

MIGRANT SEA: Developing New Narrative Models for Covering

Sub-Saharan Migration to Europe

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Abstract

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The current mainstream news frame of migration to Europe is predicated on a long-held narrative of Western superiority and exceptionalism that privileges Western voices, discourses and optics over African ones, resulting in limited context, Euro-centric coverage and a deficiency of migrant voices, stories and ideas.

As a result, the dominant Western bias inevitably shapes the practices, optics and content of news outlets worldwide and migration to Europe is generally framed as a *crisis of migration flows for the West* – threatening its cultural and economic stability – as opposed to a *global humanitarian crisis* for millions from the ‘non-West’ (Gülsah Çapan, 2018). Furthermore, I posit that it is the homogenous, sensationalized, truncated and repetitive news coverage of migration - and not merely its distressing content - has created a ‘compassion fatigue’ among audiences, further dehumanizing and devaluing migrant voices and perspectives.

As such, the essay portion of this research-creation project is (1) an overview of Western coverage of Sub-Saharan migration since its peak in 2015, (2) a synthesis of the resulting mainstream narrative drawing from postmodern and transformative interpretative frameworks, (3) a proposal of alternative narrative models and journalistic methods and practices based on literature research, (4) a reflection on the effects of the narrative that I observed during the production of my creation project, (5) a reflection on the application of my proposed practices in the field; and (6) an analysis of my research-creation project – based on my initial literature research (points 1 – 3) – that theorizes new models for more complex, ethical and engaging coverage of migration to Europe.

The accompanying *Migrant Sea* creation project is both an experiment in applying alternative methods and practices in the field and an inclusive metanarrative that integrates approaches

from both documentary and journalism to better engage a global audience. This project finds that issues of Western media bias, discursive supremacy and audience disengagement from the narrative of migration can be addressed through (1) the development of counter-narrative models that highlight migrant voices, stories and ideas and contextualize migration as a complex global phenomenon requiring decolonized news frames and paradigms; (2) ethical, inclusive journalistic practices that foster migrant agency, collaboration and creation of content that respectfully and authentically explores their realities from their points of view; and (3) utilizing innovative forms of multimedia production and storytelling to re-engage an audience wary of past coverage.

These findings not only imply that equitable and diverse reform of the mainstream narrative of migration is possible but that the tools for it already exist in current Western journalistic and documentary standards, methods, values and practices. What stands in the way of such reform is a fundamental failure to recognize the bias and privilege inherent to Western news coverage and its subsequent impact on the global media narrative, policy and the lives of millions journeying across deadly desert and sea to reach Europe.

Keywords: Multimedia journalism, digital journalism, journalism, Sub-Saharan migration, migration to Europe, Media Imperialism, Western Media, Media narratives, narrative models, alternative practices, multimedia documentary, interactive documentary, documentary.

Dedication

I cannot express how grateful and honoured I am to the *Migrant Sea* participants who let us into their lives, bravely and generously shared their stories and beliefs and ultimately trusted me to share them. Since returning from Italy, I've felt a responsibility to fulfill my promise to build *with* them an alternative to the story that has been told *for* them and *about* them. This project is for Clarisse, Lamine, Jenni, James, Mamadou, Ali, M., Sekou, Tesfu, A., Abdirahman, Stephanie, Yrgalem, Larry, Justice, Gideon, Ismaheel, Billo, Fidèle, Mouctar, Falilu and all the others we met in Sicily.

I must also thank all the community, governmental, non-governmental and aid organisations that helped me develop and produce the *Migrant Sea* documentary: Alarm Phone, ARCI, ASGI, Borderline Sicilia, Casa Speranza, Centro Astalli, Caritas, Centro Mediterraneo Giorgio La Pira, CLEDU, COOP Filotea, COOP Fo.Co., Istituto Don Calabria, MEDU, MSF, Moltivolti, Rainbow for Africa, Save The Children Italia, Sant'Egidio, among others. I must thank my collaborators, Roland Cody Larocque, my cinematographer, and Lorenzo Signoretti, my co-producer, for their passionate beliefs in social justice and for volunteering weeks of their time for the Sicilian production of the documentary, as well as Ken Guillaume, my website designer, and Mathieu O'Connor, my digital producer, for their hard work and support in designing the *Migrant Sea* website. I would like to thank my academic advisor for this project, Elyse Amend, for her invaluable support and advice throughout this rather lengthy process. I could not have produced such an ambitious media project without the financial support provided by the *Edward and Maria Roach Graduate Scholarship in Journalism Studies*, the *Sportsnet MA Scholarship in Journalism* and the *Concordia Graduate Student Mobility Award*.

Finally, I must thank my wife, Yada Hattatamnoon Grasso, whose research into European refugee law inspired *Migrant Sea's* creation and whose patience and support have been essential to its completion.

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The creation portion of this thesis, the [Migrant Sea](#) multimedia documentary, was an undertaking that I could not have undertaken alone. Although its development, creative direction and editing were solely my own, several collaborators helped me produce its content. Since only a portion of our fieldwork has been published on the website as of March 1, 2021 - the remaining content will hopefully be added later - I shall only refer to the content posted as of the date of publication of this thesis. **Roland Cody Larocque** acted as cinematographer and camera operator on the Jenni Traoré video documentary and Ismaheel Ibraheem music video, as well as camera operator on the interviews with A. and Abdirahman. **Lorenzo Signoretti** joined the project as production manager and associate producer, helping coordinate logistics, communications and production of the A. audio documentary, Abdirahman and Fidèle photo documentaries, as well as Ismaheel Ibraheem music video, *HOMELANDS* and *NAMES UNKNOWN* UGC. **Mathieu O'Connor** guided and advised the *Migrant Sea* multimedia website's conception and production as a digital producer. **Marie-Françoise Marchis-Mouren** proof-read the French transcripts of the interviews with Jenni Traoré and Fidèle Deholo. **Ken Mallar** adapted my designs and constructed the Migrant Sea website as its web designer. **Rayson Aadesh Bankar** provided the audio mix and sound design for the Jenni Traoré video documentary, Casa Federica immersive documentary and A. audio documentary.

I acted as lead producer for the entirety of this project, director and cinematographer or co-cinematographer on all video and immersive VR documentaries, was the sole photojournalist on the project, wrote and conducted all interviews myself, wrote all CONTEXT articles, edited all STORY essays, edited all audio, immersive, photo and video documentaries, created all participant Google Earth projects (with elements from Google Earth and Maps), and conceived, drafted and designed the website's aesthetic, structure and layout that Mr. Mallar would later implement. Finally, I created and integrated all ancillary media (backgrounds, text) on the current website and created and managed its social media accounts.

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INTRODUCTION

What has been popularly termed the 2015 ‘Mediterranean Migrant Crisis’ was one of the most mediated events in the past decade, unfolding around one of the world’s wealthiest and developed regions, with “*scenes of desperation, suffering, and rescue [...] now readily available to reporters, news crews, filmmakers and artists at relatively low cost*” (Trilling, 2019)¹. Yet, a 2017 EU-funded study found that a large proportion of journalists covering migration to Europe are actually “*poorly trained [and] uninformed about the complex nature of the migration narrative*” (EJN/ICMPD, 2017). Just as problematically, coverage appears to favoured Western voices over those from countries of origin (Berry, et Al., 2015). This has resulted in a distorted, uneven, and incomplete narrative supported by a Euro-centric discourse of crisis where sensationalistic reporting eschews the importance of inclusion, representation and collaboration with migrants for the impacts their arrivals have on host countries. As a result, migration is popularly seen as a problem rather than a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon that presents challenges *and* opportunities (Moreno-Lax, 2017; Crépeau, 2015). Migrant voices and opinions are largely left out of this narrative, leaving the audience only with Western tropes of swarms of impoverished, troubled, and voiceless black bodies invading Europe in the absence of nuanced, involved and informed reporting (Kishan Rhussu, 2007; EJN/ICMPD, 2017; Respect Words Project, 2017).

As Roberto Suro (2008) suggests, news media have participated in the distortion of our understanding of immigration, “heightening the public’s sense of fear, of borders out of control, and of immigrant civic and political integration as threats to national identity” (Birchfield and Dell’Orto, 2014). In turn, this has led to dangerous responses, including the xenophobia and racism that we currently see throughout Western Europe, alongside the rise of far-right, anti-migrant rhetoric.

¹ For a brief overview of Sub-Saharan Migration to Europe, please refer to the [Migration Primer](#) in the [CONTEXT](#) section of [Migrant Sea](#).

This essay is not a list of best practices that journalists can use to cover migration, nor a generalized criticism of the quality or value of coverage so far, but a reflection on how hegemonic Western news frames have distorted the narrative of migration to Europe into a strictly Western paradigm. Its accompanying research-creation project, the [Migrant Sea](#) multimedia project², represents the practical implementation of alternate discursive and collaborative multimedia models as a counternarrative that integrates values, methods and practices of both documentary and journalism to promote diversity, complexity, empathy and fairness. This essay and its accompanying research-creation project do not provide definitive solutions to Western media's failings but proposals for new, flexible, and progressive models and practices based on academic research and media production in the field.

² Online at <https://migrantsea.com/>

I – RESEARCH PROBLEMATIC

1.1 An introduction to the Media narrative of Sub-Saharan Migration to Europe

The overwhelming majority of reporting has traditionally focused on two types of content: the consequences of EU member states acting as host countries and the victimization of migrants, most notably seen in search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean (Berry et Al., 2015). As a result of this lack of international focus, two dominant modes of representing migrants emerge: as cultural, economic or security threats or as victims (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017; Crawley et Al., 2016).

In a 2017 IOM report, White and Singleton describe the dramatic coverage of migrant suffering as “short-term and limited to focus on specific incidents that register high loss of life” and lacking “follow up and deeper reflection on the migrant experience.” Migrant flows and impacts are the focus of this narrative, not migrants, their voices, challenges, skills, or potential. As Wright (2002) posits, mainstream media often represent migrants as ‘Others’ and “*objectifies them, dismissing their historical, cultural, and political circumstances.*” This partial and decontextualized coverage of migration whitewashes the West’s responsibility in creating push-factors for migration in Africa (Berry et Al., 2015).

The complexities of migrant diversity, backgrounds, and push-factors are curtailed in favour of audience-friendly, easy-to-digest migrant stereotypes; vaguely African, black, poor, uneducated, desperate, victims fleeing conflict (European Commission, 2015; Patterson, 2019) and seeking the better quality of life that Europe can offer. Migrant journeys are equally abbreviated, with coverage focusing on Mediterranean crossings while ignoring preceding intra-African migration and the push-factors that drive migrants to leave their homes³. On the other hand, post-arrival experiences - such as the Sisyphean processes of

³ Berry, Garcia-Blanco and Moore (2015) found that very few articles focused on the push-factors driving migration flows: “*Whilst we found some articles which talked vaguely about the need for more aid or assistance, in our main sample only 3.1% of articles mentioned the need to address these push factors directly via conflict resolution strategies.*”

asylum, reception and integration, general socio-economic challenges, and migrant success stories, go severely underreported (EJN/ICMPD, 2017). Positive aspects of labour migration, the importance of remittances to the home countries and the rich cultural contributions of diaspora communities are mostly absent as well (Laczko et Al., 2017; Respect Words Project, 2017).

1.2 Failings of the Western media narrative

1.2.1 Western-Centric positionality and discourse

a. Western Media Imperialism

The West's hegemony over global formative models of journalism has given its news organizations undue influence over global news narratives⁴. Having flourished both culturally and economically in the liberal democracies of America and Europe, the Western media have developed into the most wide-reaching, well-financed and influential news outlets and media conglomerates in the world (Boyd-Barrett, 2015; Kishan Rhussu, 2007)⁵. They serve not only as standard-bearers for journalistic ethics, methods and practices but also as media formation models (Boyd-Barrett, 1977). But these influential roles increasingly highlight Western-centric bias and the problematic dominant framing of the 'non-West'. As a consequence, the mainstream narrative of Sub-Saharan migration is defined by two critical characteristics: its *Western-centrism* and its *Afro-pessimism* (Nothias, 2012). It is *Western-centric* in that migration is viewed, interpreted, discussed and framed within a Western ethnocentric framework, ultimately aligning itself with Western interests (Boyd-Barrett, 2015), effectively distancing itself from global context and voices. In this narrative, migration is shown not as the stories of millions of individuals leaving their homelands for complex personal and geopolitical reasons but as a political issue *for* Europe involving the mass arrival of foreign bodies (EJN, 2015; Koff, 2008; Respect Words Project, 2017). Secondly,

⁴ For details on this essay's definition and use of the term "Western Media", as well as examples of news outlets, see Appendix 1.

⁵ For a look at the influence of enlightenment thinking (and its views on race) on liberal democracy and the foundations of modern media's framing of Africa, read [Enlightened Media](#) in Migrant Sea's [CONTEXT](#) section.

the migration narrative is *Afro-pessimistic* in that it is represented as a result of precarity and instability *endemic* to the global south and not as a result of systematic and historical exploitation and manipulation of (former) colonies by Western powers. As per Nothias' (2012) characterization of Afro-pessimism, this narrative: (1) *essentializes* migrants by erasing their diversity and individuality to create a statistical *mass* of migrants (2) *racializes* Mediterranean migrants as a whole as being *black* Africans (3) *ranks* Sub-Saharan migrants as being lesser-than Europeans (4) *describes migrants selectively* as millions fleeing precarity while underreporting the nuances that led them to leave their countries and (5) *predicts* that they will threaten European stability.

b. Discourses of Western media

For over 20 years, Sub-Saharan migrants have been crossing Africa and the Mediterranean to reach Europe. Inestimable numbers have perished in the Sahara, and over 20,000 have died or disappeared in the Mediterranean in the past six years alone. As of 2020, over 4.3 million Sub-Saharan migrants live in Europe⁶. However, the bulk of mainstream reporting on Sub-Saharan migration primarily focuses on the issues, impacts of (and solutions to) migration flows *on* Europe⁷ or Mediterranean crossings⁸. When migrant voices are included, it's often as anecdotal and vulnerable sources of human interest stories or victims of violence and trauma⁹ rather than intellectual contributors¹⁰ (Georgiou et al., 2017; Trilling, 2019). At worst, migrants are portrayed as foreign masses, social and economic burdens or outright

⁶ Estimates by [Pew Research Center](#) (2018) and [UNDESA](#) (2019).

