



MEDITERRANEAN MIGRATIONS: NGO AS THE VOICE OF THE VOICELESS?*

THE ROLE OF NGOs IN COMMUNICATING MEDITERRANEAN MIGRATION EFFECTIVELY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Introduction

■ Since the mid-1990s, a considerable number of individuals have annually crossed the Mediterranean Sea from the Northern coasts of Africa and Turkey to reach Europe. Recent years have witnessed a surge in migration towards Europe via the Mediterranean Sea, particularly from countries like Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Tunisia, following the “Arab Spring” uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Multiple factors drive migrants to choose Europe as their destination. Linguistic and cultural ties, geographical proximity, and economic incentives are significant in their decision-making process.

However, this migration often involves difficult journeys, with reports indicating threats to human lives as migrants traverse hazardous routes through the Sahara Desert and embark on makeshift maritime passages towards Italy, Malta, and Spain. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has highlighted the frequency of incidents involving distressed migrants at sea, underscoring the challenges faced by European Union (EU) member states in responding to this humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean Sea.

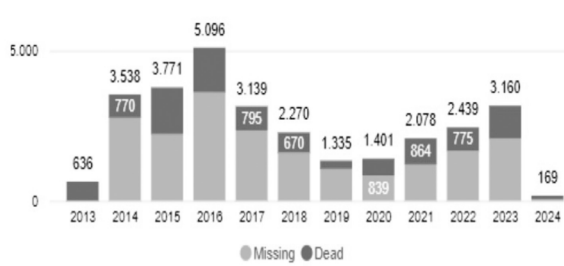
The mortality rate associated with clandestine migration has been alarming, with the Mediterranean route consistently recording a considerable number of migrant deaths from 2013 to 2024. The Mediterranean remains the deadliest route, with 864 deaths reported in 2022 alone. In 2023, the International Organization for

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Migration (IOM) recorded the highest number of deaths since 2017, with at least 2,498 women, children, and men perishing or going missing in the Central Mediterranean Sea (Figure 1.).

Figure 1. Number of dead and missing people at sea between 2013 February 2023.



Source: United Nations Refugee Agency, Mediterranean and Northwest African Maritime routes, updated on 29 February 2023.

Rescue and disembarkation operations, ensuring safety, can be seen as a moral imperative, and under international law, it is an intricate endeavor involving various actors with specific responsibilities (Orav 2022).

The stark statistics highlight the significant challenges facing European nations in managing migration flows and coordinating search and rescue efforts, often necessitated by non-governmental organizations¹ (NGOs) operating not only at the national or state level but also at local and transnational levels. Indeed, the involvement of NGOs is imperative to mitigate casualties.

Numerous NGOs have been actively responding to emergencies in the Mediterranean Sea since 2015. Between 2014 and 2017, more than ten NGOs conducted Search and Rescue (SAR) operations off the coast of Libya. However, a massive portion of these NGOs conducting SAR missions are small organizations with limited resources and expertise. Even larger NGOs, such as Doctors Without Borders (MSF), renowned for their experience in providing humanitarian aid, lacked prior experience in conducting maritime rescue activities (Cusumano 2019).

Moreover, NGOs must have political, institutional, and financial independence from public or private authorities. Therefore, they rely on their capacities to attract specific target audiences and stakeholders through their publicity on media platforms (Powers 2014), using communication strategies to communicate and promote their activities and thus obtain funds.

1 According to the definition of the United Nations, an NGO is “any non-profit, voluntary citizens’ group which is organized on a local, national, or international level. Task-oriented and driven by people with a common interest, [...] perform a variety of services and humanitarian functions, bring citizens’ concerns to Governments, monitor policies, and encourage political participation at the community level.” (United Nations. Civil Society, accessed on 15/02/2024).



A communication strategy encompasses various elements such as goals, objectives, key messages, communication channels, tactics, and metrics to gauge success.

