

# The news, social media and politics in the locked storytelling of migration in Italy

**Marcello Maneri and Andrea Pogliano**

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## Authors

**Marcello Maneri** is a Research Affiliate at FIERI and Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Milano Bicocca, where he teaches Media and Cultural Sociology. After obtaining a PhD in Sociology at the University of Trento in 1995, he was involved in several national and EU-funded projects on migration, security, and racism. He is and has been a member of the Editorial/Scientific Board of several journals such as Contemporary Sociology, Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa, Asylon(s), Cartografie Sociali, and Conflitti Globali. His research focuses on news and migration, racism, public discourse on crime and security, and moral panics. He has recently published the book “An Ugly Word: Rethinking Race in Italy and the United States” (2022), co-authored with Ann Morning, on the notions of genealogical groups’ essentialised difference in Italy and the United States.

**Andrea Pogliano** is Associate Professor at the University of Piemonte Orientale, where he’s President of the degree course in Social Work, and FIERI researcher. Within the BRIDGES project, he collaborated on four research packages as a member of FIERI. He has a PhD in sociology from the University of Milan. He was a Marie-Curie scholar at the IRESCO-CNRS in Paris and a research fellow at the EHESS. His main lines of research are in media, journalism, photojournalism and migrations and in cultural sociology. With Irene Ponzio from FIERI he got the grant Forced migration flows and asylum as a policy response from the Urban Communication Foundation (UCF) of New York. His last book is Media, politica e migrazioni in Europa [Media, politics and migrations in Europe] edited by Carocci in 2019.

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## 1. Introduction: The path behind this document<sup>1</sup>

Migrations involve millions of people in Italy and have become a fundamental pillar of the country's workforce, demographic and social security balance, as well as one of the key issues in the political debate. The way they are told therefore affects everyone, directly or indirectly. This working paper highlights some of the main features and key points of the narratives on migration conveyed by the media. Media stories are indeed the most effective means of orienting the public, influencing at the same time the way the phenomenon is discussed and handled in the hybrid media system (in the sense of including traditional and social media: Chadwick 2013), in the political scenario, by "street-level bureaucrats" (Lipsky 2010) and in civil society.

While taking into account the extensive literature available on the topic (for quantitative investigations, see the Rome Charter reports and Binotto et al. 2016), this text is based on three case studies designed to investigate narratives not only as stories, but also and above all as a process of elaboration and circulation of the stories themselves. In other words, we don't just examine narratives about immigration and their circulation, but we also look at the reasons why some narratives have become dominant over others, and what makes them more pervasive, binding or long-lasting. To this end, we studied three cases that are characterised by a heterogeneous mix of features that allow us to examine different contexts of narrative production (for a detailed analysis of each of the three cases, see Maneri et al. 2023). They concern the first challenge to the "closed ports" policy called for by Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, with the disembarkation of 53 refugees rescued by the NGO Sea Watch in Lampedusa at the end of June 2019 (Giuliani and Panic 2022; Sampugnaro 2020; see also De Blasio, Palillo and Selva 2023); the debate in June 2017 on the (subsequently failed) reform of the citizenship law on the occasion of its discussion in the Senate, fraught with identity issues inscribed in political and cultural narratives; and, finally, the attempted white supremacist massacre in Macerata by Luca Traini in February 2018, in the midst of the election campaign, on the occasion of which conflicting narratives based on often implicit notions of deserving and undeserving victims emerged (Maneri and Quassoli 2020; see also Binotto, Nobile and Rega 2020).

Despite their uniqueness, the three cases we have studied share some common features that reveal a system of long-term representation that, with specific variations, is in a sense independent of the event itself. Focusing on these common features does not, of course, mean ignoring the political context in which the events took place, which was characterised by a return to the politicisation of the migration issue, and thus its salience and polarisation. This context took shape with the so-called "refugee crisis" of 2015-16, after years of relative inactivity marked by economic-financial concerns and the technical government of Mario Monti, in office until 2013.

For each case study, we collected and then quantitatively and qualitatively analysed all the relevant news items (306 in total) published during the period of maximum focus by three major national newspapers (Corriere della Sera, Fatto Quotidiano and il Giornale) and two television news programmes in their prime time editions (TG1 and TG5), with the aim of representing

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<sup>1</sup> This Working Paper has already been published in Italian. It is available at: <https://fier.i.it/informazione-social-media-e-politica-nel-racconto-bloccato-delle-migrazioni-in-italia/>

different political orientations and ownership models. In addition, for each case we analysed the 100 most retweeted messages on the topic in the same period on Twitter, the platform most integrated with traditional media and where politically active personalities try to spread opinions and transmit emotions through their comments and narratives (Papacharissi 2016). We also collected 13 semi-structured interviews with journalists, politicians and activists involved in covering the events and the debates surrounding them. Where the data are quantifiable, we present a comparison with five other European countries (France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain and Hungary) where the same types of events have been studied according to a common methodology within the European BRIDGES project, coordinated by Blanca Garcés and Ferruccio Pastore.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, we argue that the way in which narratives about migrants have been structured and polarised obscures significant aspects of migration, conveys an idea of Italianness based on the purity of ancestry and denies the possibility of giving voice to migrants, thus contributing to their dehumanisation. Furthermore, we argue that some political strategies – namely those used by right-wing political forces in these specific years – have been more successful than others, for reasons related both to the now consolidated structure of migration narratives and to the logics of journalistic production and remediation of texts posted on social media.

