"Sailing Against the Wind": Roundtable on the Sea Rescue Cause in the Central Mediterranean

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Abstract

This study relies on the video method and the roundtable technique to discuss audience's ways of thinking about the sea rescue cause in the Central Mediterranean. After presenting a self-made video containing interviews with two members of a non-profit organization that conducts search and rescue operations of migrant boats on the Central Mediterranean Sea to a small sample size of participants, a roundtable discussion was held to debate their ways of thinking in relation to the sea rescue cause. In sharing video-based messages delivered by activists/humanitarian workers with a target audience, a discussion was initiated to explore some arguments, insights and assessments. Results showed a sense of frustration among participants and concerns about notions of legality *vs* illegality, individual *vs* collective responsibility, prosocial behavior, "limited" engagement, and perceiving the migration situation as an emergency. These results are further discussed in this study, and they not only contribute to a more comprehensive evaluation of audience responses to rescue operations of migrant boats in distress at high sea, but also suggest lines for future research about the role played by the video method and the roundtable technique in engaging people to debate human rights issues and humanitarian causes.

Keywords: video method; roundtable technique; audience's ways of thinking; sea rescue cause; Central Mediterranean Sea.

Introduction

The important role played by video messaging delivered by activists/humanitarian workers in the process of generating knowledge about the European border architecture and the sea rescue cause is little explored in the study of international relations (IR). To date, there remains a lack of sufficient studies that apply video-based messages of humanitarian character to investigate reactions and responses from target audiences. When it comes

to the sea rescue cause, more precisely, there have not been enough studies and research that implement audio-visual formats of reproducing activist messages followed by roundtable discussions in order to identify the ways of thinking of a target public.

Studies have been rather focused on assessing reactions and responses from audiences to different formats of message reproduction. Oliver et al. (2012) conducted, for example, an experiment with undergrad students using newspaper stories about stigmatized groups, such as elderly persons, immigrants, and prisoners. In levels of story involvement, results showed that the stories about the immigrants received higher scores compared to those of elderly or prisoners. In addition, one of the conclusions of the experiment was that stories in a narrative format describing the challenges that individuals face instigated more empathic processes than would other news stories based on non-narrative formats. Maier, Slovic & Mayorga (2017) conducted a similar experimental research that examined how story form influences reader reaction to news of mass violence in Africa. Particularly, results indicated that how story is told affects reader emotional response – and, indirectly, charitable giving. The experiment also indicated that straight news story – which is the most predominant and traditional form of news reporting – evoked the weakest emotional response.

Seu (2010) developed an experiment to discuss aspects of audience denial in response to news about human rights abuses. This experiment revealed the existence of a normative implication of audiences' justifications for their passivity, highly illustrated in their banal and everyday contribution to a morality of unresponsiveness. In some ways, this helped opening discussions on topics involving politics of pity, social responsibility, and distant suffering. On the other hand, García-Orosa & Pérez-Seijo (2020) investigated the specific use of 360° video format by humanitarian organizations to bring a distant reality to the audience. Basically, their analysis determined that the immersive and first-person experience boosts and enhances awareness, empathy, and user engagement. They also found evidence to suggest that humanitarian organizations use 360° video format to reinforce emotive storytelling with strategies that go from face-to-face encounters to immersive witnessing and first-hand testimonials.

The above-mentioned experiments are relevant prior work done, but they were specifically conducted by scholars associated with journalism and psychosocial studies. This somehow reveals a low interest of IR scholarship in

using different formats of message reproduction to serve as potential vehicles for initiating discussions about humanitarian issues. To fulfil this gap, the visual component becomes primary, inasmuch as this study turns video-based messages delivered by humanitarian activists into instances of debate and reflection. In doing so, opportunities for evaluating what people think in relation to the ongoing humanitarian and activist causes will emerge. In this sense, departing from the perspective that IR study should also give room to human cognition and human agency, this study draws special attention to messages delivered by ordinary people of civil society who decided to take on the role of contesting practices of state oppression by saving lives on the Central Mediterranean Sea.

First of all, it is not intended to use these ordinary people to reproduce positionalities of saviors and heroes. Rather than that, it is intended to use their messages to examine whether they can generate knowledge about the European border architecture and the sea rescue cause within academic circles. With this being said, it becomes necessary to consider the first-hand experiences from activists working along the European maritime borders to get a full picture of the migration situation. Obviously, relevant academic works should not be ignored, particularly those that embrace a critique of the disproportionate impact caused by the application of security measures in the efforts of European border authorities to deter migration by boat (see Heller, Pezzani & Stierl, 2017; Mainwaring & Silverman, 2017; Sciurba & Furri, 2017; Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019), or the credible reports drafted by international human rights organizations that condemn the anti-migration policies at play along the European borders (see UNHCR, 2019; OHCHR, 2021). However, the voices of those people who put their own lives at risk in an everyday struggle against the oppressive and violent measures undertaken by the European border authorities should also be heard.

