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## Digital media for humanitarian activism in times of COVID-19:

The net impact of Sea-Watch's social media campaigns about the migration flows in the Mediterranean Sea



## CAIS Report

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## Digital media for humanitarian activism in times of COVID-19: The net impact of Sea-Watch's social media campaigns about the migration flows in the Mediterranean Sea

My research project at CAIS tied together two different topics: the migration flows in the Mediterranean Sea and the digital media for humanitarian activism. Considering that both topics should be subjects of a more open and public debate within the academic community, my aim was to advance a multidisciplinary approach that could permeate the fields of social, political and communication sciences. This approach not only featured the states' behaviors, their traditional security practices and social implications, but also explored the digital efforts of non-states actors like the Sea-Watch Organization, a non-profit NGO that conducts civil search and rescue operations of migrant boats on the Mediterranean Sea.

Considering that digital platforms play a crucial role in everyday politics, there was a greater need for explaining the political dynamics operating along the European borders, but also the potential of digital activism for mobilizing people in the process of creating new possibilities for resistance against states' security procedures of containment against vulnerable people on the move. For this, qualitative and quantitative methods were applied in different phases of the research process. Bringing these methods together required a wider research broadly divided into three parts. Also, combining these methods in a single study allowed me to draw some valuable insights that could be used as a bridge to future studies.

### The push-back policy and the social implications

When it comes to the qualitative method, a critical argument was built by interpreting the security procedures of containment adopted by the European authorities tasked with border control issues as the main causes of the structural violence that resides within the European border regime. Chief among such security procedures of containment is the push-back policy and its tendency to establish standards of social closure and control. In simple terms, this policy is based on interdictions of migrant boats in distress at the high sea by European coast guards and allies in order to summarily return the boats to their places of departure. Pursuant to Sea-Watch (2018), for example, "the act of returning survivors to a place where they will face a well-founded fear of persecution is illegal." The linear application of this policy over the last years demonstrates that the EU-controlled side of the Mediterranean is strategically designed to seal borders and expel unwanted groups of vulnerable people on the move.

As a result, the Mediterranean Sea was transformed into a liquid graveyard, where more than 20.000 deaths were recorded from January 2000 to June 2018 (Olmedo & del Miño, 2019). Meanwhile, the political debate in Europe is neither concerned with fundamental rights and legal responsibilities nor with assistance and safe passages. The security procedures of containment came to be framed as top-down crisis intervention, characterized by short-term securitized responses such as the push-back policy, but lacking medium- and long-term strategies (Armillei, 2017). This scenario contributes to the prevalence of two social implications: the naturalization and the depoliticization of the migration issue. These social implications stem from discursive practices undertaken by politicians and reproduced in the mass media which propagate the notion that the fate of precarious travelers of migration routes depends on their struggle with the natural forces at work in the high sea, such as the winds, currents, waves, and cold weather (Heller, Pezzani & Stierl, 2017).

The only subject singled out for blame is the smuggler, while members of the public sphere tend to be placed in the position of spectators who have no direct involvement with what is happening at the European borders (Sciurba & Furri, 2017). In this sense, the Mediterranean Sea became a sort of 'depoliticized' place, where migrant deaths at the high sea are often naturalized by members of the political and public spheres. Bearing this in mind, one of the possible ways to tackle these social implications is to engage the public sphere in open dialogues and debates about rights and responsibilities.

## Is there any potential countermeasure?

The naturalization and depoliticization of the migration issue could be overcome through processes of political change. For this, public spaces should be opened in order to accommodate broader debates. Digital activism might play a crucial role in making this happen, given its potential for large-scale mobilization. In this context, it would not be wrong to argue that the antidote against the naturalization and depoliticization could be perceived as digital activism for humanitarian purposes, which is mostly understood as a combination of technology and human agency towards critique and emancipation. This is a more optimistic view of digital media and its potentials for the promotion of political change. Through documentation and denunciation, for example, digital activism might be able to mobilize societies around actions of resistance, dialogues and critical debates on rights and responsibilities.

The optimists of digital activism believe that social media campaigns open up the possibility to inspire change at the level of consciousness by means of exposing the gross miscarriages of justice that essentially characterizes contemporary international relations (Anderson, 2015). Interactions on social media, through actions and mechanisms like downloading, sharing, viewing, following, retweeting, and other alike, are tiny acts of participation that might scale up to make a major contribution to political mobilization (Margetts et al, 2016). The acts of documentation and denunciation of the violence along the European borders are inherent elements of the social media campaigns carried out by humanitarian activist groups. These acts can also serve as tools for the politicization of the migration issue by transforming the Mediterranean zone into a political space, in ways that debates over human protection and responsibilities would be able to flourish.