⁷ See examples in [POLITICO](#) (2018), The New York Times ([Higgins, 2015](#); [Pianigiani and Walsh, 2017](#); [Erlanger and Stevis-Gridneff, 2020](#)), CNN ([Mackintosh, 2017](#)), Reuters ([Scherer and Vagnoni, 2017](#); [Reuters staff, 2018](#); [Baczynska, 2018](#) and [2018b](#)), Agence France-Presse ([AFP, 2020](#); [AFP, 2018](#)) and Voice Of America ([Bryant, 2020](#))

⁸ See examples in the New York Times ([Pianigiani, 2020](#); [Kingsley, 2020](#); [Specia, 2020](#)), CNN ([Chavez, 2018](#); [Fox and Borghese, 2017](#)), Reuters ([Fernandez and Rubio, 2018](#); [Reuters staff, 2020](#)), Voice Of America ([Schlein, 2019](#)) and the Associated Press ([AP, 2019](#)).

⁹ See examples on CNN ([Wedeman and Munayyer, 2019](#); [Elbagir, et al., 2018](#); [D'Agostino, 2018](#)), The Associated Press ([Michael, 2019](#)), Reuters ([Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2017](#)) and The Washington Post ([Raghavan, 2019](#))

¹⁰ Though notable examples of inclusive coverage featuring migrant or African voices can be seen in coverage by the BBC ([Azeteng and Casserly, 2019](#); [Einashe, 2020](#); [Whewell, 2019](#)) and Al Jazeera ([Palomo, 2020](#); [Ghani, 2020](#); [D'Ignotti, 2019](#); [Iyorah, 2018](#); [Mayault, 2017](#)).

threats to European stability¹¹ (Koff, 2008; Chouliaraki et al.; 2017). This framing all plays into Western discourses of *crisis* (Jacobs, 1996) and *charity* and reinforces the well-established power dynamics of the global north-south divide (Litonjua, 2012).

The extensive use of the term 'Mediterranean migrant crisis' by mainstream news outlets exemplifies Western framing of a *global humanitarian emergency* as a local *crisis of migration for Europe* (Chouliaraki et Al., 2017; Papadopoulou 2004, 2005)¹². A discourse of *charity* (Coryat, 2008; Thomas, 2014) presents humanitarian aid, reception and integration of migrants to Europe not as a responsibility or even an investment in potential social, cultural and economic growth, but as an act of *benevolence*. This narrative that has absolved 'extractionist' Western nations (Fofack, 2019) of responsibility for migration push-factors and contributed to the otherizing of migrants worthless, voiceless and desperate black masses invading Europe (EJN, 2015, 2017) can easily be correlated to the development of far-right anti-migrant rhetoric and policies that put migrants at risk (Lanni, 2018), such as border externalization (Jacobs, 2017; Jacobs et Al., 2017), deportations (Stavis-Gridneff, 2020) and the dismantling of migrant reception (Bagnoli, 2018).

1.2.2 Flawed Methods and Practices

a. Defining Western media bias.

In a 2015 UNHCR-commissioned report by the Cardiff School of Journalism that sampled 1,065 mainstream UK press articles between 2014 and 2015, the most prominent themes revolved around the consequences of migration to Europe (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, Moore; 2015): Migration Figures (64.3%), Search and Rescue (41.3%), Reception/Rejection (39.4%), Political Response (35.3%), Trafficking and smuggling (32.1%), Humanitarian elements (24.7%), Threat to Welfare / Benefits / Resources (19.4%) and Cultural Threat

¹¹ See examples in the Associated Press ([AP, 2014](#)), FOX News ([Carslon, 2019](#)), The Washington Post ([Deane, 2015](#))

¹² This language was all the more confusing in that most of the coverage wasn't focused on migrants as a whole, but on refugees crossing the Aegean sea from Syria.

(14.2%). Newspaper articles mentioning the migrant experience, on the other hand, were much fewer in number: Journeys (13.5%), Asylum Seekers' success (3.6%) and post-arrival integration (2.4%). This data supports the exceptionalist Western narrative of its economic success and stability being the main pull-factors of migration, overlooking complex sets of push-factors with roots in colonial and modern western involvement (Crépeau, 2013; Schapendonk, 2018).

Furthermore, it appears that mainstream coverage tends to be *Afro-pessimistic*: generalizing the continent as a whole, focusing on conflict and economic precarity as the principal push-factors for migration, supporting the negative archetype of the poor, uneducated, desperate African fleeing violence (Nothias, 2012). In the same UNHCR report ¹³, the main push-factors of migration flows were: conflict (42.0%), Poverty (21.0%), Repressive Regime (8.8%), Absence of border control (4.7%) and Terrorism (2.7%). The majority of samples (46.1%) mentioned no reasons at all (Berry et Al., 2015). Surprisingly little effort is made to correlate migration to the instability left behind by imperial decolonization, Western forms of neo-colonialism – such as currency manipulation,¹⁴ military and political interventionism, the exploitation of resources¹⁵, and illicit financial flows¹⁶ – or with the diversity and cultural complexity of Sub-Saharan countries of origin. Reporting also tends to focus on the rescue of migrants at Europe's 'Deadliest Border' (IOM, 2017) - the Mediterranean - while lessening the long, non-linear and dangerous journeys through Africa that precede it (Laczko et Al., 2017; EJI/ICMPD, 2017). Regardless of intent¹⁷, the abundant coverage of Search and Rescue operations – gripping, spectacular and dramatic rescues of rickety boats overflowing

¹³ From a sample of 228 UK press articles (UNHCR, 2015)

¹⁴ Until 2019, France controlled the dual CFA Franc currencies that dominate 14 economies in Western and Central Africa.

¹⁵ Such as the century-long De Beers diamond trade monopoly and Western-owned petroleum giants currently dominating the Nigerian Oil Industry through joint ventures.

¹⁶ A 2020 United Nations Economic Development in Africa report concludes that illicit capital flight from Africa totalled \$836 billion, much of which was due to undervalued commodity imports to the European Union .

¹⁷ Several studies show that *both* Western NGOs and media organizations to use sensationalistic coverage to "frame and circulate information that will bring international attention to specific issues in specific locations" (Clark, 2001; Dawes, 2007; Powers, 2014).

with migrants by primarily white operators - aligns with Western discourses of crisis and charity and dehumanizes migrants as suffering, vague, and foreign black masses fleeing conflict and poverty and seeking salvation within 'Fortress Europe.'¹⁸

b. The lack of collaboration

There was a period during the 2015 'migrant crisis' where the Western media extensively interviewed many Sub-Saharan migrants^{19 20}. Although many of these interactions were seemingly meant to humanize migrants, they too often reduced migrants as sources for first-hand accounts, heart-wrenching stories or anecdotes, ultimately framing them as victims²¹ (Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Eberl et al., 2018). Their ambitions, experiences and opinions punctuate mainstream journalism, rarely participating in discussion or analysis. Although migrant accounts are integrated into coverage of migration, they're seldom the authors of the stories themselves; this belongs to the privileged perspectives of the journalists reporting on them. The resulting narrative is incomplete, lacking discussion about real-world issues that migrants face, and as a result, coverage becomes detached, homogenous and repetitive. Migrant agency, collaboration, and the authenticity of migrant stories rarely feature in the majority of reporting²² and most apparent in the low proportion of post-arrival stories (Berry et Al., 2015; EJM/ICMPD, 2017; Laczko et Al., 2017)²³.

¹⁸ This isn't to generalize or condemn the integrity of Western reporting on migration - much of which is empathetic, in-depth and informative - but to highlight the narrative created by the overwhelming majority of reporting as a whole. Not all journalism can contextualize migration or include African and/or migrant voices, but the vast majority doesn't.

¹⁹ As confirmed by many participants and non-participant migrants (as well as aid workers present at the time) who had been subject to a number of interviews in 2015-2016 specifically, namely [Stephanie Samuel](#), Gideon Omokagbom, Mouctar Sall, Jenni Traore, young migrants at the Italian Refugee Council offices in Catania, staff at Centro Astalli, ARCI and Moltivolti in Palermo among many others.

²⁰ See early examples of this in Reuters ([Reuters, 2015](#); [Reuters, 2016](#)), The Independent (Dearden, 2015), The Guardian ([Guardian docs, 2014](#); [Guardian Features, 2015](#)), the BBC ([Coley, 2015](#); [BBC, 2015](#)), CNN ([Penhaul and Cotovio, 2015](#); Damon, 2015; [Macguire, 2015](#)), The New York Times ([Pianigiani, 2015](#); [Yardley, 2015](#); [Bilefsky, 2015](#); [Gilbertson, 2016](#)), The Wall Street Journal ([Troianovski et al., 2015](#)), NPR ([Poggioli, 2014](#); [Frayer, 2015](#)) and France24 ([Norris-Trent, 2016](#); [Nordstrom, 2017](#)).

²¹ In their Frame Analysis of Europe's 2015 refugee crisis, Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017) found that this framing of victimhood was particularly important at the beginning of the news cycle.

²² Most evident during the 2015 peak in the news cycle.

²³ However, efforts to explore post-arrival stories exist; an excellent example is the [New Arrivals](#) initiative by European newspapers the Guardian (U.K.), El País (Spain), Le Monde (France) and Spiegel Online (Germany), a "long term project following the lives of refugees as they settle across Europe".

Although journalists once gave hope to migrants, leading them to believe that sharing their stories and creating awareness could produce constructive outcomes, this is now rarely the case. Several *Migrant Sea* participants – many of whom had already taken part in news stories - stated that they believed their realities in Italy were superficially covered to the point of misrepresentation. This has left many feeling frustrated, hurt and betrayed, and has unsurprisingly produced a general mistrust of journalists within migrant communities ²⁴.

c. The lack of migrant voices

For an asylum seeker who feels very little control over their life, the telling of their story is a significant and courageous act, a way to - for once - take control of their narrative. But many journalists fail to recognize this, recording migrant stories only to deconstruct, filter and edit them without concern for the storyteller's intention, agency, wellbeing or voice. Migrants cannot be treated as regular sources; according to the 2017 IOM *Fatal Journeys* report, "*media need to recognize that migrants and refugees are often vulnerable minorities who can quickly become scapegoats for the ills of society — social and economic decline, crime and unemployment, pressure on health and welfare services and lack of security*" (Laczko et Al., 2017). News media need to understand the effect their interactions have on such people; participating in a news story creates a sense of agency, a feeling that their voices and stories matter – sometimes at personal risk. Unfortunately, these feelings are often dispelled with the resulting news coverage that marginalizes their perspectives in favour of journalists' own interpretations or analyses. The abundance of 'parachute journalism' in field coverage of migration is a troubling indicator of poor media practices and uneven migration stories. In Sicily, I was repeatedly told of such instances by participants and asylum workers alike; journalists would arrive in a given city with very little real-world understanding of post-arrival realities and book as many short appointments as possible with local experts and migrants,

²⁴ A phenomenon that I witnessed first-hand during project presentations at the Centro Astalli SPRAR, Vela Grande, CAS San Francesco and Casa Federica reception centres in Palermo, the Italian Council for Refugees office and Sant'Egidio reception centre in Catania and CAS Hotel Liberty in Messina. Although - frequently - generating a positive response, these presentations often engendered pushback, suspicion or apathy on the part of attending migrants.

often only lasting 20-30 minutes²⁵. Their stays were mostly short and generally did not involve repeat interactions or the development of relationships with migrants.²⁶ Anna Masera, the public editor of Italian daily *La Stampa*, criticized some correspondents for behaving like “disaster tourists rather than migration correspondents” and “creating moving storytelling without really explaining politics, giving the data or giving context to the data,” pointing to a general lack of understanding of migration’s complex network of context, data and stories by the very journalists tasked with discussing it.

Most disturbingly, media coverage largely privileges politicians - both domestic and foreign – (EJN, 2015) citizens and NGOs or civil society organizations over migrant voices²⁷ (Clark, 2001; Dawes, 2007; Powers, 2014), leaving migrants with little influence over the discourses and narratives that directly impact their lives (Crawley et Al., 2016; Jack, 2017). Ultimately, they are just as they were during their journey and asylum process: voiceless and powerless.

1.2.3 Audience disengagement

Mainstream disengagement with the migration narrative is often attributed to *refugee* (Islam, 2013; EJN, 2017) or *compassion fatigue*, where audience solidarity and attention weakened as a result of repeated coverage of the hardships of migrants seeking refuge in Europe. This line of thought puts the blame firmly on the content, events and circumstances of migration coverage, all technically outside of the news media’s control; the “crisis” is wide-reaching and ongoing, so it demands constant coverage, its circumstances are tragic and, as a result, audiences develop feelings of detachment and content fatigue. However, this logic presumes that covering the crisis as graphically and frequently as possible acts in the public interest - by shocking the audience into demanding change – and ignores that it privileges only certain

²⁵ These practices aren’t unique to migration coverage, as mentioned in Aufderheide et Al. (2009).

