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In their shoes? Categorizing identities and creating citizens in refugee reality TV

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Abstract
The so-called migration crisis in Europe is not only covered by serious informative genres such as news and documentaries, but has also been the topic of entertainment genres such as reality TV. This article focuses on two cases of European 'refugee' reality TV in which European participants embark on a 'reversed' refugee journey: from the Netherlands and Germany, respectively, to war-torn countries in Africa and the Middle East. Despite the shows' claims to fulfill an important function of educating the broader public about the hardship and plight experienced by refugees in Europe, the construction and conception of collective cultural identities in these shows warrants closer analysis. Through an interpretative textual analysis of the series, we investigate how civil belonging is mapped and constructed by the series as a range of different subject positions on refugees and civic responsibility toward refugees. This study problematizes the manner in which a plurality of voices is accommodated in contemporary European liberal democratic society and how cultural forms such as reality TV function normatively as a technology of citizenship.

Keywords
Cultural citizenship, docutainment, entertainment, migration, reality television, refugees

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Introduction

In 2015, more than a million refugees[1] entered Europe (Eurostat, 2018), while thousands lost their lives on their journey to Europe (UNHCR, 2018). Media coverage of this process increased significantly after August 2015, framing it as a European migration and refugee crisis of unprecedented proportions (De Genova and Tazzioli, 2016; Kehr, 2015). Although this human mobility crisis started before 2015, it was already a crisis in humanitarian terms before it became framed as a migrant (later refugee) 'crisis' in the media (cf. Goodman et al., 2017), adding yet another dimension of crisis to the general image of Europe and the European Union under duress (cf. Tazzioli and De Genova, 2016).

Media attention of a very different kind had been given to the plight of refugees in the format of reality television (TV) several years earlier. In 2011, the Australian broadcaster, Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) aired a three-part program *Go Back to Where You Came From*. It was created in the wake of much public attention for, and resistance against, growing numbers of Asian refugees attempting to enter Australia. The rights of this TV format were sold to a number of countries, leading to similar programs being produced in Europe during recent years.[2] In Europe, the reception of the series has been rather diverse (cf. Nikunen, 2016). In Germany, for example, this ranged from a public petition to stop broadcasting the series[3] to symbolic capital being bestowed on the same series in the form of a German TV prize for the 'best docutainment' in 2013.

Strikingly, both the German version, *Auf der Flucht – das Experiment* (hereafter *AdF*) and the Dutch series *Rot op naar je Eigen Land* (hereafter *RO*), we argue, explicitly stated that their aim with the series was to 'do good' (cf. Nikunen, 2016) and clearly utilized a frame of 'good intentions' as background to producing the shows. Andrea Eisel, deputy managing editor of the German broadcaster ZDFneo, explained that she was 'surprised by the fierceness of the public reactions' against *AdF*, but that she thinks that the genre and its emotionalizing strategy are a suitable way of addressing an 'emotional' topic (Spoerl, 2013). The show's host, Daniel Gerlach, likewise stated on the ZDF website that the aim of the show was to initiate discussions and give small insights into the lives of refugees. In the case of *RO*, the broadcaster Evangelisch Omroep[4] posed a series of questions, presumably ventriloquizing the viewpoint of the 'average' Dutch citizen, which the series set as a task to answer: should the Netherlands open its borders or send all refugees home? Are refugees a threat to 'our' society or is it 'our' duty as a 'civilized' country to take in people who have had to leave their own country? (EO (Evangelische Omroep), 2015).[5] This specific, politicized stance of the series was also underlined in the question the Dutch program asked about whether the participants of the show will retain their prejudice/judgment (introducing a play on the Dutch word [*voor*]*oordeel*) or whether the experiences of the participants will lead to a particular change of mind because, as the Dutch program stated, 'if a societal problem is given a face, it becomes hard to keep thinking in one-liners' (TV Gids, 2015).[6]

The two shows largely follow comparable narrative structures. The four-episode German *AdF* first aired in August 2013. It starts with a short boot camp experience, after which the six participants – divided into two teams – are sent on a 'reversed' route. That is, instead of departing from Iraq and Eritrea, they start their journey in Germany and are meant to complete their journeys in Iraq and Eritrea.[7] During their travels, the participants meet two

different refugee families in their homes in Germany – a family who fled from Iraq and another one who fled from Eritrea – as well as other refugees in detention centers.

The first season of the Dutch version, *RO*, aired in January 2015. During four episodes, a group of six Dutch participants trace the imagined, inverse route of a potential refugee from the Netherlands to a large refugee camp in Jordan over a period of 3 weeks.[8] Similar to their German counterparts, the participants also meet and engage with different migrants and refugees on their journey. Moreover, in both series, the participants meet a number of other persons, such as smugglers and police in different countries in search for 'illegal' immigrants.

Both series thus joined the debate on refugees coming to and being in Europe, and seem to have taken onto themselves the political function of reshaping ignorant and intolerant public attitudes by means of reality TV into more informed, accommodating and accepting perspectives toward refugees.