## 2. Outside and inside the frame

The three events we have considered are intertwined with many of the themes that have characterised the immigration debate in Italy since its inception. These themes coalesce around two main positions, they are treated differently by traditional and social media, they leave other potentially relevant issues out of the picture and they undergo a strong twist due to the way their narrative has been shaped.

In the case of the Sea Watch 3 landing, the conflict that broke out was between the side that defended the primacy of law and the sovereignty of the state over its borders, which saw the Minister of the Interior as a hero and the NGO, the opposition and Europe as enemies, and the faction that defended the primacy of humanity, which instead saw the NGO as a hero and the Ministry of the Interior as the enemy.

As far as the debate on citizenship is concerned, the sides have coalesced around the idea of a law that is seen *as a risk* – economic, cultural, in terms of national security (for terror attacks) or as a pull factor for new invasions – or *as an advantage* – through the recognition of the rights of those already living in Italy and, through their consequent integration, as a guarantee for the security of the country itself. Finally, in the reactions to the supremacist attack in Macerata, the contrast was not without ambiguity, between explanations that saw the problem in excessive migration and those that described a climate of hatred unleashed by racist propaganda, albeit with striking differences between traditional and social media.

As we can see, such different events call into question transversal issues that pit the principle of security – the risks of invasion, cultural annihilation, terrorism, economic and social costs – against that of equality – regarding the value of human life and rights. Obviously, these two

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bridges-migration.eu/>. See in particular the comparative report (Maneri 2023).

principles immediately conjure up a 'right-wing' worldview – both in its emphasis on law and order and in the primacy accorded to the interests of the indigenous population – and a 'left-wing' one. However, as we shall see, formal adherence to progressive and/or liberal principles has not always led all proponents of egalitarian demands to act accordingly.

In any case, the original and, for some, surprising role of social media should be highlighted. Commonly seen as a forum for the dissemination of hate speech and fake news, social media, and Twitter in particular, have often proved more willing than the traditional media to criticise xenophobia and disinformation. Of course, there has been no shortage of insults directed at migrants and their alleged 'accomplices' – polarisation, thanks to algorithms (Berger and Milkman 2012; Venturini 2019), is the true hallmark of social media debates. However, in both the Sea Watch case and the Macerata case – but not in the case of the debate on citizenship<sup>3</sup> – we noticed a strong prevalence of solidarity content, anchored in humanitarian values, which, in the case of Luca Traini's attack, became a real civic reaction that was missing in the institutional response. This performance of social media was also confirmed, sometimes more clearly, in the other countries on which we focused our study, with the exception of France, where nationalist and security positions prevailed on Twitter (Bognár et al. 2023; Bourekba et al. 2023; Moncada 2023; Rheindorf and Vollmer 2023; Smellie 2023).

What really happens on social media, beyond the simple cliché of these platforms as the (unpresentable) 'evil soul' of the country, is often not seen: while newspapers and television channels were quick to underline and condemn insults and hate speech, they did not see, especially in the case of Macerata, the civil reaction that had built up via Twitter with more than 52,000 retweets<sup>4</sup>, reporting a debate composed only of actors, mainly politicians, already accredited with them.

However, in the light of our analyses, the main way in which newspapers and television convey the story is through the personalisation of events, which are ultimately understood through narratives in which a few characters are magnified, given significance and resonance, and projected onto various imagined communities. The case of the landing of the Sea Watch 3 is emblematic in this respect. Two "captains", Salvini and Rackete, engaged in a tug-of-war, dominated the scene. For some, Salvini represented the defender of Italians and state sovereignty, for others the inhuman "Minister of Evil". His figure galvanised supporters and opponents who saw in him the embodiment of their values or lack of them. The same happened to Rackete, for some the champion and saviour of the oppressed, but for its detractors, prompted by Salvini's communication campaign, the white, rich and bored "braggart" acting blindly according to her "left-wing" ideology. Salvini represented order, virility and the homeland or its instrumental use; Rackete was instead the mirror in which debates on race, class, political orientation, gender, generations and their interrelations were reflected (see also Giuliani and Panico 2022 on this issue).

If this characterisation made the event of the Sea Watch 3's landing memorable, thanks in part to the climactic near-collision with the Carabinieri's vessel at the dock, it did not make it easy to fully understand. First of all, the migrants whose lives were at stake in this affair remained in the background. Painted as victims or, on the contrary, described as "illegals" in a secondary

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<sup>3</sup> Despite a predominance of tweets against the reform, the distance from favourable content was less strong than in the traditional media analysed, also due to the excessive production of news by Il Giornale.

