Media Representations of ‘the Refugee’

An Exploration of the Role of Community-Based Media in Challenging Dominant Narratives of Migration and ‘the Refugee’ Through the Work of ReFOCUS Media Labs

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the importance of community-based media practices and organizations and the role they can play in challenging mainstream media portrayals of migration and ‘the refugee’. A thematic analysis of existing literature was carried out to explore the current role of the refugee voice in mainstream media. This analysis was then applied to the work of ReFOCUS Media Labs, an organization supporting refugees and asylum seekers in Greece to gain media skills and to access professional networks in order to report on their own stories as well as to address a gap in existing education opportunities and skills training. Findings indicate the potential that these community-based media organizations can have in creating spaces and channels to support people seeking protection to tell their own stories while amplifying the voices of individuals with lived experience of forced migration.

KEYWORDS
migration, media, refugees, framing

INTRODUCTION

There have been ongoing discussions in academia about the role of the mainstream media in reporting on situations about refugees and asylum seekers (Seuferling 2019). What often continues to be missing from these discussions is the voices of refugees and asylum seekers themselves. Mainstream media tend to engage with affected populations as objects of the story (Szörényi 2006), reporting on them rather than engaging with them. ‘Mainstream media’ here refers to mass media that are established and well-known sources of information. The term ‘dominant media’ can also be used here, as it refers to the media sources that are most commonly trusted, cited, and referenced.

While discussions regarding migration are prevalent in the media, they will continue to be biased and lack dimension until mainstream media work to better engage with the affected populations about whom they report on. Community-level media groups have done more work to include the voices of marginalized populations. Jack (2017) examines this in their work on the various forms
of communication for refugees living in camp settings, wherein they outline examples of how future communication could become more accessible and representative.

ReFOCUS Media Labs is a group that has been working to address this gap on the island of Lesbos, Greece since 2018. They focus on capacity building through training refugees in skills related to media creation and editing, and engaging with refugee populations to support them to be able to tell their own stories (ReFOCUS Media Labs n.d.). These skills have included modern media creation skills such as photography, audio and video production, and media editing skills. ReFOCUS works with the goal of helping students to learn how to navigate the media production process to improve their employability and their access to share their stories with a wider audience (ReFOCUS Media Labs n.d.). This article will make a case for the necessity of the inclusion of the voices of refugees and asylum seekers in reporting on migration. It will show how the work of community-based media groups such as ReFOCUS Media Labs can contribute to more representative media narratives. This article begins with an examination of existing relevant literature and explores the themes relating to the role of the refugee in mainstream media narratives and how ReFOCUS is helping to create change.

**Migration in Europe**

As increasing numbers of people come to Europe seeking protection, migration has often come to be framed in the media as a ‘crisis’ (Dines et al. 2018), with discussions relating to this so-called ‘crisis’ monopolizing many public spheres (Ammaturo 2019). When 2015–2016 saw the beginning of the highest number of asylum seekers and refugees in Europe since World War II, it further triggered an increase in securitization and militarization along EU borders (Léonard & Kaunert 2020). People continue to die and face ongoing human rights violations along European borders, yet dominant discourses still frame those arriving as the threat, rarely acknowledging the threats they themselves face. This framing is supported by the continued structures of racism and coloniality present throughout mainstream media and other public spaces (Amponsah 2021). Those who do reach Europe are often relegated to migration ‘hotspots’, such as the Greek islands, where they are left in a sort of limbo while they navigate European asylum systems.

When discussing people seeking protection, this article refers to them as refugees and asylum seekers, as this is the target population of ReFOCUS’ work. ‘Refugee’ is a legal status that is granted to those who are forced to flee their home across international borders due to persecution, war, or violence (UNHCR n.d.). Due to legal and bureaucratic obstacles in Europe, it can take people a long wait to achieve this label. Hence, when refugee voices are mentioned in this article, this is not only referring those legally recognized as refugees but rather all those who have lived
experience of seeking asylum or protection. This article further explores the dominant representation of ‘the refugee’ (with quotations as such to indicate the social construction of this figure) with a focus on this representation in mainstream media.