²⁶As confirmed by Centro Astalli employee Emilio and Vice-president Simona Laplaca, Fausto Melluso from ARCI Porco Rosso in Palermo as well as participants Jenni Traoré, Mouctar Sall and Fidèle Deholo.

²⁷ As recently as February 2020, the notably liberal New York Times has preferred to [provide a platform for former Italian Minister of the Interior \(and notoriously far-right Nationalist and anti-migrant activist\) Matteo Salvini](#) (Horowitz, 2020) over highlighting migrant voices.

stories, aspects and voices of migration. This biased coverage, in turn, results in a news cycle that seeds, feeds and ‘cultivates’ attitudes or expectations about migration to the point of disconnect (Berry et Al., 2015; Gerbner et Al., 2002; Vergeer et Al. 2000).

Homogenous Western positionality and lack of discursive diversity dramatically limit the development of the migration narrative. By privileging Western voices (especially political ones), the media focuses on abstract impacts to host countries rather than real-world stories of migration, creating a familiar, one-sided, repetitive, and ultimately disengaging narrative. Migration ends up being covered as any other conflict or disaster regularly is in the Western media²⁸: represented sensationally, defined by Western optics and, as a result, conflated with similar crises in the 24-hour news cycle²⁹.

With this incomplete narrative, the media miss the tremendous opportunity of ‘broadening the lens’ of their coverage to understand the complex, human and geopolitical context of migration (Egeland, 2015). Missing are the context of migration flows in the home countries, intra-African migration, realities in Europe or the benefits to host countries (Benny et Al., 2015; Berry et Al., 2015; Koopmans, 1996). *Compassion fatigue* isn’t the fatigue of migrants and refugees, but of the media’s coverage of their stories as “just another African tragedy” (Patterson, 2019)³⁰.

²⁸ Moeller (1999) writes “at times it seems as if the media careen from one trauma to another, in a breathless tour of poverty, disease and death. The troubles blur. Crises become one crisis.”

²⁹ Most notable in the media’s conflation of the eastern Mediterranean refugee crisis and the central Mediterranean’s migrant crisis as a single, giant phenomenon.

³⁰ As Moeller (1999) puts it, “*We need nuanced and in-depth coverage of crises and we need to hear and see the human side too. The former without the latter is boring, the latter without the former is sensationalized. To get it right, the media need to think of both the short term and the long term. They need to think of both their own interests and the ‘public interest’.*”

II – MIGRANT SEA: A MULTIMEDIA PROJECT

2.1 Project description

[*Migrant Sea*](#) is an online, interactive, multimodal, multimedia documentary that is meant to a) hypertextualize diverse coverage of Sub-Saharan migration, b) address dominant Western news frames and c) integrates, highlights and collaborates with migrant voices often left out of the discourses and narratives that involve them. Although projects that include multimedia elements and approaches are increasingly found in contemporary journalism³¹, these are usually limited in scope, content and media and are guided by a single, centralized narrative that privileges Western paradigms. The [*Migrant Sea*](#) website integrates the most prominent forms of documentary media and journalistic content into sub-narrative pieces featuring a multiplicity of voices that inform a more extensive, diverse and decentralized multimedia metanarrative. It is not only a multimedia documentary (as a metanarrative) composed of multimedia stories (integrating multiple media) and multiple media stories (each with individual media formats) but a platform for historically silent migrant voices and stories.

a. **Hypertextuality**

Migrant Sea is an experiment in hypertext in that it interweaves and interconnects stories³² to create a more compelling, complex and nuanced portrayal of Sub-Saharan migration. Utilizing interactive storytelling techniques common in online journalism, it links context with individual stories and voices in a way that connects, feeds and informs all of its content and involves the audience (Canavilhas, 2001; Garcia, 2002; Bradshaw, 2007; Salaverría, 2005). This form of hypertextualized structure and hybrid content closely resembles Canavilhas's (2006) tumbled pyramid model, where *"a news story [is] organized by levels of information chunks connected by links that allow the user to follow different reading paths (news architecture) according to his/her particular interests"* Mesbah (2005)³³, posits that even the

³¹ See examples Migiro et Al., NPR (2015), Granados et Al. (2016).

³² Although limited by the current number of elements on the website, it serves as a proof-of-concept.

³³ Based on Jensen (1998).

most straightforward use of hypertext increases the remembrance of news content and many academics argue that the use of interactivity (Fredin, 1997; Rosales, 2006), multimedia content (Edo, 2002; Bryant, 2006) and hypertext (Hall, 2001; Marco, 2003; Paul, 2005) are key to the development of online journalism (Canavilhas, 2012).

b. **Interactivity**

Migrant Sea's hyperconnectivity is highlighted in its modular form, multiple interactive navigation options³⁴, in-project hyperlinking. This multiplicity of paths requires exploration and is meant to satisfy all kinds of users: those that prefer what Darnton (1999) calls the “*upper narrative*,” browsing content horizontally to quickly gain a generalized understanding, those that prefer to “*read vertically, pursuing certain themes deeper and deeper*” and those that “*might navigate in unanticipated directions, seeking connections that suit their own interests or reworking the material into constructions of their own*”. Most importantly, it inevitably leads to a unique and personalized user experience (Bardoel and Deuze, 2001).

c. **Multiple media stories**

Migrant Sea is constructed of diverse content in various media, independent stories that contribute to the project metanarrative. The more traditional journalistic “explainer articles” (found in [CONTEXT](#)) are meant to fill in the contextual gaps left by most mainstream coverage, whereas collaborative essays, [video documentaries](#), [photo documentaries](#), [immersive documentaries](#), [audio documentaries](#) (found in [PEOPLE](#) and [PLACES](#)) and [User-Generated Content](#) function (found in [ESSAYS](#)) as platforms for migrant voices and stories. Additionally, [multimedia editorial essays](#) (also found in [ESSAYS](#)) will provide an open platform for the editorial team's opinions and reflections – at present, myself³⁵.

³⁴ In the form of multiple thematic categories including chapters ([PEOPLE](#), [PLACES](#), [CONTEXT](#), [ESSAYS](#)) and a visual navigation allowing to explore the media geographically (the [MAP](#)).

³⁵ For a more detailed and itemized list of the types of content, please see Appendix 2: Migrant Sea – Content description

III – MIGRANT SEA: A PRODUCTION

3.1 Self-reflection on journalistic methods and practices

The inception of *Migrant Sea* came from a profound uneasiness with the media's framing of migration and the general absence of migrant voices and opinions; the issue appeared global (if Western-led) and systemic and across the political spectrum. When I explored academic and journalistic literature, I discovered that much already existed to bolster my initial impressions, be it Boyd-Barrett's writings on the Western news media's global hegemony³⁶, the growing body of literature on Afro-pessimism in the media³⁷, numerous works on the failings of current news frames with regards to refugees and migrants to Europe specifically³⁸ or UNHCR³⁹ and IOM⁴⁰ reports with data to support these failings. However, I consider my interactions with participants and aid organizations during the field production of *Migrant Sea* to have been most valuable to this essay, this project and myself. These encounters not only confirmed my initial impressions and research but strengthened my sense of purpose and pushed me to question my own privilege, positionality and journalistic practices.

A recurring theme I heard in the field, both from migrants and aid workers, was the media's overall utilitarian approach to migrant voices, in that journalistic interviews were more concerned with gathering quotes to support established views on migration than give voice or tell the stories of migrants⁴¹. Most notably, during the overwhelming demand for interviews during the 2015 peak in coverage, participants expressed being moved by the apparent concern of journalists asking to hear their stories. Unfortunately, as time went on, participants

³⁶ See Boyd-Barrett (1977, 2008, 2010, 2015)

³⁷ See Ahluwalia (2000), Hawk (1992), Louw and de B'beri (2011), Momoh (2003), and Nothias (2012).

³⁸ Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017); Chouliaraki, Georgiou, and Zaborowski (2017); Georgiou and Zaborowski (2017); Eberl et al. (2018); EJM (2017); Flahaux and De Haas (2016); Papadopoulou (2004 and 2005) – among many others.

³⁹ Berry et al. (2015)

⁴⁰ Laczko et al. (2017)

⁴¹ Many of our participants, such as Jenni and Mouctar in Palermo, Gideon in Catania and Fidèle in Messina, had already been interviewed by journalists, though none had spent as much time with them or focused on their voices as we had.

felt that their views and experiences were mostly left out of the resulting coverage⁴², that journalists showed little understanding of the realities of migration and, most distressingly, rarely followed up^{43 44}. As a result, many felt used, betrayed, misunderstood, and invisible⁴⁵. Ultimately, participants in *Migrant Sea* all clearly expressed that most of all, what attracted them to *Migrant Sea* was that it was a reaction to previous coverage, that it didn't just present an opportunity to tell their stories but the possibility of truly being heard.

Throughout *Migrant Sea*'s field production across Sicily, I presented the project to over 20 potential participant groups and individuals.⁴⁶ The mixed receptions and feedback I received from these groups helped me understand first-hand the negative perception of the media that many migrants experience. During these interactions, specific key points came back repeatedly:

a. An uninformed narrative

The overall media narrative of Sub-Saharan migration, specifically as it pertains to migrant lives in Europe, was vastly different from what migrants were actually experiencing. The media's focus was on the impact on Europeans, not the lives of migrants. Mouctar Sall, [a participant from the Casa Federica group home in Palermo](#), said that he had participated in 4 interviews and several documentaries, none of which had accurately represented his

⁴² Jenni Traoré, a Malian project participant and cultural mediator for migrant reception centres in Palermo, confirmed that the surge of media attention in 2015 resulted in very few migrant voices being highlighted in the media, with most interviews being used as bite-sized quotations. This was also supported by Centro Astalli Vice-president Simona Laplaca and Fausto Melluso from ARCI Porco Rosso in Palermo.

⁴³ Emilio, an employee of the *Centro Astalli* reception centre in Palermo where our participant Lamine was staying, noted that many journalists had come to speak to migrants and take photos, but few had spent more than an hour there and none had come back over a period of several days as I had.

⁴⁴ The BBC, despite their often exemplary journalism on migration (of which these are an example, being positive news) [reported on Stephanie Samuel's arrival in 2015](#) (Sommerville, 2015) and only followed up [five years later](#) (Lowen, 2020).

⁴⁵ During a presentation of the project to a group of migrants at the Italian Refugee Council office in Catania, one young man in particular argued this explicitly: "I don't believe your documentary is relevant or useful. We've been interviewed before and nothing changes. Many others came before you".

⁴⁶ For a detailed look at the key points from my presentations, please see Appendix 4.

realities, opinions or “*changed anything in his life.*”⁴⁷ In Catania, a group of ten African community leaders, migrants, and cultural mediators confirmed that the lack of authentic and complex migrant stories and the paucity of African contribution to the contextual discourse were critical issues in mainstream coverage that have immensely contributed to the negative perception of migrants.

b. Feelings of exploitation

In their rush to report migration stories, it also appears that many journalists fail to consider that they are interacting with survivors of trauma⁴⁸. Clarisse Zohori, a participant from Côte d’Ivoire, recounted being pressured for an interview by a journalist onboard the rescue ship shortly after her rescue at sea: *“When you think about your problems, what happened to you, you don’t feel like talking to anyone. You don’t want to talk even though there were journalists on the boat. There were photographers, there were several people who came to sit next to you to make you talk about what you had experienced”*. Stephanie Samuel, a participant from Nigeria, told me about being approached by journalists in her hospital bed as she woke up from giving birth on the ship that had rescued her: *“Where are you from? What’s your name?” [...] They were just asking me questions that I couldn’t answer then because I was too weak to talk. [...] I would nod my head. ‘Mmm, yeah.’ Because I couldn’t talk. So, I was so weak then. They were just asking me questions that day. ”*

c. Feelings of abandonment

Once interest in migration had waned after the “Mediterranean migrant crisis” coverage of 2015 and 2016 - during which many journalists flocked to Sicily to cover new arrivals – many interviewed migrants felt abandoned and forgotten. They felt that when their accounts were

⁴⁷ In fact, he stated that the only reason he agreed to participate was that I had returned several times to the group home and shown actual interest in their lives.

⁴⁸ Excellent examples of such practices can be found in: Ethical Journalism Network, 2015; EJN/ICMPD (2017); Gering, 2016; Hynes, 2003; IOM (2017); War Horse (2020). These are touched upon in part IV – MIGRANT SEA: A New Model.

no longer of use to media looking for content, they had been left behind, never followed up with and, most regrettably, had seen no positive results to the coverage ⁴⁹.

[Fidèle Deholo](#), a participant from Messina, made the consequences of this all the more explicit: he explained that he couldn't bring me to particular floors of his First Reception Center because of the extremely hostile reaction of some residents to the very presence of journalists; rumours had spread that we were seeking to exploit and spread lies about them and Fidèle feared for our safety.

On Trust

After being brutalized and mistreated throughout their long journeys, confronted with a difficult reception process in Italy, and misrepresented by the media, it's exceptionally significant when former migrants regain the courage to trust a stranger, let alone a journalist ^{50 51} or a researcher ⁵². As such, re-establishing and developing a sense of trust with both potential and confirmed participants quickly became one of the most important challenges that I faced during production. With *Migrant Sea* completed, I believe that the key to the project's success with participants was my transparency both regarding the project's purpose as a reaction to mainstream journalism and my beliefs and intentions behind it. Below are key points that I emphasized:

- *Migrant Sea* was a reaction to mainstream journalism that sought to fill the gaps and correct distortions in the public perception of migration with personal, intimate documentaries to introduce audiences to migrants' unique, authentic experiences as told by themselves. The current discourse had largely failed migrants, privileging

⁴⁹ As discussed in Georgiou and Zaborowski (2017) and IOM (2017) among others.