<sup>4</sup> Limiting the count to the 100 most shared messages.

role, their subjectivity – including their political subjectivity, materialised in an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights – was not told in any substantial way. The defence of their rights (but in fact the question of rights in general) also remained out of the picture or was exclusively delegated to the “white saviour”, Carola Rackete. The same geopolitical confrontation with other European countries, also narrated as a back-and-forth challenge, distracted journalists from providing the legal framework and data that would have served to put these declarations into context. With little or no information on the law of the sea, on the real weight of reception in the various European countries, on the economic function of migration, including irregular migration, and on the actual ratio between landings with rescue at sea and autonomous landings, a narrative was constructed in which the country could rightly be seen as a victim of the cynicism of the European powers and of the internal enemy represented by the NGOs, and in which immigration was only a problem and never the solution to many other problems.

The case of the Macerata attack, on the other hand, illustrates how the game of narrative projection can lead to paradoxical results. In the episode, Luca Traini confronts six black people, whom he shoots, identifying them precisely by their skin colour. In fact, these characters are portrayed through chains of relationships. On the one hand, there are the victims themselves, who remain almost anonymous and whose image was captured from a distance in only four news reports. They become visible only through identification with the community of (potential) asylum seekers in Italy, defined by Berlusconi as a “social bomb”, linked to debates on invasion and crime, and almost never with the black community or by thematising anti-black racism. The alleged reasons for Traini’s action also link the victims of the shooting to Innocent Oseghale, the Nigerian drug dealer who, a few days earlier, had killed the Italian Pamela Mastropietro, also in Macerata. On the other hand, there is Luca Traini, who, unlike Innocent Oseghale – who is described only in terms of his deviance, his nationality and his status as a foreigner with an expulsion order – is fully humanised, with references to his everyday life and his psychological state<sup>5</sup>. Traini is metonymically projected onto the entire Italian community whose “intolerance” he shares, he is presented (not without a hint of irony) in the self-appointed role of Pamela Mastropietro’s avenger and, above all, he is placed alongside the real victim of this representation: the city of Macerata and, symbolically, all of Italy. The city is portrayed, in the words of the news of the time, as “under siege”, “in panic”, facing “foreign crime”. In the end, this game of projections turns the (individual) perpetrator into a (collective) victim. Conversely, instead of investigating the attacker’s behaviour by reporting on the fascist milieu from which he came, the journalists committed themselves to contextualising it by focusing on the refugee community in Italy (one of the three main characters in almost a third of the news items), thus transforming the victims into perpetrators, whose victimisation was ultimately predictable.

The coverage of the four other attacks we studied in Europe, all jihadist-inspired, was very different (Bourekba et al. 2023; Moncada 2023; Rheindorf and Vollmer 2023; Smellie 2023). In the coverage of these events, psychological explanations were overwhelmed by analyses of the context of the attackers’ origins. Furthermore, it is worth underlining that reactions aimed at symbolically reconstructing the offended community, with public ceremonies of solidarity with the victims, were, as always, the rule (Lule 1990; Nossek 2008; Maneri, Quassoli and

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<sup>5</sup> See also Frisina and Pogliano (2020). For a more general analysis of the different treatment reserved for victims and executioners depending on their origin, see Maneri and Pogliano (2021).

Ricci 2019). But not in Macerata. Almost as if the victims were not considered part of any conceivable (human) community, the public authorities, the government representatives and the local institutions thought of “softening” the mood by denying the victims this closeness at a time when it would have been more appropriate. For their part, the media, when a demonstration of condemnation was finally celebrated, presented it as the act of a radical minority, and described it by reporting on the most extreme acts, rather than giving a voice to the participants.

In this case, as in others, it was the words of the politicians that determined the course of the story. The debate on the reform of the citizenship law shows how dependent the media are on politics. Firstly, the parodying of the law by its political opponents, but also by much of the journalism, in terms of an automatic *ius soli*<sup>6</sup> has overshadowed the aspects of the law that characterise it in terms of *ius culturae*, such as the requirement for schooling in the country, thus encouraging narratives that evoked cultural annihilation. The political choice to use children of foreign origin as a symbol and support for the main and almost sole argument of the campaign in favour of the law, followed by the recording by *La Repubblica* of 17 very short video interviews with non-citizen minors born in Italy, unintentionally reinforced the thesis of an automatic *ius soli*, leaving out issues of discrimination and the demand for rights, silencing the agency of second-generation migrants and their social movements in favour of a sentimental narrative that seems to understand citizenship as a paternalistic concession to those who “go to school with our children” and perhaps speak the same regional dialect. On the other hand, prophecies of jihadist attacks and new invasions, as well as appeals to ethnic-cultural purity, were supported by *Il Giornale* in the many articles and commentaries devoted to the subject.

In conclusion, the dominant narrative reaffirms an Italianness based on blood (or ‘ethnicity’, ‘race’?), where identity and belonging are naturally linked to an ancient lineage at the basis of a social division between the ‘true Italians’ and the others. When it comes to welcoming them, migrants are not considered as subjects who think and speak, but as a burden to be removed; when they seem capable of representing, through their victimisation, a wound at the heart of the constitutional values – which condemn racism and fascism – this relationship between them and the country is denied; if, finally, there is talk of granting them Italian citizenship, it is only because their otherness has been successfully erased by the creation of an image based on innocent, culturally assimilated children.