The media and the production of collective memory

As there is no end in sight to the political debates surrounding migration (Parrott et al. 2019) and as the media plays a powerful role in influencing public perceptions, beliefs, and memories, it is crucial to challenge continued exclusionary dynamics. There is a need to create space for people to have ownership and control over their own stories. When engaging with mainstream media, it is crucial to critically examine who is present, who is excluded, and whose voices are highlighted. This article does this by focusing on the continued exclusion of refugee and asylum seekers’ voices telling their own stories, as ‘the refugee’ is often presented as voiceless (Georgiou 2018) and ahistorical (Malkki 1996). These factors can have an impact on how events are seen and experienced in the present and historically, as the media can serve as a form of collective memory.

It is crucial to explore who is documenting and narrating history, as this can have a major influence on how society remembers (Gatrell 2016). Barney et al. (2016) wrote about the ‘participatory condition’ of our society, noting that participation has become a focal point upon which to explore, explain, analyze, and criticize media. A lack of participation can even result in historical erasure, as Amponsah (2021) notes in her research on the voices of Black women in Belgium. She finds that due to a lack of visibility, there is a lack of record of their existence resulting in a false narrative of the historical non-existence of Black women in Belgium (Amponsah 2021).

Academically, this examination of the exclusion and inclusion of different voices has often occurred through work on the subaltern. This idea of the subaltern is not easily defined or pinned down; nevertheless, it can provide an important and interesting lens to explore this discussion of producing memory and recording history. The subaltern refers to those who hold less power within hierarchies, an example of which could include refugees and asylum seekers. This idea of power and who holds what kind of power is at the core of subaltern studies (Place & Ciszek 2021). This can be related back to the example from the work of Amponsah (2021), as this seeming erasure of a group is one that occurs as the subaltern is given limited space to speak and record their lived experiences.

Spivak (1988) discussed the context of Europe directly, in their pivotal work on the subaltern, noting the history of colonialism and the resulting production of the Other, historically non-white groups, as compared to the Subject of Europe. The long and continued history of colonialism and
racist structures and policies in Europe is often ignored and underestimated as people deny the category of race as being relevant in European contexts. This is discussed by Böröcz (2021), who outlines the construction of a racial hierarchy with whiteness in a place of privilege.

The racialized Other is furthermore often presented as a homogenous group, who are described in general terms as a unitary mass rather than as individuals with agency and unique voices. In counteracting this power and aiming to overcome inequalities, it is essential to focus on this idea of the value of ownership over one’s own story and narrative. Audra Simpson (2007) has explored the importance of this in terms of indigeneity and Indigenous voices, noting the importance of making space for Indigenous voices to narrate their own lived experiences and to challenge discourses that portray their lives as static and unchanging over time.

One way this is done is through the work of citizen journalists. Many students from ReFOCUS become citizen journalists, producing content through which they can challenge dominant external discourses about refugees. This role can be framed in terms of the idea of participation, as discussed by Barney et al. (2016), as citizen journalists participate in spheres that have often been dominated solely by the voices of those with power in mainstream media spaces.

**ReFOCUS Media Labs: ability, opportunity, and freedom**

ReFOCUS was started to support asylum seekers and refugees in gaining relevant media skills (ReFOCUS Media Labs n.d.). ReFOCUS’ founders note the importance of the potential impact of their work through ‘providing real skills that ensure real futures’ for their students (n.p ReFOCUS Media Labs n.d.) as well as by better preparing them for European job markets (ReFOCUS 2021). Students at ReFOCUS have noted the Media Labs as the most impactful part of their experience on Lesbos (Andrea 2022). Current and past students use the skills gained there to report on ongoing issues, such as the 2020 Moria Fire in Lesbos, where the work of ReFOCUS ‘citizen journalists’ was featured in a BBC feature, *Lesbos: who started the fire at Europe’s largest refugee camp?* (BBC News 2020). In addition, they support others, including potential future journalists, by sharing the skills they have developed through teaching others (Andrea 2022). Andrea (2022) wrote a feature for National Geographic on the work of ReFOCUS and noted the potential this work can have at a community level. One key example she gave was that of a woman who spoke of how she had been able to support other women who had escaped spaces where they were oppressed due to their gender and who continue to navigate male-dominated spaces. Students had the opportunity to navigate access where others could not when the Greek police were blocking other journalists at various times (Fallon & Froghi 2020). Students also have opportunity to create their own films (Andrea 2022). This has included the film *Nothing About*
Us Without Us, written, directed, and edited by two of ReFOCUS’ senior citizen journalists which serves as a call to the media to better engage with the communities that they report upon (ReFOCUS Media Labs n.d.).