NGOs, particularly those focused on migration-related issues, traditionally relied on traditional media in their communication strategies (Dimitrova–Ozdora, 2022). However, with the advent of technological advancements, especially social media, they have increasingly shifted towards digital tactics to enhance their advocacy efforts and expand their influence in a rapidly changing world.

Despite heightened public awareness about the dangers faced by migrants in the Mediterranean Sea and the considerable number of rescue operations conducted by NGOs and other agencies, the number of deaths and missing individuals has continued to rise in recent years. According to data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2023 marked the deadliest year for migration across the Mediterranean Sea since 2018.

This research aims to investigate and examine how NGOs operating in the Mediterranean leverage digitalization in their communication models and interactions with users. The primary aim was to assess the extent and effectiveness of these organizations in fostering participation and inclusion through relational models. These models utilize web opportunities to integrate a cognitive approach – focused on consultation and informational content – with methods that encourage the broad expression of users' emotional and experiential dimensions.

By utilizing information sourced from NGOs' official websites and social media platforms between December 2023 and February 2024, we were able to identify their strengths and weaknesses in the digitalization and nature of their communication. The specific matrix used for the content analysis is composed of two different dimensions. It is mostly replicable for other relevant studies.

The work is divided into four paragraphs.

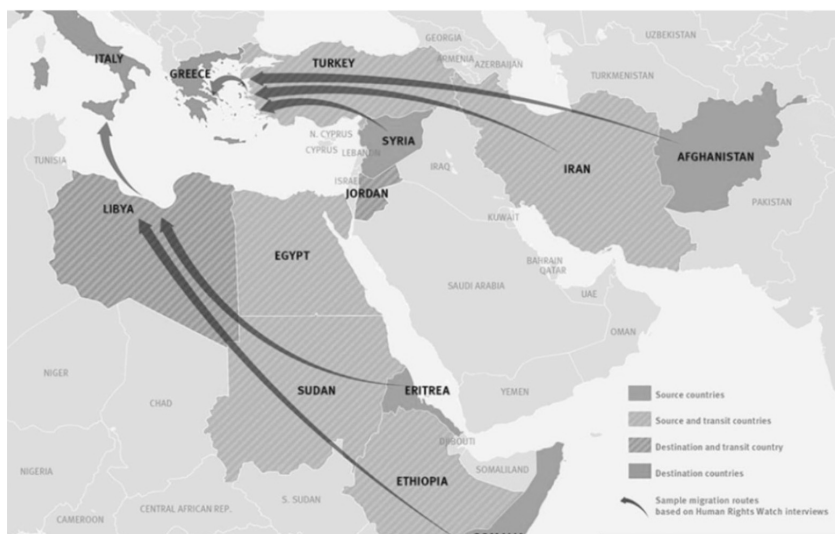
The first paragraph sets the background on the migration phenomena in the Mediterranean Sea and the Search and Rescue operations. In the second and third paragraphs, we analyzed the online communication strategies of the NGOs operating in the Mediterranean Sea. In the fourth paragraph, we elaborate on the results of the qualitative analysis.

The Search and Rescue operations and the migration crisis in the Mediterranean Sea

The Mediterranean Sea is a maritime route particularly affected by migration flows. Often this route is navigated by people moving further away from their countries of origin along smuggling routes, trying to reach Europe.

The Mediterranean Sea has three main referred routes: "Western," "Eastern" and "Central" (*Figure 2.*).

Figure 2. Migration flows in the Mediterranean Sea.



Source: The United Nations refugee agency.

Italy, Spain, and Greece stand out as European Union (EU) countries grappling with significant numbers of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea, primarily originating from Southern African countries via Libya and Tunisia.