### 3. Narrators and narrated

If these are different variations of a more general narrative, who is the narrator? And, consequently, what are the points of view? Although the media tries to present itself as an independent voice, it is in fact mainly a reported discourse: that of the sources, which is then subjected to a series of transformations (Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Baden 2018; Van Dijk 1988).

As might be expected in a country characterised by a strong alignment between the media and politics (Hallin and Mancini 2004), the voice of the latter was by far the most present,

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<sup>6</sup> The principle that the nationality of a person is determined on the basis of their country of birth.



accounting for at least half of all verbal reactions, which rose to three quarters in the case of the citizenship debate. Political representatives have a significant and often decisive influence in determining the main turning points in media coverage (some of which are due to judicial decisions), in promoting the main themes of the discussion, in identifying the protagonists of the stories (even if they are often themselves) and in labelling them, as well as in determining the emotional pitch of the reporting of the facts. In short, politics is not only able to dictate the media agenda and open windows of attention to which other voices must adapt (this is the firm impression of two NGO press officers we interviewed, for example), but also has a strong weight in determining the structure of the narrative. The comparison with the other 5 European countries studied shows that this preponderance of politics is something very Italian: politicians, 59 per cent of citations in Italy, drop to 44 per cent in the European average. (Bognár et al. 2023; Bourekba et al. 2023; Maneri et al. 2023; Moncada 2023; Rheindorf and Vollmer 2023; Smellie 2023).

As for the other voices, NGOs are assigned the role of representing the migrants' point of view, with an average of 9 per cent of verbal reactions – 7 per cent is the European average. Migrants, refugees, and people with a migrant background as a whole are left with one per cent of the quotes. This is an impressive difference, not only in relation to the other voices (which include officials, experts and ordinary people), but even in relation to the European average, albeit a meagre 10 per cent – after all, we are talking about events that talk about these people.

If we shift our attention from newspapers and TV channels to Twitter, the balance of voices is strikingly different. Here, influencers and other ordinary people dominate (40 out of the 100 most shared messages, compared to a European average of 30 per cent), while politics accounts for less than a fifth of tweets, to which we must add just as many messages from traditional media (even more in other European countries). Social media therefore provide an arena more open to voices not accredited by the press, which does not include migrants, who are also almost absent here (Germany is the exception, see Rheindorf and Vollmer 2023). In any case, as we have already seen, the voices of civil society are not taken up and thus amplified by the traditional media.

The absence of migrant voices can be explained in many ways. In general, the media's preference for official sources is well known because their access is cheap, productive, predictable, relevant (because they make the decisions that matter) and also seen as a guarantee of authority. Migrants, on the other hand, are difficult to access (especially in the case of landings) and journalists face the additional challenge of the language barrier. In addition, they often do not have the resources to build a substantial social media following outside the artistic field, from which their requests sometimes come (Frisina and Kyeremeh 2021; Ardizzoni 2020; Cuconato 2021; Giuliani and Houbabi 2021). These factors may be even more pronounced in Italy because of the lack of institutional consolidation of foreign communities and because, in two out of three events, the migrants mentioned above were people who were far from being fully integrated into the social fabric.

However, our research highlights additional factors of marginalisation of migrants' voices that were brought to our attention by our privileged witnesses, particularly in relation to the Sea Watch case. On the part of the NGOs, which also acted as loudspeakers for their demands, the priority is to protect the migrants. This means acting as a shield against the pressure of journalists on people who are shaken by traumatic events, who are not used to communicating

with the media, and who must remain anonymous to avoid possible reprisals in their countries of origin. Moreover, the refugees' contacts will soon be lost anyway, and with them the possibility of giving them a voice in a less fragile situation. The result, as the press office staff themselves admit, is that their perspective is at best mediated by someone else and they are denied any role as protagonists. On the part of politicians, it is clear that their voice is considered useful only in certain cases and through certain icons, such as those of women and children. Finally, journalists seem to consider migrants' voices not only inaccessible but also unobjective, falling into a positivist conception of objectivity in which this quality results from the absence of subjectivity and not from the comparison of inevitably different subjectivities.

This lack of voice contributes to the dehumanisation of migrants and refugees, who are portrayed as communities engaged in often problematic behaviours rather than as individuals with a voice, a point of view and a history.

## 4. The conquest of narrative hegemony

Before looking at the specific role of journalism in producing and orienting narratives, which will be examined in the next section, let us consider the media as a space for the visibility of political and social actors who, in our three case studies, have tried to develop and disseminate narratives and commentaries. First of all, two mirror images emerge from the research: on the political front, the communicative strength of right-wing leaders and the weakness of centre-left ones; on the civil society front, however, a predominance of the progressive world to the detriment of more conservative voices. The civil society that proposes conservative or extreme right-wing ideas seems to depend more on the production of messages conveyed by the political leaders of their area of affiliation, messages that the members of civil society share and help to circulate in the mediatised public space (Mazzoleni 2009). However, this claim requires some specification, clarification and explanation.