Students have noted a gap in mainstream media, as they explained in an interview for Al Jazeera, due to the fact that when international journalists come and go, often only staying for a limited time on the island, they have a limited understanding of the context (Fallon & Froghi 2020). The students also noted in the same interview that these international journalists do still have an important role in sharing the news of what is happening in places that may otherwise not feature on an international scale with the world (Fallon & Froghi 2020). ReFOCUS forms a growing movement, having now graduated many classes, and is continuously increasing in size, having opened a second media lab as well as launching an online portal (ReFOCUS Media Labs n.d.).

**METHODOLOGY**

This research was undertaken with the goal of exploring the role of community-based media organizations in challenging dominant media discourses of migration and ‘the refugee’. This was done by carrying out an inductive thematic analysis of relevant secondary literature. Literature was found using the University College Dublin OneSearch portal (which was selected due to institutional access at the time of conducting this research) by searching the keyword combinations ‘Media’ + ‘Refugees’, ‘Reporting’ + ‘Refugees’, and ‘Story’ + ‘Refugees’. Sources were selected based on their relevance as outlined in their title, keywords, and abstracts. Additional sources were found in the reference lists of these initially selected works.

Key themes were identified from this literature. These themes were then used to examine the case study of ReFOCUS Media Labs. Their work was examined using the information found on their websites, including project descriptions, news reports, and the work of ReFOCUS students and citizen journalists. ReFOCUS was selected due to its relevance to this exploration of the role of community-based media groups. They operate at a community level and are committed to assisting their students to develop skills, including photography, audio and video production, graphic design, media editing, and computer skills, in order to better share their own stories and to improve their professional capital to enter the European job market (ReFOCUS Media Labs n.d.). Through capacity-strengthening and meaningful engagement, they aim to support their students, who additionally take on leadership roles as they learn and grow, including as teachers for future students. This discussion is further contextualized using relevant literature on subaltern studies, participatory media, and race.
ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Five key themes emerged from the literature that was selected: the role of framing narratives, the impact of technological advances, discussions related to the right to communicate, the notion of experts speaking on behalf of others, and the importance of ownership of one’s own narrative.

The media and migration: framing the refugee

Mainstream media is extremely powerful, having the potential to influence how people think about global topics (Parrott et al. 2019), create national consensus (Thomas 2011), identify problems and potential solutions (Boomgaard et al. 2018), and influence policy changes and implementation (Jelíñková 2019). Throughout history, mainstream media has influenced views on migration and continues to play a role in defining many common perceptions of ‘the refugee’ (Kotilainen & Pellander 2021).

Among the most common tactics employed in mainstream media are framing devices and narratives (Ng et al. 2021). Framing devices and narratives are tools used to contextualize an event or report, including metaphors or overarching themes, which can influence the perspectives and opinions of those engaging with this media. When considered through a historical analysis, as Kotilainen and Pellander (2021) did, representations of refugees have shifted as the groups who were migrating have changed, reflecting a racialized framing. Stark differences can be seen between historical reporting on white European refugees compared to refugees from non-white countries (Kotilainen & Pellander 2021). These racialized framings are often dominated by narratives constructing migration as a threat (Triandafyllidou 2018). This can be seen in the framing devices such as that of the ‘migrant crisis’ in Europe, which attaches the blame for this crisis to the ‘migrants’, as Horsti (2016) explores in her work on how the media witnesses and reports on migration. Framing has further included depictions of what it means to be a ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ refugee (Kotilainen & Pellander 2021; Marinescu & Balica 2021). Kotilainen and Pellander (2021) explore media creations and representations of figures such as the ‘smartphone-using refugee’ who have raised suspicions due to a public idea that anyone who can afford a phone cannot be a legitimate refugee. Another common rhetoric that can emerge because of these frameworks is the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ binary, which pits the citizen ‘us’ against the refugee Other, ‘them’ (Horsti 2013; Mannik 2012).