Research question and methodology

Utilizing reality TV to governmentalize viewers rather than only entertaining them, is a good example of a broader move in the entertainment industry to utilize reality TV for reproducing some kind of social order (Skeggs and Wood, 2012: 28) – often one that is deemed as 'empowering' for 'ordinary' people (Carpentier, 2010: 85). Following Ouellette and Hay's (2008) notion of reality TV as a 'technology of citizenship', we asked ourselves how this instrumentalization of reality TV as a form of governance that construct the 'rules' of 'everyday life' (Ouellette and Hay, 2008: 8) works in the case of *AdF* and *RO*. In this reproduced social order, what kind of citizen is being created by this series' discourse? How are participants (and viewers – by implication) challenged about their thinking regarding migrants and refugees? Is this 'citizenship work' also directed toward the migrants and refugees who appear in the series and if so, how? How are categories of belonging (a key issue with regard to citizenship) constructed through the series? In our analysis of the series, we focus on these issues by starting with the idea that reality TV is a technology that governs individuals into specific ideological positions as citizens with regard to refugees and ask how the two series function as such: what civic virtues are transmitted through these series? Who may claim belonging to the civil community defined by these virtues?

We approached these questions by conducting a critical, qualitative textual analysis of the two series in the cultural–critical tradition (cf. Fürsich, 2009), in order to understand how the series 'tell their stories, how they represent the world, and how they make sense of it' (McKee, 2003: 17). After viewing the episodes, we gathered additional data such as producers' comments and viewers' reactions to the series from news and social media. These additional sources were included as research material in order to understand the 'sense-making potential' of the series (Mikos, 2016) and keeping in mind that '[r]eality TV [. . .] does not just consist of programme texts but also of the entire discursive field that surrounds them' (Kavka, 2012: 2). For us, the 'sense-making potential' of the series is tied to the fact that the series themselves and how these have been reacted to, make acutely visible the border work related to belonging and identity. We repeatedly viewed the episodes (eight in total, four episodes of *AdF* and four of *RO*) to identify themes (of each episode and across episodes) related to issues of subject formation, identity and

belonging. We took detailed viewing notes on the discursive formation and performance of subjectivity and identity and shared these notes with each other for review and comments in order to make our assumptions and interpretations explicit (cf. Braun and Clarke, 2006: 78). Our aim is to investigate the (discursive) formation of refugee and non-refugee subjectivity as claims about and constructions of identity and belonging – in short – as claims to citizenship. The themes we identified and focus on in our analysis relate to these constructions of identities and belonging and conceptions of citizenship.

The argument in this article is structured as follows: first, we follow Ouellette and Hay's (2008) claim that reality TV works as a 'technology of citizenship' as starting point for our theoretical framework. In the subsequent analysis and discussion of the two series, we consider the kind of citizen that is being constructed through these series: what are the different subject positions and civic virtues with regard to refugees being created discursively by the series? In order to do so, we looked at the particular consequences of identity construction in these series and argue that the series function as a technology of citizenship in two ways: one way is by debunking claims by citizens that the presence of non-citizens threatens their rights and sense of sociopolitical belonging, and second by giving voice to social subjects, and by doing so, actively construes the category of 'citizen' as a rights-bearing (i.e. political) social subject. However, we also find, in concurrence with Skeggs and Wood (2012), that the normative, governance approach to reality TV, which initially informed our analysis, is insufficient to explain the effect and outcome of a second way in which the series can be seen to work as 'technology of citizenship', namely by enabling political agency and civic subjectivity. We will argue that this second function rather points toward the enabling nature of series like these to produce sites of the public sphere where political talk and resultantly political subject formation (partly) takes place. We conclude, however, that this aspect of the series is less inclusive and agentive than the series seem to have intended.

Theoretical framework: reality TV, citizenship and the construction of subjects

In line with industry developments in recent years, it is difficult to simply describe the two series, as both constitute a mix of various genres: reality TV, documentary and travel program (cf. Kavka, 2012: 2) in order to present factual content in an infotainment manner (cf. Hill, 2007). Being based on the same original format, both series are structured more or less in the same way. First, an introduction of the episode's topic is given, presented as a challenge by the host, and then second, a narration of the experiences of the group during this challenge, which is often accompanied with suggestive music as soundtrack. The third element is the individual or group reflection on the experience or challenge and finally an introduction to a new experience or challenge. The final episodes concluded both series with a debriefing of the participants at the fictive starting point of the refugee route they have retraced. Although the 'reality' claim in the genre's name poses important questions about the nature of this reality, it is the genre's nonfictionality and unscripted nature that provides the apparently fascinating and popular blend of entertainment and documentary that suggests to the viewer to have 'unmediated, voyeuristic' access to 'authentic personalities, situations, problems and narratives' (Ouellette and Murray, 2009: 5; see also Deery, 2015).

By including refugee testimonies and making explicit the hardship and precariousness of refugee lives, both series seek to effectuate changing attitudes toward refugees in a European context: not only in terms of the participants but also to achieve a similar kind of attitude change among viewers of the series (cf. Cover, 2013). Seen as such, this kind of reality TV functions as a technology of citizenship, as Ouellette and Hay (2008) explain. They see TV formats such as reality TV not as a semiotic system of representation (e.g. who is represented and how and to what effect?), but rather as resources or types of technology that can be and are used to manage citizens. Reality TV is, as they explain, 'a cultural technology that, working outside "public powers", governmentalizes by presenting individuals and populations as objects of assessment and intervention, and by soliciting their participation in the cultivation of particular habits, ethics, behaviors, and skills' (p. 13). Reality TV thus functions as a kind of school in which participants are expected to learn the rules of 'individual and group governance'. That is to say: they learn 'how to behave as individuals and members of social groups' (p. 4) in such a way that 'the rights and differences of all citizens should be respected' (pp. 170–171). Ouellette and Hay define this as a form of 'neoliberal citizenship': the receding state delegates many of its responsibilities to the market and the individual. One area in which this delegated responsibility may be found is that of public anti-discrimination programs. Although Ouellette and Hay focus on the United States in their study, their argument remains valid in the case of Europe (the Netherlands and Germany): in *RO* and *AdF*, anti-discrimination training has been packaged in the form of a televised, entertaining and sensationalist (travel) challenge.

