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"Back Way" Migration to Europe: The Role of Journalists in Disseminating Information Campaigns in The Gambia

Alagie Jinkang*, Valentina Cappi**, Pierluigi Musarò**

*Department of Psychology, University of Bologna
** Department of Sociology and Business Law, University of Bologna

Abstract

Faced with food insecurity, unemployment and broken infrastructure, many Gambian youth risk their lives through irregular and dangerous journeys to Europe – the so-called "back way" – with the hope to maximize opportunities for "better life conditions". Concurrently, local and Western governmental and non-governmental organizations implement in the country information campaigns on the risks of irregular migration, thus complementing extraterritorial border policies with symbolic bordering practices. This article explores the role of Gambian journalists in circulating narratives, including information campaigns, about "back way" migration to Europe, both as content creators and content disseminators. Starting with an overview of these narratives, this paper discusses the results of an online survey with 54 Gambian journalists, conducted between 2020 and 2021. Our findings show that journalists' communication strategies are shaped both by the limits and the opportunities of the Gambian information ecosystem inviting further research on local journalists' potential role in reproducing or negotiating Western discourses about irregular migration.

Keywords
Migration; information campaigns; journalists; the Gambia; symbolic bordering;

1. Introduction: The Persuasiveness of Narratives in Symbolic Bordering

Among the factors that can facilitate, limit or trigger potential migrants' decisions to move (Hagen-Zanker 2008; de Haas 2011), narratives are identified as a meso-level cultural driver (Czaika and Reinprecht 2020) which can increase or decrease the desirability of the act of migration, the likelihood of particular migration patterns, or the attractiveness of destinations. The act of migration, in fact, is never a mere individual movement, but an option always inserted within an imaginary that precede, inspire, accompany, explain, reframe and survive the individual act of migration (Turco 2018).
Narratives about risks and opportunities and about migrants' countries of origin or destination are produced and vehiculated at a transnational level by a wide variety of social actors (media, migrant themselves, host communities, organizations, policymakers, academics, etc.) through different communication channels with diverse purposes. Among all the competing types of narratives that contribute to the social construction of the migration phenomenon, we can enumerate, by way of example: migrants' tales about countries of origin, transit and arrival, or about their experiences of the journey, and of living abroad; fictional and non-fictional migration-related narratives and representations diffused my media outlets in migrants' sending and receiving countries; narratives concerning migration processes disseminated within both migrants' community of origin and host societies through "word-of-mouth" or social media histories; academic papers framing migratory processes through different explanatory models; mythological and religious tales concerning population exoduses and promised lands; reports compiled by institutional organizations concerning migration trends and policy recommendations; and – last but not least – information campaigns aimed at raising potential migrants information on the risks of irregular migration.

All these narratives contribute to creating, justifying, or dismantling physical and symbolic borders between people and between places. They act their performative power (Berger and Luckmann 1984; Griswold 2008) through visual and narrative rethorics, by framing migration as an emergency phenomenon rather than as a natural and historical process, by depicting migrants' arrival in host countries as an invasion rather than as a beneficial opportunity for societies' renewal, by emphasizing the difference between the "us" (the figure of the citizen) and the "them" (the figure of the foreigner), and by figuratively reshaping the imagery on the "inside" and the "outside" of nation-states (Musarò and Parmiggiani 2022). As stated by Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2020, 29), "while the territorial border interrogates the infrastructures, hierarchies and practices of migrant reception, the symbolic border highlights the role of representation in legitimising bordering power". Territorial and symbolic borders represent two sides of the same coin, and advocate the need to adopt a holistic approach to migration, capable of considering the imbrication of symbolic and material practices in shaping (the governance of) migratory processes. The techniques of control which nation-states or supra-national institutions practice in order to securitize and externalize their borders act both at physical, symbolic, and imaginative level (Collyer and King 2015). Borders can thus be interpreted as the product of a "borderization" process carried out through specific policies, practices and discourses, as shown by Cuttitta (2014).

As such, information campaigns targeting potential migrants can be listed among the "soft strategies" aimed at controlling the mobility of selected people towards the Global North (McNevin, Missbach, and Mulyana 2016), while contributing to the extension of the power of the European states beyond their sovereign borders (Musarò 2019). Defined as purposive attempts to inform, persuade and motivate behavior by reaching audiences through organized communication activities (Atkin and Rice 2013), information campaigns enact their bordering power through storytelling strategies, visual politics and social mobilization activities aimed at promoting immobility by reshaping potential migrants' perceptions of migratory journeys, of the countries of destination, and of the opportunities available in their country of origin. In this sense, they are part of what Bigo (2008) calls "ban-opticon", that is a contemporary form of governmentality deployed at a transnational level and aimed at the management (at a distance in time and space) of a minority profiled as "unwelcome". For these reasons, information campaigns are considered instruments used by Western governments to deter people to leave their country of origin and cross the legal boundaries of the European nation states (Nieuwenhuys and Pécoud 2007), while creating, normalizing or reproducing moral geographies of the world (Musarò 2013; Watkins 2020).