Visuals are a powerful element employed in media. The image can shift the focus of the story depending on what it depicts, including shaping the viewer’s emotional response (Parrott et al. 2019). While visual representations can have the potential to ignite responses, Malkki (1996) cautions, in their work on exploring the construction of refugees as Silent Emissaries, that visuals
can also have the impact of reinforcing notions of the voiceless refugee, as they are often pictured alongside a story and not necessarily with their own words. Szőrényi (2006) expands on this in their research on coffee table books depicting imagery of refugees and asylum seekers, noting that those who are visualized are often not intended to have their own narrative beyond how they are portrayed by the photographer.

**Emerging technologies**

Continued technological advances have resulted in an increase in the accessibility of communication channels. This is especially true through the smartphone, which has been heralded as a potentially empowering device for those attempting to claim asylum as it supports better communication options (Seurferling 2019). It has additionally created the ability to more readily document events, including human rights violations (Byrne 2015).

This leads to questions of whether these digital advances can open up more spaces for historically marginalized voices. Technological advances have created opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers to produce and share their own stories, including those that can challenge dominant stereotypes (Godin & Doná 2016). Furthermore, they have created opportunities for smaller organizations and citizens to get their work and information out alongside larger media groups (Hickerson & Dunsmore 2016). Since the accessibility to contribute to and participate in global news has increased exponentially, it has led to phenomena such as the rise of the citizen journalist (Horsti 2016).

While increases in technological capabilities have created opportunities for access and amplification, it is crucial to note that they can also have a negative and harmful impact on marginalized populations. These can include the increasing securitization and militarization of borders through the use of modern technologies (Leurs 2017). There is an additional risk of an increase in the amount of misinformation produced and shared, which can make navigating authenticity more difficult (Byrne 2015).

**The right to communicate**

Some academics have used their work to explore and advocate for the importance of the right to communication, particularly for displaced populations (Thomas 2011; Jack 2017; Leurs 2017). This argument can be positioned within the wider argument of the need to perceive refugees as legitimate subjects with rights and agency (Kotilainen & Pellander 2021). Communication rights can be situated within one’s more general social and cultural rights (Leurs 2017). While the right to communicate is not explicitly recognized as a human right, it is referred to and documented in
Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which outlines every person’s right to expression, opinion, information, and ideas (Jack 2017; Thomas 2011). Thomas (2011) refers to this in their work on the communication rights of refugees and other displaced groups, pointing to the need for access to channels of communication as a key part of this right. They further outline that displaced people and refugee groups should be represented in, and have access to and control over, their own media.

The reality for many refugees and other displaced groups living in refugee camps is that their access to information and communication channels is often controlled and limited by their environment, both through physical access (Jack 2017) and through restrictions imposed by camp administrative and management staff (Seuferling 2019). Further limitations can encroach on this right as people seeking protection are forced to self-censor their media use to ensure they do not share things that could be used against them during their asylum claims (Leurs 2017). While this right should be protected by the state, Thomas (2011) notes that in the absence of this, civil society actors should step in and take responsibility for protecting it.

**Examining the ‘refugee voice’: the phenomenon of ‘speaking on their behalf’**

Refugees’ voices have commonly been left out of dominant media narratives about them (Jack 2017; Bosch et al. 2019) as the refugee is often presented as a wordless and silent figure (Malkki 1996). Even at pro-refugee protests, the voices commonly featured are not those of the refugees, but they are rather again rendered this seemingly voiceless figure (Chouliaraki & Stolic 2017). In these spaces, people still commonly speak up and speak out on behalf of refugees (Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017). Similarly, refugees and asylum seekers are not given much space to speak in many media discourses and are generally placed as the subject of narratives, rather than as active agents (Bosch et al. 2019).