Ouellette and Hay point out that the conventions of reality TV orchestrate an individual to work on himself or herself 'in the interest of the group – which can involve cooperating with others, becoming more tolerant, and adjusting behavior and expectations'. (p. 8) What our reading of the two series makes evident, however, is that the category of citizen – the implied group membership through political subjectivity – is itself contentious and at stake, and furthermore that the series do not only function as a means to *create a certain kind of virtuous citizen*, but in fact (attempts to) allow individuals to *perform* as political subjects in ordinary, everyday politics. Both series make evident that there is political and ideological contestation about how to behave as 'citizens' toward refugees, and that membership of who constitutes a citizen is not something that *is*, but which is discursively claimed and constructed. This insight highlights the important role played by entertainment media, and confirms its mediating function in making visible what Carpentier (2011) calls the 'participatory process' (p. 109) of media: it shows not only the 'discourses on participation and power' but also the 'failures and constraints' of this process in terms of whom it includes and excludes as *participants* in this process. Much attention has been given to the *performance* of ordinary members of the public as participants in reality TV formats (Hill, 2005), but it remains important to point out that participants are of course far from a homogeneous group themselves, constituting a diversity of intersectional and cross-cutting social identities (Skeggs and Wood, 2012).

Our analysis below explains that these series certainly function as a (normative) technology of citizenship that educates participants in proper civic behavior and position-taking. However, our analysis also points out that these series are instrumental to facilitating political agency and subjectivity (to be recognized as a citizen who has the

right to claim rights) among 'ordinary people' (cf. Clarke, 2013). Indeed, scholarship on reality TV has also been pointing toward the genre's instrumental role in creating and mediating the public sphere in order for ordinary citizens to publicly express themselves as participants in political debate (Dahlgren, 2005; Lunt, 2013) and facilitating the political engagement of viewers (Graham and Hajru, 2011). This holds not only for the European participants, who comment and reflect on their simulated refugee experience and relate this to the experiences of refugees, but also for the refugees themselves, who have been given a voice in the series, and by implication political agency and subjectivity (Couldry, 2010). By means of this second function as technology of citizenship, these two examples of reality TV enabled participants and viewers to act as citizens through political participation in the form of everyday political talk, which Graham (2015) defines as the free and open communicative engagement by citizens with relevant societal and political issues and through which citizens achieve 'mutual understandings about each other and the political and societal problems (and solutions) they face' p. 250). In our analysis, we will focus on the consequences of this everyday political talk for the kind of citizenship and political subjectivity that the series enabled.

Discussion: identity and a plurality of voices

The explicit and outspoken, opposing views of the contestants (and viewers) on the refugee issue, the morphing of harrowing experiences of refugees into entertainment and competition, and the reversed experience of refugee trajectories by European citizens pose important questions in relation to the construction of 'citizenship'. How is the category of 'citizen' constructed and how is it filled with content? How are social identities and subject positions constructed in the series, and what do these imply in terms of membership and belonging to civil, national or cultural collectivities? How does the issue of voice (having a voice, being heard) relate to the process of claiming rights from a particular subject position? In the following discussion, we will consider two ways in which the series function as technology of citizenship and examine how they construe collective identity and employ voice as the articulation of specific political subjectivity.

AdF and RO as a technology of citizenship to debunk concerns

The notion of citizenship conventionally indicates specific political rights and duties bestowed on and expected from individuals within the confines of the state (cf. Isin and Turner, 2002). However, it also relates to matters of collective belonging and identification and is thus linked to the issue of identity (cf. Dahlgren, 2006; Isin and Saward, 2013; Stevenson, 2003a; Van Zoonen, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006). From the start of the two series, emphasis is placed on the establishment of particular identity categories. As the German series' subtitle of 'experiment' suggests, these identities are constructed tentatively in the form of a 'a try-out', and conducted in the relative isolation of a laboratory, or more precisely a 'civic' laboratory, following Ouellette and Hay, where 'human subjects are tested on their ability to master certain technologies of citizenship, and to fashion themselves in relation to particular civic virtues' (p. 16).

However, unlike the German series' rather non-committal titular reference to conducting an experiment from the perspective of fleeing refugees, the Dutch series' title suggests a seemingly more confident position toward what is seen as established identity categories: someone addresses refugees through a clear imperative: 'get lost'[9] to 'your own country'. The Dutch series' title follows in a much more expletive manner the idea of 'going back' that had been put forward by the Australian series (*Go Back to Where You Came From*). It might, given the series' frame of 'good intentions', have been an ironical attempt, despite the obvious absence of quotation marks, to uncover and expose Dutch intolerance toward migrants. This intolerance is most explicitly formulated in the statements by some of the participants about the importance and need to close national and European borders for (all) migrants and refugees.[10] From the start, therefore, a frame is established that distinguishes between 'us' and 'them', 'here and there', 'ours and theirs' and positioned within a specific, national context. In fact, as Griffiths (2015) argues, 'the migrant as Non-Citizen has been crucial to the definition of the Citizen. Demarcating categories of Non-Citizen serves to mark the boundaries of belonging and the national community from the outside' (p. 72).