Since 1999, EU member states have grappled with irregular migration, notably increasing towards Western Europe by land and sea from 2000. The continuous political unrest in the Middle East and North Africa exacerbated migration flow (Wolff, 2015). The tragic loss of migrant lives underscores the urgent humanitarian crisis, with over 22,000 deaths since 2000 (Brian–Laczko 2014). To respond to this crisis, the EU initiated strategies and agreements with third states to bolster control of sea borders, focusing on regions such as the Italian islands, the Canary Islands, the Strait of Gibraltar, Malta, and Greece. Notably, the Italian-Libyan agreement in 2008, facilitated by EU financial support to the Libyan government, aimed to stem the flow of African migrants to Europe (Edwards et al. 2019). While this agreement led to a drastic reduction in migrant numbers, criticism arose due to its perceived violation of the principle of non-refoulement outlined in the 1951 Geneva Convention (Toaldo 2015).

Experts argue that the migration crisis post-2014 poses one of the most significant challenges for the EU, stemming from various social and political factors in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, including the Arab Springs in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and other states affected by political instability, civil conflicts, and terrorist activities in Syria and Iraq (El Ghamari–Daniiloudi-Zielińska 2022).

These migration flows started to represent a crisis for European countries around 2015, when the number of arrivals reached the major peak specifically



the Eastern Mediterranean route which involves maritime migration from Turkey to Greece and, to a lesser degree, Cyprus, and Bulgaria. Subsequently, the number of irregular arrivals on the Eastern route decreased due to the agreement signed between the EU and Turkey in 2016 (Frontex 2019).

The central Mediterranean, most directed to Italy and Malta, remains the most critical, due to the lack of effective political authority, particularly evident in Libya due to institutional inadequacies amid economic and political instability (Toaldo, 2015; Edwards et al., 2019). According to the IOM, the Central Mediterranean route remains the most perilous and deadly in the Mediterranean Sea (IOM report 2024). This route is characterized by extensive trafficking activity, with migrants and refugees subjected to human rights abuses, including torture, forced labor, and sexual violence, perpetrated by criminal groups involved in human trafficking and smuggling.

The situation on the Western Mediterranean route involves crossings from Morocco or Algeria to Spain. According to Frontex, the Spanish Coast Guard detected around 57,000 irregular arrivals in 2018. This number dropped to 24,000 in 2019 and further to 17,200 in 2020, before rising again to 18,500 in 2021. The number decreased again in 2022 (Frontex, Western Mediterranean route 2021).

A key factor in maintaining relatively low departure levels from this route is the strong cooperation between Spain and Morocco in coordinating surveillance on the Strait of Gibraltar and the Atlantic coast. The Moroccan Coast Guard also receives assistance from Spanish authorities (Fine 2019). Additionally, the adoption of the Team Europe Initiatives in December 2022 between the EU and transit countries like Morocco has been significant.

Overall, despite all the agreements signed by the countries of destination and the countries of transit regarding the management of the migration crisis in Europe, according to the data collected by the agencies, we can say that the EU failed to manage the dangerous situation in the Mediterranean Sea.

Maritime Search and Rescue missions in the Mediterranean Sea (SAR) and the intervention of the NGOs

In a global context, rescue and search operations are defined as actions conducted by professional and trained persons, whether by land, sea, or air, to help people in distress, regardless of their nationality or their status. In the EU context, SAR is the operations of the EU members to assist any vessel or person in distress at sea regardless of the nationality or status of such a person or the circumstances in which that person is found under international law and respect for fundamental rights (Migration and Home Affairs, EU Commission 2023). The International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR Convention), entered into force in 1985, "was aimed at developing an international SAR plan, so that, no matter where an accident occurs, the rescue of persons in distress at sea will be coordinated