However, this optimistic view remains utopian in the sense that a transition from online to offline mobilizations would be required at a macro level. The Mediterranean Sea can only become a site of political action and mobilization through the formation of a large and active resistance within the public sphere. Although able to promote a process of social ferment on behalf of rights and legal responsibilities in relation to migration issues, digital activism has been so far able to mobilize only at a micro level.

Digital activism for humanitarian purposes might be a countermeasure to overcome the social implications of depoliticization and naturalization of the migration issue along the Mediterranean Sea. Yet, this seems to be a more utopian than realistic assumption. According to my research findings, digital activism for humanitarian purposes has been more oriented to relieving the pain caused by the social implications. That is to say, this form of activism has been playing an important role in opening

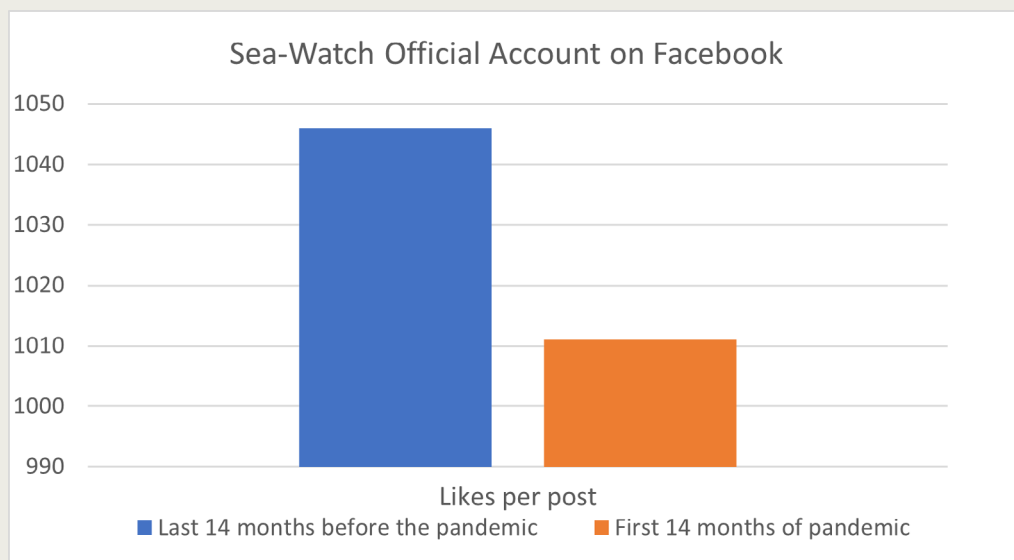
possibilities for the politicization and denaturalization of the migration situation along the Mediterranean zone, but it has not become part of a large-scale process of transformation of the European border regime.

## The impact models

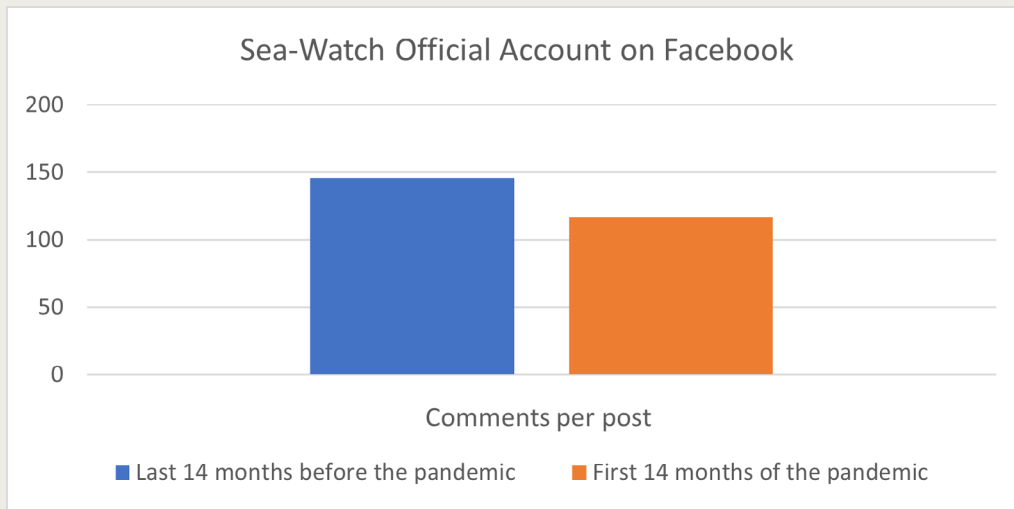
The assumption above was tested by quantitative net impact models. Four models were developed to assess users' involvement through internet-based interactions with Sea-Watch's contents posted on Meta Platforms in two different time frames: the 14 months before the outbreak of the pandemic in Europe (from January 2019 to February 2020) and the first 14 months after the outbreak of the pandemic in Europe (from March 2020 to April 2021). The first two models below represent Sea-Watch's internet-based activity and users' involvement on Facebook, whereas the last two models illustrate Sea-Watch's internet-based activity and users' involvement on Instagram.

