RESEARCH ARTICLE

BETWEEN EMPATHY AND SOLIDARITY. HOW CIVIC ACTIVISM INHABITS THE BOUNDARIES OF EUROPE AND CITIZENSHIP ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

FABIANA BATTISTI
SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME

MARCO BRUNO
SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME

ABSTRACT: This study explores the potential of digital civic activism, considering the existing contributions of migration, political, social movements, and media studies on solidarity towards contemporary migration flows in Europe. The study investigates how the unbalanced techno-symbolic assemblage of power exercised on European borders can be challenged through spontaneous acts of online solidarity. It looks at bottom-up solidarity on social media platforms, holding together two dimensions: the communicative practices of specific singular makers of solidarity, seen as potential activation elements; the response of the users reached and involved by their content. To this end, two activists located on the real borders of the Balkan route and on the digital borders of the social media platform Facebook have been studied, namely Nawal Soufi and Lorena Fornasir. A quali-quantitative analysis was carried out on posts and related comments published in the last two years on the Facebook pages of the two activists. We argue that in today's fragmented digital public sphere, their communicative practices are acts of citizenship insofar as they represent a form of resistance to the European fortress system and re-appropriation of the use of social media. Indeed, they can empathically - emotionally and cognitively - connect networked citizens to the reality of migration flows, conveying awareness and soliciting the participation of a possible *mediapolis* that casts on/offline acts.

Introduction

In relation to social issues, such as the refugee crisis, there's a preponderant challenge concerning the ability to look at contemporary social change by examining its pervasiveness through social media (Doudacki, Carpentier and Glowacki 2022). This constitutes a further element of complexity in the process of co-production of reality, which no longer depends solely on media institutions but belongs to a public dialogue in which different voices can intervene. Even though public visibility is not easily accessible and responds to both media and social media logics, the impact that individual voices can make is never fully predictable.

Although the organising and solidarity practices of grassroots activists through Facebook and WhatsApp groups and NGOs communication have been explored in the literature (Chouliaraki and Georgiou 2022; Selva 2020), to our knowledge there is a lack of studies exploring the potential for on/offline civic activation and mobilisation through the use of public pages and profiles on social media platforms. Adopting the lens of the digital border as a techno symbolic assemblage of power (Chouliaraki and Georgiou 2022), we assume that civic online activism is a political act of resistance to create meaningful and participatory on/offline connections. By attracting networked citizens, it restores dignity and a sense of reality to migratory flows through identifying and emotional empathy (Donise 2021), since it is a gradual and repeated process that implies a cognitive and not only an emotional effort. Moreover, this emotional and mental involvement allows to make concrete commitments with real and offline consequences.

Therefore, we carried out a twofold quali-quantitative analysis of the last two years' posts and related comments on the Facebook profile of two activists in the Italian digital public sphere: Lorena Fornasir and Nawal Soufi. Both represent an emblematic case of spontaneous and legally persecuted on/offline activism for migrants on the Balkan route, while in Italy no mainstream or alternative media was dealing with the emergency. Writing and posting both in Italian, the former is engaged at the first access point in Italy (Trieste) most critical for restrictions and rejections to Slovenia (Cespi 2021)[1], while the latter provides assistance directly along the route according to the requests for help, she receives.

They enact 'de-bordering solidarity' (Ambrosini 2022) through social media, challenging the concepts of boundary and norms of reception by practising acts of citizenship (Isin 2008). They also seem to develop a form of re-appropriation of social media platforms, employing them as individual users to create humanitarian networks of help. The present study raises the following questions:

1. How is the concept of border transformed in online/offline activism and citizenship practices of resistance?
2. Does social media activism involve the individual user? In which ways?

In the following first section we develop our exploratory study by tracing the terms in which solidarity coexists, struggles against European entry regimes, and is criminalised. In particular, the perspective adopted concerns its possibility of online expression, in fact it is reconstructed how political solidarity can dialogue

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[1] As has been reconstructed by several studies (among others Cespi 2021), the externalisation and militarisation of European borders has gradually led to migration flow containment agreements since 2016 with Turkey and Balkan countries. This condition has favoured the perpetuation of systematic rejections and readmissions that are more and more informal and in chains, in a framework of absolute lack of protection for migrants' rights, denounced at the international level. Among others, on the Italian-Slovenian and Belorussian borders, increasing violations of human rights have been reported, through forced readmissions not linked to the initiation of administrative procedures, mistreatment, and the removal of documents. In particular, the province of Trieste is the only Italian area directly affected by the Balkan route that has seen an increase in readmissions of over 25% in 2020 compared to 2019 (Cespi 2021).

with and be mediated online by the stratification theory of empathy of singular activists, activating connective actions on/offline. In the second one we expose our methodological choices, involving lexicometric analysis combined with visual and frame analysis of posts and comments. In the results we first present evidence of the 3 frames found in the narratives of the activists' posts: (im)mediate advocacy frame, civic empathy frame, condemnation of institutions frame. Then we interpret the comments, anchoring our restitution to the cluster analysis, emphasising how empathy triggers a feeling of reciprocity that allows a stratified possibility of participation for users. In the last section, we clarify the potential of activism by individual activists to induce grassroots solidarity actions capable of connecting more individuals directly to the places and protagonists of the Balkan route. This is possible through an empathic connection established through the sharing of first-hand experiences. This connection is conveyed and becomes itself a form of innovative resistance not only to the concept of the online border, but also to the use of the social media Facebook for purely self-promotional, commercial or entertainment purposes for both users and activists.

1.   Solidarity and borders. Assemblage of representations, actors and acts

Following the recent proposal by Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2022), it is possible to place the concept of the border within a digital dimension that is not separate but inevitably intertwined with the geo-political reality of European migration routes. What emerges according to the two authors is a techno symbolic assemblage of power that imposes the contradictory coexistence of military security, humanitarian care and activist solidarity across space and time, but with profoundly different roles. All those social actors who in fact work in support of migrants or, on the contrary, in defence of European borders contribute to the configuration of borders as spaces of resistance and hospitality or brutal militarization (Dastyari, Nethery and Hirsch 2023).