⁵⁰ See Gering (2016).

⁵¹ This is all the more notable in Italy, where a *REMINDER project* study by McNeil and Karstens (2018) shows evidence of a significant erosion of trust in the media.

⁵² A UNHCR paper by Tricia Hynes (2003) extensively discusses the tension between refugees / asylum seekers having survived traumatic events and anyone they perceive to be "officials". This quite definitely applies to journalists as well, who are often considered to represent the media as a whole such contexts.

Western voices over theirs in mainstream coverage. Those best suited to tell stories of migration were migrants themselves⁵³.

- Even though the project was produced in an academic-journalistic context, I was not a journalist, and the project was not ‘typical’ journalism; I wasn’t employed by a news organization, I wasn’t chasing a story, and I had no editor or organization to answer to, no agenda to force onto them, no allegiances to anyone but participants⁵⁴.
- Collaboration was at the heart of the documentary; our purpose was to authentically represent their lives and perspectives, not interpret their meaning for an audience. Most notably, this would be achieved through the use of first-person narration and their input and approval in the construction of the final documentaries. They would tell their stories as they chose, and from this, we would create media together.
- Agency over their stories was as important as the stories themselves; during and after production, participants were in control of what they shared, omitted and how they would tell their stories. Rough versions of pieces would be sent to them for revisions and approval, and they would have the opportunity to modify or retract any content at any time after production had been completed.
- Most importantly, I emphasized my belief that the West was in part responsible for migrant flows in a great deal of African countries and, as such, needed to rewrite its narrative. To this point, *Migrant Sea* wasn’t an act of charity but of solidarity⁵⁵.

⁵³ Most inspiring were Daniel Trilling’s passionate writings on migrant voices in *The Guardian* (2019), *Lost in Media: Migrant Perspectives and the Public Sphere* (2019) and his book *Lights in the Distance* (2018); Aidan White’s EJA (2015 and 2017), ICMPD (2017) and IOM (2017) reports highlighting their absence in the media and potential solutions; and Chouliaraki, Georgiou and Zaborowski’s (2017) content analyses of mainstream media coverage of migration.

⁵⁴ Aufderheide et al. (2009) qualify this independence as being a key differentiator between journalism and documentary.

⁵⁵ This consistently struck a chord with migrant participants and non-participants throughout production. Tesfu Fshatsion, a participant from Eritrea, mentioned Europe’s colonialist past and present as being the core reason for their responsibility: “They shouldn’t be doing Africa a favour. It’s their responsibility, it’s a debt that they have to pay.”

Fidèle Deholo, from Cameroun, also brought up colonial exploitation as push-factor for migrant flows: “When we look at the suffering in Africa today, all the division, all these problems, Europe is partially responsible [for it]. [...] If Europe hadn’t done this, Africans would never want to leave their countries. They are the ones who colonized us”.

Jenni Traoré, from Libya via Mali, brought up post-colonial exploitation as a reason for African precarity: “When you come to us, to Africa; the iron, the uranium, the bauxite, the gold that you take from us, should give all of it back to us. If you do that, we’ll stay home. It’s simple. It’s easy”.

As participants included my team in their daily, intimate lives, I developed close relationships with many of them. Some, like Sekou, Ismaheel and Fidèle, said that our interviews were the most they had opened up about their stories to anyone - even family - and had even allowed him to shed some of the emotional baggage. All participants bravely and generously trusted me with their stories and voices, and this trust bonded us.

3.2 Multimedia production in the field

The multimedia production of *Migrant Sea* over seven weeks was both exacting and enlightening. During this period, an incredibly large and diverse quantity of media content and stories were produced in a limited amount of time⁵⁶. In every location, multiple documentaries in different media formats would be produced concurrently. Creating multiple documentaries simultaneously in numerous media formats demanded a flexible and diverse toolbox in terms of physical equipment capable of producing audio, video, photo and 360-degree documentary, production coordination and the methods and practices (both in the approach to filming and interactions with participants) associated with each format.

The simultaneous production of multiple stories facilitated the development of their interconnectivity and the greater narrative while still in the field. For example, particular media would be produced for integration into various documentaries and formats; a single video interview could be used as a video voice-over, a VR voiceover, an audio doc, photo captions and as the basis for a collaborative essay. This allowed for the spontaneous creation of new stories and standalone, ancillary media content not attached to predetermined pieces, but that could enhance the website's interconnectivity and multimediality. Perhaps most importantly, the diverse toolbox of production equipment

Additionally, during an hour-long project presentation with 30 or so migrants and community leaders at the Sant'Egidio reception centre in Catania, the topic of European responsibility for migration by far dominated the conversation. Afterwards, several even spoke to me privately to emphasize their approval of the project.

⁵⁶ For a complete list of what was produced, see APPENDIX 2: Content Description and Appendix 3.

allowed participants to choose the format of their documentary and sometimes even participate with the creation of User-Generated-Content⁵⁷.

However, such an approach also complicated production. Communications, scheduling and movement were not only multiplied but compounded, as projects needed to be coordinated between themselves every day. Workdays were generally quite long – between 12 and 14 hours – and days off were few and far between. Additionally, producing several documentaries at once also restricted the amount of time with each participant. I generally met with participants over 4 to 6 days. Every day, I would schedule as much time as possible with each of them, alternating between as many 2-3 hour individual appointments as possible. Although the amount of time I spent with participants was never brought up as an issue, I often found myself questioning the pace of production.

3.3 Collaborative post-production

Since the inception of *Migrant Sea* as a collaborative documentary focused on migrant agency, I'd experienced some discomfort concerning my role as its sole editorial and creative director. The irony of myself, a white man of European descent, being responsible for a project that highlights migrant voices and issues certainly wasn't beyond me. However, although the project recorded participants' stories and voices, the idea that it would ultimately be my sole responsibility to filter, interpret and edit the footage (and their stories) into media – reconstructed realities - that authentically represented their lives and perspectives seemed increasingly discordant with its original intent. Most importantly, it felt necessary to address the project's built-in editorial "power differential" (Aufderheide, Jaszi and Chandra, 2009) between participants and content-creator; even if I did exclusively edit from participants' words, thoughts and voices, my interpretation would remain inherent. Even if the raw

⁵⁷ I lent disposable film cameras and a GH2 mirrorless digital camera to participants so that they could capture their own realities. These photos were then integrated into participants' collaborative essays or adapted into short UGC photo essays.

material was sourced from their lives and voices, the ultimate construct - after selection, restructuring and editing - would be in my hands.

With this in mind, I set out to integrate participant agency into post-production. If participants were collaborators and not simple sources, including them in the shaping of the final media was the best way not only to preserve their agency, security and the authenticity of their voices but to remove (as best I could) the power dynamics between journalist and “subject” that had burned so many migrants in the past. My primary ethical responsibility was towards participants first and myself and the audience distant second and third ⁵⁸.

To achieve this, I integrated participant feedback, dialogue and modification into post-production. Instead of sending a source a near-final draft of a piece shortly before publishing, I involved participants by sending them rough cuts (or rough drafts) early on, once the piece had begun to take shape but retained enough flexibility for modifications, specifying that I was not only looking for clarifications, factual corrections and redactions but for their sentiments on the pieces as reflections of themselves, a series of discussions about the pieces within the context of the project with the goal of making collective decisions. If participants disagreed with particular choices or elements, the goal was to discuss them; if they remained unconvinced, their story remained theirs, and edits would be made to their satisfaction⁵⁹. The value of this process became quickly apparent: a participant identified as [“M.”](#) in the documentary asked to retract her UGC photos and that her story become anonymous; [Abdirahman](#), another participant, asked that certain shirtless photos of him be

⁵⁸ As per Aufderheide, Jaszi and Chandra’s 2009 study of the ethical responsibilities of documentary filmmakers and producers, *“This perception of the nature of the relationship—a sympathetic one in which a joint responsibility to tell the subject’s story is undertaken, with the filmmaker in charge— demonstrates a major difference between the work of documentary filmmakers and news reporters. Many documentary filmmakers work with people whom they have chosen and typically see themselves as stewards of the subjects’ stories”*.

⁵⁹ This kind of participant-imperative approval isn’t unheard of in documentary filmmaking, especially when it involves the development of trust and strong relationships. Furthermore, filmmaker Gordon Quinn believes that it fundamentally differentiates documentary from journalism: *“Our code of ethics is very different. A journalist wouldn’t show you the footage. We will show you the film before it is finished. I want you to sign the release, but we will really listen to you. But ultimately, it has to be our decision.”*

taken out of his photo documentary; and [Fidèle Deholo](#) asked to redact certain circumstances surrounding his departure from Cameroon.

Migrant Sea's [collaborative essays](#), on the other hand, were conceived in the field as I became mainly preoccupied with the aptitude of short-form documentaries to adapt the complicated and extensive stories, views, and discussions shared during interviews. The interviews were so unique, in-depth and unlike anything that I had heard or read elsewhere that I felt obligated to develop an additional, longer format tailored to their complexity: long-form, first-person, multimedia essays based on participant interviews. I hoped that these could address issues of Western discursive homogeneity, narrative bias and intellectual exclusion of migrant voices through the discussion of context, personal experiences post-arrival realities and socio-political manifestations of migration to Europe with migrants themselves. Whereas *Migrant Sea's* media documentaries were to be hours of interviews, thoughts and moments distilled into short pieces interpreted to represent a participants' voice, the collaborative essays would allow for the long-form exploration of their stories.

Using transcripts of the extensive participant interviews a source, I would first adapt syntax and grammar, eliminate redundant passages and perform (generally minor) adjustments to structure in order to adhere to a chronological account of their lives from their pasts in their home countries through their journeys to Europe and into their lives, opinions and realities in Italy. Throughout this phase, I would make specific efforts to keep as much of the original tone, vocabulary and sentence structure intact, preferring to synthesize or combine sentences rather than completely rewrite their content. I also paid close attention to removing any potentially harmful personal information. Although much of the stories were impossible to verify independently, I fact-checked as much information as I deemed possible – namely details about migrant journeys⁶⁰, particular locations⁶¹, or specific events that were covered

⁶⁰ Such as the routes themselves, details about smuggling, human trafficking, and the economics of slavery in northern Africa, much of which has been covered by migrant aid organisations and NGOs.

⁶¹ Such as migrant neighbourhoods in Algeria, prisons / detention centres in Libya, information often referred to in migrant aid or NGO reports.

by the media⁶². Once I considered a text sound and succinct enough, I sent the text to the participant for a review of my fact-checking, creative and editorial feedback, which was then discussed and applied until final approval. As with the media documentaries, I requested feedback on facts, tone, vocabulary, content on structure, asserting that the primary purpose of the essay was to reflect their voice and ideas. In essence, they had to recognize themselves. As of this writing, all participants in completed media⁶³ have expressed satisfaction or outright enthusiasm with the accurate representation of their voices, stories and ideas.

⁶² Like the Boko Haram attack on Fidèle's village and A.'s detention by Italian authorities.

⁶³ Jenni Traoré, Fidèle Deholo, M., A., Abdirahman Abdulahi Hasan, Falilu Diallo and Mouctar Sall.

IV – MIGRANT SEA: A NEW MODEL

4.1 A new narrative model

The mainstream portrayal of Sub-Saharan migration has substantial, discursive and systemic problems that result in the dominance of Western voices over African ones (Berry, Garcia-Blanco and Moore, 2015; EJI/ICMPD, 2017). As such, developing alternative methods and practices is essential to countering the skewed discourses and incomplete narratives of migration (Leurs et Al., 2018; Parr, 2007; Slutskaya et Al., 2018) that, for years, have only begun with the death or rescue at sea of black bodies in the Mediterranean. Migrant voices must be integrated and involved in developing their own narratives (EJI/ICMPD, 2017), not merely utilized as conventional journalistic sources, storytelling tools or narrative tropes. Collaborative practices must be developed to promote migrant agency and self-representation while substantially integrating their voices into the narrative by providing space for their personal experiences, stories and ideas. The challenges and problems that migrants and asylum seekers face in Europe must be attentively investigated and highlighted as essential parts of this narrative. Perhaps most significantly, inclusive methods and practices must be implemented in field production and the editorial output. The responsibility that journalists have towards their migrant sources can't stop once they return to the newsroom; their voices and stories must be deliberately integrated and elevated by the reporting. Too often have journalists failed to recognize the best interests of the migrants they interact with or the negative impacts that their practices may have. Migrants aren't only sources but economically and politically vulnerable survivors of trauma who are willing to speak out in the hope that their accurately reported stories will engender change.

4.2 Alternative methods and practices

From my research into academic literature and documentary practices and my experiences and interactions in the field, I developed a broad set of alternative methods and practices that can be divided into three categories: (A) developing the narrative, which covers ways for journalists to better understand and report on migration as a whole; (B) developing

collaborative practices, namely to improve current behaviour in the field; and (C) engaging the audience, or how these alternative practices can, in turn, be utilized in the final output.

A. Developing a better narrative

Developing a more vibrant, more complex narrative of migration to Europe involves addressing three principal issues in current coverage: (1) lack of context, (2) lack of migrant voices and (3) lack of migrant post-arrival realities (Berry et Al., 2015; EJN, 2015).

(1) Improving context

The reality of the current narrative is that, due to lack of funding, resources and interest, few journalists are specifically tasked with the migration beat⁶⁴. As a result, most tend to lack a proper understanding of the complex realities of migration, use incorrect terminology and are underprepared if they work in the field (ICMPD, 2017; Laczko et Al., 2017).