Information campaigns, however, are only one of many narratives that concur to (de)legitimize the transnational mobility of people in an information environment where contradictory stimulants circulate, and where shifting power relations between information producers and disseminators compete. Furthermore, the intermediation provided by local actors in campaigns' implementation or dissemination can transform or even subvert the message they are meant to spread (Maâ 2021).

Starting from these assumptions, our paper extends the research question posed by the H2020 project "PERCEPTIONS" on how narratives about Europe are disseminated in countries abroad and how they influence migrants' decision-making, to deepen the understanding of the mediating agents of these narratives and their role in (re)producing or countering symbolic bordering practices. This paper thus aims at exploring the role of Gambian journalists in circulating narratives, including information campaigns, about irregular migration to Europe, both as content creators and content disseminators. The Gambia is taken as a case study because of its being a significant migrant-sending country to Europe through Italy, as well as for the country's strategic geographical location (just at the Atlantic ocean also used during the Transatlantic Slave Trade) and porous borders for human traffickers and people smugglers. The number of Gambians arriving by sea in Italy in the last decade – and the numerous information campaigns targeted at the country – makes The Gambia an intellectually fascinating focus for this research. Gambian migrants, in fact, made up 11.929 (6.6%) of the total of 181.436 people who arrived in Italy through the Mediterranean Sea in 2016, 5.808 in 2017 (International Organisation for Migration 2017). Meanwhile, Gambians also ranked among the top nationalities of arrivals in Spain with a total of 5.499. Given The Gambia's small population, compared to other top arrivals by nationalities such as Nigeria, Eritrea, Guinea and Ivory Coast,

Gambian migrants' journey towards these two European countries deserves to be explored also retracing the paths of this route in the narratives spread by its journalists.

Gambia's media, in fact, plays an increasingly important role on public communication about the "back way" and its role in European-funded campaigns is not explored. Moreover, Gambian journalists are key stakeholders in the agenda of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), as can be read from IOM's project "Communication for Development" aimed at "Strengthening Communication on Migration in The Gambia" through: (a) implementing training programs to support government-led strategic communication on migration; (b) strengthening media coverage of migration issues; and by, (c) developing evidence base to inform communication on migration and strengthen migration-related information campaigns.

However, journalists appear as an understudied category, if compared to the other social actors, and even less attention has been devoted to non-Western journalism practice within this field (Ogunyemi 2015). Nevertheless, they play a crucial role in feeding migratory imaginary, since they are simultaneously conveyors of information, a potential audience for migratory narratives, and potential producers of "culture of migration" (Zelizer 2005). The role of journalists is particularly interesting within the Gambian migration discourse, since here, recognizing that information plays a crucial role in migration management, other institutions officially working outside the media industry compete or cooperate with them in producing and disseminating information. It is the case of the IOM, which appears as a key player in the media's narrative on particularly irregular migration. The IOM functions as a major provider of European-funded information campaigns in The Gambia, offering training opportunities for Gambian journalists on migration reporting and making them key players in its information campaigns. Furthermore, since the IOM established its country office in The Gambia, information it shares (which is otherwise unattainable to many infrastructurally poor media houses) directly feeds into media narratives about migration to Europe, as investigative journalism is poor and alternative sources of migration data are fewer or none (Noble 2018). Consequently, when concerns about migration policies became a topical matter during the 2020–2021 election as it was in ending Jammehs' dictatorship in 2017, data provided by the IOM directly fed into Gambian migration politics in the media. Investigative coverage on migration was considered as sensitive during Jammeeh's time and journalists were his sworn enemies as they were killed, tortured, imprisoned and prosecuted and many fled the country from 1994–2017.

This paper thus aims at shedding more light on Gambian journalists (as actors) and their public communication about the "back way" (as practices) that may potentially influence migration processes while circulating narratives about it. How often do they talk or write about Europe in their job? What are the main aspects they address? Do they have a role in shaping discourses around the "back way" phenomenon? Are they involved in the design or dissemination of information campaigns targeting Gambian potential migrants? What do they think about campaigns' effectiveness? After outlining an overview of The Gambia's information ecosystem and of how information campaigns on the risks of irregular migration address the "back way" phenomenon, in the following sections we will try to answer the above-mentioned questions by discussing the results of an online survey, conducted between 2020 and 2021, involving a sample of 54 Gambian journalists residing both in The Gambia and in Europe.

2. Deterrence Narratives: Information Campaigns in The Gambia

Since the beginning of the new millennium, The Gambia, as well as other sending countries, became the target of European and local information campaigns. Formally aimed at raising information on the threats of irregular migration, on the danger of human trafficking, on the challenges faced by the returnees, or on the difficulties of living in the countries of destination, these campaigns – usually implemented by governmental, intergovernmental or non-governmental organizations – are one of the several measures adopted for migration management and control. The underlying assumption of information campaigns is that the path of irregular migration is undertaken by people on the basis of ignorance or skewed narratives (Schans and Optekamp 2016), as well as that a proper information

could change would-be-migrants' perceptions and thus their attitudes towards migratory decision making (Pécoud 2010; Fiedler 2020).