Focusing on brutality, the controversial Eurocentric response against incoming migration flows, both regular and irregular (Castelli Gattinara 2017; De Genova 2016; Milan and Pirro 2018), is a rhetoric of exclusion and hardening of borders shared with Australia. This includes the relocation and outsourcing of important legal and administrative responsibilities for refugee protection to third countries (i.e. deportation, border policy in Balkan countries), according to a logic of externalization that totally replaces the concept of protection for the refugee with that of refugee as a risk (Murray 2023).

In digital migration, Leurs and Smets (2018) have highlighted the opacity of European border tracing and the asymmetry of power relations between social justice and factors such as nationality, ethnicity/race, class, religion, age, gender, sexuality, language and ability.

Moreover, a feminist and critical approach to the study of big data has shed light on the privatisation of European border datafication and their control also in terms of expulsions and repatriations. Valdivia, Aradau, Blanke and Perret (2022, 13) show how they are managed entirely by consultancy companies that develop the feasibility studies to the private companies that build the technologies of control, often in cooperation with the consultancy companies themselves.

Therefore, exposed to a dramatic and legal use of racial violence by law enforcement, as part of a political and symbolic exercise of power (Ferreira Da Silva 2001), migrants are embedded in the ahistorical and isolated vision of a migratory flow (Birey, Cantat, Maczynska and Sevenin 2019). This regulatory approach proposes a fairly reductive view of reality whereby migratory flow is indistinct and uncontrollable, implying a cognitively unbridgeable distance between migrants and European citizens (Author 2021; Giddens 1990), a sort of insurmountable cognitive boundary. The media, which are able to legitimise inclusion and exclusion

through discursive reality-defining practices, inevitably contribute to create this distance (Wodak 2020; Ponzanesi and Leurs 2022). Indeed, in continuity with long-standing critical studies in the Italian context (for a review see Author 2021; Binotto 2020), the symbolic opposition between 'us' and 'them' and the dehumanisation and objectification of the other are media examples that reinforce the political idea of a fortress-Europe (Valente, Tudisca, Pelliccia, Cerbara and Caruso 2021; Hernandez, Drzewiecka and Greco 2023). In contrast, others have emphasized the intent to enact differential inclusion: "by rethinking the logics of borders beyond their apparent role as tools of exclusion and violence, we intend to signal the more open and complex ways in which borders react to diverse kinds of migrant subjectivities and thereby operate to produce differentiated forms of access and "rights" (De Genova, Mezzadra and Pickles 2015, 57; Ambrosini and Hajer 2023).

For this reason, migration flows are radically politicised and mediatised, to the extent of criminalising solidarity and NGOs, restricting their freedom to intervene in all border areas (Heller and Pezzoni 2017; Berti 2021; Cusumano and Bell 2021; Linardi 2021; Watch 2022).

However, in the techno symbolic assemblage of power new material and political forms of support for refugees have emerged (Cantat 2016, 2018; Birey et al. 2019) with examples of strong and widespread solidarity and form of contestation (della Porta 2018; della Porta and Steinhilper 2021). Several studies have revealed a grassroots activism that is spreading across Europe, both on transit routes and in refugee camps by the migrants themselves, stranded on their journey, or second-generation migrants.

Even through these spontaneous forms of resistance scholars have redefined what European institutions named "refugees' crisis" as a crisis of reception (Lendaro, Rodier and Lou Vertongen 2019) and solidarity (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019). Assuming solidarity as a political action that contributes to the formation of shared identities and political subjectivities (Agustín and Jørgensen 2016), it is important to highlight how certain civic actors can enact a 'de-bordering solidarity' (Ambrosini 2022).

Especially including social media, challenging concepts of borders and norms of reception by practising acts of citizenship (Isin 2008) could transform and mediate awareness, creating new sites and scales of struggle.

Specifically, if we consider an act as simultaneously directed and oriented towards something before calculation, responsibility or intention, and an ethical act as the author of any action (Isin 2008, 21-34), then it is possible to understand how acts of citizenship in themselves construct the actors of solidarity and not the contrary. Acts constitute the symbolic potential of the rupture of the pre-established condition. In this sense, digital activism, as the whole of input (activists) and output (users' response), seems to represent the most accomplished form of act as Isin theorises it. That's to say expressions of one's political actions and claims to the defence of denied rights. Solidarity and citizenship are bound by an ethical perspective, especially the former is a relational practice, contested and generative (Agustín and Jørgensen 2016). In the current study practising acts of citizenship involves going through the activation, realisation and sharing of solidarity and empathy. These two instruments in fact become the main glue to the construction of a sense of belonging to what Silverstone (2006) termed *mediapolis*. This is an open and collective space-city built as much by the media as by individuals and it would not exist without participation. . This participation and its effectiveness have been the subject of scientific debate due to a misleading media-centric approach that contributes to obscuring historical-cultural contexts and the geopolitical asymmetries in accessing and using internet (Ponzanesi and Leurs 2014; for an international approach see Sorce and Dumitrica 2022). As recently systematised by Masullo, Wilner and Stroud (2022), social media, and consequently the digital public sphere, offering dialectical challenges, as any *reflexive modernisation*, For this reason they should allow us to aspire to a higher quality of content and public debate. In this sense, possibilities of meaningful connection (Sontag

1977) by social media use can shorten the seemingly insurmountable distance between migrants and Europeans.