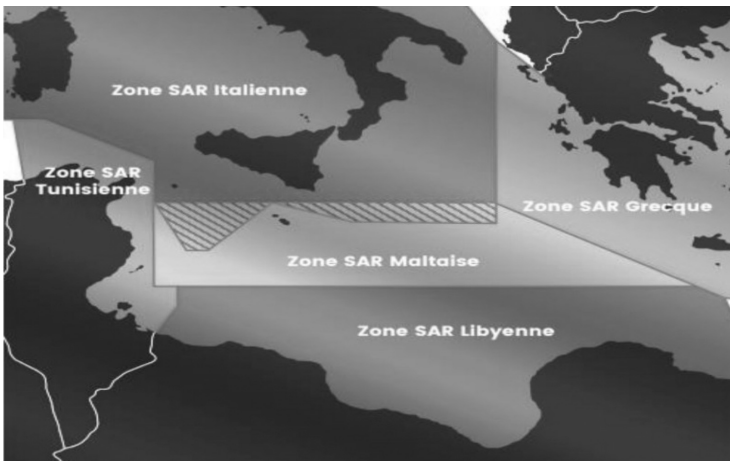


by a SAR organization and, when necessary, by cooperation between neighboring SAR organizations” (International Maritime Organization).

In compliance with this legal framework each coastal state organizes its maritime authorities, with its technical capabilities (Brutton 2017), as we said before combatting this kind of crisis requires coordination and cooperation with states because of its shared responsibility.

For the efficiency of operations, the SAR convention provides the division of the world’s oceans into maritime regions (Figure 3.). According to the definition adopted by Frontex in its report, the SAR region is “an area of responsibilities with each assigned to a national maritime rescue coordination Centre. In these centers, the National Coast Guard receives information about emergencies in their rescue zone and coordinates the rescue. Such as in the Central Mediterranean Sea, the rescue zones are divided between Italy, Malta, Libya, and Tunisia. It is the responsibility of anyone who discovers or learns about an emergency at sea to immediately alert the rescue center responsible for that area.”

Figure 3. Delimitation of SAR regions in the Mediterranean Sea.



Source: Booklet for the civil society “State obligations relating to rescue at Sea.”

Coastal states are obligated to engage in cooperative agreements for conducting SAR operations. In this context, it is crucial to acknowledge two significant aspects. Firstly, a maritime SAR region delineates a geographical area where the coastal state holds responsibility for coordinating SAR activities, distinct from an extension of its national boundaries. Secondly, the coastal state cannot deploy all SAR resources necessary for rescuing individuals in distress within its entire maritime SAR region (Button 2017).

These regions are managed by National Maritime Rescue Coordination Centers (MRCCs), which coordinate rescue operations in collaboration with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and coastal guards from each nation.



For instance, the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre plays a pivotal role in the Central Mediterranean, operating within Italian waters and partnering with other nations' RCCs, with funding from the European Union.

However, before 2013, the Central Mediterranean lacked dedicated rescue vessels, with Italian and Maltese authorities typically conducting such missions. In response to significant migrant deaths, including the 2013 Lampedusa tragedy, Italy launched its first SAR operation, *Mare Nostrum* (Brady 2014). However, *Mare Nostrum* was discontinued at the end of 2014 due to concerns that it functioned as a “pull factor” for migration and faced political and financial challenges (Del Valle 2016).

To fill the gap left by the Italian initiative, Frontex launched *Operation Triton* in November 2014, primarily focusing on border control but also including SAR operations. The EU also initiated *Operation Sophia*, targeting human smuggling. Despite the increase in SAR operations, efforts to strengthen the asylum system remained limited, with a greater emphasis on border control and combating irregular migration (Farugues and Di Bartolomeo 2015).

Since 2014, the reduction in SAR operations at sea and the concurrent rise in migrant deaths have prompted several international NGOs, such as MOAS, Sea Watch, Sos Méditerranée, Sea Eye, MSF, and Proactiva Open Arms, to commence their operations in the Mediterranean (Waisbord 2011; Cusumano–Villa 2019).

Given the significance of these NGOs' operations, this study aims to explore the impact of digital marketing as a communication strategy on public opinion and policymaking, alongside their communication with diverse target audiences across various media platforms (Waisbord 2011).

The digital transformation of communication strategies of the NGOs

This paragraph explores how NGOs implement their operations through traditional communication strategies and adapt to digital tools with the development of ICT. It examines the effectiveness and accountability of these strategies, as well as how NGOs attract individuals through both social media accounts and traditional media.