In dominant media narratives, as Malkki (1996) discusses, it is again common to hear someone speak on behalf of refugee populations as a so-called ‘expert’. This can lead to the reproduction of dominant knowledge and viewpoints through the often-Western expert testimony (Rajaram 2002). Refugee voices are additionally often excluded in academic and policy discourses (Sigona 2014) as well as throughout ‘mainstream historiography’ (Gatrell 2016). Even when their voice is included, it is often not given the same weight as the voices of others (Georgiou 2018). Horsti (2013) noted a difference in how various voices were included in the media in Finland in her research on the role of refugees in Finnish media. She found that when local Finnish supporters were quoted, they were referred to as experts, while asylum seekers who were quoted only had their voices used to express emotions or to thank supporters.
In Nikunen’s (2016) work on Badolato, a town in Italy which was commended across media platforms for the welcoming environment it created for asylum seekers, they noted that the voices of these asylum seekers who were being welcomed were often excluded from these accounts, with their actual experiences in this town going largely undocumented. Malkki (1996) further outlines that in the case of Rwanda, the voices of refugees that were included in dominant narratives and reports were sometimes quoted out of context to better fit the story that was being told by those in positions of power. A similar finding came out of Rajaram’s (2002) paper where they explored an Oxfam project which had the goal of ‘Listening to the Displaced’ yet continuously adapted the voices included to meet their own agenda.

While this portrayal of refugees posits them as voiceless, this gives an inaccurate view of refugees’ reality. The common idea of ‘giving voice to the voiceless’ ignores the reality of people who are silent not due to a lack of a voice, but rather due to their having been oppressed and kept quiet by historical structures (Malkki 1996). It is important to note the multiplicity of reasons someone may stay silent, including reasons as simple as not being ready or not wanting to share one’s own story (Bycel 2019). This multiplicity is crucial to understand and acknowledge in order to better break down the binary of voice versus silence (Sigona 2014).

**Ownership over one’s own narrative**

Much of what is written regarding the inclusion of refugee voices focuses simply on their participation and does not challenge the system they have to participate within (Bosch et al. 2019). When refugee voices are included, they will often still be managed or owned by another as their voices and experiences are curated through another person choosing the sound bites (Bishop 2018) or captioning the image (Szörényi 2006) to fit their vision. Refugees are often presented as a homogenous group with a narrative created for them that may be external to their actual lived experiences.

This can be contrasted with the work of refugees in telling their own stories on their terms, as was seen in the case of the Walnut. The Walnut was a ship carrying a displaced group in which passengers took pictures of their experiences on board, resulting in a collection that showcases a unique perspective on being a refugee and on the collective experience on the ship (Mannik 2012). Young Congolese refugees abroad also took ownership of telling their stories and shared their work with people back home to promote mutual empowerment and collaboration between diaspora groups and those who had remained in their home country (Godin & Doná 2016). These examples show cases in which refugees used their voices, took ownership of their narratives, and worked to fight against dominant narratives and stereotypes (Ryu & Tuvilla 2018).
Meaningful engagement can be said to go beyond simply participation to include equitable partnerships. When given opportunities to engage with mainstream media channels, refugees and asylum seekers can challenge dominant constructed representations of migration and ‘the refugee’ (Godin & Doná 2016). Power dynamics need to be addressed and dismantled, and in the case of the media, refugees and asylum seekers need to be able to present themselves as citizens and professionals on their terms and on their own merit (Chouliaraki & Stolic 2017).

Here it is important to tie in discussions regarding consent, and particularly informed consent, as often the quotes and images and stories that are selected to be shared are chosen without adequately consulting the people whose experience is being shared.

**DISCUSSION**

ReFOCUS supports their students through skill and network building, thereby increasing their access and abilities to share their own stories with a wide audience. The work of these students as citizen journalists has many crucial benefits. These include access to populations where others sometimes cannot go and a better contextual awareness compared to international journalists who often come and go without fully understanding the local context and dynamics (Fallon & Froghi 2020). Actors from within a population have critical understandings of navigating the context they live in, with ReFOCUS students noting, for example, the importance of consent and how this consent is often not gained by external journalists, even for children (Fallon & Froghi 2020). This is especially relevant when adopting a subaltern viewpoint, as consent is inherently impacted by power dynamics. When consent is under-achieved by these journalists, it reinforces the image of the photographed subject as the voiceless Other.

A further opportunity is presented here to challenge the common dynamic where marginalized groups, such as displaced populations, are expected to repay the resources they are given, including humanitarian aid, by sharing their stories and images to be used by others for their purposes such as fundraising and advocacy (Eade 2007). The work of ReFOCUS helps to break down this power imbalance by giving people opportunities to access and improve upon their skills, networks, and opportunities to tell stories on their own terms.