Indeed, facing the daily challenge of encountering and opening up to otherness concerns meaning-making processes, which are influenced by emotions in the digital dimension (Nikunen 2019). In her reconstruction, political emotions, which are closely linked to political solidarity, play a central role as "a moral relation that unites individuals in a struggle for a common goal" (Nikunen 2019, 15). Empathy is among these and seems to be able to generate solidarity towards the other, especially through social media. As the way a message is structured can influence the way meanings are interpreted (Champ 2008), the potential consonance of interpretation between activists and users lies in their correspondence of status. Individual citizens/activists from the field usually convey content to the individual citizen/user. Indeed, this should be corroborated by a consonance of intent, that corresponds to an ethic of seeing (Sontag 1977).

Although it requires a cognitive-imaginative effort, however, empathy seems to be limited to a sentimental complacency (Hemmings 2012) and is therefore believed to be less capable of conveying proximity than compassion (Boltanski 1999). In fact, as Donise (2021) reconstructs in his layered theory of empathy, this is phenomenologically divided into *unipathy* and *emotional contagion*, *identifying empathy*, *encompassing and narrative*, *sympathetic*. In the first ancestral level, the difference between the self and the other is annulled, in the second there is the ability to understand and contextualise the other's emotion, in the third contact with the other is mediated by a narrative, and in the fourth the feeling and understanding of the other's experience are associated with participation and sharing. This layered proximity to the feeling of others may actually allow, as Hemmings (2012) argues, for the feeling of dissonance that is indispensable for understanding inequality or misrepresentation and performing solidarity actions. In this sense, public demonstrations of solidarity performed by individual activists on social media can be seen as acts of citizenship and expressions of the need to be heard against oppression towards migratory flows (della Porta and Steinhilper 2021). The horizontality of online participation, in fact, demonstrates a willingness to act and a political positioning on the part of the individual, despite the fact that online activism can be seen as undemanding, linked to an individualistic fruition and of little practical effectiveness (Nikunen 2019).

Previous studies on crisis, conflicts, solidarity and humanitarian campaigns have investigated the reactions to particular images and news and whether social media campaigns encourage action (Chouliaraki, 2013; Orgad, 2012; Pantti, 2015; Selva 2020). At the same time, studies on the digital activism of social movements have identified a structure of discursive opportunities (Cammaerts 2012) in the possibility of self-representation and forms of re-appropriation of social media platforms in order to promote social resistance to political and algorithmic power (Treré 2018). Using social media is indeed a resource of empowerment insofar as it allows citizenship to be transposed into its digital dimension (Boccia Artieri 2021) and to engage and nurture bottom-up activist practices at multiple levels (Leong, Pan, Bahri and Fauzi 2018). These require ongoing and challenging personal (activist-side) negotiations with platform features (Dumitrica and Felt 2019) regarding both the creation and publication of posts and their dissemination and reception. Digital spaces can thus become a critical battleground in pro-migrant mobilisation (della Porta and Steinhilper 2021), insofar as the potential of connective action of individuals on social media platforms on controversial issues is considered (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). As has been noted, online forms of micro-activism defy the slacktivist critique related to lazy or click participation by users, instead creating meaningful participation as people mobilize around issues of personal relevance (Dennis 2019).

Furthermore, it has been pointed out that "collective action through social media makes people more active in offline activities intended to solve a given problematic situation" (Chon and Park 2020, 92). Therefore, online activism has a direct correspondence with offline activism and represent an attempt to solve problems by communicating with like-minded (i.e., polarised) people in order to change a society, policy or organisation (Chon and Park 2020).

Thus, activism involves the construction of an exchange of information shared by a plurality of individuals or groups (Diani, 1992) and concerns (a) contentious issues, (b) collective action, (c) solidarity or collective identity, and (d) an effort to solve problems using communication (Chon and Park 2020, 74). Moreover, the possibility of an online construction of solidarity seems central as it questions the meaning of European borders through the spontaneous initiative of volunteers working directly in the field. Specifically, considering the hybridity of an increasingly fragmented and stratified public sphere (Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri 2020), different actors are empowered not only to emerge and fuel parallel debates, but also to reach specific segments of publics.

In this sense, it seems to us that studies have not yet explored enough the possible symbolic value of the communication of the individual maker of solidarity, rather they have investigated the more established communication strategies of NGOs active in the Mediterranean (Selva 2020). The present study assumes that online civic activism can create meaningful and participatory connections, attracting networked audiences, engaging in dialogue with traditional communication actors and evoking an *emotional* and *identifying empathy* that restores dignity and a sense of reality to migration flows (Donise 2021). We believe empathy can be an activator of solidarity for both activists and audiences, as it is capable of triggering the reciprocity of perspectives necessary for the latter to manifest (Chanial 2022). In other words, solidarity can be read as a factual expression of empathy.

2. Methodology

Breaking into the fragmented public sphere (Bentivegna and Boccia Artieri 2021) the two selected case studies potentially reach a diversified audience and allow for deeper practical knowledge in specific contexts (Flyvbjerg 2001) and analytical generalisations (Yin 2015). They concern Facebook pages of migrants' civil rights activists Nawal Soufi and Lorena Fornasir, both active for migrants in transit and from the Balkan Route and on the most used social media in Italy (Agcom 2022). Namely, Nawal Soufi is herself the daughter of Moroccan migrants, she was born and grown up in Italy, but she hasn't yet the italian citizenship[2], whereas Lorena Fornasir is a psychotherapist who created the association Linea d'Ombra and every night in Trieste 'Piazza del mondo' (officially Piazza della Libertá) she tends the feet of migrants who manage to arrive in Italy.