Effective communication strategies are essential for social and humanitarian organizations to accomplish their main objectives, which include raising public awareness of the dangers of irregular migration and motivating the community to take part through volunteerism and donations.

Communication strategies have significantly contributed to expanding the image of NGOs through connections with diverse audiences to let them be more informed on the one hand increase people's mobilization and facilitate fundraising on the other hand (Cabanillas–Ostio–Esparcia 2023). Generally, the NGOs need to build a strong connection with donors and stakeholders achieving higher fundraising success, in contrast, the NGOs will experience a drop in funding and donor



support (Sofia–Chaudhry 2021). To this end, accountability is also pivotal (Kyriacou 2008). SAR NGOs must prove that they are credible and responsible by providing frequent updates on their operations at sea “saving lives,” describing their decision-making methods, and responding to any issues that come out. In contrast, they will be subject to failure and incredibility which could make it harder for them to conduct SAR missions successfully and increase their funds (Dimitrova–Heidenreich–Georgiev 2022). This accountability is frequently undertaken through numerous mechanisms such as social media, NGO annual reports, official websites, and traditional media.

However, in the context of migration, SAR activities in the Mediterranean Sea are not only NGOs’ responsibility but also governments and their local agencies. In this situation advocacy and lobbying are important tools provided by the NGOs to influence the government agencies and policy makers to adopt specific recommendations and regulations concerning their mission and their goals. Moreover, through media platforms such as interviews, press releases, and videos published on their websites, NGOs can exercise pressure on governments and international organizations to address the primary reasons for irregular migration and help those vulnerable people to install in safe places. In this case, it is necessary to understand the meaning of advocacy which refers to a range of activities that aim to influence change in a policy or practice that involves sending messages or acting for a particular humanitarian crisis (Gurunj 2014).

As highlighted by the organizational legitimacy theory adopted by Schuman, the main goal of the NGOs is to maintain their influence, and their impact on the stakeholders and specifically maintain public trust. Through strategic positioning of their profile and their means of mediation, NGOs can increase their credibility (Fenton 2010) with the different stakeholders (*Figure 4.*).

Figure 4. The key stakeholders identified by the sampled NGOs



Source: Maja Wisenberger, 2018.



The NGOs' strategy can use two ways of communication, first based on traditional media strategies, and second, digital marketing or online media.

According to Reiman, "social media platforms differ from the traditional communications tools using their dependence on direct and indirect interaction with friends, followers, and constituents" (Reiman 2012). Numerous studies argue that users would rather get informed from social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram rather than traditional media (Manetti–Nitti–Bellucci 2022).

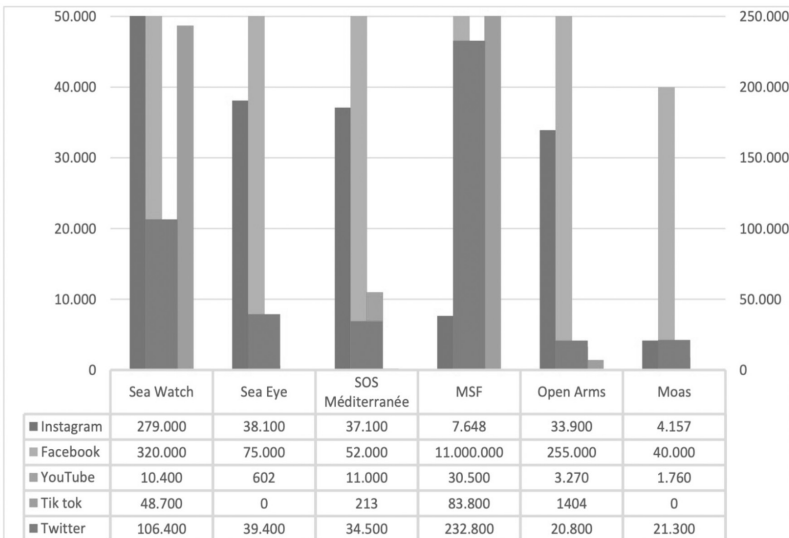
The online communication strategies of the different NGOs in the Mediterranean Sea.