The first way in which both series work as a technology of citizenship is by debunking some of the concerns that inform a sense of threat that many citizens – also some of the participants to the two series – feel with regard to refugees. These myths function as demarcation lines between citizen and non-citizen that are maintained and kept in place as various ill-informed concerns formulated by some of the European participants in the series against refugees. In our analysis of the series, we identified three such demarcation lines or concerns that are held against the light by the series for critical scrutiny and reconsideration: concerns over losing privileges related to the welfare state, concerns toward (cultural) otherness and concerns related to cultural identities that may result in exclusive, nativist nationalism.

A first concern expressed by certain participants refers to specific rights that are bestowed on citizens, in particular the effect of refugee accommodation on the (national) welfare state and social security issues. This concern is expressed as a fear for losing these rights, such as housing and unemployment support, that (tax-paying) citizens may face because of these newly arrived, but destitute people, who make a demand on and are dependent on state welfare support, even though they have not contributed to it themselves, nor are officially recognized as members of that society, in the sense of having formal citizenship. In the case of *RO*, this concern is formulated by comments (not only by participants, but also in the questions posed to viewers) that refer to refugees as 'fortune seekers' and as people who 'steal' 'our' jobs. In fact, the concern for the effect and impact of refugees and migrants on the national context has been cast in 'securitization' policies, a discourse about illegality and criminality of refugees and migrants (De Genova, 2016; Griffiths, 2015) and 'deserving' and 'undeserving' refugees (Holmes and Castañeda, 2016). The series, in its attempt at critically scrutinizing these exclusionary concerns, put the participants through specific securitization practices enabled by these policies (detention, fingerprint control, police checks, the criminalization of illegal residence, etc.) to experience the humiliating and dehumanizing effects of these practices. The series thus offer a critical perspective on these practices that frame migrants and refugees as non-deserving outsiders who pose a security risk to European society.

Participants also experience the meager living conditions in refugee shelters, both in various European locations and in the Middle East, which may be read as attempts by the producers of both programs to bust popular myths about the generous material and financial state support to refugees.

A second dominant line of thinking among participants with regard to refugees is a concern about the cultural effects of (Muslim) refugees and migrants on 'Christian' and liberal cultural values of Europe. This subtext is evident especially in the confrontation by Dutch/German participants with different cultural habits and traditions of migrants and refugees from different cultural backgrounds (such as eating *halaal* meat in *RO*, or different habits of using the bathroom in *AdF*). The series, in their attempt to 'do good' and debunk common myths that feed fear among many citizens about refugees, explore these lines through the various interactions and experiences that the participants have with the refugees and migrants they encounter on their journey.

It is within this context of nationally established categories of 'us and them' that a third line of concern, that of an exclusive cultural identity, or Dutchness and Germanness, is established. In the first episode of *RO*, one participant (Sandra) complains about *habbi-babbis*, whereupon she is challenged to be more specific about whom she is talking about: who is a habbi-babbi – a foreigner, someone wearing a headscarf, a Moroccan, a non-white? She responds by saying: 'Everything (sic) with a bit of colour'. In the one-on-one (participant before the camera) quickly following this conversation, Yernaz (who has a Surinamese background) says that he would never identify himself as 'habbi-babbi'. To him, the whole distinction between 'white and non-white is very stupid'. Sandra's way of classifying people of color as a collective 'other' – opposing presumably a category of 'self' that relates to Dutchness or possibly even Europeanness, drew much viewer attention, which implies contestation of and reflection about categories of self and other and understandings of belonging.[11] In *AdF*, remarks about racism and prejudices pertaining to race are discussed frequently among the participants and reveal the extent to which this identity marker functions to include and exclude. One participant, Kevin, remarks that he automatically thinks about AIDS in relation to people of color, another participant, Stephan, mentions his experiences with right-wing radicals as a former member of the band Böhse Onkelz, and during his testimonial, a former refugee, Salomon, explains that he explicitly does not want to live in the East of Germany because of the threat of racism. Moreover, fear of over-foreignization (German: *Angst vor Überfremdung*)[12] gets some space in the discussion, also through one participant's remarks of being a supporter of Thilo Sarrazin, who in 2010 published a controversial book, in which he argues that Germany does away with itself by (among other things) increasing immigration from Muslim countries. In the opening sequence to the series participant, Katrin, states that she agrees with Sarrazin's theses.

These examples of explicit and implicit constructions of cultural and national identity and belonging have at their core a pressing question: the issue of including more recent arrivals to states (migrants or former refugees) into these collectivities grouped around notions of culture and nation. Although it is not the aim of this discussion to go deeper into this topic, the abundance and productivity of current (neo)nativist and xenophobic definitions of citizenship and national belonging is evident in our current context, characterized by the extensive mobility of people (cf. Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). Evidence

of the extent of this discussion are a number of recent publications that critically look at exclusive racial and ethnic categories, cultural identity and identification processes in both countries (see, for example, Do Mar Castro Varela and Mecheril, 2016; El-Tayeb, 2016; Essed and Hoving, 2014; Hondius, 2014; Marschke and Brinkmann, 2015; Wekker, 2016). Also on a European level, the problematic association of a particular race (whiteness) with conceptions of European and national identity has gained new currency (see, for example, De Genova, 2016 and also Weber, 2016).