At the time of the investigation, they constituted the only example of continuous coverage of the growing balkan emergency in the Italian context. Unlike the mainstream, alternative and NGO media that have historically focused on the Mediterranean landings, the activists have tried to tell the route so that it becomes public knowledge. In the case of Nawal Soufi, for instance, it's evident in the re-launch of the video of her

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[2] Italian citizenship is regulated by Law No. 91 of 5 February 1992 (and its implementing regulations: Presidential Decree No. 572 of 12 October 1993 and Presidential Decree No. 362 of 18 April 1994). In addition to the old criterion of *ius sanguinis*, i.e., by Italian descent, civil union or marriage, adoption, the legislation also provides for application and recognition. However, the procedure for migrants and second generations is fairly tortuous and administratively discretionary. For those who request it, this creates an obstacle to the real possibility of participating and being integrated in the public life of the country, fully accessing the same rights as the rest of the population (Ambrosini 2004).

own public hearings at the European Parliament and the Strasbourg Court in favour of human rights as a cultural interpreter who has decided to live alongside the pain of migrants. In the second, Lorena Fornasir publicly exposes herself as a first reception reference, risking being charged with aiding and abetting illegal immigration in Italy (see Fortarezza 2023, Trucco 2023).

We considered it relevant to investigate the communicative proposition of the activist by individually radiating humanitarian initiatives and the potential activation of bottom-up and on/offline solidarity promoted by them. Considering the intricate network of mutually constitutive agencies - algorithms and users - in datafied environments (Rieder, Matamoros-Fernández and Coromina 2018; Airoldi 2022), Facebook's algorithm can suggest contents by association. Therefore, the potential for change in the two case studies is consistent with the fact that it can favour the visibility of diversified formats and content from friends, pages or profiles that users interact with the most. The further reason why the two activists represent an interesting case study concerns the fact that their communication is probably more personal and less structured than that of NGOs and potentially usable by a wide and heterogeneous audience.

Methodologically, the analysis was conducted on the posts published over the last two years on Soufi and Fornasir's Facebook pages (421 in total) and on the first 10 comments of each post. Given the heterogeneity in the number of comments of the posts in the corpus, in order to ensure the most balanced analysis possible, we chose to select only the top 10, as all posts had at least 10 comments.

The posts were collected through the Crowd Tangle platform, while the comments through the free tool ExportComments.

Therefore, a quanti-qualitative approach was adopted to investigate the dual level of the present study using the Rgraph package and the lexicometric software Iramuteq, taking into account digital and visual methods (Caliandro and Gandini 2016). Starting from the ethical problematization of the use of images in research on migratory phenomena (Nikielska-Sekula and Desille 2021), in the present study the centrality of the visual proposition present in the posts was investigated as a tool of direct public awareness.

Assuming that the power relations implicit in visual cultures are disrupted by activists' direct contact with migrants, for each image we considered two levels, 1. denotative (who or what is depicted), 2. connotative (ideas suggested by what is depicted and how it is depicted) as Van Leeuwen and Jewitt illustrated (2000).

The image was always combined with the accompanying textual content, verifying the register of the latter. This was achieved by applying the concept of frames devices - proposed by Gamson and Modigliani (1989) and adapted on media representation of migration by Author (2018) as follows: labels, role of subjects, metaphors/catchphrases, examples, images, definition of theme, attribution of responsibility. Considering the controversies discussed in the literature regarding frame studies of social movement communication (among others Van Dijck 2016), occurrence analysis and cluster analysis were adopted in support of the identification of the following frame devices: role of subjects, attribution of responsibility, metaphors.

Moreover, in an attempt to operationalize empathy, we considered as indicators: narrative voice and perspective positioning. Empathy can be read as the ability of the content producer to move on the axis of the subjectivity being talked about on both the visual and linguistic levels.

3. Findings

3.1   Facebook posts: narrative solidarity as form of activism

Overall, the two case studies considered are in diametrically opposed positions, on the one hand there is Nawal Soufi (henceforth NS) who presides over the outside of the European borders in the Balkan route, as it continuously moves along the route and beyond (i.e., the Belarusian border), bringing assistance in the most critical situations. While on the other we find Lorena Fornasir (henceforth LF) who permanently occupies the internal front with the support of her husband and the association they founded, Linea d'Ombra. Both live and tell, therefore, the drama of an extreme border such as the Balkan route through the lens of the experience of those who help travellers attempting to reach Europe and the survivors of this crossing of territories and military controls.

As the posts of the two activists highlight, being outside the borders of European citizenship characterises their existences. Migrants often arrive in Trieste 'Piazza del mondo' wounded and physically exhausted and lacking the necessities to survive - including documents - and to contact their loved ones. However, this condition of physical and psychological deprivation and violence does not differ from the reality they experience on the other side of the European border (along the route), rather in Italy it becomes more visible and recognisable thanks to LF's acts of solidarity. Specifically, the analysis of the posts allowed us to identify two different linguistic registers, highbrow and informal, adopted respectively by LF and NS. While the former presents longer post, with quotations from scholars or intellectuals and historical references, the latter prefers a more personal, simple and fast language, capable of recalling agency take on emergency requests, for instance.

Both openly attribute the responsibility for the brutality suffered by migrants to the European Union and Italian national policies. On a denotative level, they propose a representation of the subjects marked by the border places crossed by migrants, the migrants themselves and the activists together with them. On the connotative level, however, the photos of the posts suggest proximity, restore the human dimension of the flow of migration and denounce the abuses to which the militarisation of borders exposes. Three specific frames emerge from the use of these devices for the narration of the acts of digital solidarity proposed by the two activists, they are: (im)mediate advocacy frame, civic empathy frame, condemnation of institutions frame.

The first (Figure 1) concerns the ability to become a vehicle for direct help on Facebook and through social media, breaking down the barriers of the limit between what the user can and should know and what they actually know about the reality of European borders. Becoming a vehicle of help means being the instrument of amplification of a meeting between solidarity, needs and attention to the overall needs of an existence, therefore not only contingent but also future. This implies the possibility of guaranteeing well-being, albeit in a temporary form. In this way, the two activists make possible an active involvement on the part of users capable of making them co-protagonists and close to the urgency that the emergency dimension of the border imposes.