From what Margetts et al (2016) referred to as "low-cost activities" undertaken by users (such as liking the contents) to "high-cost activities" (such as commenting), the models represent engagement rates that leave a digital imprint. For example, the models of **Likes** correspond to the average number of likes that Sea-Watch had per post within a given period. They indicate the average number of users who interacted with the campaigns by doing an act that is highly low-cost: clicking the Like button. The models of **Comments** correspond to the average engagement rate of high-cost activity. They illustrate the average number of comments that Sea-Watch managed to get per post within a given period.

### Model Facebook Likes

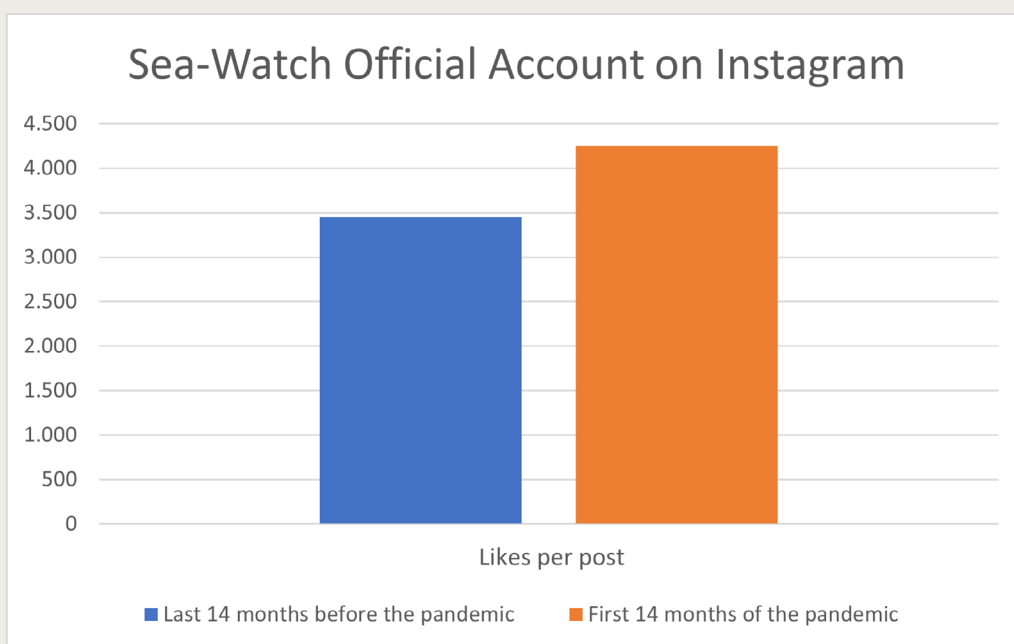


### Model Facebook Comments

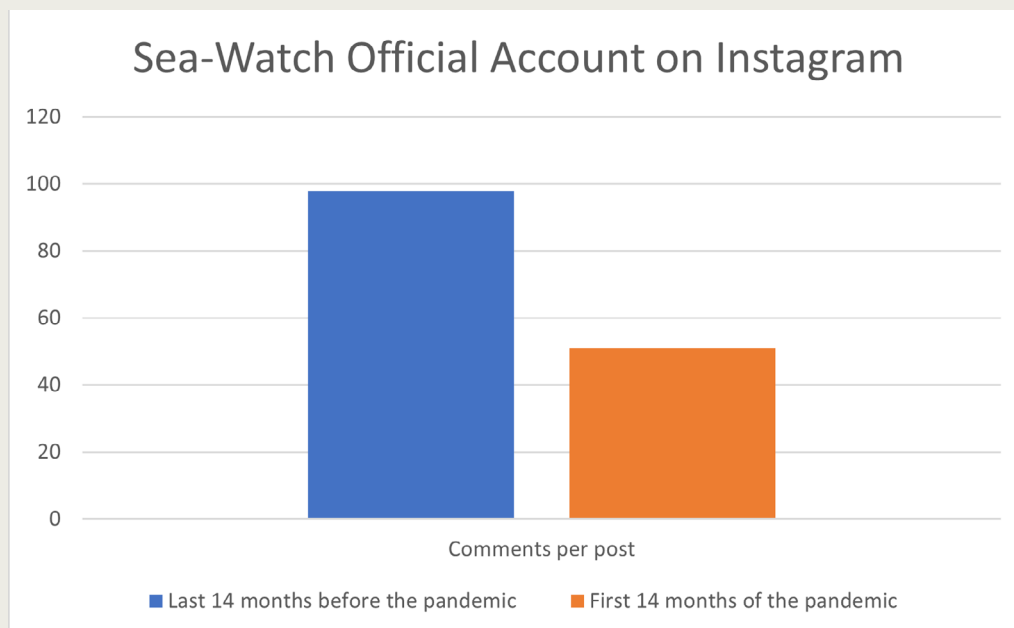


As the Facebook impact models demonstrate, the engagement rate of low-cost activity (e.g., likes) per post throughout the pandemic was lower than the rate from the same period before the pandemic. This suggests a decrease of low-cost activity in the first 14 months of the pandemic. When it comes to the evaluation of the high-cost activity engagement rates (comments), it was possible to note a decrease during the first 14 months of pandemic in comparison with the same period before the pandemic. The Facebook impact models reveal that Sea-Watch's campaigns were not significant in terms of both low- and high-cost activity. This particularly leads to the conclusion that the aspect of online collective actions and users' involvement throughout the first months of the pandemic declined, where the costs of participation were insignificant. In the same manner, two other models were developed to evaluate the net impact of Sea-Watch's campaigns on Instagram.

### Model Instagram Likes



### Model Instagram Comments



The Instagram impact models demonstrated that Sea-Watch campaigns were more successful as promoters of online public engagement in terms of low-cost activities only. As one may note, the models indicate a higher calculated engagement rate of low-cost activity in the time period during the pandemic. This suggests that users became more engaged in low-cost activities during the first 14 months of the pandemic on Instagram. On the other hand, in terms of high-cost activity engagement rate, the average rate during the pandemic was lower. This leads to the conclusion that users became less engaged in high-cost activities in times of pandemic. Therefore, the Instagram models show that the aspect of online collective actions was closely related to clicktivism, with minimal costs of users' involvement.