First of all, it should be noted that the communicative strength of right-wing leaders can be seen both in their ability to impose their narratives in traditional media and in their presence over time on platforms such as Twitter. With regard to the first aspect, it is surprising that the security narratives conveyed by right-wing political communication stand out in cases such as the landing of a small number of asylum seekers. Even more striking is the fact that they stand out in the case of a racist attack and a reform of the citizenship law, when the centre-left was in government, with all that entails in terms of media space reserved for its members. Regarding the second aspect, even when humanitarian narratives prevailed in the short term on Twitter, extending the data collection to a year, right-wing political communication was largely dominant.

In fact, the presence of some civil society actors on Twitter (first and foremost the famous anti-mafia writer Roberto Saviano) was limited to the peak period, because progressive civil society communication on social media cannot function in a "continuous flow" while maintaining a high circulation. Its strength is mostly reactive and therefore episodic, driven by indignation at what is perceived as the political and communicative violence of the opponent, and it achieves temporary successes by personalising and demonising the same (as was the case with

Berlusconism and then with Salvinism). What has been and still is missing, as some of those interviewed confirm, is an organised network for the defence of rights that can count on solid political support.

When analysing the reasons for this imbalance in favour of right-wing narratives, several factors come into question. The first is long-term and linked to the structure of the migration narratives (and frames) that have dominated the debate in recent decades (since the 1990s). Having been identified for many years as a strategic issue for winning electoral consensus exclusively from the right, the resulting communication investments have led to the dominance of the battle of frames, leaving centre-left parties to play a defensive game, with little strategic capacity to impose other narratives beyond the humanitarian one. This has often been sacrificed in the pursuit of the right on security issues, leading to internal fragmentation and poor narrative coherence. As many studies on media and migration in Italy show (Binotto and Martino 2004; Binotto et al. 2016; Maneri 2019), over the years a public debate has emerged in which it is almost impossible to avoid questions of public order and the cultural threat posed by migration. The refusal to speak explicitly about racism and anti-racism in the case of the attempted supremacist massacre in Macerata, the absence of an opposition leader who was a communication reference point for this political space in the case of Sea Watch 3, and the inability to articulate a strong narrative on citizenship without appearing dogmatic and sentimental (with the narrative centred on children) in the case of the debate on the reform are clear examples of the communicative ineffectiveness of an entire political space.

At the root of this cautious and defensive, if not defeatist, attitude of the centre-left is a kind of phobia of public opinion. It does not seem to be understood, as the right-wing coalition did, as a force to be persuaded and managed, but rather as a spectre to be explored and feared. A clear example of this is the story of the reform of the Citizenship Law, in which, following the successful communication strategy of the right, which we will analyse shortly, some polls have shown a reversal – temporary and contextual – of public opinion, which had previously been largely in favour of the reform. At this point, the progressive political forces – as shown both by the political statements of the then head of government and by the interviews we conducted – considered it appropriate to back down, missing an historic opportunity.

‘I remember that at a certain point, some institutional actors thought they had noticed a change in public opinion. I remember that when I was looking for support for this campaign [the “I was a foreigner” campaign], I asked if the fight for citizenship reform was at least making progress, and several people told me: “The orientation of public opinion has changed and even on the issue of citizenship there is no longer a majority [...]. It seemed to me that this change in public opinion, whether real or perceived, played a decisive role in blocking this reform’. (MEP for + Europe)

Similarly, on the occasion of the attempted massacre in Macerata, other interviews we collected document how it was precisely concern about the alleged climate of intolerance towards migrants – briefly intercepted on social media – that led several centre-left politicians to support the immigration-insecurity equation, going so far as not to support the anti-racist demonstration organised by a section of civil society. We spoke of a “phobia” of public opinion precisely to underline that this approach is not only not based on solid scientific data, but also tends to fear public opinion rather than shape it.

This reluctance to even just try to impose its own narrative is manifested in the continuing

inability of the progressive coalition to respond to one of the right's most effective 'puppet' arguments, namely that the centre-left is committed to a policy of unlimited immigration. The leaders of the centre-left have rarely questioned this issue, and are thus stuck in the role assigned to them by their political opponents. Thus, the visits of MPs to Sea Watch 3 and the lack of counter-arguments to those of the right in the debate on citizenship have allowed the opponents to portray, in the political communication scenario, a generic left (including the Democratic Party) in the role of naive "no-border" activist, and not in that (much closer to the truth) of a pragmatic actor committed to reducing the number of arrivals in various ways – including the notorious agreements with the Libyan militias.

Another reason for the narrative imbalance we are talking about concerns the distinction between plural parties and personal parties (Calise 2015) and the advantages that the latter enjoy in a world where social and disintermediated communication has changed the rules of the game. Communicative coherence, the speed of action and reaction on social media, the greater appeal to journalists who are always on the lookout for political sound bites that are immediately expressed (as the journalists interviewed told us), make personal parties, like *Forza Italia*, able to focus their communication around the figure of the leader, as the League has done in recent years and as *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy) is doing today. Personal parties end up being more efficient and performative on all issues, as shown by various political communication studies (e.g. Gerbaudo 2019).