In the case of NS, for example, there is a direct search for volunteers ready to leave and long-term collections of material or immaterial goods. Her exemplary case is the #adottaunmigrante campaign, that's to say "adopting a migrant", whereby it is possible for anyone to directly support a family or an individual migrant financially for a year and stay updated by WhatsApp groups (as in the first post below: "All you need is a Whatsapp phone number and a smile to warm the hearts of those you 'adopt'").

In the case of LF, instead, the frame is declined both in the invitation to join the 'Piazza del mondo' meeting every afternoon in front of Trieste station, and in the fundraising for food and basic necessities to be provided especially in winter.

The connective action that this type of advocacy seeks to activate in the offline dimension will be discussed in the next section (as in the second post below: "[...] a sheet with the names of the migrants who died or disappeared [...] caused a catastrophe in the etymological meaning of the word overthrow. In fact, it overturned the communicative modalities of the square, prompting some young people to write the names of their dead or disappeared comrades [...]: to put everything on the line, even one's life, as happened to the comrades who died fighting against the violence of the border").

Figure 1 – Examples of (Im)mediate advocacy frame. In the first image, NS promotes the #Adottaunmigrante, that's to say "adopting a migrant" initiative as a gift for her birthday; in the second one LF tells the experience of stitching together with migrants their memories.

The second, civic empathy frame, (Figure 2) concerns the use of storytelling in the restitution of the humanity of people fleeing and on the border. Individual stories are returned by activists in the same way that photographs, according to Susan Sontag (1977), testify to participation in another existence. The emphasis is not on compassion, but on the difficult choices, abuses and difficulties faced by people on the move, often forced to survive illegally and for years in border areas. Central in this regard is the majority presence in the analysed corpus of the term 'person', rather than migrant.

The tension of the narration, in fact, implies a cognitive effort that proposes a gradual empathy post after post insofar as the activists participate in the lives of those who live on the borders of citizenship, give them back their voice and dignity, and share and experience it themselves as in the case of NS.

The NS series of posts "Diario di bordo" is a kind of thematic column on the Balkan route which reports daily on the life stories of migrants and volunteers on the route. It constitutes a significant example of the narrative experience that best embodies on the one hand the collection and transmission of stories, appeals and

photos received directly from migrants in distress, and on the other hand the constant updating of solidarity actions carried out on the border, to empower and spread awareness of their need. As an example, in the case of NS, the stories of those who have been living for years on the other side of the European borders are reported, both their motivations, their journey and their current inhumane living conditions (as in the second post below: "Perhaps one day he will return to his country of origin, or perhaps he will die on this frontier from cold or hunger, but we will be left with the arduous task of looking ourselves in the mirror in the coming years", as in the third one: "How many times have you tried to cross the Croatian border? As many times as I have...14 years, 14 attempts, 14 wounds that will not heal easily. Embrace me and don't think about it, at least for now...let's go for an ice cream"). In addition, strategies in support of their survival are recounted, such as hiding food or basic necessities in black rubbish bags and burying them in the woods of the Balkan route, where migrants stranded there can then use them. The sharing of this information takes place many hours later precisely for safety reasons of both the volunteers performing the action and its beneficiaries.

While LF shares the necessary proximity in everyday life, there is not necessarily the story of the migrant but the story of an encounter between him and his host, between the hard marks of the journey on his body and their consideration and transformation into something positive (as in the first post below: "place where at least that truth of life on whose removal our life is based can show and tell itself"). There is the restitution of the concrete possibility of caring for another existence in a public place, as real as the piazza and as digital as Facebook. Since it is considered a natural and political act of humanity, it is not only right and morally due, but is proposed as an example potentially replicable by anyone anywhere else in Italy in the forms that the specific situation may require.

Figure 2 - Examples of Civic empathy frame. In the first image, LF shows the deep wounds of migrants' bodies and stands as a warning against removal from public consciousness; in second top and third ones at the bottom NS tells the experience of a 16-year-old and a child with disabilities stuck on the border for months and years.
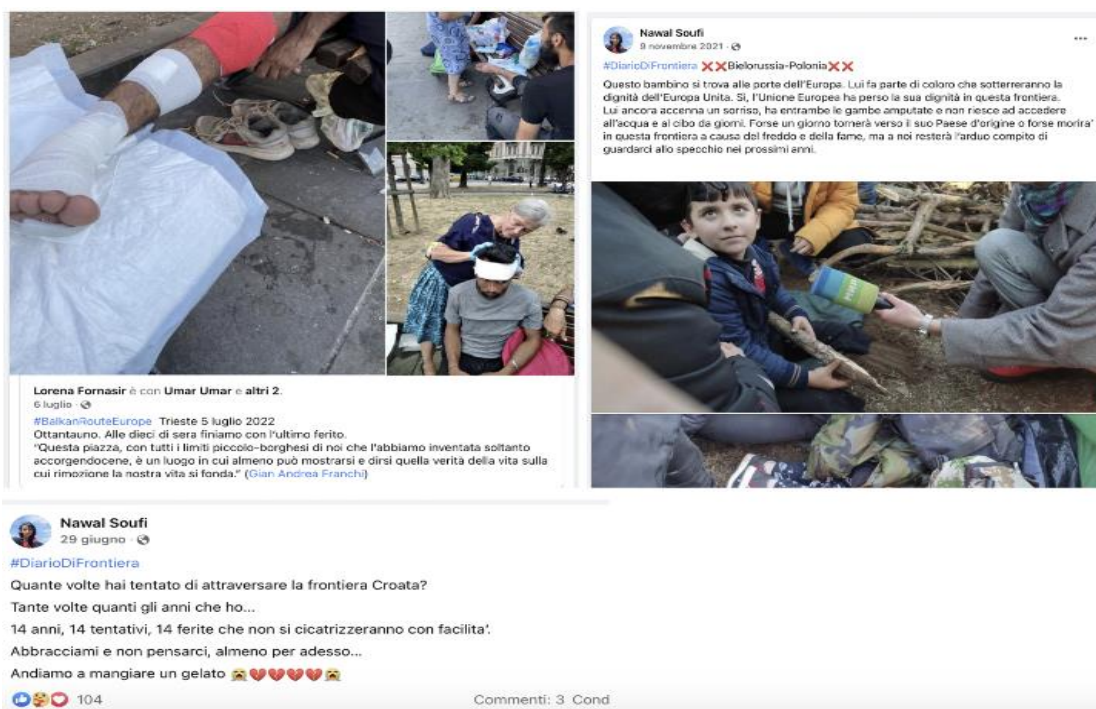
The third condemnation of institutions frame (Figure 3) concerns the open denunciation and contestation of the criminalisation of humanitarian intervention on the borders, in this case between Poland and Belarus. Here the dimension of risk is predominant on both sides, thus considering both the actions of the solidarity makers and the people on the run. We see the dissemination of the European Court of Rights' convictions against Poland, as well as the dissemination of physical and psychological abuse by the border police. 'Death' is the most recurring term in this regard, whether it occurs at the hands of the border police or due to the cold of the Balkan route and in general Eastern Europe. What is relevant to observe is the shared condition of danger, whereby the two activists publicly expose themselves and attempt to build bridges of knowledge and critical support also through the public digital sphere.