Despite, or precisely because, there is little evidence on the impact and effectiveness of these campaigns (Browne 2015; Rodriguez 2019), several international organizations – such as the IOM and the United Nations – drew toolkits aimed at providing guidance to improve effectiveness of information campaigns targeting smuggling and trafficking of migrants. These toolkits suggest first of all that campaigns should be formulated in ways that can be understood by their target audience, using materials and broadcasting them through mass and social media in appropriate languages in countries of origin. Developing the campaigns with local institutions and NGOs, targeting the entire community, using real-life testimonies to tell their stories, involving local actors and celebrities are identified as good practices to maximize the campaigns' expected outcomes (Browne 2015). Since the 1990s, IOM has operated as the leading service provider of information campaigns following the request (and funding) of mainly Western and European States (Nieuwenhuys and Pécoud 2007). Despite IOM officially became a country office in The Gambia in July 2017, thus establishing an operational presence there, since 2001 it has been implementing different programs of migration management aimed at combatting human trafficking, facilitating the reintegration of returning migrants and enhancing capacity building activities, including Gambian journalists reporting on migration and related issues. In addition to the specific program "Communication for Development", which includes three different campaigns aimed at "encouraging safe migration" (namely: "Migrants as Messengers", "IOM X The Gambia", and "Strengthening Communication on Migration in The Gambia"), awareness-raising activities are a stable presence also within other IOM's programs (addressing, for example, Migrant Protection and Assistance, Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration, Counter-Trafficking, Assistance to Vulnerable Migrants, Immigration and Border Management, Labour Mobility and Human Development, and Migration Health).

Among the campaigns – and the institutional actors in charge of them – targeting The Gambia in the last few years, we can enumerate, by way of example, "CinemArena", an outdoor mobile cinema initiative (in its fifth edition in 2019) that reached 31 villages across the country for nightly community events. This campaign, aimed to "empower individuals to make informed decisions about their migratory journeys by screening short videos and documentaries highlighting the realities of irregular migration, utilizing comedy to stimulate dialogue and engaging community leaders and members in a debate". It is a result of the partnership between IOM and the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, the Italian Ministry of Interior and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. In the same year, Kairo Survivor-LED Crisis Society (KSLCS) launched a campaign focusing on the Kanifing Municipality and West Coast Region to "inform potential migrants about the dangers and risks of migrating irregularly to Europe" and to "enable potential migrants […] to make well-informed decisions".

In 2020, the *Tekki Fii* (Make it here? Make it here!) campaign was launched with the aim of raising information of the Gambian youth, including returnees and potential migrants, "towards the benefits of choosing to stay in their country of origin". This campaign is part of the "Building a Future: Make it in The Gambia" Program, an initiative of the Government of The Gambia financed by the European Union Trust Fund for Africa, and implemented by the International Trade Center (ITC), the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), the Portuguese Cooperation Agency and the Belgian Development Agency (Enabel).

The content of information campaigns ranges from the risk of death and other threats in both transit and host countries including human trafficking and migrants smuggling, kidnapping and extortion, uncertain investment, language and cultural barriers, long stays in asylum and hosting centers, rejection of asylum request, imprisonment and deportation, violence and discrimination, poor treatment and work exploitation, immigration controls, xenophobia and health issues through the backway trajectory. In their attempt to reduce emigration before migrants reach the border by convincing them not to leave their home, these campaigns complement both traditional methods of migration control, such as the surveillance of borders, and externalization policies, such as waiting zone in transit countries, or biometric measures to screen visa requirements before potential migrants start their journey. The externalization of borders put in place by information campaigns acts with

respect to both temporal and spatial dimensions, since migrants-receiving countries deploy deterrence campaigns as safe-distance tools in order to intervene in migration decision-making before the migratory act actually takes place. Their symbolic bordering power lies in the way they portray sending-countries as safe and worthy to stay, while migration as dangerous and destined to fail; in the way they avoid to portray receiving-countries, or portray them as impenetrable and securitized; in the way they portray migrants and asylum seekers as naïve victims of their ignorance and of smugglers' lies; in the way they miss to provide information about regular channels for migrating, or they do so only as a secondary issue; finally, in the way they spread communication both in migrants' sending and receiving countries mainly to reassure the public opinion that international migrations are governed and national borders are thus controlled (Cappi and Musarò 2022).

However, the impact of information campaigns targeting potential migrants (or, in certain cases, returnees) is largely unpredictable, due to several factors related not only to the campaigns' production features but also to the dynamics of the audience reception. Audiences with different socioeconomic backgrounds and resources can negotiate or attribute multiple potential meanings to the same message when decoding it. Furthermore, the intermediation of the actors – including journalists – in charge of disseminating campaigns' messages and materials can transform or even subvert these messages (Rodriguez 2019; Maâ 2021).

To the aim of deepening the understanding of which stakeholders contribute to disseminating narratives about irregular migration and migrants' sending and receiving countries in the Gambia, and through what means they do so, in the next paragraph we provide an overview of the key players and resources of the country's information ecosystem.