All this considered, this study makes use of the audio-visual format of activist messages delivered by ordinary people working in the frontlines of the migration routes in the Central Mediterranean Sea to promote a roundtable discussion with a target public. To achieve this goal, the video method is brought into the university classroom with the purpose of opening discussions with students and faculty members who have the potential to become scholars, scientists and decision-makers in the near future, or even occupy other positions of worth to society. In doing so, it was possible to identify the

participants' points of view, critical assessments and different attitudes toward the video-based messages and, most importantly, the sea rescue cause.

Method and Technique

Over the past two decades, a number of scientific studies have been published on the importance of video method in academic research (see Banks, 2001, 2007; Gregory, 2005; Pink, 2007, 2012; Haw & Hadfield, 2011; Bates, 2015; Harris, 2016). Bates (2015), for instance, summarized that, by allowing for the incorporation of what is often referred to as 'more-than-textual' and 'multi-sensual' elements of everyday life, the video method offers vivid evidence of sensory other people's experiences and creates new repertoires of emotion and sensation. By complementing this argument, Harris (2016) suggested that such a repertoire of emotion and sensation is something unique that other conventional research methods such as audio recording, thick observations, or different types of interviews would not be able to capture.

Aiming to provide vivid experiences of humanitarian activists working in the frontlines of the migration routes along the Central Mediterranean Sea, the video method is here applied to serve as a tool to conduct a roundtable discussion with university students and faculty members. Through the production of a video capturing two members of the Sea-Watch Organization, the applied method consisted of depicting the audio-visual processes of activist messages on behalf of the sea rescue cause. The purpose was to make visible the obstacles and challenges that stand on the path of those people working along the European maritime borders. The 10-minute video is freely available as supplemental online material in the data availability statement of this study. It consists of a self-made production based on first-person experience and had to do with giving to the humanitarian activists power and agency to come forward and share their messages in front of the camera. The critique over the European border architecture, together with the concerns, struggles and problems faced by the two workers in their duties at Sea-Watch Organization are just a forecast of how the video unfolds.

As previously observed, the video method served to initiate a discussion with a target audience through the application of a technique able to gather a range of different perspectives, feedback and brainstorm. By defining the roundtable as an open discussion where participants are on equal footing, Bridgeman (2010) highlighted the fact that this technique provides everyone the same influence to speak uncensored. Additionally, Kenett & Zonnenshain (2018) argued that the roundtable technique requires that participants can present

their arguments, ideas and viewpoints with supporting evidence, and that everybody can listen to each other. Considering this, the next sessions discuss in a structured and documented way the narrative data collected from qualitative inputs, critical assessments and considerations provided by seven university students and faculty who voluntarily decided to participate in a roundtable discussion. Participants were one recent master's graduate, five PhD students and one post-doctoral fellow recruited at the Central European University (CEU), Campus Vienna, in Austria. The great majority of the participants (i.e., six) were third country nationals, which consequently may have shaped some of the research findings.

Prior the roundtable, participants fulfilled a registration and consent form which supplied them with information regarding the aims of the research. Participants were also made aware that their anonymous contributions in the roundtable discussion would be included in a peer-reviewed and publicly accessible journal. Furthermore, considering the procedure which participants voluntarily decided to join the roundtable discussion, one important factor is the generalizability of the results. To be more precise, the participants' willingness to join this specific event might have shaped the results of the roundtable discussion, and it is extremely difficult to know whether their ways of thinking concerning the sea rescue cause reflect the opinions and viewpoints of other students and faculty members outside the study sample. What is also particularly relevant to highlight about the roundtable discussion is that the small sample was comprised by a total of seven participants from a single university. In light of this fact, results might differ from broader samples in important and significant ways.

When it comes to the setting and conduction of the roundtable discussion session, the participants were gathered in a classroom at the Central European University (CEU), where they watched the video portraying the messages of the Sea-Watch members, and thereafter were requested to answer some open-ended questions. The questions helped encouraging the participants to contribute with their arguments and served as analytical guidance to extract information and gain deep insights to determine their ways of thinking about the sea rescue cause.