By engaging with and creating space for more voices to be highlighted and heard, persisting stereotypes and misconceptions can be challenged and even dismantled. This includes challenging the image of the voiceless refugee victim in favor of an active, right-bearing citizen journalist. Former ReFOCUS students have added to this conversation about the need for better engagement with their film *Nothing About Us Without Us*. This film can be argued to add to the calls for an
end to this presentation of refugees and asylum seekers as a voiceless and homogeneous mass in favor of recognizing individuality and varying lived experiences. This is not to say that displaced populations do not have shared experiences nor to deny the value in recognizing these, but rather to recognize that within these shared experiences and beyond the numbers and dominant narratives exist numerous individual stories and experiences (Bycel 2019).

Refugees have often been used as a symbol by others, for instance in media discourses or political campaigns, instead of being taken as human beings (Szörényi 2006). This can be tied to continued colonial power structures as well as racialization, which are reflected in the media as Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) note in the case of the United Kingdom. Ammaturo (2019) further explores these continued colonial structures and the hegemonic dominance of whiteness in Europe, writing about this same dehumanization of refugees and migrants across European migration ‘hotspots’, where many people are stuck waiting for asylum decisions.

One area that needs improvement in addressing these continued power structures is the need for a better effort to not fall into the trope of ‘giving voices to the voiceless’. Similarly it is important to not frame the work of ReFOCUS through the notion of giving skills to the unskilled. These ideas of voiceless and unskilled populations of refugees and asylum seekers further reflect social constructions of a seemingly powerless refugee figure. This is not to say that ReFOCUS frames their work as such, but rather to warn against a too-common narrative that appears in mainstream spaces. Where the work of ReFOCUS is important is in helping their students to overcome barriers to participation by providing them with learning and educational opportunities (Andrea 2022) and connecting them for potential partnerships with professionals and major media networks including BBC (ReFOCUS Media Labs 2020). These help to address the disconnect between the mainstream media and refugee citizen journalists.

The importance of this participation can be related back to the work of Barney et al. (2016) where they note the importance of participating, for instance as a citizen journalist, as a valuable resource in society. Thomas (2011) argues in their work on the communication rights of refugees and other displaced groups that it is important for civil society to intervene and take responsibility when these rights are not being sufficiently protected. The work of ReFOCUS again can be identified to support this right to communicate for their students.

These opportunities for participation, as supported by ReFOCUS, also create spaces for refugee voices to be involved in the documentation of collective memories through their inclusion in mainstream media practices, as well as their work on documentaries and films. This brings back the argument of the importance of having ownership over one’s own story. The ability to tell
one’s own story on one’s own terms is crucial to gaining power and challenging dominant stereotypes that can oppress. This is true for producing memory, and for how stories are remembered, as well as for challenging the dominance of Western knowledge. When expert voices are allowed to speak ‘on behalf’ of refugees and asylum seekers, this not only reinforces the idea of the silent refugee figure but also leads to the erasure of other forms and methods of knowledge (Malkki 1996; Aridici 2022). When discussing this idea of producing memories, it is important to acknowledge that dominant histories and those produced in mainstream channels, such as in mainstream media, often reflect the histories of those in power rather than being representative of objective historiography. These histories and collective memories can be constructed and framed in a way that can take or give more power to groups (as Simpson (2007) notes is the case for Indigenous peoples) and can even erase subaltern classes, as has sometimes been the case for refugees in dominant historical accounts.

Students reported feeling empowered through their work with ReFOCUS. One student noted that even though she could not speak the language of those around her, she now felt she could express herself to a wider audience through her pictures of what was occurring around her (ReFOCUS 2021). Language barriers often persist as an issue for preventing inclusion and access to spaces for those who do not hold skills in the dominant language (e.g. Parham 2004). Others discussed the importance of supporting other women in a male-dominated profession (Andrea 2022). One student at ReFOCUS discussed her work related to this topic, noting that her film Speak Up Loud was made to support women to move away from traditional gender-based roles (Andrea 2022). Through their involvement in ReFOCUS, students are encouraged to engage with their refugee experience as something that gives them an important perspective on and knowledge about the situations of other people who have been forcibly displaced (Ryu & Tuvilla 2018). An increase in the accessibility of digital platforms has also further increased the ability of people, including refugees and asylum seekers, to have their voices amplified through social media (Godin and Doná 2016).