As a case study, we selected six of the most recognized and active NGOs operating in the Mediterranean: Migrants Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), SOS Méditerranée, Doctors without Borders (MSF), Sea Watch, Sea Eye, and Initiative-taking Open Arms.

We proceeded to analyze information on their official websites and social media platforms.

Considering the results presented in our bar chart we acknowledged that the best option for our analysis was to focus on the most popular websites used by the organizations as a strategy of communication: Facebook, Instagram, and X (Figure 5.).

Figure 5. The number of followers on social media platforms by NGOs.



Source: Elaborated by the Author (data collected from NGO websites).



As we can see the MSF has a greater number of followers than others on X (232.8 thousand) also in Facebook which reached 11 million followers, and has a strong social media presence, selecting which platform is the most suitable to use, how to interact with supporters, and what kinds of information to provide are all related to understanding how to accomplish your objectives.

According to the information collected by MSF's Facebook, we note that MSF frequently shares videos about the humanitarian crises in the Mediterranean Sea. This information is presented in the form of short videos that promote their successful rescue operations at Sea.

As for Sea Watch, it surpasses MSF in terms of Instagram followers, respectively 279 thousand and 371 thousand. We note that Sea Watch, like many other NGOs, prefers to use Instagram as a powerful tool for communication. Instagram has over one billion users in the world, which has raised awareness, especially the younger audiences. Through it, NGOs can share effective stories through images and videos after verification.

YouTube, the largest video-sharing platform, plays a significant role in the communication strategies of NGOs. It allows the NGOs to share videos documenting their successful operations in rescuing people and thus they can use this platform to have a powerful emotional impact, inspiring viewers to donate. Through YouTube, the NGOs can receive feedback about their activities, their interventions, and their humanitarian assistance. This specific platform is considered a useful platform for Sea Watch, SOS Mediterrane, and MSF, which have the highest numbers of followers compared to MOAS, Sea Eye, and Open Arms.

To understand how NGOs use the opportunities offered by digitalization, research was conducted to survey their models of communication and relationship with users. In particular, the research aimed to try to understand to what extent, and with what results, those organizations activate processes of participation and inclusion based on relational models that, using the opportunities of the Web, combine the cognitive approach, based on consultation and purely informative content, with forms aimed at encouraging the widest expression of the emotional and experiential sphere of users.

The analysis conducted between December 2023 and February 2024 used two macro domains of interaction, centered on the factors "Engagement" and "Information", for which specific measure indicators were identified.

Through the dimension referable to the variable "Engagement," it was intended to let emerge the ability to solicit the attention of users (potential and/or real); to this end, the following indicators were used:

- WhatsApp contact.
- Email.
- Possibility to share videos and photos.
- Community and campaign events.
- Login for users.
- Frequency of updating social media pages.



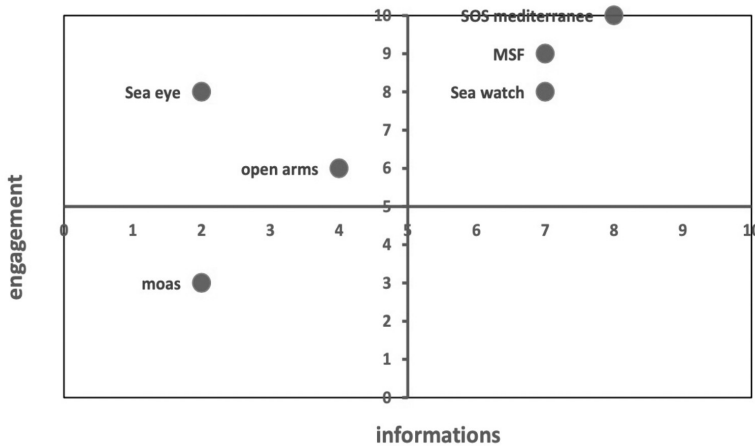
Concerning the “Information” dimension, the attitude of NGOs to integrate purely rational aspects with emotional and creative aspects in promotion actions, capable of emphasizing options for personalization and intensification of identification processes, was investigated.