Results

Drawing on contributions from seven participants, the dataset was comprised by forty minutes of audio-recording. Among several topics discussed throughout the roundtable, six are worthy of consideration: i) the description

of the work done by the Sea-Watch members, ii) the framework of legality and illegality, iii) the notions of individual and collective responsibility, iv) the main motivations of prosocial behavior, v) the limitations of engagement, and vi) the question about perceiving the migration situation as an emergency. Before exploring these topics, it is important to observe that, due to confidentiality and anonymity reasons, participants' names, corresponding departments and academic degrees were anonymized. Participants are identified by number category only. This considered, right at the beginning of the roundtable discussion, a short but interesting answer was given by one of the participants after they were asked about what words they would describe the practical work done by those who fight for the sea rescue cause. A participant came up with the saying:

Sailing against the wind! (Participant 4)

Definitely, this interesting answer has a connotation that transcends the natural forces at work at the high sea to which border-crossers and humanitarian workers have to face. The 'wind', in this case, can also be interpreted as the pull and push-back measures adopted by border authorities to deter migration by boat and that are well-explained in the video by the two Sea-Watch members. Therefore, this saying serves as a proper metaphor to describe the struggle of those people who fight against nature and oppression to survive and save lives on the Central Mediterranean. In addition, there were positive comments that described the work done by the two Sea-Watch members, such as:

Undoing the harm done by the system (Participant 6).

Brave! Going against power (Participant 3).

Admirable (Participant 2).

But there were also comments that demonstrated a sense of frustration:

It's just a small drop in that large sea. (…) but consoling themselves that they are doing something (Participant 7).

The work sounds very frustrating. (…) just having to keep fighting and fighting (Participant 3).

It's like a band-aid (Participant 2).

About the framework of legality and illegality, two contributions should be highlighted:

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By certain European institutions, their work is considered to be illegal, even though they do the most probably legally necessary thing, which is save people's lives. So, there is always this question of what is considered be legal by law and what should be done from the moral perspective of protecting human rights (Participant 1).

There are so many cases of workers like that being prosecuted for aiding illegal immigration (Participant 2).

In relation to the notions of individual and collective responsibility, some participants argued:

This [the migration situation] is about much deeper structural problems; (…) within the framework of nation-states (Participant 5).

[We should] not rely on individual responsibility. It puts the burden on the individual (Participant 6).

On the other hand, another participant said:

When you feel kind of responsible, being engaged can help you to soften this feeling of responsibility (Participant 1).

Following this, a participant questioned how prosocial behavior can be motivated by reminding us about a specific moment of the video, when one of the Sea-Watch members explained why he decided to be a member of the organization. The Sea-Watch member said in the video that he got involved with the organization after being confronted with the migration situation in Berlin, where migrants and asylum-seekers were left on the streets under precarious conditions. Addressing this specific moment of the video, a participant argued:

When the situation comes to Berlin is when he feels responsible. There is a very slippery slope. Where do we draw the line between having this idea of savior complex? (…) it can't go to that level. Responsibility should be about dignity, about well-being of people; not only the people who are in the zone of the EU (Participant 6).

What could be perceived as a sense of "limited" engagement was also identified among participants. Eventually, the most significant contribution and that best represents this sense of "limited" engagement of participants towards the sea rescue cause was the following:

> *As a third country national, you need a job permit, a certain income, and so many things to be able to live here [Europe]. Deciding to join the sea rescue cause might not be as easier as it could be for EU citizens (Participant 1).*

Finally, when it came to the question about perceiving the migration situation as an emergency, two participants said:

> *The word emergency may have a natural disaster connotation, and somehow blurs the responsibility. (…) it's something that happened and they have to urgently find the means to solve it. (…) maybe if we use different wording to say that this is a structural problem caused by very specific intentions of actors to discriminate against some people (Participant 1).*

> *It [the so-called word 'emergency'] treats the migration situation as a problem we have to solve urgently. It's urgent to solve the problem of uneven wealth distribution that causes migration. The migration situation is a symptom of something else that should be an emergency (Participant 6).*

Discussion

As previously observed, the results of the roundtable indicated six topics that were significantly discussed among participants. Essential to this discussion section, thereby, is to combine a literature review with a brief comparative approach of the results. Beginning with the participants' positive comments about the practical work done by the Sea-Watch members, this result is consistent with previous research showing that an audience could be emotionally attached, involved and compassionate with stories portraying human suffering (see Tester, 2001; Höijer, 2004; Huiberts & Joye 2015). With reference to participants' sense of frustration, however, there remains a lack of sufficient studies indicating audience levels of frustration towards stories of human suffering and messages of humanitarian character, which points out possible directions for future research.