Journalists must develop a better understanding of the **root causes of migration in the home countries** in order to provide a nuanced and decolonized context of migration that explores the unique and complex historical, geopolitical, environmental, economic, cultural, and social⁶⁵ interactions that shape its development both nationally and trans-nationally.

Journalists must also better examine **migration routes** – their complications, difficulties and the trauma they cause – before even reaching the Mediterranean⁶⁶. The horrors of Sub-Saharan journeys are currently massively underreported⁶⁷, leaving a gaping hole in Western audiences' understanding of migrants to Europe, namely their resilience.

⁶⁴ A 2015 EJN report explains this as being the result of news companies struggling to afford coverage of smaller stories, leading to a herd mentality where media simply follow each other to cover *“a small cluster of the most obvious stories”* (EJN, 2015). The mainstream media *“are generally well-intentioned but often lack the resources, support and guidance to provide balanced reporting that is well-researched and contributes to a better understanding of migration as a phenomenon”* (EJN/ICMPD, 2017).

⁶⁵ Often between multiple cultures and ethnic groups within a country.

⁶⁶ For Migrant Sea, I created Google Earth projects following each participant's journey, allowing the audience dynamically follow the route they had taken to Europe. See [Fidèle's](#), for example.

⁶⁷ A 2016 UNHCR survey of 136 migrants reported that more people are thought to die crossing the Sahara than the Mediterranean (Laczko et Al., 2017; UNHCR, 2016).

Host countries – and crucially, their relationships with countries of origin - must also be monitored for changes that could affect migration flows, wellbeing, legal status and living conditions.

Journalists must better understand **public policy and its real-world consequences**, as it is essential to covering social, economic and political problems that undermine migrant wellbeing in Europe. These include inadequate laws and regulations, gender and racial discrimination, precarity, state and non-state corruption and the weak enforcement of regulations (ICMPD, 2017). Just as importantly, these must then be examined in the context of international agreements, laws and human rights.

Finally, journalists must study and **use correct terminology**⁶⁸, as many have precise legal definitions that should be adhered to adequately explain complex and nuanced concepts like human rights, European policy, asylum, reception and integration. These words and ideas profoundly impact how audiences understand and interpret migration stories, and their misuse has too often fed anti-migrant rhetoric, fear, and anxiety.⁶⁹

A better understanding of migration can be helped by establishing good working relationships with migrant aid, advocacy and social service organizations in the field as well as local and international NGOs. There's too often a disconnect between field workers and journalists, and it's crucial to build a relationship of trust as they can be invaluable resources in understanding rapid developments. Many organizations also frequently publish reports and papers full of data, statistics and research, and newsletters with up-to-date developments.

Overall, coverage should be accurate, fair, fact-based, independent, impartial and ethical. Most importantly, journalists must work on countering the current skewed framing of migration by showing humanity, compassion and empathy, being transparent and

⁶⁸ See Appendix 1: Notes on Language for this essay's use of terminology.

⁶⁹ Terms like "illegal migrants" or analogies like "swarms", "flood", "waves".

accountable, challenge misconceptions, misinformation, and hate and try to be positive and search for solutions (EJN, 2017; Laczko et Al., 2017; ICMPD, 2017).

(2) Involving migrant voices

With today's media landscape being a "battleground for inclusion and exclusion" (Leurs et Al., 2018), it's surprising how migrants themselves can be left out of discourses and narratives that are, at their core, *about* them. Although "human interest" stories are a frequent trope in current migration coverage, most fall into patterns of victimization and oversimplification that reinforce contemporary narratives (De Haas, 2012). Migrants are shown as innocent, noble victims of terrible circumstances searching for a better life, often without the context of the experiences that led them to Europe or the resilience and ambition that allowed them to reach it. By converting migrants from storytellers into sources and taking the principal role for themselves, journalists effectively remove any agency provided to them when sharing their stories. This is a sentiment that was echoed repeatedly *by* groups of potential participants to whom I presented *Migrant Sea*: migrants often felt that their accounts had been taken from them and distorted in their re-telling^{70 71}.

When it comes to analytical coverage of migration flows and regional policies, migrants are almost entirely left out of the discussion, despite their unequalled qualifications to offer insight into real-life experiences and impacts. Although many migrants have complex interpretations and opinions on the politics, realities and framings of migration, these are seen "*against a background of impossibility*" and as "*of lesser value, little importance, and poor quality*" (Mbembe, 2001). Given the complexity of the humanitarian protection process in Europe and the impacts of national politics directly on their wellbeing, many *Migrant Sea* participants are exceptionally knowledgeable and shrewd in their reflections on migration policy and would be a valuable addition to any media analysis.

⁷⁰ Namely: at a Italian Council for Refugees presentation in Catania where *Migrant Sea* was highly criticized in part because of this; at a Sant'Egidio discussion with 30-or-so migrants; by Fidèle Deholo in Messina and Mouctar Sall in Palermo.

⁷¹ See Buchanan, Grillo and Threadgold, 2003; Laczko, Singleton and Black, 2017; Trilling, 2019.

This can be achieved through the development and implementation of collaborative – and inclusive – practices (Kindon, 2003; Leurs et Al., 2018; Parr, 2007; Slutskaya et Al., 2018) ⁷². But most importantly, the Western media must decolonize (Berting, 1995; Smith, 2002) - or de-Westernize (Curran and Park, 2000; Thomas, 2014) - its coverage of Africa and begin treating African minds as equal and essential participants in the narrative of migration.

Migrant Sea integrated several collaborative practices into its production and post-production processes. Before filming began, the project was transparently discussed and developed with participants, requiring their input on the documentary medium and the boundaries within which the project would function. This was both a collaborative process – feedback occurred throughout filming – and a necessity, as participants included us in their daily lives. The interviews with most participants were extensive, semi-structured, discursive in tone and bilateral, as participants were also encouraged to question me about my beliefs, motivations and reflections foundational to the project. The feedback, modification and approval period in the editing process ensured not only that facts were checked and participant security was assured but that their voice, intent and agency were respected in the final media.

Additionally, *Migrant Sea* fostered the creation of migrant User-Generated-Content: disposable and digital cameras were distributed to specific participants so that they could create their own photo essays on daily life⁷³; Save The Children in Catania asked a group of migrant teenagers to produce [drawings of home](#), which were described in short interview segments; Lamine Mané, a participant in Palermo, performed a striking reading his award-winning essay for the camera; and Ismaheel Ibraheem [performed a song](#) outside the massive CARA di Mineo reception centre. These are currently a part of the *ESSAYS* section of the website.

⁷² A notable effort is the [Refugee Journalism Project](#), a project that supports refugee journalists in the UK.

⁷³ To mixed results, as the timeframes (between 4 and 6 days with the cameras) may have been a bit short and as a result, the quantity and content of photos from each individual series is a bit limited.

Although the specifics of hypothetical collaborative possibilities are numerous to expound upon in this essay⁷⁴, any continuation of *Migrant Sea* would be an elaboration of its original inclusive mandate and significantly involve the development, fostering and integration of User (namely migrant) Generated-Content, the intellectual integration of underrepresented voices in contextual analysis of migration and the inclusion of journalistic content and media perspectives from countries of origin.

(3) **Post-arrival realities**

A result of the devaluation of migrant voices has been the underrepresentation of post-arrival realities as complex and challenging issues in migrants' lives (Berry et Al., 2015; EJN, 2015).

Much of current “human interest” reporting on migrant experiences in their host communities still frames migrants as mediators of cultural diversity or as voiceless, struggling and powerless ‘Others,’ once again falling into problematic Western-centric narratives and discourses (Laczko et Al., 2017). Migrant success stories are proportionally infrequent in mainstream coverage (EJN/ICMPD, 2017), as are the numerous positive effects of migration on host countries - cultural, social and economic⁷⁵. These realities are currently curtailed by an overwhelming media framing of migrants as abstract factors in Western socio-economic growth rather than human potential.

B. Developing collaborative practices

Journalistic methods and practices must be adapted to the particular context of migration to correct its current – ostensibly harmful - news frame. Most importantly, Western journalists must alter their ingrained preconceptions of migrants and learn to value them as intelligent

⁷⁴ Initiatives like [The Refugee Journalism Project](#) and [Wapikoni Mobile](#) (to which I have participated) have already created programs that provide equipment and provide training, mentoring and networking for fostering the creation of participant-led documentary or journalistic content by underrepresented communities. Any expansion of *Migrant Sea* would heavily borrow from their experiments.

⁷⁵ Many European countries (Italy, most of all) that are in a demographic decline and *need* immigrant workers to fulfil low-skilled jobs (among others) necessary to maintaining their economies (Staglianò, 2014). And these immigrants do not exist in a vacuum; they eat, rent apartments, pay taxes and contribute to their communities in invaluable ways.

human beings with critically important perspectives instead of using them as sources or stereotypes to reinforce long-held ideas.

This should be achieved by (1) empowering migrant voices through ethical journalism - considerate and inclusive - practices in the field, (2) empowering migrants by providing them with tools for agency and self-representation and (3) prioritizing their voices and self-representation in the media output by integrating collaborative methods into current journalistic storytelling and creating new forms of journalism designed explicitly around their agency.

(1) Inclusive practices in the field

The development process of inclusive practices must first and foremost be built on our acknowledgement of journalists' past mistakes in their coverage and treatment of migrants. To rebuild a sense of trust, journalists must be well-informed about migration, transparent about their intentions, ready to hear grievances and willing to engage in a complex dialogue with potential participants. Above all, participants must feel respected and valued as the principal agents of the telling of their stories.

I believe that the development of trust, value and respect demands significant time and dedication to migrant participants, something that – I've been told ⁷⁶ – has been lacking so far. For these reasons, I believe that journalists covering migration should adhere to a set of ethical journalism practices - both in the field⁷⁷ and in their resulting coverage itself ⁷⁸ conceived explicitly in response to past deficiencies in the media narrative of migration ⁷⁹.

⁷⁶ As previously mentioned, a sentiment expressed by many migrants during project presentations at the Centro Astalli SPRAR, Vela Grande, CAS San Francesco and Casa Federica reception centres in Palermo, the Italian Council for Refugees office and Sant'Egidio reception centre in Catania and the CAS Hotel Liberty in Messina.

⁷⁷ Focused on longer-term, in-depth investigation, transparent, respectful and sensitive interactions with participants on equal footing and frequent follow-ups afterwards.

⁷⁸ Focused on fact-checking, the highlighting and inclusion of migrant voices not only as sources but as intellectual contributors, balanced coverage including the positive effects of migration, a more complete, contextual and diverse framing of migration (integrating multiple perspectives) and paying particular attention to avoid sensationalistic reporting on tragic incidents and the criminalisation of migrants,

⁷⁹ Examples of which can be found in reports by the Respect Words Project (2017), IOM (Laczko et Al., 2017), the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN, 2017) and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (EJN/ICMPD, 2017).

During the field production of participant documentaries, I found that the importance of transparent, inclusive and respectful values and practices manifested themselves in two categories of interactions: in the embedding into participants' intimate and daily lives and in the in-depth interviews⁸⁰.

a. Collaborative development

As participant-led documentaries are often a voyage of discovery for journalists and filmmakers in the field, inclusive, sensitive and transparent practices should begin with the original presentation, exchange and conception in tandem with the participant and continue throughout production with regular check-ins and feedback. The principal difference between this proposed approach and current journalistic practices is the explicit inclusion of participants in the production's format, guidelines, topics and boundaries and increased transparency regarding the journalist's intentions, background and output.

For *Migrant Sea*, I would always precede production with a casual, camera-free meeting with participants to address these issues immediately. I would first share my background and intentions as well as the project's projected structure, output and mandates of agency, collaboration and promotion of migrant voices. The documentary would be a series of choices for participants, to which there were no wrong answers; our goal was to produce a documentary, but above all, ensure a positive experience for the participant where they retained an important amount of control throughout. Not only would participants exercise agency in the telling of their story, but in the choice of the medium in which it would be covered, editorial input during post-production, and final approval before their story was published. With this said, I would present our approach's flexibility and discuss participants' preferences, interests, concerns, and desired outcomes of their documentary. We would also determine format, production and personal boundaries. I would emphasize the importance of transparency; regardless of disagreements and difficult conversations, they could always

⁸⁰ The third, collaborative post-production, being out of the field.

expect honesty and respect. We would then determine a schedule and determine access, with interviews always planned for the end of the week to establish trust and facilitate participants' comfort when discussing difficult topics⁸¹.

These points regarding agency, comfort, access and collaboration would be regularly discussed throughout production. I discovered how important this was several times during filming, as participants would only express discomfort when explicitly asked ⁸².

b. Participant interviews

An inclusive approach to interviews not only requires the application of certain ethical practices but a shift away from journalists' desired outcomes (i.e. conducting an interview in order to obtain specific answers and content) and towards the participants' sense of agency (ceding them significant control over the interview, explicitly encouraging them to express their opinions, feelings and ideas) and unique experiences. Preparation is especially important in interviewing irregular migrants; it demands special care, increased ethical sensitivity, special interviewing techniques and a basic understanding of the asylum and reception systems (Gering, 2016).

As such, interviews should be prefaced with a detailed conversation with participants regarding the interview's purpose and parameters, namely participant agency, respect, equality, safety, and experience. Above all, participants must feel that the interview represents a safe space in which they are in control of their stories, not an interrogation. Considerate and ethical interviewing practices⁸³ must be followed throughout the interview to maintain that safety and agency. Although I have found no research regarding these techniques specifically being applied in the context of reporting on migration, anecdotal

⁸¹ As per Gering (2016).

⁸² Lamine Mané, for example, only revealed discomfort when asked.

