others.

In the case of RRN this becomes apparent in the powerful messages communicated in its main webpage calling refugees to become radio producers: “We are here to raise refugee and asylum seekers voices. We pass the mic and let you be heard”. The photo accompanying the message is of an RRN producer, most likely himself a refugee. The photo, like the message it accompanies, projects a welcoming warmth and intimacy. Alongside this and other similar messages and images, RRN’s digital portal includes a campaign of vigilance

against terrorism. “If you see something, say something... We must keep vigilant against terrorism. It is everyone’s duty to do so” is the message in English, German and French. The message is printed on top of a black and white close up photo of a man’s face. He looks straight into the camera behind his hands that hide most of his face, in a photographic composition that challenges any intentions by the (refugee) viewer to hide from (citizen) responsibility.

In the case of *Migrant Voice* responsibility is a demand directed to the British state and the media. On this digital space, migrants speak with assertive and powerful voices against the state’s and the media’s bordering power that silence them. Among the variety of its content that includes testimonies, campaigns and migration news, the website dedicates substantial space to individual migrants’ profiles. Not unlike the institutional initiatives, the subaltern speaks. But with different voices. The narration of Daniel Debessai’s story, a statistician from Eritrea, is titled “Journey through the UK job system”. The narration describes Daniel’s struggle with employment in the UK; for him, the most difficult journey is not transnational but *within* the nation-state. The profile photo accompanying the story lacks aesthetic value but represent Daniel sitting in front of his computer, possibly in his office. Another profile is that of Roza Salih, a Kurdish Iraqi refugee. The title of her story: “Education – application denied”. Roza describes her struggle to get access to education as asylum seeker in the UK. Her story concludes with the introduction of an NGO Roza co-founded – *Glasgow Girls* – campaigning against deportations of vulnerable asylum seekers. The photo accompanying the story is a selfie, an image lacking aesthetic value but not immediacy, as Roza appears in a close shot looking directly into the camera and into the viewer’s eyes.

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How are refugees and migrants represented in these digital initiatives? What kind of voices are heard on this side of digital Europe? First, migrants and refugees appear as human agents in visually and discursively unceremonious and ordinary appearances: they are anything but a spectacle. They are actors with some symbolic power – e.g. as radio producers or as campaigners. Second, they appear as vulnerable but agentive: they are agents of suffering due to destitution and injustice in national and transnational contexts. Their suffering is sometimes silent, but it is rarely represented as part of a mass experience: individuals speak and their voices project the convergence of suffering, hope and resilience. Third, they are political agents. In both websites, refugees and migrants speak as citizens, even when they lack citizenship rights: they have voice, they have demands, they contest injustice.

The grassroots side of digital Europe uses voice to advance politics of solidarity, equality, and hospitality, against the reduced agency of suffering refugees or of exceptionally successful migrants, as in the institutional initiatives. Yet, this side of digital Europe is not pure, and itself participates in bordering practices, partly by contesting and partly by reaffirming them. This becomes apparent in the selective voices heard here too: those who speak hold certain symbolic capital – they are the ones that have managed to succeed against injustice. Furthermore, in this side of digital Europe as well as the institutional one, refugees and migrants do not set the parameters of the conversation; rather, they respond to the symbolic and territorial bordering acts, as these are set by the state (that excludes them from rights) and the media (that exclude them from representation). Thus, and inevitably, grassroots digital Europe is itself subject to the bordering power that sets the conditions under which refugee and migrant speak.

**Conclusions: Voice as agentive presence or conditional recognition?**

This analysis raises critical questions about the meaning and value of voice in digital Europe. What kinds of encounters and boundaries between Europeans, refugees and migrants are represented and imagined in digital Europe? The digital voices of refugees and migrants constitute, in many ways, the much-needed alternative form of mediation against the voiceless and threatening *Other* that predominates in Europe's mainstream media. Yet, the voice and presence of the refugee on Europe's digital screens reflects the digital space as an ordered space of representation and recognition.

Within this order, relations of power are complex. Within (digital) Europe, for example, institutional initiatives carry enormous symbolic power as, on the one hand, they influence politics and policies of migration and, on the other, they are the ones that proactively invest in digital projects that frame migration. Initiatives like the *I am refugee/I am migrant* and *Aware Migrants*, I argue, set strict conditions for recognition by producing a digital order of appearance (Arendt, 1958), where refugee and migrant voices appear as conditional, exceptional, and inferior to European humanity and rationality. Within them, newcomers appear as *people like us*. The emphasis on commonality opens up possibilities for the humanisation of newcomers, but sets conditions for their humanisation: there are aesthetic and discursive requirements defining who these people are and who they should be in order to be accepted. The emphasis on individuality of their voice detaches them from regional and global struggles and structural inequalities that explain their journeys, struggles and precarity.

The appropriated individuality of the seen and heard refugee and migrant can be read through Agamben's "structure of exception" (1998), a condition that offers a kind of membership without inclusion (*ibid.*). Within this order, newcomers are respected but not recognised as they remain vulnerable, irrational and dependent on European values. This is

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demonstrated in the staging of newcomers' testimonies in studios or in locations that Europe demarcates and controls – in framing spaces that are Christian and which are welcoming to the clearly defined Other, these initiatives reiterate that the newcomer is just tolerated, not accepted.

Inevitably, digital discourses that emphasise bounded vulnerability and inferiority contain refugees and migrants into Europe's own zones of comfort, and even enhance a narcissism of ignorance, where newcomers lose their distinct and complex histories and biographies as a condition of their acceptance. This is a force working through what Butler (2015) refers to as a performative form of power, which works in two ways: on the one hand, as certain forms of recognition become extended to an endearing or vulnerable newcomer, others become unrecognizable and not worth recognition. On the other hand, demarcation works performatively (ibid.) – “certain political distinctions, including inequality and exclusions” (2015, p. 6) are not named but performed: the vulnerability of the African migrant who has no control of his fate and of the Indian migrant who is thankful to Italians' fascination with his Otherness, powerfully reproduce partiality and membership without inclusion. In light of these conditions, a critical question still remains unanswered: is the digital personalisation of the subaltern yet another expression of a Eurocentric imaginary, or even a familiar media format, to respond to liberal Europe's fears towards the many newly arrived strangers?

Many grassroots digital initiatives aim to tackle this question. They present the impure but imaginable alternative to symbolic bordering, as this is, on the one hand, enacted in mass media's silencing of refugees and migrants and, on the other, in appropriations of voice in digital Europe. In grassroots digital Europe, subaltern voices can speak a language that contests national and transnational injustices, even if, at times, these actors incorporate

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the conditionality of their right to speak, as set *to* them but not *by* them, i.e. as they only speak as strongminded and eloquent subjects.

It is often such impure expressions of voice in digital Europe's representational space that reveal the potential of digital communication to not just reaffirm but to also challenge the conditional recognition of refugees and migrants. It is important to further research and understand how digital representational spaces, which go beyond the interactive space of social media, become battlefields for visibility, voice and recognition. This is an area of study that digital media research has often side-lined as it falls outside the binary of hegemonic mainstream media versus citizen-led social media. Yet, it is precisely this space in-between the mainstream and the social media that needs to be further studied, most importantly because it constitutes a space where the subaltern might not just speak but might also occasionally be heard.

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