As a technology of citizenship, these series normatively governmentalize by educating the participants and viewers of the shows into particularly positioned political subjects whose knowledge and firsthand experience of the refugee situation are altered. The participants were, through their exposure to refugees and refugee experiences and additional information provided by the series' hosts and other individuals, worked on to adjust their own opinions and concerns with regard to refugees, as the intermediate exchanges between participants and hosts, and the final debriefing at the end of both series demonstrate. It is, however, evident from audience reactions that the right to define what is considered to be an acceptable opinion for citizens with regard to refugees is contested. Concerning *RO*, a member of parliament of the PVV raised the question of why public money is spent on a program that attempts to change only the minds of PVV voters on the topic of admitting refugees into the Netherlands (Tweede Kamer der Staten – Generaal, 2014). Such a critical response makes clear the struggle for the symbolic power to categorize people – as Dutch, as German, as European or as (former) refugees, 'deserving' migrants, or as strangers. The question by the PVV member furthermore implies resistance against the governmentalizing of (some part of) the audience, for whom the series were produced in the first place. Careful analysis of the audience's 'political talk' about these series might provide further useful insight in this regard but is beyond the scope of this article.

AdF and RO as a technology of citizenship that broadcasts a plurality of voices

As we have argued above, reality TV as a technology of citizenship clearly works toward instilling particular, normative points of view and behavior (civic virtue) toward migrants and refugees coming to Europe in the participants (and viewers). As technology of citizenship, the series not only present, scrutinize and attempt to influence the behavior and attitudes of participants (and audience) toward refugees, but also function as a technology that discursively constructs the category of citizenship itself by giving 'voice' to social subjects as rights-bearing political subjects. Membership, or lack thereof, of this category of rights-bearing subjects has far-reaching implications for belonging and identity. As we have seen above, the series work not only by addressing the demarcation lines running between citizens and refugees, but also by creating citizenship, in the sense implied by Isin (2008) as an act that entails the demand to have one's claim to specific rights recognized: to 'enact oneself as a citizen involves transforming oneself from a subject into a claimant' (p. 18) of particular civic rights. Citizenship, from this point of view, is no longer seen as having the status that allows one to claim certain rights and requires certain duties from the individual because of specific membership of a

collectivity, but rather the process through which rights and recognition are claimed by taking a specific subject position *as* a particular subject. One way through which this position-taking takes place is by having 'a voice' (Couldry, 2010).

The process of having a voice – a crucial element in both series – is complementary to the process described above, where participants and viewers are nudged to consider refugees and migrants not (or no longer) as criminals and fortune-seekers, but as fellow humans in precarious situations. Throughout the series, the participants meet a range of 'others' and 'strangers', who are given the opportunity to recount (to some extent) parts of their (life) narratives: former and current refugees, and interestingly, also other individuals (such as border police, smugglers and volunteers in refugee camps). This recounting of seldom-heard (life) narratives gives people whose voices are mainly absent from mainstream media a chance to tell their personal stories. For many viewers, this might be the only exposure to the self-told stories of these 'others'. By giving the refugees and migrants the opportunity to make their own voices heard, they are able to take up the position of right-bearing individuals, through telling their own life narratives to the participants and the viewers. For Stevenson (2003b), (cultural) citizenship is about making the dominated – those who are often invisible and inaudible in the public debate – heard and to have them speak for themselves; in fact, it is about: 'having access to certain rights and *the opportunity to be heard, in the knowledge that you will have the ear of the community*' p. 334, emphasis added). In various instances in both *RO* and *AdF*, former or current refugees are given a face and voice, and invited to share their stories with the participants. Giving a face and a story to persons whose stories are frequently unseen and unheard, personalizes and humanizes them. This process is instrumental in effecting a change of attitude *in the participants*, and makes sense as an additional effect of reality TV as a technology of citizenship that normatively governmentalizes participants (and by implication the audience) in recognizing less 'audible', marginalized individuals as being rights-bearing political subjects too with the right and access to (symbolic) representation.[13]

It is, however, not only life narratives of the migrants that are made audible through the series. Following the generic conventions of reality TV, each episode of both series are interspersed with private 'testimonials', enabling the participants to reflect on their experiences during the inverse refugee journeys. An important subgenre of these participants' stories is the so-called 'conversion narratives' which is the tangible, linguistic evidence offered by participants of the otherwise invisible process of coming to a different opinion with regard to refugees and migrants (cf. Douglas and Graham, 2013; Stromberg, 1993). In the case of *RO* and *AdF*, these conversion narratives reveal, for example, the political transformation of (some) participants. In *RO*, it is notably Sandra, who started off in the series with negative and one-dimensional views about migrants and refugees, who becomes someone with an explicitly expressed compassionate and empathetic understanding regarding refugees and their situation. Her own televised struggle with the harsh realities she experienced, evident in her emotional responses such as crying in front of the camera, reveals her ideological transformation. Sandra's conversion drew much, often positive, public attention in the online discussion of the series and the many comments (either in support of, or more critically) on her changing, more accommodating attitude toward migrants and refugees.[14]