⁸³ Exemplary guidelines for trauma reporting and the treatment of vulnerable sources can be found at The Ethical Journalism Network (EJN, 2017), The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (Chin, 2013; Gering, 2016), the International Journalists' Network (Ricchiardi, 2016), the Open Media Hub (Abdu-Fatil, 2017) and the [War Horse](#) (2020).

evidence⁸⁴ and the overall negative perception of journalists that I witnessed during the production of *Migrant Sea* suggest that such techniques are too often forgone in the field.

Participant agency should be established to give interviewees as much of a sense of control as possible (Ricchiardi, 2017), namely over the duration, boundaries and pacing of the interview and allowed to pause or end the interview at any time (Gering, 2016). We would jointly establish the boundaries of the interview (EJN, 2017), as I emphasized that their stories were theirs to tell and that they should feel no obligation to recall traumatic events that may be distressing for them or share information that may put them at risk⁸⁵.

Interviews should be semi-structured and aim to use as many open-ended questions as possible, as this allows for tangents, flexibility (Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986) and exchange. To prepare and put participants at ease, I would explain the chronological structure of my line of questioning; a straightforward structure is particularly helpful given the length of their journeys and the trauma they endured - some participants' accounts may seem fragmented, scattered or contradictory at times.

A conversational, transparent and bilateral tone is preferable, as it establishes the interview as being an exchange on equal footing as opposed to an interrogation with skewed power dynamics in favour of the interviewer⁸⁶. Interviewers should be ready to share information about themselves, their background, and their opinions to feed the conversation and encourage participants to ask their own questions and even potentially debate topics. Participants should also be encouraged to take control of the interview (Gering, 2016), to sidebar and explore ideas and issues of their own initiative⁸⁷. In essence, although the interview inevitably remains led by the interviewer's line of questioning, the balance of

⁸⁴ See the previously described instances where Clarisse Zohori and Stephanie Samuel were accosted by journalists in moments of extreme vulnerability.

⁸⁵ See McMahon et al. (2014)

⁸⁶ I would explicitly differentiate the nature, tone and power dynamics of our interviews from what participants may have experienced in the past with the Italian Asylum Commission or other journalists.

⁸⁷ Such as contextual information, critical analysis, hypotheticals, beliefs and ideas

power/control of the interview should be pushed to favour the participant as much as possible to create a dynamic of exchange and collaboration.

In fact, contrary to standard journalistic practices where sources may only have a set amount of time to retract certain statements, vulnerable participants should be allowed to retract statements at any time⁸⁸ following the interview (Mills, 2018); given the legal precarity of the asylum status of many, certain information, such as small differences from their Asylum Commission interviews, could jeopardize their humanitarian status. It is paramount to the security of participants to consider the consequences of the interview carefully⁸⁹, both personally for the participant (asylum status, physical safety, danger to their family) and at large (their position within their community). Although it is standard practice for journalists to consider the wellbeing of their sources when publishing an article, this should be the absolute priority when working with vulnerable migrants, above even their obligations to their audience and “truth”⁹⁰. Being that migrants are extremely vulnerable sources, particular consideration needs to be taken to ensure their safety and well-being, while special precautions must be taken to limit harmful exposure once the story is published⁹¹.

Participants should be explicitly encouraged to share their ideas, questions and feelings throughout the interview, as these are rarely quoted in regular reporting on migration and migrants in favour of actual dramatic events, returning the interview's focus onto the storyteller and not the story (Chouliaraki, Georgiou, and Zaborowski, 2017).

Perhaps more so than for typical journalism - advance research on migration prior to the interviews is not only advisable to better formulate the line of questioning, but essential to their ethical treatment of the interviewee (EJN, 2017). It is a journalists' obligation to inform themselves about the context of migration, the trauma that many experience during their

⁸⁸ This should also be clearly integrated into the release/ waiver provided to participants.

⁸⁹ Two examples: A.'s asylum status is currently under appeal at a court in Catania, so a follow up was essential to consider his potential anonymity; and Fidèle Deholo left Cameroun for reasons of security that might also jeopardise his asylum status, so certain details had to be redacted after the interview.

⁹⁰ See Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014).

⁹¹ See War Horse (2020) guidelines.

journeys and the legal precarity in which many find themselves upon arrival in order to conduct the interview with compassion, calm and sensitivity (Gering, 2016).

(2) Migrant User-Generated Content as tools for self-representation

Given the ever-increasing inclusion of UGC (tweets, posts, videos and photos) into modern journalism, media produced by migrants is essential to the development of an inclusive media narrative (Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Reich, 2008). By providing journalistic tools, platforms and most importantly, the opportunity for migrant storytellers (especially young ones⁹²) to tell their own unfiltered stories, journalists can empower them to actively participate in alternative media framing as content creators themselves. The development of UGC is, in this sense, significant on two fronts: the development and integration of new, diverse voices into a tired and homogeneous media narrative and as a critically meaningful act of agency *through* self-representation (Urichio, 2016).

For these reasons, I considered the fostering of UGC as being necessary for *Migrant Sea* to truly fulfil its mandate of providing a platform for migrant voices to participate in the media narrative directly⁹³. Four types of media were produced - photography, spoken word, drawings, and music – to ultimately be published in the [ESSAYS](#) section of the website. Drawing from my own experiences with Wapikoni Mobile and the documentary *Born into Brothels* (2004), I distributed disposable and digital cameras - to interested participants for them to produce their own photography, which they would be later caption during a follow-up interview upon retrieval of the camera or remotely. During post-production, participants and I

⁹² Leurs et Al. (2018) suggest that critical media literacy “centred on visual media production skills, civic engagement and critical consciousness” are crucial to engaging young migrants in the self-representation necessary to create a more inclusive media narrative of migration.

⁹³ Unfortunately, because of the project’s limited scope and resources and its primary commitment to a complex, cohesive and more complete narrative born out of *collaborative* media (with which I had to be completely involved), I determined that the production of UGC would have to remain a secondary experiment for the time being.

would first select and discuss photos together⁹⁴ and later review and approve the captions based on or transcribed from their interviews⁹⁵.

The only instance of spoken word UGC was participant Lamine Mané's reading of his award-winning essay on his new life in Palermo, under which was published a translation of the text.

The drawing UGC was produced without my direct involvement; conceived with Giovanna di Benedetto from Save The Children in Catania, the organization asked a group of young migrants to draw images (and caption them with a short audio description) around the theme of home. These can be found as [HOMELANDS](#) in the [ESSAYS](#) section of the site.

Ismaheel Ibraheem, a participant from Nigeria, had produced a song about his journey to Europe and asked if we could film [a music video for him outside his residence at the CARA di Mineo reception centre](#)⁹⁶. The performance was minimally edited and published to Youtube with a short caption approved by Ismaheel and accompanied by the song's lyrics.

Being that the project's primary resources needed to be dedicated to producing *collaborative* content in a short timeframe, the production of UGC has been limited to an experiment. However, though minimal in their impact on the project's narrative as a whole, they are significant to *Migrant Sea's* mandate of self-representation.

Prioritizing migrant voices in journalistic output

The implementation of inclusive field practices and the promotion of User-Generated Content are ultimately useless if the resulting journalism doesn't highlight migrant voices. As testified by several participants, instances of this in the past have only added to many migrants' reticence towards the media⁹⁷.

⁹⁴ Specifically, I would share all photos with them, from which both of us would select our favourites.

⁹⁵ Unfortunately, the author of the UGC photo series meant to integrate for this MA (identified as M.) asked to retract her content from the website for personal reasons. As such, I can only describe the process

⁹⁶ The largest such facility in Europe, housing 4,000 people at its peak in 2014.

⁹⁷ As supported by statements by participants Mouctar Sall, Jenni Traoré and Fidèle Deholo as well as community leaders in and young migrants at the Italian Refugee Council office in Catania and Fausto Melluso at ARCI Porco Rosso in Palermo.

Regarding the *representation* of migrants within the media narrative as a whole, there needs to be a significant shift in how journalists approach *human interest framing* (Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud, 2015). Commonly used as a way to bring a personal narrative or a human face to the issue of migration (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000), human interest stories are often criticized for oversimplifying systemic and structural factors and lacking the complexity of perspectives and arguments found in issue-specific journalism (Benson, 2013; Suro, 2011). Just as problematically, although these stories appear to be framed from migrant perspectives, journalists most often take on the role of the narrator for themselves, effectively removing any agency provided by the telling of the story in the first place. *Migrant Sea* addresses these issues in two ways: issues of agency and self-representation are addressed with the development of storyteller-first migrant-focused documentaries, and issues of discursive and contextual oversimplification are addressed with the development of collaborative long-form narrative essays.

The migrant-focused media (first-person stories, audio, photo, video, 360 documentaries) in *Migrant Sea* were designed as fundamentally collaborative creations differing from traditional human interest journalism in that their purpose isn't to evoke public empathy by *transposing* a face or a story onto a predetermined 'issue' of migration but to authentically *represent* and recreate the voices, views and stories of their protagonists with whom issues are naturally explored and discussed. To this purpose, I tried to remove myself – as a perceptible narrative presence – as much as possible to highlight the participant as the principal storyteller. Practically speaking, this meant constructing these stories almost entirely from material involving the participant and heavily involving them in corrections and approval. As such, the audio, video and VR documentaries are entirely narrated by participant voices; their stories are told in their own words, the photo documentaries integrate interview excerpts into captions and the first-person essays were heavily drawn from interviews and reviewed, corrected and approved with participants before publishing.

Traditionally, the editorial power of profile pieces (or biographies) is skewed in favour of journalists or editors, as they are the final interpreters and arbiters of tone, structure and content⁹⁸. This power dynamic is all the more significant when working with the underrepresented voices of vulnerable people (Gering, 2016). Even if I was to strictly adhere to the facts and narrative expressed in individual interviews, editorial and interpretative power would still remain in my hands. As such, it was necessary to introduce inclusive creative and editorial practices into the writing process of the essays to maintain (and reinforce) the voices and agency of participants despite my interpretative role as the writer⁹⁹. This approach set out to integrate participants narratively, linguistically, structurally and editorially.

3.1 Multimedia storytelling as a tool for improvement

Deliberate efforts must be made to address the mass audience disengagement from the migration narrative. New narrative models can combine complex and diverse discourses and perspectives with information that better contextualize them to create cohesive, consistent coverage that includes issues relevant *to migrants* and raises public awareness. Inclusive journalistic methods and practices can promote migrant agency, collaboration and creation, enriching the narrative with new experiences, insights and reflections. But beyond these changes, given today's overflowing, always-on and always-available media ecosystem, new, innovative and interconnected forms of multimedia storytelling must be implemented to create more fulfilling stories and discourses that, above all, reach and engage modern audiences (Singer, 2010; Urichio, 2016; Deuze, 2004; Siapera and Veglis, 2012).

a. Different types of content

The integration of multimedia storytelling and multiple media formats not only allows for the inclusion of various types of content into a project's metanarrative but for the interconnectivity and intergrowth of stories (Kawamoto, 2003; Pavlik, 2001). These interweaved stories can

⁹⁸ As Broersma, Herder and Schohaus (2013) write, "*while sources decide what could be published, journalists eventually determine what will be published and who will get a voice in the news.*"

⁹⁹ This collaborative methodology would also be briefly described in a foreword to each text.

inform and enrich each other, utilizing and bridging the discursive, methodological, and practical strengths of journalism and documentary to better and complete a larger story. The following characterizations aren't meant to be narrow definitions of these two approaches (exchange and growth between them should be fluid), but the roles that each has naturally taken in Migrant Sea's model for a complex, contextualized, and diverse narrative.

Journalism has the unique capacity to collect and interpret dense amounts of general information to contextualize greater phenomena and interconnect individual, more focused and diverse stories as a part of a greater narrative¹⁰⁰. Although the personal sentiments and opinions (and biases) of the authors are an integral part of robust and passionate journalism, its values of fairness, accuracy and responsibility towards its audience (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014) can contribute to a balanced narrative that can integrate both important personal, human, non-journalistic paradigms and the context that highlights why they matter.

Documentary's strength, however, resides in its intrinsic and deliberate – and decidedly non-journalistic – focus on the individual, whether the author or “subject.” While journalism's goal is to inform its audience, documentary's is to provide them with *a higher* (sociological or emotional) truth – not necessarily *the singular* truth¹⁰¹ (Aufderheide et Al., 2009). As a result, documentary can provide nuanced, diverse and intimate storytelling that is often lacking in journalistic coverage (Greenbaum Kasson, 2010¹⁰²) and dives into the personal experiences, relationships and perspectives of the underrepresented (Bernardo Ruiz in Borum Chattoo, 2105). Furthermore, its editorial independence (Looney, 2014), creative flexibility, ethical sensitivity and personal sense of moral and social accountability and responsibility¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Namely with its integration of unique multiple media elements and hyperlink to diverse stories.

¹⁰¹ Though it is frequently debated where journalistic documentary fits in this characterization, I would argue that its name speaks for itself. Although documentary is now also being taught as a part of journalism curricula, the distinct values and goals of a piece are what ultimately categorize it (Greenbaum Kasson, 2010).

¹⁰² "You can present something on network news that has clarity but doesn't necessarily have nuance" said *Restrepo* filmmaker Sebastian Junger when differentiating his Afghan war documentary from broadcast coverage such as *Nightline*.

¹⁰³ At least, in its best practice.

(Greenbaum Kasson, 2010) make it an ideal format for complex collaboration between participants and producers (Aufderheide et Al., 2009).