3. The Gambia's Information Ecosystem: Key Players and Resources of a Narratives' Factory

The Gambia's information ecosystem is improving after two decades of Jammeh's dictatorship. From media censorship and oppression, a significant number of Gambian journalists now consider their press as relatively free according to the France-based media watchdog, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) (2021). In terms of World Press Freedom Index, it has moved from 143rd position in 2017 to the 87th position in 2021. Despite a few violations of press freedom also being reported in the 2020 and 2021 electoral period, the new government has enhanced access to information and media pluralism through the liberalization of the telecommunications and broadcast sector thus limiting the monopoly of Gambia Radio and Television Services (GRTS) for news coverage. Since 2020, the country has had four daily newspapers, thirty-three radio stations and six TV channels (RSF 2021). Noble's analysis (2018) of print, broadcast and online media shows that the sector has responded to the change of government with the formation of new groupings in the media sector and the multiplication of independent contents, confirming simultaneously the importance of radio communication in a country with literacy rates between 50% and 60% (where the majority of the population rely on information in their languages rather than in English). Community radios – that are mostly funded by local non-profit organizations and provide local and international news content in Gambian languages – are still considered as trustable sources. However, most media houses struggle to keep operations due to limited professional skills, unstable power supply, and cost of staffs' salaries (of average 100 euro) and transportation for news coverage. As a result, they depend on poor infrastructure: generators and solar panels for power supply, and on content produced by third parties, including European media (such as the BBC, etc) and international organizations such as the IOM for information on migration. Besides announcements and advertisements, their main financial sources include the purchase of air time by international or national NGOs for sensitization campaigns (Noble 2018). The IOM also plays a sensitive role in the provision of training and provision of migration data to Gambian journalists including information campaigns on the "back way" to Europe. However, newspapers have a small capacity printing and distributing (only between 1.500–2.000 copies, predominantly within the urban areas of the country with the majority literates) and their content is usually dominated by press conferences, official statements and international news, i.e. content shared by third parties such as the IOM on migration. As a result, there is little

locally-produced content on investigative journalism creating heavy reliance on reports and news content outside of The Gambia. Looking offshore, the Gambian diaspora serve as a source of information for Gambian audiences through their online news websites, radios, Facebook, Twitter and other social media channels (Noble 2018), even if their contribution is frequently criticized and previously censored by repressive media laws. Meanwhile, notwithstanding minimal internet users, online contents are increasingly accessed by the Gambian population mostly through a mobile phone.

However, the changing contexts of Gambian media also influences its patterns of coverage on migration. Accordingly, the professional class most prosecuted by Jammeh's dictatorship after fellow politicians were the journalists. Today, Gambia's media is in a state of transition from a situation of no media freedom towards a relatively free media with expanding digital coverage. However, a free media environment, as postulated by Freedom House (2016, 2017) is "where coverage of political news is robust, the safety of journalists is guaranteed, state intrusion in media affairs is minimal, and the press is not subject to onerous legal or economic pressures". In fact, as Gambia's human rights situation deteriorated, so did its diplomatic relations with the EU during the dictatorship. As a result, in November 2014, the country ended dialogue with the EU, leading to the EU to withheld €13 million grant package, and €33 million earmarked for 2015–16 on matters relating to migration (Fall 2020). As its most important donor partner, with the change of government, the EU continues to offer technical and financial assistance to The Gambian government, mostly focusing on migration related matters (Fall 2020).

Accordingly, media freedom is widely regarded as the cornerstone of democracy (Zielonka 2015) not least because of the informative role played by the media to question policies, scrutinize public servants and inform citizens on political choices and implications. Although press freedom is widening, Gambian news outlets still reflect the dominant language, interest and topics that governments and third parties supply them. As such, in Jammeh's era, the GRTS was considered as the extension of his private political interests and while others such as the Foroya Newspaper, The Point and The Standard were considered as its fierce critics and many were censored. Journalists operating diaspora news outlets such as Freedom Newspaper and others, were directly considered as "dissidents" to be prosecuted. In retrospect, diaspora news outlets contributed immensely to ending Jammeh's dictatorship and media censorship and together with local media houses, were greatly influential in the highly contested 2020–2021 elections.

Today's media coverage on migration is open to both traditional and modern media outlets in both home and abroad (Triandafyllidou 2018) and Gambian media professionals are today relatively free, and could represent diverse viewpoints on migration, particularly on deportation and related European information campaigns. Meanwhile, the expansion of social media means that Gambians can now find all types of content (from news to lifestyle coverage, and from sports to advertisements on their browsers on social media, as long as they have a smart phone and internet connection). As Starr (2009) argued, digitalization threatens traditional newspapers since it potentially creates echo chambers of the like-minded and many audiences directly depend on social media content rather than buy newspapers. Meanwhile, social media connects citizens in news ways to organize protest and call for policy change (Khondker 2011) as much as it also helps nongovernmental organizations to assemble support for their campaigns (Patler and Gonzales 2015). However, the digital divide is evident, as most Gambians are educationally and economically poor. On the one hand, many cannot (always) access online content due to the high cost of internet and unreliable electricity supply, on the other hand, many are unschooled (cannot read or write). Consequently, the participation of the population is potentially compromised and by default, the majority rural dwellers face challenges to influence migration policies through media.