Finally, there is the factor of strategic investment in communication, where the right is clearly more ready than the centre-left to embrace the opportunities of the digital world. The visibility that the leaders of the main political parties enjoy more than anyone in traditional journalism has to be achieved on social networks. Investing in a social media management team is an undeniable advantage that the right-wing parties have been able to exploit much better than the centre-left, which seems to have given up on this aspect. A clear example was the hailstorm of criticism from members of the Democratic Party and important left-wing intellectuals against the investments made by Matteo Renzi, as party secretary, in digital political communication. It is no coincidence that among the examples analysed in our research, perhaps the most obvious step towards the rapid conquest of narrative hegemony is the strategy adopted by the political right to overturn and win the battle over citizenship reform. The use of street presence, brawls in parliament, strong statements in newspapers, political controversies and constant activism on social networks (which allowed even a minor figure such as the leader of the fascist movement *Casa POUND Italia* to become one of the most retweeted users on the subject) swept away like an avalanche the calm and reassuring strategy chosen by the centre-left to present the passage of the reform to public opinion. More than the imposition of one narrative over another, this case clearly shows the advantage of a different strategic investment in communication, a better understanding of the logic of the media and a skilful plan orchestrated by the social media management set up by Matteo Salvini (the so-called "Beast", managed by League's media manager of the time, Luca Morisi). Whether the narratives produced were credible or not, the effect was above all to make the opponents' narrative appear naive and oversimplified, to raise doubts among the public about the unexplained consequences of the reform, to shake the reassuring castle that the centre-left must have considered strong enough to win this communication game.

Outside of politics, the case of second-generation activists, who have been campaigning for reform at various levels for the past twenty years, has instead shown how much strategic

commitment and investment in communication – especially with the recent campaign On the Right Side of History – is needed to try to gain visibility and introduce a perspective and a narrative into the mainstream public sphere (Frisina and Pogliano 2023). Above all, however, it has shown that these investments are not enough without significant support from political parties and traditional journalism. At the same time, the case of the NGO Sea Watch showed how, in the absence of relevant political voices on the progressive side, NGOs become a central actor of the narrative and can gain wide visibility, provided they adapt to the narrative needs of the news industry, especially that of personalisation, as happened with Carola Rackete. However, NGOs have concerns about protecting the lives and image of asylum seekers, which limits their narrative capacity. They are also wary of creating excessive political controversy, which would make them even more disputed and opposed. In short, they do not have the narrative construction potential that should be available to progressive political parties and leaders on these issues. However, it is precisely this aphonia of progressive political communication that is leading many NGOs involved in maritime search and rescue to ask themselves about new ways of communicating and to expand their communications team, including new professional profiles. The most obvious risk of this kind of delegation of humanitarian narratives to NGOs is that the narrative of rights becomes even more of a reactive and episodic force that feeds on tragedy and images of suffering – and partly depends on them to be effective.

## 5. The machine of journalistic mediation

While much of what has been written above has to do with disintermediation and political communication strategies in the social media sphere, traditional journalism – also thanks to its online potential on social networks, the dissemination of its multimedia inputs, the personal profiles of journalists on Twitter and the presence of newspaper editors and commentators on TV programmes – remains a crucial actor both in the production of narratives and in its ability to amplify the visibility of others and to silence potentially important voices. Despite the profit crisis that affects it and distorts its working practices, journalism remains a crucial mediator of the narratives that circulate in public spaces.

The comparison with Twitter also showed that the events and content covered by traditional journalism were the main subject of comments on this platform, which instead produced very little alternative content in our three case studies. While this is most likely a platform dependent finding (Twitter is favoured by politicians and journalists, who are still a minority), it is also true that this is the virtual space where current affairs and politics are most discussed.

This introduces a first crucial point of the matter: the preponderance and self-reference of a small community of politicians and journalists. The system of cross-attention between Twitter profiles (especially those of journalists and politicians) and traditional journalism helps to strengthen the links between journalism and politics, to the detriment of other actors whose difficulty in achieving visibility in information flows is well known, from minorities to experts and academics. Moreover, in the case of the latter two, the Italian public arena seemed particularly unwelcoming in comparison with other European countries. It is therefore not surprising that, even in the cases analysed, and with the partial exception of Sea Watch 3, journalists and politicians were the actors who controlled the narrative development of events.

A second issue concerns the socio-demographic composition of this restricted community in comparison with other major European countries, especially the United Kingdom and France. Our study has shown that in Italy the journalistic community is not only made up exclusively or almost exclusively of “native” whites and adults, if not elderly, but also almost exclusively of men. In a historical period that is supposed to be dominated by social media and, according to some, by woke culture, this is a fact that never ceases to surprise and is also the essential starting point for understanding the role of Italian journalistic mediation on migrations. It is therefore from this reality – a limited and self-referential community that constantly denies a voice to a potential audience of scholars, experts, activists, migrants and children of migrants – that some news production mechanisms that strongly influence the development of specific frames and narratives must be understood.