The following indicators were considered:

- FAQ presence (frequently asked questions), assist the visitors to understand the NGO’s mission.
- Dedicated app (allows the NGOs to engage with users directly through smart-phones).
- Area reserved for operators, bloggers, press.
- Guides and tool kits.
- Attractiveness of the graphic and multimedia content “videos and photos”.
- Annual reports.

Based on these key elements, we proceed with the analysis, synthesizing the observation in dichotomic variables: the value “1” was assigned in case of the indicator’s presence, while the value 0 in case of absence. By summing the scores of individual items, an integrated score was obtained for each NGO (Figure 6.).

Figure 6. The extent of engagement and information



Source: Elaborated by the Author (data collected from official portals of the NGOs).

We can see that SOS Mediterranee MSF and Sea Watch employed efficient and clear information that conveyed the organization’s purpose, projects, and impacts. Also, they provide access and instruments for volunteers, and stakeholders to engage. These instruments are volunteer Sing Up, and donations portals, contact us through social media accounts, which improve the efficiency and the value of the information adopted on their websites and increase the awareness of the users about the emergency cases in the Mediterranean Sea.



Regarding the MOAS, there is a limited quantity and lower quality of information regarding the organization's activities in search and rescue missions in the Mediterranean Sea, although in recent years MOAS has been operating in other countries, such as Ukraine, Sudan, and Afghanistan.

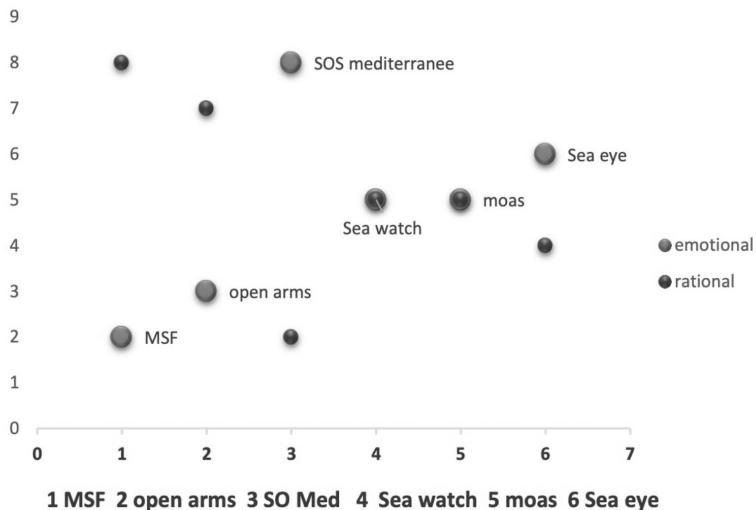
Generally, studies discern between emotional and rational information. The emotional information can provide many advantages for the NGOs, motivating the public to donate, advocate their issues, and increase visibility. On the other hand, some NGOs can also provide informative content with a rational dimension, focusing on facts, data, and statistics, such as the number of rescued people, how many operations they conducted daily, and logical information.

In our application of rational and emotional dimensions, we based our analysis on the content of their official websites and collected the following indicators:

- The content of documentary videos and photos.
- Personal stories of migrants.
- Appeals: urgent calls for action.
- Donor appeals.
- Publication of reports and activities.
- Statistics and data.

From the analysis, it is evident that the level of rational and emotional information employed by the NGOs differs from one to another (*Figure 7.*).

Figure 7. The level of emotional and rational informative content of the NGOs' websites.