Essays are often included in either of the above categories because they incorporate characteristics from both; their formal and thematic flexibility can mean the use of formats commonly found in journalism with the unabashedly personal perspective of documentary¹⁰⁴. This formal and thematic ambiguity is significant in that it allows for the open exploration and expression of themes and ideas less easily defined than in journalism and documentary. Editorial essays integrate the informative aspect of news journalism while strongly expressing the opinions of their author. Photo, video and immersive essays utilize imagery to convey the creator's state of being rather than external events. As such, it is their capacity to bridge – and strengthen - journalistic and documentary content when combined with hypertextuality that give essays an important place in *Migrant Sea's* narrative model.

b. Multiple forms of storytelling

The inclusion, integration and interlinking of media in multiple media formats necessitate a range of storytelling techniques and languages and – through their hypertextuality – the development of new ones. Audio, video, 360, photojournalism, documentary and essays each offer numerous creative possibilities within their individual styles, structure and editing that, when cross-pollinated in a multi-media context, can present surprising and innovative solutions to the gaps left by the original formats (Singer, 2010; Urichio, 2016).

c. Flexibility in collaborative practices

Producing content in multiple media can improve collaborative practices and participant agency, as participants can help choose the medium in which they will be represented, thereby determining *what* they choose to reveal and *how* their story will be told¹⁰⁵.

¹⁰⁴ By this characterization, I consider op-eds, editorials and contributed opinion pieces as essays, separate from (news) journalism despite being published by news organizations (The Media Insight Project, 2018).

¹⁰⁵ During the production of *Migrant Sea*, I would always present the story and its medium as ultimately being the choice of the participant. Yrgalem Berih, for example, wanted to share her story and name but preferred to remain visually

Furthermore, user-generated-content can involve participants as co-creators or creators in their own right (Urichio, 2016), either by asking them to participate in the creation of media for a journalist-led project or engage in the creation of their own.

d. Multiple formats, outreach and immersion

While the overarching narrative of *Migrant Sea* is achieved through the interconnecting of multiple stories, their diversity of *media* makes them ideal for dissemination on various the platforms - and, by extension, devices – of the modern converged media ecosystem (Siapera and Veglis, 2012). These different stories (and iterations) in multiple media formats provide the audience with the practical choice of how, when, and where they will engage with the greater narrative (Deuze, 2004; Urichio, 2016).

anonymous and chose an audio-only interview; Salu, from Palermo, preferred not to be interviewed but was extremely interested in being featured in a VR documentary.

V – CONCLUSION

There is abundant evidence that media narratives continue to shape public perception of migration and, subsequently, the discourses that shape policy¹⁰⁶.

Failing to recognize the systemic Western bias at the root of this narrative poses multiple ethical, ideological and discursive problems. Firstly, it is a failure of the liberal and democratic precepts that the Western media claim to hold as essential – universal dignity and human rights– as it dehumanizes and devalues the voices of millions of migrants¹⁰⁷. Secondly, it promulgates an uneven, incomplete and biased Western-centric news frame that contradicts their stated values of fairness, clarity and accuracy¹⁰⁸. Lastly, this failed narrative has not only resulted in the disengagement of the global mainstream audience with the human crisis of displacement¹⁰⁹ but will undermine the credibility of the media in the long term. Current mainstream coverage of migration sends a clear message to its global audience: migrant lives, voices and stories don't matter as much as Western ones.

Given current global inequity between fragile – yet often resource-rich – developing states and stable – often extractionist – Western countries and increasing transnational mobility, migration flows to the West are unlikely to stop. (Im)migrants already have and will inevitably continue to reshape Western society¹¹⁰. It is therefore essential that their voices, stories and ideas be integrated if the public is to understand this phenomenon properly – and for policy to adapt accordingly. This essay has proposed alternative journalistic approaches to respond to these failures and reform the problematic narrative of migration: the better research and contextualization of migration as a global issue with Western roots; the diversification of voices and paradigms as a part of the public discourse of migration; the adoption of ethical

¹⁰⁶ See Abu-Fadil (2017), Berry et al. (2015), Georgiou and Zaborowski (2017) and Respect Words Project (2017).

¹⁰⁷ See EJN/ICMPD (2017), EJN (2017), IOM (2017), Horsti (2016), NPPA (2020) and Esses et al. (2013).

¹⁰⁸ As per Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014)

¹⁰⁹ See Moeller (1999), Patterson (2019), Betts (2013, 2015)

¹¹⁰ See Kindleberger (1967) and Boraccetti (2018)

and collaborative practices in the field that respect and value migrant perspectives and stories¹¹¹; the creation of new narrative models that integrate migrants into the editorial process and highlight them as essential to the understanding of migration; and the development of hypertextual, interactive and multimedia narrative architectures to deepen and diversify the levels of information and media available to the audience (Canavilhas, 2006) and hopefully help them re-emerge from the compassion fatigue caused by previous coverage.

Migrant Sea was both an experiment in the application of these methods and practices and an attempt to synthesize a model that addresses significant issues of contextualization, discursive diversity and migrant agency. My practical proposals should be regarded as guidelines for reform from which better methods, practices and narrative models can be developed, just as they themselves were gleaned and expanded from previous research and literature. Its production was also a profound experience for myself both as a researcher and as a human being, as it allowed me to witness the real-world impacts of the failures of the media and understand the urgency of reform. However, my critical analysis of current migration coverage and my literature research into its historical and discursive roots leave many avenues for further investigation, notably from intersectional, postmodern and transformative frameworks¹¹². And although my conclusions specifically focus on Sub-Saharan migration to Europe, I believe that many of them can be applied to mainstream coverage of migration as a whole, regardless of the region of origin.

Much like the narrative it seeks to counter, *Migrant Sea* is far from complete, as I have only been able to include a fraction of the stories that were shared with me. I not only hope to complete the project with the stories of all participants but, if possible, expand the project

¹¹¹ (Abu-Fadil, 2017; McMahan et al., 2014; Slutskaya et al., 2018)

¹¹² Critical Race Theory would be a particularly important avenue through which one could explore popular media narratives of migration, as illustrated by Bouie (2018), Eze (1997) and Nothias (2012).

with further media production beyond Italian borders and, most importantly, better and deeper collaboration with diverse, insightful voices.

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APPENDIX A: Notes on language

Since *Migrant Sea*'s goal is to construct a counternarrative to Western media's perception of Sub-Saharan migration, I've chosen to avoid using specific terms that feed into this narrative and use alternatives more in line with this project's mandate.

The terms 'migrant crisis' or 'refugee crisis' are confusing and problematic as they play into sensationalist crisis narratives that focus not on the issues at the root of mass migration – why people leave or flee their home countries – but on the impact that migration allegedly has on Europe. Furthermore, these terms tend to refer to the 2015-2017 period where millions of Syrian refugees fled civil war to Europe, conflating their stories and journeys with those of African migrants crossing through the Western and Central Mediterranean, a phenomenon that had already been ongoing for nearly two decades (Bjarnesen, 2015; Nessel, 2011).

My usage of the term 'West' or 'Western' refers to the culturally, politically, and economically dominant (and in many cases, formerly imperial) countries of Western Europe and North America (1) whose hegemonic models of journalism have been exported as "media formation models" (Boyd-Barrett, 1977) for media markets worldwide, namely to former colonies¹¹³ (2) whose liberal journalistic values and standards have become normative methods and practices internationally (Nerone, 2013) (3) whose news conglomerates are the most widespread, well-funded and thereby influential at "local, national, regional and transnational levels" (Boyd-Barrett, 2015; also see Arsenault and Castells, 2008; Noam, 2009) (4) whose outlets generate the most significant output of news media worldwide and as a result dominate the global flow of information (Geniets, 2013) (5) whose media can influence, set (Weaver et al., 1997) and frame (Entman, 2003) global social and political agendas and

¹¹³ Boyd-Barrett (2015) describes this as the "post-Imperial model" of journalism, most importantly represented by the United Kingdom, France, Spain and the United States of America.

public opinion (Davidson, 2019; EJV/ICMPD, 2017; Esses et Al., 2013; Nossek, 2004) and (6) command a great deal of respect, recognition and prestige worldwide.

When discussing the 'mainstream' media, news, or narrative, I refer to hegemonic Western-based international news outlets and news services. Generally owned by powerful international conglomerates or state-funded, these organizations dominate the global media narrative by setting discursive agendas (McCombs and Reynolds, 2002) and serve as templates, both in form and content (Boyd-Barrett, 1977) for smaller media organizations worldwide. Most notable examples are 24/7 broadcasters such as Voice of America (state-funded), CNN (owned by WarnerMedia) and FOX News (owned by News Corp and Fox Corporation) in the United States; the BBC (mostly state-funded) in the United Kingdom; Radio France Internationale (state-funded) and France 24 (owned by Groupe TF1) in France; and Deutsche Welle (state-funded) in Germany (Geniets, 2013). Perhaps even more significantly, the dominant News Agencies that produce, sell or redistribute news are mostly western-based: Reuters (UK), the Associated Press (United States), Agence France-Presse (France) are widely considered to be the most popular (Boyd-Barrett, 2008).

This formative modelling has resulted in Westernized news frames becoming the international norm, even in counter-hegemonic news outlets and agencies such as Al Jazeera¹¹⁴, RT, Telesur, CCTV and Xinhua (Boyd-Barrett, 2015; Geniets, 2013). As per Boyd-Barrett (2010), the *“overall shape and feel of these organizations is generally western, even when not actually based in the West.”*

Although the *Migrant Sea* website's long-term objective is to provide migrants to Europe of all nationalities with a platform for their voices and stories, the current version (and by extension, this essay) prominently features Sub-Saharan migrants to Italy. For this reason,

¹¹⁴ Al Jazeera English, established in 2006, recruited many journalists from Western news organizations for its launch, most notably from the BBC, which decidedly shaped its recognizably Anglo-American approach to international journalism.

my use of the term 'migration to Europe' generally refers to the Central, Western, and Eastern trans-Saharan routes leading to Italy via Libya.

For the sake of simplicity, I take an *inclusivist view* (Carling, 2020) in my use of the term 'migrants,' as I use it to cover all categories of people in movement (as does the IOM), including refugees who have received international protection, asylum seekers who have applied for humanitarian protection and economic migrants escaping hyper-precarious lives.

In this project's context, I have interacted with many migrants who described their stay in Italy as a transition period. As such, I use the terms 'migration' or 'transit migration' as per Aspasia Papadopoulou-Kourkoulou's (2008) definition: "*the situation between emigration and settlement that is characterized by indefinite migrant stay, legal or illegal, and may or may not develop into further migration depending on a series of structural and individual factors.*"

The purpose of this project being to collaborate with migrants in the formation of a new narrative, I've chosen to refer to those having joined the project as 'participants.'

APPENDIX B: MIGRANT SEA – Content Description and Platforms

Multiple media stories

Migrant Sea is constructed from multiple types of content utilizing different methods of journalistic storytelling:

- **Traditional journalistic [“explainer” articles](#)** focused on providing historical, geopolitical and socio-economic context that is typically lacking in mainstream coverage. These articles, however, can also integrate embedded multimedia elements such as maps, data visualizations, photography, video clips, video backgrounds and immersive videos.
- **Collaboratively created essays on individual participants’ pasts, journeys, and current realities.** These are created through a remote, collaborative process between participants and me, where I first edit, condense and adapt transcripts of their interviews into a structured, narrative first draft, which is then corrected and adjusted according to their feedback. These - like the explainer articles - contain embedded multimedia elements.
- Intimate, short-form [video documentaries](#) on the lives, voices and perspectives of individual Sub-Saharan migrants throughout Sicily. In order to truly focus on the agency of participants and authentically represent their stories, perspectives and voices, these are solely narrated by interviews with the participants.
- [Photo documentaries following the lives of individual migrants](#) in Sicily. The photo captions integrate quotes from the interviews with the participants in question.
- **Immersive (360-degree) video documentaries** on the lives of migrant households and reception centres in Sicily. As with the video documentaries, these are solely narrated by interviews with participants.

- [Long-form audio documentaries](#) edited from audio interviews about the pasts, journeys, current lives and perspectives of migrants in Italy. Approximately 45 minutes in length, but can be broken down into three chapters.
- [User-Generated Content \(UGC\)](#) created by migrants themselves. These include photo series taken by participants, [drawings by migrant teenagers](#), a [musical performance](#) and a prose reading.
- [Editorial multimedia essays](#) serving as loose platforms for op-eds and [abstract explorations of locations](#) and topics. These are much looser in style than journalistic pieces, integrating multimedia elements and focusing on editorial voice to create pieces that don't quite fit in the previous categories.

A WORK IN PROGRESS

Although enough material was produced for a larger-scale project – to be completed following the completion of this Masters - the current website only features a selection of what was produced.

Below is the amount of content for which material was produced in the field:

- 5 x Video documentaries
- 5 x VR documentaries
- 4 x Photo documentaries
- 5 x audio-only interviews with migrant participants: one in French, two in Italian and three in English.
- 13 x video interviews with migrant participants: three in French, two in Italian and eight in English.
- 12 x video interviews with non-migrant participants, generally people involved in migrant reception: three in French, eight in Italian and two in English.
- 4 x VR / Photo essays

- 9 x UGC: eight photo UGC, one drawing UGC and one music UGC

Below are the stories and media assembled for the current version of the website:

- 3 x explainer articles: [Migration Primer](#), [Upon Arrival](#), [Enlightened Media](#)
- 4 x collaborative essays: [Fidèle](#), [Abdirahman](#), [A.](#), and [M.](#)
- 1 x video documentaries: [Jenni](#).
- 1 x VR documentaries: [Casa Federica](#)
- 2 x photo documentaries: [Abdirahman](#) and [Fidèle](#).
- 1 x audio documentary: [A.](#)
- 1 x VR / photo essays: [Names Unknown](#)
- 2 x UGC: [The Journey](#) and [Homelands](#)

Multiple platforms

Migrant Sea's multimediality, both within its more “traditional” journalistic content that integrates multimedia content and in its use of individual documentary stories told in a variety of media, is meant to create a more interactive, personalized and engaging user experience than traditional forms of documentary and journalistic storytelling.