Demographically, more than half of the total number of 61.515 people (62.6%) have migrated irregularly outside The Gambia in the years 2014–2018 with irregular migration most observed among the population with secondary school education (13.478) and those without any formal education (10.147), but very low among those with higher/tertiary education (273) (GBoS 2018). Although the report does not state how many Gambians migrated regularly to Europe, it observed

similar patterns of movements among age groups, professional and non-professional sectors. However, as one of the highest indebted countries globally and with one of the highest unemployment rates (35.2% among 15–64 years) in continental Africa (UNDP 2019), the country's 2.3 million people rely on tourism, rain-fed agriculture and remittances (more that 20% of Gross Domestic product), many Gambians practice the "back way" as a strategy against poverty (Kebbeh 2013; Zanker 2017; GBoS 2018; Altrogge and Zanker 2019; Conrad Suso 2019; World Bank 2019; Jinkang 2020; DSPD 2021; Ratha et al. 2022). Meanwhile, as a country of migrants (Gaibazzi 2013), The Gambia is also both a transit and destination country of 9.7% international migrants including 7.854 refugees (IOM 2017), thus inviting us to explore it as a phenomenon of mixed migration flows. Albeit considered as highly risky, nevertheless, due to a combination of restrictive European policies and the poor conditions in The Gambia that give "little alternative", a significant number of Gambians are still willing or constrained to undertake the "back way" (Zanker 2017; Altrogge and Zanker 2019; Conrad Suso 2019).

4. The Role of Gambian Journalists in Disseminating Information Campaigns and Narratives about Europe: Results from an Online Survey

4.1 The Survey's Design and Methodology

To the aim of exploring the role and practices of Gambian journalists in the dissemination of information campaigns and narratives about Europe to their compatriots, identifying as well the different channels and the communication strategies they tailor for their audiences, firstly, we identified the Gambia Press Union (GPU) as a gatekeeper for our research. On the one hand, the GPU is direct reference and principal institute for Gambian journalists, thus it could easily facilitate the recruitment of its professionals for this research, and on the other, the precarious nature of Gambia's information ecosystem makes the GPU an ideal gatekeeper in order to help disseminate it and to put its resources (internet, electricity and computers) at the disposal of Gambian journalists wanting to participate in the survey. The survey itself, as a technique of data collection, had been precisely chosen, instead of interviews or focus groups, in order to allow sustainability to the participation of journalists, in terms of dedicated time, costs of internet connection and anonymity concerns. This choice, however, limited the possibility to deepen our understanding of the situated work contexts and political or value orientations of the media outlets for which individual respondents work, which certainly influence the autonomy they have in their work with respect to what and how they cover certain topics. Moreover, through the survey we could not decipher journalists' individual interests in cooperating with international organizations in spreading information campaigns, nor could we catch possible discrepancies between their opinions, thus the stated data, and their daily practice. Using Qualtrics Survey Software, we circulated an online questionnaire made of open-ended and closed-ended questions to Gambian journalists through the Gambia Press Union (GPU), between December 14, 2020 and January 25, 2021. Participants were asked to further distribute the questionnaire to their colleagues, providing thus a snowball sampling. The questionnaire covered 37 questions categorized into six sections: socio-demographic characteristics, job experience, experience of reporting about Europe and opinions about migration, perceptions and involvement in information campaigns, job expectations, and role perceptions.

The questionnaire's structure was designed to allow two different research questions to be answered and explored in two parallel researches: the first one, which is the focus of the current article, was aimed at investigating the degree and modes of involvement of Gambian journalists in disseminating narratives about Europe and the "back way" migration in The Gambia, as well as to identify their suggestions for campaigns' improvement; the second one was aimed at exploring the relationship between journalists' role perception and job expectations. Accordingly, aside from participants' socio-demographic characteristics and professional experience, for the purposes of the current

research, we asked to the participants: how much they were familiar with information campaigns on irregular migration targeting The Gambia; whether they were involved in some of these campaigns' design or dissemination; through which channels they used to spread them; how much they considered information campaigns effective in influencing prospective Gambian migrants behaviors; how often they talked about Europe in their work and which aspects of Europe their articles/talks/shows mostly concentrated on; which sources of information they used to talk/write about Europe in their work; and what information they think their compatriots would need to know about the risks and dangers of migration.

Most questions were based on a likert scale (1–5) response format or multiple choice, while few were open-ended. Different methods have been adopted for data analysis: survey's quantitative data have been analyzed through SPSS and Tableau Software, whereas qualitative data have been summarized and examined through pencil-and-paper thematic analysis.

Being this survey a non-interventional study – and a non-medical research –, ethic approval was not required. In any case, all participants' identifying details have been omitted or anonymized, and the planning, conduct, and reporting of this research are in accordance with the Helsinki declaration as revised in 2013. Participants' informed written consent to take part in the research has been obtained prior to the commencement of the study.