A result of these conversion narratives, however, is that the life stories of (former) refugees are eclipsed by the emphasis that is put on the amply meted out personal conversion narratives of the participants themselves, to the point where they risk inaudibility once more. Couldry (2002) explains that mainstream media is often guilty of the symbolic exclusion of the oppressed and powerless (the majority of the people, as he puts it). The overshadowing of refugee narratives by the conversion narratives of participants is a good case in point. This was also the case in the Australian series (*Go Back to Where You Came From)*, as Douglas and Graham point out. They cynically describe this strategy of giving the participants – whose struggles viewers witnessed – the last word as being a solution to combat 'compassion fatigue' on the side of viewers (Douglas and Graham, 2013: 137). It goes beyond the scope of this article to investigate in more detail, but it is worth pointing out here the functioning of affect among participants during this process of being governmentalized: the affective reactions of (some) participants expose the complex delineation between our individual and collective, public selves and the affective economy through which social relationality is established (cf. Ahmed, 2004).

A second aspect related to the functioning of these series as a technology of citizenship that enables political agency in the form of political participation by ordinary citizens, is evident in how the series enable political deliberation in the form of everyday, political talk by the participants – among one another, and toward the viewer in front of the camera. Putting a group of people in conversation together 'who do not hide their opinion' (Tuvalu Media, 2015) and who have clearly been selected because of their lack of consensus on the issue of refugee rights, implies the emergence of some sort of public sphere where issues of a common concern are deliberated in a public (i.e. open) manner.

The point of departure of the series already points to this direction: what would happen if people holding oppositional political ideas regarding hospitality, belonging and asylum policy were brought together under testing circumstances? In other words, what is the extent of the spectrum of positions in the public sphere with regard to this highly ideologized and politicized topic? The political talk by the participants ranges from tolerant and inclusive attitudes toward refugees that see them through the prism of equality and liberty (cf. Modood, 2013) to (extreme) xenophobic position-takings that may be grouped together as anti-liberal and which consider refugees as threats to European values, social security and European identity (cf. Inglehart and Norris, 2016). These opposing ideas were, in the case of the German series, framed as a 'clash of cultures', and in the Dutch series framed as an ideological dichotomy (formulated by means of an oppositional opening question): 'all borders open or everyone to go back to their own country?' The goal of employing such a binary logic as a rhetorical strategy might have been to expose the disfunctionality of populist, but equally inadequate, oppositional solutions, which come down to either 'accept everyone' or 'close the borders to all foreigners'. Throughout the course of the series, by way of the experiences, the limitations and inadequacy of such a binary and polarized approach to the complexity and multidimensionality of human trans-border mobility, however, become clear to all participants.

Furthermore, space for a diversity and plurality of voices to engage with the topic had seemingly been enabled through the multimediality of both series, simulating and stimulating an active public debate on migration and refugee-related topics. Especially in the Dutch case, viewers were invited to reply to the program through Twitter[15] hashtags,

implying a 'free space' to discuss the apparently thorny issues on the table (such as 'Do refugees steal our jobs?'; 'Is the Halaal slaughter (of animals) barbaric?').[16] Although *AdF* did not invite viewers to respond through Twitter in the same way, there was nevertheless discussion on Internet forums about series, while the manner in which the series turned human suffering into entertainment was objected against by a petition to abolish the series by explicitly expressing dissatisfaction with the series' 'racist and colonial stereotypes' (Change.org, 2013). Moreover, the views of some of the participants, such as Mirja (*AdF*) and Willeke and Sandra (*RO*), were subject to much online criticism. In the case of Mirja, online commentators suggested that she would not be able to understand what refugees go through because of her own political positioning (Masumy and Wunder, 2013), while comparable criticism against the negative and hostile positions of Sandra (initially) and Willeke with regard to refugees and migrants were raised in the Dutch context.

These examples, however, pose the question about the efficacy of the series as true sites of political contestation. Were the series really able to accommodate or deal with various, opposing ideologies regarding responsibility for 'the stranger' or 'the other'? Did the series manage to create a truly deliberative public sphere on the issue of refugee and migrant accommodation? Did the series manage to establish a dialogue across fundamentally different political positions about civic responsibility on individual and collective levels toward refugees?

In *RO*, Willeke, the participant with the most explicitly intolerant view toward refugees and migrants, departs prematurely from the series and is also absent during a televised debate that included the other participants and politicians representing the center-left and center-right on Dutch refugee policy the day after the final episode. Not much context is given to Willeke's departure. There is a conversation with the host in which she partly explains her wish to exit: although she saw much sorrow, she feels helpless about it and 'cannot do anything with it'. The other participants (e.g. Rick) interpret her departure as the result of being constantly attacked for her opinion by the others, while Martin thinks she 'snapped' because 'many questions were posed to her that she rather did not want to answer' (episode 3). Her absence from the last part of the journey and the debate exposes the difficulty to establish a multivocal, civil dialogue covering a large range of political perspectives on the issue of refugees and migrants. Instead of such a dialogue emerging, to emerge the series present the discussion as a more limited range of (liberal) opinions, because of the (growing) absence of the extreme (anti-liberal) opinion. In *AdF*, there are various instances during which the participants with the most opposing points of view argue with each other and although none of the participants leave the series prematurely, Kevin repeatedly *considers* this option in front of the camera. But apart from noticing these differences, the series seem unable to deal more fundamentally with such political divergent position-takings. In the Dutch case at least, the question is implicitly raised: what happens if the most outspoken, anti-liberal, xenophobic view against refugees and a more tolerant asylums policy literally exits the 'moderate' debate? This point is particularly relevant in light of recent debates on the fragmentation of the public sphere and the so-called filter bubbles on the Internet that disable citizens from getting in touch with viewpoints that are fundamentally in opposition to their own, particularly in the case of 'political or moral issue[s]' (Bozdag and Van der Hoven, 2015). In addition, but this is beyond the scope of this article, one might ask