Source: Elaborated by the Author (data collected from official portals of the NGOs).



We noted that the MSF website provides rational information related to its humanitarian activities, in which its focus is on providing medical assistance to urgent crises. MSF publishes its financial reports annually and data statistics such as the number of people assisted by them. In a few cases, they publish emotional videos or photos of migrants in critical situations, but it is limited.

On the contrary, SOS Mediterranee uses more emotional content as a marketing strategy, shared daily on social media platforms and its official website life stories of those rescued. They published a film named “Io Capitano” by Matteo Garrone portrays the adventure of a teenager named Fofana Amara who took the risk to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. The objective of this emotional film is to address a specific message to people about how perilous the journey at sea.

Open Arms has a rational dimension rather than emotional, first because there is a limited number of emotional photos and videos of rescued people or emergency cases. Second, Open Arms is an organization that shares with its public audience more information regarding successful operations conducted by them at sea and on land. Their projects and collaboration with stakeholders, as volunteers and donors.

As for Sea Watch, we noted a combination of empathy and rational behavior, although emotion is at the core of Sea Watch’s goal. They highlight the enormous human suffering experienced by refugees and migrants undertaking dangerous sea journeys. From a rational perspective, Sea Watch operates with strategic methods, they advocate for ensuring safe routes, and their independence from political aspects affirms that their actions are based on the mission.

Following the same strategy as Sea Watch, MOAS’ informative content is mixed between the rational and emotional aspects. It promotes its principles of solidarity and integration because it believes that effective assistance requires participation. Finally, Sea Eye’s website focuses on information about their actions during search and rescue operations at sea, also providing details about lost people at sea and their dangerous journey, sharing emotional photos and videos of irregular migrants especially women and children as the most vulnerable people as the other NGOs.

In summary, these NGOs employ a variety of communication strategies, understanding the importance of using both emotive and rational arguments to persuade the public about the humanitarian work they undertake. Each strategy plays a different part in drawing attention to and supporting its objectives.

The communication challenges facing the NGOs in the Mediterranean Sea

Ensuring arrangements for saving lives, cooperation and coordination with the responsible actors for the rescue of people in distress at sea around states’ coasts is an international obligation as confirmed by the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) in (Chapter V), the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in its (article 98, paragraph 2), and the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue.



Nonetheless, the numerous legal framework governing SAR and disembarkation imposes several duties on governments of member states, including a solid and unchangeable commitment to preventing maritime fatalities and a duty of due diligence that requires effective and efficient SAR response coordination, international protection, and the non-refoulement of rescued individuals. EU member states are not permitted to strategically decide not to rescue lives at sea or push them back to insecure countries.

Therefore, the NGOs continued to play a vital role in saving migrants in distress at the Mediterranean Sea, which covers the gap left behind by States. They played an advocacy role to address the migration issue and the suffering of migrants and refugees during their dangerous journey at Sea, via the use of digital social media strategies. But despite their crucial life-saving mission the NGOs today face challenges and problems with the EU states and other transit states (Carrera and Cortinovis 2019).

An improvement of the NGOs' communication strategies is crucial for boosting their influence and effectively expressing their goal. As our research has shown, several of the analyzed NGOs would need a more in-depth strategy capable of properly informing people, also to increase their participation. This is especially true for MOAS. The most traditional NGOs, such as MSF, have a more engaging and informative strategy in place.

Digital engagement and presence, the NGOs specifically in the humanitarian field need to keep their official websites, and social media platforms like X, Instagram, and Facebook updated with relevant data and information. Increasing the opportunity for the public to participate and join conversations and networks. Blogging means that they regularly publish informative blog posts. Increasing the number of press releases. Advocating for policy changes through public campaigns such as charity festivals. The non-profit sector is a sector based on donations collected from private individuals, also public funds. So, for financial transparency, the NGOs must share annual reports, and financial statements, and so for them, to guarantee the future of the organization and to catch more funds.

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