The results manifested evidence of a higher impact of clicktivism in times of pandemic. Nonetheless, testing the net impact of Sea-Watch's campaigns after the lockdowns and restrictions may be an interesting next step to take in order to figure out whether the costs of users' involvement continued to be minimal. In any case, this research provided insights that impel more informed future tests. The arguments, the net impact models and results addressed throughout this research project can be useful as a bridge to future discussion concerning the role of digital activism for humanitarian purposes in creating new fields of contention against the structural violence of the European border regime and its social implications.

### Visual production: the research project video

During my stay at CAIS I realized that my research project was a compelling case for the production of visual content. With the help of Raphael Lima, a photojournalist with some years of experience in visual content creation, I decided to interview academics and practitioners (including a Sea-Watch worker) with the aim of producing a video that would explore the main arguments of my research project. So the participants of the video came together to scrutinize a range of topics about the migration flows in the Mediterranean Sea. What is interesting about the video is that it unfolds a critique towards the desirable move beyond the nexus mobility and humanitarian crisis. This idea is firmly defended by Prof. Dr. Antonio De Lauri, who argues in the video that "if we continue to think of mobility and migration in terms of emergency and crisis, what we would produce is not an activism oriented towards political change and legal reforms."

The critique conveyed in the video also suggests that expressions of profound humanity could be found in the practical work of NGOs such as Sea-Watch and their digital efforts to attract public attention and awareness about the migration situation at the European borders. But a more radical form of political change requires a large-scale transition from the logic of humanitarian emergency to the promotion of discourses on legal rights and responsibilities. Only by doing so civil society would be capable of pressuring the European border authorities to provide legal routes and safe passage for those groups of people who risk their lives in the transit zones in and around Europe. The idea behind the research video is to open up a debate about the possibilities for change.

The video was made public on the CAIS YouTube channel, and it can be watched via this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eqPft7MclUY>.

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