4.2 Respondents' Characteristics and Job Experience

A total number of 54 journalists (natives of The Gambia) constituted the research's final sample, of which 33 male and 21 female. The age distribution shows that 85.2% of the respondents are between 25 and 44 years old and that 48.1% of the sample obtained a university degree, followed by those having a vocational training or professional certificate (31.5%) and those having a college diploma (20.4%). The respondents currently living in The Gambia are 74.1% of the sample, while 24% reside in Europe (Sweden, Denmark, Germany, France, The Netherlands), and 1.9% in Turkey. The participants living in Europe have been living there for 5–10 years. Moreover, 63% of the sample has up to 10 years of work experience as a journalist, while the remaining 37% has more than 10 years of experience. The 38.9% of the respondents work as freelancers or self-employed journalists, while the 61.1% declare to be employees.

For what concerns their field of coverage, the journalists involved in our survey work mostly under The Gambia Press (94.4%), with 24.4% working also for European Press and 1.9% working for other African Press. Taking into account that more than one answer was selectable, the majority of the respondents (63%) consists of journalists working for the print media (paper journals, magazines, and newspapers), followed by 38.9% working as web journalists, 33.3% as radio journalists, 5.6% as photojournalists, and very few people working as presenters, accountants, village correspondents, and podcast journalists. Journalists residing in The Gambia work mainly as paper journalists (followed by those working for the radio and the web), whereas journalists residing in Europe work mainly for the web, followed by those working for printed newspapers.

4.3 Respondents' Habits of Reporting about Europe: Sources, Topics, and Motivations

Half of the journalists involved in our survey declared to report news about Europe, during their work, up to three times per month (with 29.6% of them reporting more than three times per month). The remaining half report about Europe less than once every two or three months, and 13% of the sample never reported about Europe. Recent research shows that, for what concerns media coverage of foreign news, "the global salience of countries is strongly determined by country size, elite status and various factors of relatedness, including geographical, historical, economic or cultural distances" (Grasland 2020). Among the multiple factors of relatedness which historically tie the African Continent to Europe, and that make Europe newsworthy (or, at least, covered) in our respondents' work, migration is the most prominent. When asked about which aspects of Europe they mostly address, in fact, Gambian journalists indicate migration (17.6%), followed by international and diplomatic relations (6.5% each), remittances (6.5%), health (5.6%), irregular migration (4.6%) and

economics (4.6%) as main topics, just prior to football (3.7%). Among the journalists residing in The Gambia, migration and remittances emerge as the most cited aspects when writing/talking about Europe, whereas journalists residing in Europe (Figure 2) share with their colleagues migration issues as the priority of their agenda concerning narratives about Europe, while addressing health and international relations right after, as major objects of their discourses. For both groups, irregular migration appears within the top five topics treated in relation with Europe.

As noted by Chang, Shoemaker, and Brendlinger (1987), "proximity" is considered a criterion for newsworthiness. Our data invites us to consider it not only in a geographical sense but also – and especially – in terms of the concrete effects on everyday life and future developments in the related country that these may have, thus in terms of the migration flows between countries rather than in terms of borderised entities. Although our research does not allow us to understand what newsworthiness criteria have guided the practices of the journalists involved, it is known that these criteria have to do not only with the nature of the events in question, or the multiple interests at stake, but also with considerations more closely related to the routine of journalistic work, with the business model as well as the editorial line adopted by the newspaper or broadcaster in question (Shoemaker 2006). In addition, as observed above, we might consider that The Gambia only recently exited an authoritarian government and "even in countries with high levels of media freedom, the news often reflects the language and topics that governments and other powerful groups prefer. This is because reporters often depend on government officials for information, especially about political issues" (Allen, Blinder, and McNeil 2018, 2). What we can observe from our data is that migration to Europe is covered predominantly by paper and web journalists, followed by radio and tv journalists, whereas irregular migration to Europe in particular, is covered predominantly by radio journalists, followed by web and paper journalists.

As a way of exploration, we have surveyed 75 news articles from three major Gambian newspapers – The Point, Standard Newspaper and Foroya – between the period of 2020–2022 to better understand which major frames journalists used to report migration. We have firstly observed that migration is generally reported as a news and secondly, that irregular migration is framed as a tragic but not a spontaneous event. Journalists' discourses were concentrated on the pull factors (threat narratives) to Europe and the negative impacts of migration on The Gambia and Europe. These articles particularly stressed activities of international or foreign actors such as the EU and IOM contrasting irregular migration and, recently, in awarding those journalists who satisfied IOM's reporting frames. Limited investigative journalism on migration in The Gambia can also be associated with previous media censorship whose marks are still there. Meanwhile, operational differences matter in media's public communication, as technological backwardness and limited skills can reduce both the quantity and quality of information.

Subject to the way these different fields of journalism operate and how they are represented in our sample, the media landscape seems to suggest that radio journalists have more freedom of expression as compared to paper journalists to treat the "delicate" side of migration topic.