Both run the risk of being legally persecuted, emblematic is the case of the Court of Bologna battle conducted against LF. The accusation of aiding and abetting irregular immigration has attracted significant media attention, strengthening the political commitment of the activist and her association Linea d'Ombra. In this respect, two aspects emerge: the ability to network with local associations and the adherence to a media and social media logic. The second, more pronounced for LF, corresponds to the ability to interface with the press, among others the national public broadcasting service, and continuously seek its attention. This strategy implies compromise, gaining visibility on the terms of the targeted media, and is typical of humanitarian campaigns. However, LF's 'Piazza del mondo' also pursues the channels of film productions from below and even through mainstream media footage manages to express the dimension of encounter. In contrast, this kind of compromise seems to be absent in NS's publications. She prefers to work individually and outside the media hype, but always in close dialogue with supporting associations and NGOs. Her status as the daughter of migrants - and therefore lacking Italian citizenship - becomes the legitimisation of her protest and her actions. While the strategic resource of irony is the key to the spontaneity with which she exposes her denunciation in the form of a subtle outburst, as the reversal of reality is capable of surprising the user and triggering deeper reflection (as also in Figure 1: "And if you want to adopt me too, you are welcome to give me 10 kg of chocolate a month...gluten-free", as in the second post below: "Spoilt for choice on how to die...Dying of urine? Dying of salt water? Dying of total thirst?" and in the third one: "Boat trips to give water to migrants? Is this also aiding and abetting?"). The outrage that NS manages to convey through irony highlights the ambiguity of European choices and the unjustified violence carried out by the border police, as well as the unreal common views on migration and migrants, assimilated by the European population through distorted media representations.

3.1   Comments: user solidarity engagement and the circularity of empathy

In the light of the narratives identified in the posts it is now functional to observe the comments, in order to investigate the possible correspondence of the contents and the capacity to activate solidarity through empathy. To this end, cluster analysis was applied to the over 4,000 comments. Compared to the analysis of occurrences, this allows us to visualize the main narrative dimensions present in the corpus of comments, which is heterogeneous and fragmented but no less relevant.

Figure 3 – Examples of Condemnation of institutions frame. In the first image, LF is relaunched in the prime-time program "Piazza Pulita" on the private national broadcaster La7. In the second and third ones NS denounces the absurdity of the EU's actions with disarming irony and exasperated tones.
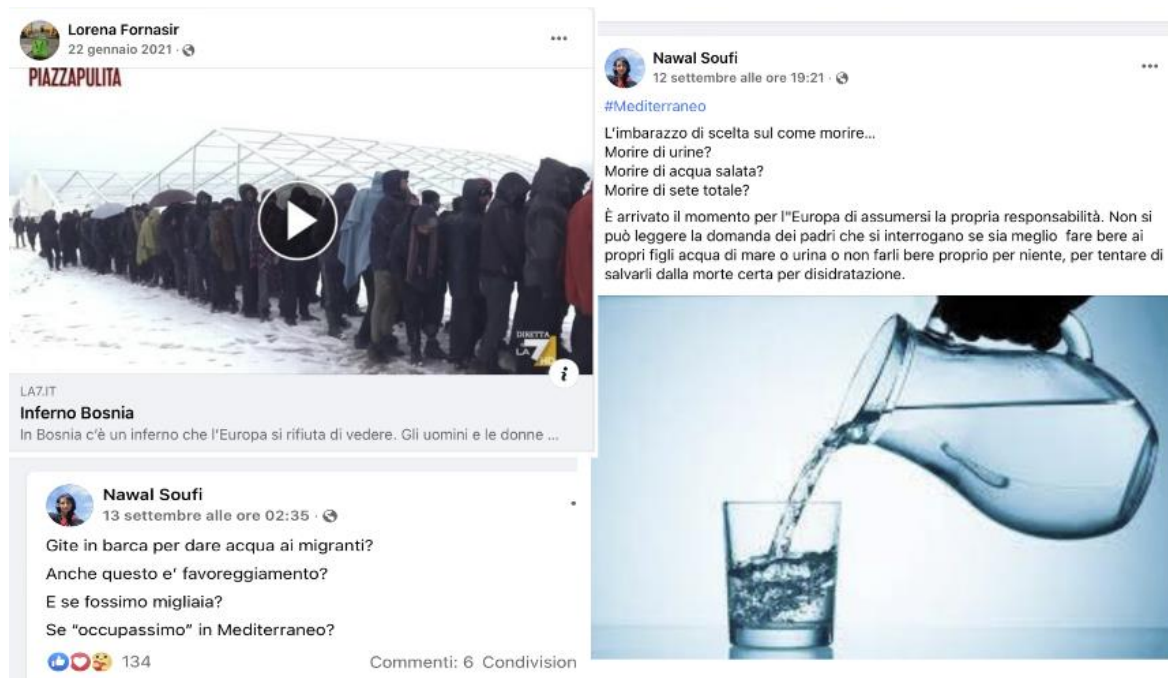
As can be seen in Figure 4, four different clusters can be traced. The prevailing one (top right) can be traced to a dimension of gratitude, which shows the users' admiration and esteem for the two activists. They are recognised as an informative and operational reference, as gatekeepers and caregivers of solidarity. The two activists are followed, encouraged and believed in because they are credible in the eyes of the users, thanks to their ability to transmit from the field and without filters their actions, reflections and concerns. In this dimension, the proximity established, especially in the case of NS, induces users to ask for updates about her own safety and, more generally, about the health and well-being of the activists.