One of these mechanisms concerns the strategic importance of sources and, in particular, the need of journalists in the digital age for rapid political reactions and commentary. This need for speed is a further advantage for personal parties, those who have invested more in digital communication and those who have focused more on migration from an electoral perspective and are therefore more interested in proactively conveying their messages. Interviews with journalists show that these expectations are met by right-wing parties and often disappointed by centre-left parties.

‘Salvini is very efficient in the sense that, in one way or another, we need news and he constantly gives it to us. I don’t chose him because I like him more, but because I report the news he gives me... if you called them, they answered the phone and gave you the explanations, while the others didn’t speak... So when we journalists have to fill a space with an interview, it is inevitable that they (the league) have more space’. Journalist at Corriere della Sera

Another crucial factor in the selection of voices in the news media is the expectations that journalists have of their audience. These expectations lead to the prediction of an audience of native whites only, with the consequence that what is perceived, albeit through problematic indicators, as their point of view is more easily accepted. Secondly, the very reference to a public that is assumed to be tired of being exposed to the suffering voices of asylum seekers leads journalists to lose interest in these stories.

[...] so in the end they all have more or less the same stories and so even in the newspaper they tell you: “Yes, okay, but fifteen days ago the same thing happened... and this one also fled from Eritrea... but we already know that they are fleeing from Eritrea! Unless you are Avvenire or Famiglia Cristiana [Catholic media] who try to focus more on these stories. [...] In the media these stories don’t work very well because the reader is used to reading about landings... he already knows that they are fleeing wars... it’s routine’. Journalist at il Fatto Quotidiano

What is expressed in the interviews is crucial and seems to combine the alleged “compassion fatigue”<sup>7</sup> (Moeller 1998) with the lack of novelty that these suffering voices would bring to the

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<sup>7</sup> The expression “compassion fatigue” refers to the idea that the media threaten our ability to feel compassion by showing us too much or too little of the suffering of others. Developed in regard to news media by Susan Moeller (1998), this idea has seen other important developments, such as the “states of denial” addressed by Stanley Cohen in 2001, Susan Sontag’s reflections on photography and “distant”

narrative. Let us not forget that recent history has shown us that the suffering of migrants has now become newsworthy and capable of shaking the public. However, this only happens when journalists pick up on issues that are considered new from an aesthetic or substantive point of view – the photo of Alan Kurdi, the tragedies of Lampedusa – because of the number of deaths, the reappearance of their bodies and personal belongings, the school report sewn into the boy's jacket, and so on.

If familiarity is important in the narrative constructions of journalism, this translates more than anything else into the familiarity of the story frame, namely the frames used to talk about migrations. As classical research on news production teaches, journalism tends to give importance to new and unexpected aspects as long as it is able to propose them within consolidated frameworks (Galtung and Ruge 1981). The novelty of Carola Rackete, a young ship's captain with dreadlocks, has attracted the attention of a community of older male journalists, but the need for familiarity pushes towards familiar narratives, avoiding or withholding the background information that could break old frames. This is one of the reasons why the case of the *Sea Watch 3* was treated without focusing on factual information about rights, taking full advantage of the plot of the clash between opposing cultural worlds, represented by the two "captains" who give life to the opposition between the narrative frames of security and humanitarian aid. It is the narrative thread chosen by the journalists – new and familiar at the same time – that has led to the selection of certain Twitter comments at the expense of others, and to the caricature of the voices of civil society as a stereotypical reflection of these two cultural worlds. It is this choice, finally, that has led to the obsessive pursuit and dispute with the *Sea Watch Italia* press office in order to fix an interview with Carola Rackete, as if this interview were an essential piece of information for the public, and not instead an attempt to fill in the story already chosen, colouring it with new personal and private details.

A very similar argument can be made for the Macerata event. The relative novelty of an attempted supremacist massacre is clearly an element that fuels the newsworthiness of the event. However, the need for familiarity within which to place these facts leads to the privileging of the story of individual deviance, the chronicle and cinematic tale of the lone avenger, which intrigues and at the same time reassures the public, bringing the narrative back into the familiar genre of crime news. Hence the excessive attention paid to the perpetrator, the desire to reconstruct his psychological profile, ignoring the victims and giving little space to the ideological and cultural context and the crucial issue of racism and anti-racist movements. Much more familiar than these issues, which are always poorly explored and explained by journalism, is the narrative of the invasion of migrants and the anger of the local population. These themes are favoured by many newspapers as a way of broadening the story and giving it an angle that goes beyond crime news to include politics and an imagined audience made up entirely of white, 'native' and frightened people.

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pain in 2003 and – even before that – those of Luc Boltanski on "distance suffering" in 1993.