Another explanation for why migration is at the top of the coverage on Europe by the journalists interviewed have to do with their civic engagement performed by them. When asked about the ideals and values they uphold as journalists, in fact, according to a likert scale, in a list of 14 items, the following journalists' functions were rated as extremely important in this order: (1) acting as a watchdog of the government (74.1%); (2) advocating for social change (61.1%); (3) developing the intellectual and cultural interest of the public (55.6%); (4) providing citizens with the information they need to make political decisions, no matter the controversy of the topic (50%), followed by (5) motivating people to participate in civic activity and political discussion (44.4%) and (6) acting as watchdog of political parties (44.4%).

These findings appear to be in line with the general tendency for journalists to gravitate towards "interventionist, socially committed, and motivates", as observed by Hanitzsch (2007). However, the results could also suggest the journalists' willingness to distance themselves from political power, tempering the value of objectivity with considerations for the interests of their community they serve (Matsaganis, Vikki, and Ball-Rokeach 2011).

The sources of information most used by the journalists involved in the survey to report about Europe

are: reports (75.9%), European press (61.1%), witness accounts (35.2%) and personal experience (20.4%). The predominance of reports and European press on witness accounts and personal experience allows us to understand to what extent the narratives disseminated by the media at a local level are intersected and negotiated with those produced on an international scale, and vice versa. Moreover, the journalists residing in The Gambia declare to resort to reports and the European press (31.5%) more than the journalists residing in Europe (14.8%). As a result, it can be deduced that resident journalists multiply and disseminate (both directly and indirectly) European narratives about migration to their audiences. Moreover, Gambian journalists' engagement with institutions such IOM, NGOs or European campaigners through workshops, trainings (on reporting migration and related areas), funding and involvement in information campaigns, could influence or even limit their role as producers of alternative or counter-narrative to those produced by European or international media agents.

4.4 Journalists' Involvement in Information Campaigns: A Role Limited to Dissemination?

To the aim of exploring the different degrees of journalists' involvement in information campaigns targeting The Gambia, within the survey we asked them about their own awareness, experience and opinions about the campaigns. The majority of our respondents (83%) declared to be familiar with the information campaigns on irregular migration in The Gambia, and they cited, as campaigns they are acquainted with, the following: *No Back Way* (45%) – an EU funded initiative implemented by the Government of The Gambia –, Back way rhythm (40%) – songs and music competition among Gambian artists addressing the "back way"-, IOM (36%), Radio campaigns (27%), Tv shows (11%), *Tekki Fii* (9%), *Attaya* (green tea) crews (9%). *Attaya* crews refer to gatherings where green tea (*attaya* in Senegambian languages) is cooked and mixed with sugar and served to people at meals, and on all social occasions. *Attaya* is a Senegambian way of life used to maintain social relations and can take on average 1 h; since many Gambian youths are unemployed, "*attaya*" crews are even more common and a place for potential "back way" migrants. For instance, *bantaba* is a Mandinka word for a public square usually at the center of the village or town where youths can gather to discuss and be together while cooking *attaya*. Thus, *attaya* crews, *bantaba* (public center), as well as marketplaces, serve to host public events and thus a target for information campaigns for civic education.

Meanwhile, it is interesting to note the synecdoche that associates the IOM with information campaigns, reflecting the visibility and the leading role of this institution in the implementation of sensitization activities in The Gambia. This element should invite us to seek to understand what are the major implications of this finding and furtherly research if and how the perception of IOM as an external actor – interested in vehiculating specific types of messages which we have shown acting potentially as bordering practices – improves or limits the reliability of its information campaigns and as a result, the position of Gambian journalists.

Our data shows that only 13% of the journalists involved in our survey have personally been involved in the design of some information campaigns, whereas 64.8% of the sample has been involved in their dissemination activities. The more engagement of journalists in dissemination rather than in designing, suggests that on the one hand they are envisioned more as content disseminators, rather than content creators, on the other hand that they are perceived as trusted sources of the campaigns' audiences. These findings show that, for what concerns our sample, journalists' expertise, recently acquired freedom and previous experiences (dictatorship), are poorly utilized when implementing information campaigns. Moreover, the channels these professionals use to spread the campaigns appear to rely more on (private) social media than on the mainstream media in which they formally work for (at least, for what concerns the print press): social media (51.9%) appear to be the channels most used by journalists to spread the information campaigns, followed by *Attaya* crews, *Bantaba* and Market conversations (37%), Radio and live talks (35.2%), caravan tours (20.4%), television shows (9.3%), and other channels (9.3%). The fact that our respondents re-post campaigns' messages in the social media and other private channels, or spread them in the context of face-to-face conversations with local audiences, rather than through the channels in which