But as the project’s primary purpose is to create awareness, much of its media is also hosted on freely accessible platforms and social media networks: video and VR documentaries are posted to YouTube, a selection of photos is being posted progressively to Instagram. The audio documentaries, though currently embedded into the website, are meant to be later published on Apple podcasts and Google podcasts once a sufficient number will have been produced.

The project also has dedicated social media pages on Facebook and Twitter in order to highlight an article or documentary every week. Ultimately, the goal is to propose pieces to news media outlets for re-publishing, much like a news service.

APPENDIX C: A DESCRIPTION OF *MIGRANT SEA*'S FIELD PRODUCTION

PRE-PRODUCTION: OCTOBER 2018 – FEBRUARY 2019

Between October 2018 and my departure in February 2019, I contacted dozens of Italian and international NGOs, charitable organizations and aid workers to present the project, search for participants and determine my itinerary. These conversations were incredibly helpful and informative, as they confirmed my position that Sub-Saharan migrants have been left out of their own narrative and that an alternative was necessary. During this period, I also confirmed the involvement of my two team members: Lorenzo Signoretti, my production manager (L.S. in the table below), and Roland Cody Larocque (R.C.L. in the table below), my director of photography.

PRODUCTION: MARCH 2019 – APRIL 2019

Field production of the *Migrant Sea* multimedia documentary took place in Sicily and northern Italy between February 28 and April 22, 2019. In Sicily, I was joined by Lorenzo and Cody, who passionately volunteered for the project and assisted me for 25 days. Lorenzo, being Italian himself, helped me produce (communicating with organizations and participants, scheduling), and Cody assisted me in filming video elements. I would produce all 360 video, photography and audio interviews myself.

Together, we travelled throughout Sicily to the cities of Palermo, Mazara del Vallo, Ragusa, Catania and Messina to film a total of five video documentaries, five VR documentaries, four photo documentaries, five audio documentaries and 12 interviews with asylum and reception experts. Additionally, we helped participants produce nine pieces of User-Generated-Content.

On April 12, I travelled to Northern Italy, where I produced three interviews with reception experts and a single photo documentary.

For a more precise breakdown of the field production, see the table below:

Table C.1: A breakdown of *Migrant Sea's* field production

Month	Start	End	Location	Filming Activity	Participants	Crew
Feb.	28	7	Palermo	Prep / Research	N/A	S.G.
March	7	13	Palermo	2 x Video documentary 1 x VR documentary 1 x audio interview 1 x UGC 5 x non-migrant interviews	Lamine Mane Jenni Traore M. Clarisse Zohori James Dumbuya Mamadou Keita Ali Asfano	S.G. R.C.L.
March	13	18	Mazara del Vallo	1 x video documentary 1 x non-migrant interview 1 x UGC	Sekou Keita	S.G. R.C.L. L.S.
March	18	25	Ragusa	1 x video documentary 1 x VR documentary 1 x photo documentary 2 x interviews 1 x non-migrant interview 2 x UGC	Tesfu Fshatsion Stephanie Samuel Abdirahman Hasan A. Yrgalem Berih	S.G. R.C.L. L.S.
March	25	2	Catania	1 x video documentary 1 x photo documentary 1 x VR documentary 2 x interviews 2 x non-migrant interviews 3 x UGC	Larry Scotty Gideon Omokagbom Ismaheel Ibraheem Justice Uwadeigu	S.G. R.C.L. L.S.
April	2	6	Messina	2 x photo documentary 1 x VR documentary 2 x non-migrant interviews 2 x UGC	Fidele Deholo Mamadou Billo Sow	S.G. L.S.
April	6	11	Palermo	1 x VR documentary	Falilu Diallo Mouctar Sall	S.G.
April	11	22	Torino	1 x photo documentary 3 x non-migrant interviews		S.G.

POST-PRODUCTION

Between May and August 2019, I de-rushed and organized all footage and photography for all audio and visual documentaries. Between September 2019 and January 2020, with the help of my assistant Marie-Françoise Marchis-Mouren, I transcribed all participant interviews, an essential step in creating collaboratively written texts and video subtitles. Between January 2020 and February 2020, I produced full wireframes for the design of the *Migrant Sea* website and began development with my digital producer, Mathieu O'Connor. In March 2020, I delivered the brief to my web designer, Ken Guillaume, who began its design and production. Between March and November 2020, video, photo immersive and audio documentaries were edited, as well as four first-person essays. The participant feedback phase occurred between August 2020 and January 2021, with Jenni, Abdirahman and Fidèle in particular offering very positive feedback, editing notes and more detailed information. A. informed me that he had to remain anonymous (for the time being) due to ongoing court proceedings. M. asked that her UGC photography be withdrawn from the project and her story kept anonymous. Final editing and mixing of the media occurred between December 2020 and February 2021.

The website was troubleshot and content integrated from January to March 2021. Due to practical and budgetary concerns, certain elements from the original proposal, such as interactive maps and graphics embedded into articles, had to be scaled down. Due to an issue with the website's architecture, direct hyperlinking to media isn't yet possible, though this will be corrected in the future.

PRODUCTION CHALLENGES

Confirming participants

Confirming participants in advance and at a distance proved incredibly difficult. Few were available to discuss the project via Skype, and aid workers overall told me that it would be

better for me to meet interested migrants and present the project upon arrival. Fortunately, this proved correct, and the project found more than enough willing participants.

Media suppression as a part of an anti-migrant discourse

Despite months of preparations, the project encountered some obstructions, namely from Italian federal authorities, the government then being led by the far-right – and notoriously anti-migrant - Deputy Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini. We were refused access to any reception centre or organization under the supervision of federal authorities.

Following the Italian Coast Guard

In 2017, I wrote a paper on the Italian Coast Guard's migrant Search and Rescue operations in the Mediterranean. It was while researching this that I first found myself reflecting on the absence (and its injustice) of migrants from the mainstream narrative. In a sense, this paper was the inspiration for *Migrant Sea*. I had received positive feedback and interest from high-ranking Coast Guard commanders that I had interviewed, so following a Search and Rescue operation became a natural story to pursue. This all changed after the 2018 Italian federal elections. After months of correspondence, the Italian Coast Guard cut off all communications with me. Following dozens of emails and phone calls to different departments, I was ultimately informed that they would no longer collaborate with media. This was in stark contrast with the Coast Guard's decades of outspokenness and dedication to migrant rescue. Although not officially correlated, the cessation of almost all migrant Search and Rescue operations coincided with new, sweeping anti-migrant policies implemented by the Ministry of the Interior.

Accessing first reception centers

Reception Centers in Italy fall under two different types of jurisdictions; municipalities control secondary reception centers, while federal prefectures control first reception.

In the field, this meant that it was much easier to obtain access from local authorities than federal ones. While local municipalities universally expressed support for our project, federal authorities were either incredibly difficult to access or outright refused us access.¹¹⁵ Many aid workers told us that this was due to the government's anti-migrant policies at the time of filming.

The only exception to this was a CAS (first reception) in Termini Imerese, where the staff granted us access without requesting permission because they were preparing to cease operations within the following year.

¹¹⁵ We were refused access to a CAS in Palermo, a CAS in Ragusa - where one of our participants worked - a hotspot in Pozzallo, the massive CARA reception center in Mineo and a CAS in Messina.

APPENDIX D: PROJECT PRESENTATION

What follows is a broad synthesis of the presentations I made to potential participants throughout Sicily.

1. Personal Presentation

I would begin by introducing my personal and professional background: *“I’m a Canadian filmmaker. I’ve made commercials, music videos, documentaries for 15 years. I also make a lot of films with NGOs a little bit everywhere in the world, lots of Human Rights stuff. My wife is a Human Rights lawyer. It’s something that’s always been very important to me.”*

2. University context

- The project was conceived independently due to superficial Sub-Saharan migration coverage in the mainstream media.
- Only later was the project integrated into an MA in Journalism.
- As a result, the project has an academic framework and University support.

3. Problematic / project as a response to mainstream journalism

- The project is a reaction to mainstream journalism and its coverage of Sub-Saharan migration to Europe.
- The mainstream media’s focus on Search and Rescue at sea is emblematic of a greater issue at play: it focuses on the border at which migrants cross into Europe because that is when they ostensibly become European responsibility. The narrative is always told from a European perspective.
- The media also focuses on Search and Rescue because it is dramatic and attracts viewers’ attention. However, this coverage shows people at their most vulnerable and often at their weakest - both literally and figuratively – viewing and defining them through their suffering. As such, this coverage is not representative

of migrants as complex human beings, people with their own voices and stories to tell.

- The western perspective dominating the media narrative also poses a significant problem in that it portrays itself as superior, regardless of policy being pro-migrant or anti-migrant. On the one hand, western powers are portrayed as morally superior; they're told that it is their obligation as liberal, benevolent and humanitarian democracies to support migrants and refugees. On the other, western powers are portrayed as economically and culturally superior; they're told that the west is so rich and successful that migrants seek to invade and exploit it.
- Both of these stances ignore the fact that the West's wealth and resulting societal and economic stability were built upon the century-long exploitation of resources in foreign colonies, namely in Africa.
- The mainstream media narrative also lacks context about migration. Migrants come from many different countries, all of which have many different cultures, many different locales. Everyone also has their own reasons for leaving.
- The superficiality of the mainstream media narrative also promulgates – if only by omission – prejudicial African migrant archetypes; since further context is rarely provided, audiences can surmise that the majority of African migrants are rural, poor, uneducated people fleeing conflict or starvation. This ignores realities that are infinitely more complex: many are highly educated, speak multiple languages and dialects, work from a young age, are highly skilled, come from urban cities, come from middle-class backgrounds. Many leave for personal reasons, economic reasons, due to environmental factors, not just conflict and poverty.
- The mainstream media narrative tends to ignore the difficult realities that migrants face after having arrived in Europe.
- Overall, the western media tends to report on migrants as Others, as the subject of stories, rarely the authors. Much is written *about* them, sometimes their

opinions are cited, but migrant voices and opinions seem rarely included in any kind of actual dialogue.

- Migrant voices are rarely the highlight of the media coverage of migration. Hundreds of thousands of people have crossed the Mediterranean, but few of their stories, thoughts and perspectives have transcended citation and entered the mainstream narrative. Many gaps in knowledge about Sub-Saharan migration could be filled if this were the case, not to mention a greater awareness fuelled by a more intimate understanding of the stakes and realities.
- This disenfranchising of migrants at the hands of the western media removes any possibility of shaping their own narratives. Gone is the agency to represent themselves. Their stories are taken away from them and rewritten by foreigners who cannot fully understand them.
- In lacking a proper *socio-political context* and the inclusion of migrant voices, popular perception of migrants remains as a negative cliché: migrants can be perceived as principally coming to Europe to take advantage – or exploit - European generosity. There is little focus on the economic, social and cultural boon that migrants have historically proven themselves to be for Europe in the past, enriching and diversifying countries like Germany, the U.K. and France richer economically and culturally. Migrants who work pay taxes, pay rent, eat, generate income and most often begin by working the jobs that native Europeans do not want to do. European society, culture and economy are not a zero-sum game.

4. Project Description

- The project is at its core a website. It will be an online multimedia documentary, accessible to everyone.
- It will feature two principal types of content: articles offering context about why people migrate from Africa to Europe and documentaries and stories from the point of view of migrants in Italy.

- I describe the short documentaries as collaborative and participants as collaborators because of the project's focus on migrant self-representation. Although filmmakers have filmed the interviews and daily lives of participants and will ultimately edit and create the documentaries, the guiding voice remains the participants'.
- The website will contain many kinds of documentaries in many kinds of media: video, photo, 360 video, and audio. These will be filmed over a period of 3 to 4 days per location so that we can experience and record participants' daily lives alongside them.
- This variety of media equipment allows us to be flexible in that participants can share whatever they want however they prefer. If someone can't be filmed but wants to show us their life, we can take photos. If someone wants to remain anonymous, we can just do an interview and produce a podcast. We even lend out cameras so participants can take their own photos. As long as someone wants to share their story, we can work with them.
- What the project relies on, however, are in-depth interviews about migrant stories, perspectives and opinions. These are not typical journalistic interviews in that we are not only looking for answers to our questions but to create a dialogue, a conversation focusing on migrant voices. It is also for this reason that the interviews will be more elaborate and longer – anywhere between 90 and 180 minutes - than typical journalistic interviews. Participants can share whatever they want, as much as they want, at their own pace.
- The goal of the interviews isn't only that participants share their pasts, but their thoughts, opinions and feelings as well. The interviews are not so much about events as they are about experiences.
- The interviews will then be used to narrate video and 360 documentaries, create audio documentaries, caption photos and serve as the basis for long-form texts.

In fact, participants will exclusively narrate their own documentaries, assuring that it genuinely – and literally – represents their voice.

- In this sense, we want this to be a platform for African voices, not our own. This is how the project differs from traditional journalistic coverage of African migration to Europe.
- This visit to Sicily is a first step, as we'd like to continue the project later, returning to Europe and possibly progressing to the home countries in Africa.

I would always conclude by emphasizing the importance of agency above content to the project:

“Your story isn’t what’s most important; what’s most important is how you feel about it, what you’ve gone through emotionally. We want to know about what you’re living through now. Because who you are as a person is even more important to us than your story. It’s more important than your suffering.”