to what extent the ensemble of voices actually convened in this context produce, in their eventual consensus on the topic of refugees, a kind of consensual 'post-political order', where no real political contestation seem to take place any more, only a debate about *how* to achieve specific, seemingly desired outcomes to particular issues and problems (cf. Darling, 2014).

Although both *RO* and *AdF* function to some extent as a site of political deliberation, enabling participants and the audience to engage in everyday political talk and resultantly making the diversity of opinions on social identities and values visible, the series nevertheless reveal an agenda in favor of a particular (read: accommodatingly liberal) attitude toward migrants and refugees (cf. Mouffe, 2007) that is enhanced by functioning of the series as tool of governing participants into particular political subject positions. The empowering goal of making seldom-heard voices audible, and the ideological aim of initiating an open, political debate on a controversial, oppositional topic, are thus, as our discussion shows, undermined by the series themselves.

Conclusion

During recent years, the relative success of the format[17] reveals that TV producers acted on an impression that TV viewers were not yet satiated with the plight of refugees. Headlines in the news early in 2016, of the Australian team for the next season of *Go Back* being caught in fire from ISIS in Syria, certainly added dramatic tension to this documentary-based entertainment format. To understand the functioning of both series, it is important, as our analysis has shown, to be sensitive toward both the governmental functioning of the format that aims at informing citizens about the situation of refugees in order to reproduce a desired kind of citizenry as well as the enabling aspect of it that allows ordinary citizens to participate in everyday political talk and thus functions (albeit flawed) as a site of the public sphere. As our discussion points out, the intentions of the shows were to create greater awareness and insight about the real-life situation of refugees among the general public, and it is, therefore, not surprising that the series carry an evidently normative attitude toward the question of civil reactions toward refugees and migrants. Beyond the normative intentions of the series, however, one can also read these series as a site of the public sphere where popular culture and participation in it becomes a tool for active citizenship. Given the fragmentation of the current public sphere and political landscape such an attempt by the public broadcast service is noteworthy. But the problems identified in this process, as our discussion shows, underline the difficulties to create and facilitate democratic dialogue across the widest possible range of voices about contested, deeply disputed, societal issues. In addition, the series create a problematic relationship between seldom-heard life stories of socially marginalized persons and entertainment, which results in a form of symbolic eclipse of these marginalized voices. The way the series use voice as a technology to enact citizenship is, therefore, problematic because the migrant narratives are overtaken by the more spectacular conversion narratives, while new questions arise with regard to how those voices which resist a particular accommodating form of citizenship (advocated by the series) are to be dealt with (in the series, and by extension in the public sphere at large too). The entertainment industry's attempts at engaging with these issues are noteworthy. Yet, the reverberation

of the entertainment dimension in these series, despite their proclaimed political intentions on one hand, and the particular (normative) interpretation of citizenship, on the other hand, underline the necessity for a continued, and critical investigation of the important role the media plays in facilitating civic interaction and critical reflection on societal relationality, especially about how we understand ourselves and others in the face of ongoing processes of migration.

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Notes

1. The choice to refer to mobile people as either migrants or refugees is a highly contested political speech act, despite the common practice of often conflating the two categories. Crawley and Skleparis (2017), however, argue that maintaining a distinction between groups of people as belonging to either of the two categories, is a form of categorical fetishism that maintain a politics of exclusion and containment. They are critical of the (often well-intended) persistence in using refugees rather than migrants, but claim that doing so in fact maintains the problematic dichotomy that fails to adequately accommodate the complexity of factors leading to human mobility. Because of the political implications of the terms, there have, in the past couple of years, also developed preferences in regional media to use either of the terms. See Berry et al. (2015). Given that the two programs we report on explicitly refer to 'refugees', we will continue to use that term, although we are aware of the problems that are perpetuated by its use.
2. Denmark: *Send Dem Hjem* (2013), Germany: *Auf Der Flucht: Das Experiment* (2013), the Netherlands: *Rot Op Naar Je Eigen Land* (2015 and 2016), Belgium: *Terug Naar Eigen Land* (2016), Poland: *Wracajcie, skąd przyszliście* (2018.) In 2018, the third season of the Australian version was aired.
3. The petition asks for

   an immediate STOP of the television series "Auf der Flucht" which is crammed with racist and colonialist stereotypes. It is not tolerable that a channel of public service media – which we all pay for whether we like it or not – uses real suffering and real misery of asylum-seeking people to produce such a racist programme and dares to broadcast it. We demand the immediate discontinuation of the programme, an apology, a public statement as well as the donation of all revenues to organisations fighting against racism and for the rights of asylum-seeking people. (Change.org, 2013, sic.).