they formally work, invites us to open a new field of inquiry, or at least new questions: what is the line between journalists as journalists and as active citizens? Do they use this channels as a communication strategy set up in order to reach a diversified audience within the Gambian information ecosystem (following the available good practices on how to improve campaigns' effectiveness), or do they use it because they have limits and constraints (for instance ethical concerns or limited space in print media, Tv and radios) posed by the media outlets for which they work? Or, again, do they act differently to maximize the individual benefits that may accrue to them as freelancers rather than as representatives of media outlets, or to maximize the benefits of their audiences? Our data do not allow us to provide answers to these questions, and invite further research. It is worth pointing out that, although journalists spread information campaigns, the majority of them declare to consider campaigns not effective at all (38.9%) or not very effective (29.6), whereas 25.9% consider them somewhat effective, and only 3.7% evaluate the campaigns very effective or extremely effective (1.9%). We do not know whether there is a particular interest that causes journalists to continue to put out information campaigns (e.g. to increase their economic or social capital, or their role status, or pure civic engagement) or obligations to their media outlets, however, the fact that information campaigns continue to be recirculated certainly contributes to the (self)feeding of the "media&migration industry" led by IOM, which can in turn be functional for even more supra-national agencies' power in migration management (McNevin, Missbach, and Mulyana Citation2016; Watkins 2020). The medium of information campaigns appears as very much the message: these tools on the one hand illustrate to what extent physical borders have become performances (Collyer and King 2015); on the other hand, their circulation assigns to intermediaries, such as journalist, a role in determining when, where and how a border is performed (Wonders 2006). The survey does not confirm whether journalists modify the messages of information campaigns while disseminating them, but their low involvement in decision making, the recently-acquired freedom of expression and the opportunities of learning and working offered them by leading organizations in this field, suggest the potential risk of reproducing the narratives concerning migration's push and pull factors sustained by local and international NGOs and institutions. When asked about how it would be more effective to spread information to influence prospective Gambian migrants' behaviors, our respondents suggested the following as recurring elements: to reach out to the people (especially in villages) physically and making use of local media; to involve the diaspora to have a "trustful" narrative of their migration experience; that campaigns' funding and direction should have a local leadership; finally, that European funding should be used to create real alternatives in The Gambia rather than focus on so-called threats which they claimed is immediately opposed by their audiences religious and traditional beliefs in destiny.

From these responses, it can be deduced that information campaigns are highly contested, criticized for their approaches (design, implementation and evaluation) and are considered ineffective in influencing prospective Gambian migrants' behaviors.

5. Concluding Remarks

Our research was aimed at exploring the role and practices of Gambian journalists in processing information about Europe and in disseminating information campaigns' narratives in The Gambia. Gambian journalists were identified as intermediaries of discourses and sensitization activities concerning the "back way" migration to Europe, both as respect to local population and the country's government and as respect to those international agencies – such as the IOM – that make use of information campaigns for migration management and control. Our findings show that migration is a regular topic on the agenda of Gambian journalists involved in our research, contributing to a media coverage about Europe which is expressed mainly by the economic and human flows that connect the country with the continent.

Looking at the recent reconfiguration of The Gambia's information ecosystem after the end of the Jammeh's dictatorship, it can be assumed that Gambia's media reporting on migration and information campaigns contrasting irregular migration to Europe are at a crossroad of politically,

socially and economically sensitive matters. The management of migration – and the narratives adopted to legitimise it – mobilizes conflicting and competing interests: (a) The Gambia government's socio-economic and political interest derived from remittances in terms of GDP; (b) interest of the IOM and European-funded campaigns to effectively contrast the phenomenon thus serving as symbolic bordering, and; (c) the role of investigative journalism to give accurate and complete information.

The Gambian journalists involved in our research demonstrate a strong civic engagement, evaluating the ideal role of their profession as mostly aimed at acting as a watchdog of the government and advocating for social change. However, their reliance on European media and international organizations as major sources of migration data and training might potentially affect journalists' role as watchdogs. In addition, although little involved in the designing of information campaigns, and despite being convinced that these campaigns are not effective in modifying the decision-making of potential migrants, Gambian journalists play a substantial role in spreading campaigns' narratives on social media. Our research does not confirm whether journalists modify the messages of information campaigns – that they perceive colonial in their approach and that we have shown acting as bordering practices – while disseminating them, but their low involvement in decision making, the recently-acquired freedom of expression and the opportunities of learning and working offered them by leading organisations in this field, suggest the potential risk of reproducing the narratives sustained by local and international NGOs and institutions.

Considering the role of Gambian journalists in exiting the Jammeh's dictatorship, and the coverage they devote to the topic of migration in different media channels, it can be assumed that they can potentially shape perceptions of their audiences and national politics on migration policies. By drawing attention on how Gambian journalists (both home and abroad) report about migration (their methods, contents, and frequency), we underline the need for further research on the links, interests, and areas of overlap or conflict between the local production of news and the one of intergovernmental agencies that, while not primarily concerned with the media industry, become key players in the production of narratives on migration. While Gambian journalists have a key role in creating and publicizing narratives, discourses and perceptions about migration, we hypothesize that their potential to promote a counter narrative will largely depend on improved structural conditions for their work. This means: technical infrastructure, better (and autonomous from agencies such as IOM) national training for journalists (to investigative with special focus on local content), decent salaries to incentivise impartiality, media independence from government and sponsors, as well as general public literacy to increase their audiences. This improvement might speed up processes to achieve the targets set by The Gambia Compendium of Policies (DSPD 2021), which outline for the first time a Migration Policy under the Ministry of Interior, and does not entrust it to Western intergovernmental agencies.

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