The second (bottom right) concerns the immaterial and material support that users seem willing to offer, so on the one hand there is the dimension of praying for people in dangerous situations at the border and the constant request for updates on the appeals for help shared online. On the other hand, there is the explicit declaration of support provided financially or the willingness to organise local crowdfunding meetings in cooperation with third sector associations, up to the willingness to volunteer to provide help directly on the route. In the case of NS, an integral part of material help is in fact the explicit request to access/subscribe to WhatsApp or Telegram groups linked to each support initiative, e.g., in the case of the #adottaunmigrante campaign support is direct and shared with a group of other supporters who receive updates and photos directly from the migrant or family in transit on the route.

Fig. 4 - Factorial representation of the semantic clusters of the commentary analysis corpus.
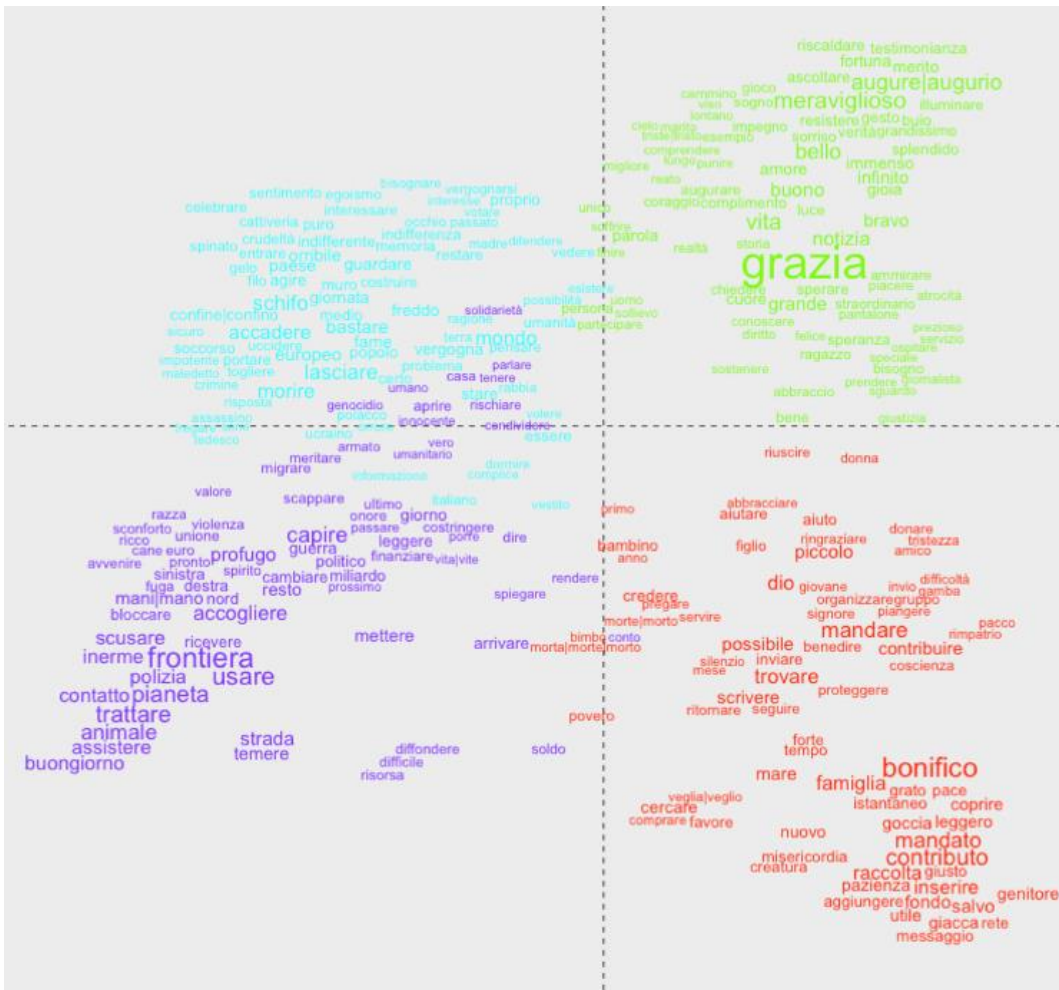
The third cluster (bottom left) presents the dimension of bewilderment towards the condition of stalemate and exclusion that borders entail, authentically discovered through the civic and digital engagement of activists. To this dimension can be traced, especially in the case of LF, the ability to fit into the mainstream media agenda and bring to light the atrocities perpetrated on the Balkan route through the narration of their own initiatives. Here, users show that they develop an identifying empathy, linked to the cognitive effort of imagining the border conditions and understanding in return their own condition of privilege and comfort as European citizens.