   In 2016, the petition had received 35,570 signatures. Thus, despite low viewing figures for the German series (the first episode was watched by 60,000 viewers (Becker, 2013)), opponents of the program managed to mobilize a significant number of people to express their dissatisfaction with the series' implementation.
4. In the Dutch case, the series was made in collaboration with Stichting Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland (Dutch Refugee Council), an independent organization that supports refugees in their asylum procedure in the Netherlands.

5. The call for participants for the Dutch series clearly addressed people with an outspoken opinion toward asylum seekers. It reads: 'Do refugees form a threat for our society or is it our duty as a civilized country to take in people who need to leave their own country? [. . .] we are looking for participants who do not hide their opinion and want to undertake an unforgettable journey' (Tuvalu Media, 2015, translation by the authors).
6. The moralistic, normative intentions of the German and Dutch series are in line with the Australian original, of which Douglas and Graham argue that it aspired to 'sociopolitical intervention' in a politicized discussion about migrants and refugees (Douglas and Graham, 2013: 129).
7. The show's host is Daniel Gerlach. '*Team Afrika*' consists of Kevin, Mirja, and Songül; and '*Team Irak'* consists of Katrin, Stephan and Johannes. Together, this group constitutes 'six Germans with very different political viewpoints' as is stated explicitly in the (weekly repeated) introduction of each episode. The motive for using a reverse route is not clear. Some journalists argued that the decision to use a reverse route is paradoxical and leads to confusion. Furthermore, it makes the pretext of understanding what refugees have to go through on their way to Europe problematic (see, for example, Helmes, 2013).
8. The six participants 'with different opinions about Dutch asylum policy', as the series made explicit at the start of each episode, are: Martin, Fareeda, Willeke, Rick, Sandra and Yernaz. The show is hosted by former national judoka and Olympic medal winner, Dennis Van der Geest.
9. The Dutch expression 'rot op' means something like 'get lost' or 'go away'. The Dutch dictionary Van Dale defines it as: 'ruw woord voor: ophoepelen (*coarse* word for: buzz off)' (1976, emphasis added), but in 2015, as '*informal' for 'go away' or 'buzz off' (emphasis added). Google Translate, however, suggests 'fuck off' as translation, which is possibly too strong. Nevertheless, the expression contains strong sentiments of resentment and negative emotion.*
10. A more radical proposal is put forth by one of the Dutch participants, Sandra: 'The solution, to me, all refugees on an island, somewhere in the Pacific Ocean, (place a) dome over it, lock (it), throw away the key, continue with your life, never bother with it again' (translation by the authors).
11. In this context, it is interesting to note the content of episode 3 of the Dutch series, when the group accompanies the Athenian police on a 'sweep': they check passers-by for their articles in an effort to track illegal migrants. The program makes it clear that the stopping of passers-by is carried out on the basis of racial profiling: only people with a darker skin color are being stopped. Later on in the same episode, they meet with a leader from Golden Dawn, and in the run-up to this event, much is made of the 'darker' skin tone of Fareeda and Yernaz and the explicit racism of this Greek ultra right-wing party.
12. In 1993, *Überfremdung* won the award for 'worst German word of the year' (*Unwort des Jahres*). The award exists since 1991 for words used in public communication that are deemed inappropriate and possibly offensive to human dignity (Duden, 2015).
13. It should be mentioned here that a number of documentary initiatives have been undertaken to give refugees and migrants their own voice, such as writer Arnon Grunberg's journey with former Afghan refugee Qader Shafiq from the Netherlands to Kabul (retracing Qader Shafiq's journey, also in reversed order!), on which Grunberg reported in the Dutch newspaper NRC (Grunberg, 2015), as well as documentaries such as *Those Who Jump* (*Les sauteurs*, Sidibé et al., 2016) and *Exodus: Our Journey to Europe* (Bluemel et al., 2016). Likewise, there are academic initiatives that include self-portraits of migrants and refugees, such as 'Young connected migrants: Comparing digital practices of young asylum seekers, refugees and expatriates in the Netherlands', led by Koen Leurs (2017, see project website: http://connectedmigrants.sites.uu.nl/video-portraits/).

14. See, for example, comments made on Twitter, under hashtag #rotop (all translated from Dutch by the authors): 'Respect for Sandra' (Girlnextdoor, 24 January 2015), and 'I'm really starting to have sympathy for habibabi-girl Sandra! Who would have thought of that' (Samir El Hafiani, 24 January 2015), 'I think that this is worth repeating [. . .] If we can reach more people like Sandra' (El Griego, 23 January 2015), and 'Sandra, "madame habbiebabbie" turned. And that is why #rotop is exactly now so damn relevant! Sensational, profound, urgent' (TVpraat, 23 January 2015).
15. Besides Twitter and Facebook, the series were discussed on other Internet forums too. See, for example, Forum FOK! (2015). Furthermore, the Dutch broadcaster also provided an online game (tagged as 'Are you more clever than a refugee?'). The game was intended as an instrument to hook viewers and provide additional information about the experiences of refugees.
16. These questions reveal a sub-discourse about the position of Islam culture in the Netherlands. This politicized topic is all the more interesting, given that EO is an Evangelic, Christian broadcaster.
17. The series in both Australia and the Netherlands had sequels.

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