Concerning the framework of legality and illegality, the question about what is considered be legal by law and what should be done from the moral perspective of protecting human rights is well-explored by leading scholars in the field of humanitarian borderwork. For example, some researchers adopt the term 'disobedient actors' to describe those people who work in the frontlines of the migration routes by facilitating what the European authorities

often call as "illegal entry" (Heller, Pezzani & Stierl, 2016; Stierl, 2016). What these researchers fundamentally discuss about these actors is that they are now occupying an important space that was previously out of reach for civil society. Consequently, these actors offer a greater possibility for acts of 'disobedient observation' able to counter the state monopolization of the sea (Stierl, 2016).

In terms of responsibility, there are some outstanding studies in the literature that examine the dilemma between the individual and the collective. Some works analyze audience perceived responsibility for others (Goldberg, 1993), other works identify arousal of feelings of responsibility and obligation (Levine & Thompson, 2004), while other studies focus on modes of avoidance to preserve responsibility towards the suffering of others (Cohen, 2001). Furthermore, concerning the question of how prosocial behavior can be motivated, some studies concluded that any action is the extent of emotional arousal an emergency situation creates in us (see Clarke, 2003). Apparently, this explains the Sea-Watch member's decision to join the organization after having a direct confrontation with what he perceived as an emergency situation, like migrants and asylum-seekers facing precarious conditions in the streets of Berlin. Hardy (2006) also identified three sources of prosocial motivation in young adulthood: identity (see Bergman, 2004), reasoning (Carlo, 2005), and emotion (Hoffman, 2000).

Regarding the limitations of engagement towards humanitarian causes within the community of third country nationals, although there are several studies that address the manifestation of diaspora engagement in different forms (see Cohen, 2008; McIntyre & Gamlen, 2019; Galstyan & Ambrosini, 2022), very little empirical research has been conducted to examine the possibilities and limitations of non-EU citizens when it comes to becoming participants of pro-migrant movements in more active and engaged ways (for citizenship, migrant activism and the politics of movement, see Nyers & Rygiel, 2012). Last but not least, when the roundtable participants seemed not to perceive the migration situation along the Mediterranean as an emergency, this might demonstrate what Seu (2010) referred to as the avoidance of moral criticism for not engaging. By saying that we should instead get to the real reason, to the root of the problem, like "uneven wealth distribution that causes migration," participants might have reproduced what Seu (2010) interestingly called as 'realist' discourse fulfilled by deep-reaching action with ineffectual and

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idealistic solutions. Simply put, this discourse does not only claim a moral high ground, but also helps avoid blame.

Conclusion

The proposed application of the video method and the roundtable technique proved to be efficient in engaging the audience to debate issues involving the sea rescue cause. Properly speaking, both method and technique were able to provide participants a legitimate learning opportunity. Nonetheless, it is important to observe that both method and technique should also be applicable to other target publics within university circles. Among many categories that people differ from each other – and this includes academic background, gender, sex, age, and others – the topic addressed in this roundtable (the sea rescue cause) demonstrated that results may specially vary depending on the nationality of the participants. As one may note, the target audience of this roundtable discussion was, in its majority, composed by foreigners. In this sense, follow-up research could be conducted to apply the same method and technique in order to discuss the same topic with a broader target public that would include more EU-citizens. In doing so, the discussion about the limitations of engagement and notions of responsibility, for example, would most likely take another course.

Considering the results of the roundtable discussion, it is possible to conclude that the audience's ways of thinking about the sea rescue cause are particularly based on: 1) a strong sense of frustration, 2) concerns about legality and illegality, 3) a constant dilemma between the individual and collective responsibility, 4) a sort of criticism over one of the Sea-Watch member's motivations of prosocial behavior, 5) a 'limited' reasoning of engagement among third country nationals, and 6) a more 'realist' discourse with ineffectual and idealistic solutions. Regardless their respective proportions, these ways of thinking are significant for future developments of broader research, especially further investigations focused on the potential arousal of a sense of frustration among participants over humanitarian causes and the limitations of engagement of non-EU citizens.

Data Availability Statement

A short and edited version of the dataset that supports the findings of this study is publicly available in Figshare at DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.22015292.v1. This audio-recording of the roundtable discussion was edited to protect the privacy of participants. The self-made

video used to initiate the roundtable discussion is publicly available in Figshare at DOI 10.6084/m9.figshare.22147250.

Ethics and Consent

No ethical approval was required because this study relies on information freely available in the public domain. This study also develops an analysis of a dataset where the data are properly anonymized and informed consent of participants was obtained before the original data collection.

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Declaration of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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