Partially overlapping with the previous one, the last cluster (top left) presents a more marked stigmatisation of atrocities committed by European policies, towards which users show concern and open hostility. We could therefore consider it logically consequential to the previous one, as if without the presence of one we could not have the other. Indeed, the possibility of accessing content recorded directly on the route and often by the migrants themselves, mediated by the publication of activists expressing outrage at European and Italian humanitarian inaction, receives emotionally consistent responses from users.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Our results reveal how, through daily content, the volunteer inhabits the digital social square, disseminating calls to action and requests for help that are direct and open to the civic sense of every European citizen. These contents are disruptive and symbolic of a civilisation that does not abandon those on the other side of the border of European citizenship. Each case study corresponds to a phase inside and outside the border, but both offer an emotional and identifying empathy capable of conveying the gravity of the conditions experienced by fostering identification with the other, a gradual imaginative effort that requires time and attention, two dimensions of which the activists are vehicles.

They bridge the social distances between citizens and the voiceless, since the other is never identified only as a migrant or refugee but is simply a person in need of first aid.

The responsibility that activists evoke is not to the powerless but to the people, so the presiding over the border by both is amplified by the dimension of social narrative that can be distinguished in three frames: frame of immediate advocacy, frame of civic empathy, frame of condemnation of institutions.

On the one hand, it is necessary to remember that their will to overcome the borders of European citizenship by practicing online activism collides with the digital borders that exclude a large part of the population (Ponzanesi and Leurs 2014; Sorce and Dutrimica 2022) and with episodic coverage and immature solidarity from the generalist and sector media. On the other hand, the wide range of opportunities offered by digital activism to express support (Boccia Artieri 2021) ensures a stratification of participation in acts of solidarity that anyone can undertake directly through activists, only financially or in person.

Indeed their "acts of citizenship" (Isin 2008) represent a primarily symbolic value and therefore have no power to counter the crisis and risk narrative of border externalization (Murray 2023), however they acquire a dimension of reality in the following three ways.

First, the posts (which represent the input of the act) bring to the knowledge of the phenomenon (and of the intervention actions on the Balkan route) a potentially vast and unaware public of European citizens. Second, the public responds (output of the act) with a diversified high or low intensity participation (Leong et al. 2022) (e.g. by sending economic offers or proposing themselves as a volunteer to organize fundraising in Italy or to go to the "field" in Trieste or on the Balkan route). Third, the concrete actions of solidarity carried out, both with the remote contribution of the people, and actually on the "field" by the activists (e.g. NS manages to pay medical or accommodation expenses for several asylum seekers in difficulty stranded on the Balkan route with minors or in precarious health conditions)

These continuous acts of resistance have the ambition to connect reality and the digital public sphere, also creating legal precedents of defense for those accused of aiding and abetting illegal immigration, such as LF.

Even though the research only considers two case studies, which could only speak to those who are already engaged in humanitarian commitment, it is equally possible to recognize the communicative potential for those invisible audiences that can nonetheless be reached and involved by the empathy conveyed by the posts. As Masullo, Wilner and Stroud (2022), and for digital activism Chon and Park (2020) and Dennis (2019), argue social media can become better spaces as they can contribute to civic action, inviting participation and building bridges between different communities and a sense of belonging towards societal challenges. In the specific case analysed, it is possible to trace a political use of social media by the two activists, which testifies to a re-appropriation of the concept of citizenship and bottom-up activism at the expense of the concept of the border, questioned through the direct narration of the stories of people in transit. It is possible to interpret the actions of the two activists as forms of political resistance and re-appropriation of the use of the social media Facebook (Cammaerts 2012; Treré 2018; Dumitrica and Felt 2019) through the unstructured but spontaneous sharing of reflections, requests for support and the invitation to join support networks (i.e., Telegram) or in person.

That said, controversial risks should also be considered. The use of empathy or rather "visual affective practice" is in fact supported by the affordances of the platform in terms of visibility and reactions to posts and can also fuel racist sentiments and consensus towards the closure and national protection of borders. This is the controversial case of the social communication of far-right pages (Nikunen, Hokka and Nelimarkka 2021). Considering the present study, it would be relevant to investigate the impact that the two realities can have on the sense-making process of the users, without forgetting the opacity of the platform's politics of visibility (Milan 2015).

In the present case, the strategic use of social media, which becomes a tool for transmitting and constructing solidarity, seems to succeed in triggering solidarity action on the part of the individual user, which in turn implies political positioning (Nikunen 2019). As the activists become a direct conduit of help, therefore call to action in connection with them follows a potentiality of action, able to trigger a change in perspectives. Even if it does not necessarily imply a communality with a collectivity, this one-to-one relation instilled a strong connective triangulated action between activists, users and migrants. In this sense, we believe that the comments investigated constitute only the tip of the iceberg of the potential actions that makers of solidarity trigger, which can be investigated by further research in the future, e.g., by interviewing part of the audience active and involved (i.e., in social group networks outside Facebook, as WhatsApp).

In conclusion, echoing Appadurai (2013), we believe it is possible to glimpse in the actions and empathy of activists a contagious ethos of possibility, capable of triggering the growth of horizons of hope, expanding the field of imagination towards building a capacity to aspire to an informed, creative, and critical on/offline citizenship.

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Authors' Information:

Fabiana Battisti is a Ph.D. Candidate in Communication at Sapienza University of Rome, Department of Communication and Social Research. In 2023 she was a Visiting Scholar at Africa Media Matrix School of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University (South Africa). Her work dialogues with journalistic coverage and digital activism and the framing processes involved in the construction of social representation. Main research interests include media, diversity and decolonization, journalism, digital and participatory culture, and science communication. Several papers have been presented at national, European and international conferences (e.g., ICA and IAMCR)

Marco Bruno is Associate Professor at Sapienza University of Rome, Department of Communication and Social Research, teaching Sociology of Communication and History and Models of Journalism. He is chair of the three-year graduate program in Public and Corporate Communication and member of the teaching board of the International Joint PhD in Social Representation, Culture, Communication. His approach aims to understand how the media frames knowledge and representation of reality, with research focus mainly on analysis of journalism and information, media and diversity, political and electoral communication, political phenomena and participatory practices. He is the author of four books and many contributions in national and international journals and books.