## 6. Conclusions (and a look to the future)

We can summarise what has been said so far as follows:

- a) Immigration narratives are dominated by a *small circle of politicians and journalists who speak from a privileged social position* defined by precise characteristics of social class, 'race', age and gender, and who imagine an equally privileged audience.
- b) The idea of an *Italianness based on the purity of ancestry plays a crucial role in defining mainstream narrative spaces*.
- c) *The voice of migrants is systematically denied, thus favouring their dehumanisation. Their representation is delegated to humanitarian NGOs*, with the resulting dependence on episodes and images of extreme suffering.
- d) *Social media give space to more diverse and often more supportive voices, but when this happens, it rarely attracts the attention of newspapers and TV news programmes*, which prefer to describe it as a place for the spread of hate speech.
- e) *The progressive side's communication on migration is reactive, consisting of defensive counter-frames rather than truly alternative frames*, and this prevents the discussion of migrants' rights from being carried forward with continuity and independence from the political actions of the opposing side.
- f) *Public opinion on migration plays a crucial but opposite role depending on the political orientation: for right-wing parties it is an entity to be persuaded and managed, while for centre-left parties it appears as a spectre to be explored and feared*.
- g) *"Leader" or personal parties are better adapted to the speed and structures of contemporary hybrid communication than plural parties*, with important implications also for the issue of migration – perhaps more so than for many others.
- h) Due to the activism of sovereignist leaders, even when progressive narratives seem to have the upper hand at the height of events, *in the long term security narratives predominate also on social media*.
- i) *The discursive battle over migration is taking place on a ground that is far from neutral: more than a blank page, it resembles a text that has already been written, in which some frames appear in relief, while others do not find the space to be expressed. Given these discursive conditions, resulting from years of the dominance of security policies and consequently of security frames, it is particularly difficult to bring out and advance new narratives on migration*.

The overall picture that emerges is therefore characterised by a certain stagnation, in which new events are easily recomposed within consolidated frames, and in which ideas of native culture and Italianness based on blood still constitute the dominant horizon of meaning within which specific narratives settle. See the assimilationist discourse that frames the debate on citizenship, but also the exclusion of the victims and their projection into the sole role of disruptive refugees in the attempted massacre in Macerata. It is also a picture that shows the dominance of political and journalistic voices with positions consolidated over years, leaving



little space for experts, migrants and their children, but also, and more generally, for women and young people. When it comes to migration, some security frames linked to threats persist even when the narratives logically seem to leave them little room for manoeuvre (the attempted supremacist massacre, the reform of the citizenship law), revealing a locked public discourse.

The only hope for those who believe in the protection of human rights that this study leaves room for is the relative vibrancy of civil society on social media. It is a force of opinion that develops humanitarian narratives and fills the void left by the centre-left, which seems to have given NGOs a blank check to talk about migrants and their rights. It is therefore necessary to understand how this force can give birth to more proactive narratives, less passively and reactively dependent on the actions of the sovereignist side, and how to develop innovations in communication in the light of a double need: that of protecting migrants and asylum seekers and that of giving them speech and images. Indeed, it is clear that an important issue raised by this study, as by others that have preceded it, is the need to think about new forms of visibility for that central actor in the stories of migration and asylum, the migrant person herself, who is very often left on the margins.

What can be done, then, to change the framework of conditions that make migrants visible almost exclusively within narratives that criminalise, victimise or insert them into the domain of the docile, integrated, grateful and possibly even pleading migrant? How can we escape the humanitarian-victimising and paternalistic narrative as the only way to counter the paradigms of insecurity and invasion? The question of rights, as we have seen, is potentially central, but it seems difficult to convey it as a direct request from migrants in a framework of agency rather than victimisation or cultural merit.

To conclude, some considerations of a more strictly political nature. Given that the main centre-left party seems unwilling to invest in a new narrative, much less to promote it proactively, or, as it happens, to give space to those who are trying to produce this narrative themselves (second-generation migrants grouped in associations and their allies in anti-racist movements), it would seem obvious to look to humanitarian NGOs and progressive civil society for answers. In fact, there are a number of projects dealing with these issues. Often supported by think tanks or social communication agencies, they are trying to reinvent their own communication on migrants.

The other perspective of change, which has been actively promoted for years, concerns journalism and takes the form of actions such as those of the Rome Charter and its Observatory (media monitoring and training for journalists to achieve a more diversified use of sources, more contextual information, language reflexivity, etc.).

Within these initiatives, it is often hoped that migrants and their descendants will be more actively included in the stories, thus giving more space to their voices. However, we believe that without significant political-institutional representation, more inclusive narratives will continue to struggle to emerge. Because of the way the Italian journalistic system is structured, and despite the spaces for change that have been opening up for a few years with the presence of digital newspapers that can rely largely on subscription revenues, which are increasing over time, political representation remains essential for new narratives to gain significant space.

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# BRIDGES

Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives

**BRIDGES:** Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives is a project funded by the EU H2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and implemented by a consortium of 12 institutions from all over Europe. The project aims to understand the causes and consequences of migration narratives in a context of increasing politicisation and polarisation around these issues by focusing on six European countries: France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. To do so, BRIDGES adopts an interdisciplinary and co-productive approach and is implemented by a diverse consortium formed by universities, think tanks and research centres, cultural associations, and civil society organisations.

**The BRIDGES Working Papers** are a series of academic publications presenting the research results of the project in a structured and rigorous way. They can either focus on particular case studies covered by the project or adopt a comparative perspective.

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