Media discourses provide an opportunity to further perpetuate or challenge stereotypes such as that of the smartphone-using refugee figure, which has been used to reflect and perpetuate suspicions relating to the deservingness of a person who can afford a phone yet is seeking protection (Kotilainen & Pellander 2021). This re-framing can take place as the smartphone-using refugee instead is the one who is reporting on their own experiences and the experiences of those around them and is sharing their knowledge and insights through their access to technology. ReFOCUS’ work can be seen to challenge this link between access to technology and the un-
deserving refugee, instead presenting this access to technology as an opportunity to connect and engage.

In looking toward improving journalism and mainstream media practices and making them more ethical, points raised have included the importance of visibility, voice, and context (Horsti 2016). ReFOCUS began with a focus on skill-building and training to fill the gap in educational opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers to gain employable skills in European job markets. A major part of their work which has emerged is the creation of opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers to report on their own lives and the challenges they face individually and as a wider refugee community in Greece (Fallon & Froghi 2020). This has included students who continue to share updates on their situation and to advocate for the need for change as mainstream media sources shift their focus away.

**Limitations**

The clearest limitation of this study is that it has been conducted using only secondary data and without actively consulting with refugees or people with experience of forced displacement themselves. As this article has outlined, it is crucial to engage with and include the voices and experiences of those with lived experience of any topic that is being discussed. This article has not yet fully engaged with this process of inclusion. This is primarily due to a lack of availability and representation in academia on this topic. This brings up the ongoing issues of access to academia and the barriers to this access, including time, finances, and the continued need to better decolonize western educational institutions. It is thus important when engaging with this article to keep in mind it has the potential to reproduce dominant western knowledge and perspectives without adequately engaging with alternative perspectives that challenge them.

The role of the researcher here is one of an investigating subject, as introduced by Spivak (1988) in their included work on the subaltern. As Spivak writes, the intellectual, or academic, can play a role in helping to create spaces and improving access for more representative voices to be included and amplified in spheres they may not currently have, or have only limited, access to.

**Recommendations**

The role of community-based media in amplifying marginalized voices has shown potential and further research on the role of refugees in relation to the media should focus on this and aim to engage and highlight refugee voices. Within academia, there are opportunities to expand and improve upon this research by first engaging more directly with the voices of people with lived experience. It could also be beneficial to further engage with the ideas of the subaltern. The work
of Spivak and similar thinkers could provide interesting analyses and ideas for challenging and breaking down continued power hierarchies, especially those related to colonialism and racism.

Mainstream media organizations and actors need to critically examine the way in which they engage with and tell the stories of those who they report on, with a particular focus on acknowledging and challenging persisting power dynamics and dominant framing tools. With technological advances, in particular the smartphone, come increased opportunities to engage with people currently experiencing forced displacement in order to improve the representation of who is seen and heard within mainstream media. Practitioners would do well to remember the importance of supporting local actors and to resist speaking in place of those with lived experience in an ‘expert’ role. They should rather aim to highlight and amplify the work, voices, and lived experiences of refugees and asylum seekers themselves. Finally, to better commit to prioritizing communication rights for all people, it is crucial to provide more opportunities for participation in mainstream media settings. This is especially important when looking at the role media can play in producing collective memories and avoiding the erasure of the lived experiences of refugees and asylum seekers.

CONCLUSION

The importance of the work of community-based media groups such as ReFOCUS has been argued to be crucial both in challenging dominant narratives of migration and ‘the refugee’, as well as in creating more spaces and opportunities for those with relevant lived experience to contribute to mainstream media discourses. This is especially important when looking at the role of the media in influencing public opinions and in producing collective memories. This is not to say that there is no value in international reporting and mainstream media, but rather that there is a need to challenge and complement these voices with the voices of people with lived experience who are often excluded from dominant discourses. Furthermore, there is a need to give them power over how their stories are shared and framed in the world. Current media practices tend to reproduce dominant narratives, knowledge, and beliefs when left unchallenged. The work of citizen journalists and groups such as ReFOCUS is crucial to challenging these hegemonic systems to create a more inclusive and representative media narrative. Mainstream media needs to better commit to including and amplifying voices from the populations they report on, and, as Bosch et al. (2019) note, they need to keep discussing migration, but additionally first and foremost they must let refugees and asylum seekers speak.
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