



Article

# The two-sided spectacle at the border: Frontex, NGOs and the theatres of sovereignty

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## Abstract

The Southern Mediterranean border has in the past decade become one of the most deeply contested political spaces in Europe and has been described as a site of the border spectacle. Drawing on textual and visual analysis of Twitter messages by two of the most prominent actors in the field, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, and the humanitarian and medical NGO Médecins Sans Frontières, the article examines the split nature of the Mediterranean border which is, among others, visible in radically different narratives about migrants' journeys, border deaths and living conditions. The findings challenge previous scholarship about convergence of humanitarianism and policing. The two actors are waging a fierce media battle for moral authority, where they use widely diverging strategies of claiming authority, each of which carries a particular set of ethical dilemmas.

## Keywords

border deaths, Frontex, humanitarianism, media practices, migration

The Southern Mediterranean border has in the past decade become one of the most deeply contested political spaces in Europe. This liminal space between Europe and Africa has seen intense media and political focus on boat arrivals as well as high levels of contestation surrounding search and rescue activities (SAR). According to International

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Organization for Migration (IOM)'s Missing Migrants Project, almost 20,000 people have died in the Mediterranean Sea since 2014, making it the most dangerous border in the world (IOM, 2017). Several observers have pointed out the ritualistic and performative aspects of contemporary border enforcement (Andersson, 2014; Andreas, 2000; Brown, 2010; De Genova, 2013; Franko, 2020). Drawing on the work of Guy Debord (1995), De Genova (2013) argues that today the border is a spectacle. However, the border spectacle is, as Andersson (2014) points out, two-sided. The spectacular nature of cross-border mobility encompasses not only the threatening, militarized and law-enforcement aspects, but also the humanitarian ones. 'The visual economy of clandestine migration' (Andersson, 2014 : 142) thus involves the highly politicized discourses of threat and invasion, as well as the production, distribution and consumption of images of migrant suffering and death (Franko, 2020).

The article explores this two-sided nature of the border spectacle, and the media economy supporting it. It examines the visual and discursive framing of the Mediterranean border by two of the most prominent actors in the field: the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, and the humanitarian and medical non-governmental organization (NGO) Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). The two organizations have been in recent years drawn into an increasingly contentious disagreement about search and rescue activities in the region. Since 2016, humanitarian actors have gradually become the main actors within SAR in the Mediterranean (Cutitta, 2018). Frontex and EU member states have, on the other hand, chosen to decrease their involvement, or as Carrera and Cortinovis (2019) suggest, abdicate their responsibility for the saving of lives at sea. This abdication of responsibility has been accompanied by heightened levels of political contestation, resulting in threats of criminalization and confiscation of assets of humanitarian actors (Carrera and Cortinovis, 2019; FRA, 2018).

However, there seems to have been not only a transfer of actual authority for SAR from state to humanitarian actors, but also a growing disagreement regarding how to deal with border deaths: with criminalization and inaction on the one hand, and unconditional priority given to search and rescue on the other. These developments raise questions about previous scholarly findings about convergence of humanitarianism and policing (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015). For example, while the following message about the situation in the Moria refugee camp is typical of MSF communications, the tragic situation in the camp is hardly mentioned by Frontex:

We saw the fire spread across #Moria and rage all night long. The whole place was engulfed in flames, we saw an exodus of people from a burning hell with no direction. Children scared and parents in shock. We are working now to address their needs.

(Marco Sandrone, @MSF Lesbos, 9 September 2020)

Drawing on textual and visual analysis of Twitter messages by Frontex and MSF, the article documents and aims to understand the process of splitting of the Mediterranean border as a political space.

The interesting question to ask is: if we presume that the high levels of migrant suffering and mortality are perceived as tragic and unfortunate by all actors involved, how

is it that they invite so diverse responses and narratives? What kind of understanding of the border and of migrant suffering do these divergent and polarized responses build upon? What kind of emotional and practical measures are invited by the different framings of the problem? Moreover, if the Mediterranean is a political space where the actual task of the saving of lives has been transferred from one set of actors (nation state and EU authorities) to another (NGOs), how has this transfer (or abdication) been framed and justified? What can these approaches tell us about broader issues of how precarious lives are governed today, the responses to distant suffering, the tasks of state policing agencies and the changing nature of state sovereignty?

### **Borders, border deaths and the theatres of sovereignty**

Borders, and the politics surrounding border deaths, have a long tradition of being seen as sites where the transformations of sovereignty come into relief (Bosworth, 2008; Weber and Pickering, 2011), most notably in Giorgio Agamben's (1998) understanding of sovereignty as a production of bare life (a similar understanding is also promoted by Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics: see De León, 2015; Mbembe, 2003). Refuting Agamben's thesis, Wendy Brown (2010) argues that rather than representing a site of sovereign strength, contemporary border fortifications should be read as sites of its diminishing power. According to Brown (2010: 25), under conditions of contestation and erosion of state sovereignty, borders and border walls become prime sites for the theatrical staging of sovereignty; they 'function theatrically, projecting power and efficaciousness that they do not and cannot actually exercise and that they also performatively contradict'. These theatrical performances, exemplified by militarized walls, thus function as a 'production of an imago of sovereign state power in the face of its undoing' (2010: 25).

Yet, neither Brown's nor Agamben's analysis is adequate for describing the dynamics surrounding search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean. The activities of NGOs, with their focus on unconditional saving of lives, not only challenge the homo sacer and necropolitical thesis (Franko, 2020). The humanitarian border also points to the complex transformations of sovereignty which are not guided by nation state objectives nor neoliberal agendas. A burgeoning body of IR scholarship has in the past two decades thoroughly documented the rising power and authority of international NGOs and their complex relationships with state actors (Stroup and Wong, 2016). These insights are also increasingly gaining salience within criminological scholarship (Lohne, 2019).

In some contexts, the authority of NGOs may be delegated to them by states. Most often, however, as Green (2013) points out, the power of NGOs is a result of their own entrepreneurial activity. At times, when moral authority is increasingly contested (Hopgood, 2009), NGOs' claims on authority are often based on their vocal principled commitments and perceived legitimacy of their causes (Hopgood, 2006). The contestations between NGOs and states tend to be depicted as struggles between David and Goliath where the former—drawing on a principled authority—is directly challenging states' authority and shaming their moral corruption. NGOs challenge not only the actual exercise of sovereignty, but use the shaming and challenge state moral authority as a crucial instrument in building their own standing and legitimacy.

A central aspect to NGO power is their maintenance of relations with external audiences (Stroup and Wong, 2016: 141) and Twitter has in recent years become one of the most powerful channels of political communication. This article examines NGO engagement with social media which provides useful insights into their strategies of making claims on authority. Tellingly, while Frontex's Twitter account has 38,400 followers, MSF\_Sea's followers number 90,100 and its mother organization, MSF International, has 152,700 followers. The article analyses Twitter communications in order to examine the competing claims on authority made by border control agencies and humanitarian actors in the Mediterranean. While previous criminological scholarship has shown how NGOs and civil society organizations can in various ways be co-opted into performing the tasks and objectives of the state penal apparatus (Corcoran et al., 2018; Tomczak, 2017), or assume expert authority that shapes state punitive trajectories (Lohne, 2019), there is a dearth of criminological studies of direct state–NGO confrontations, particularly in the EU context.

The narratives of the two actors present in the Mediterranean, therefore, offer valuable insights into the nature of political authority in this liminal space. NGOs have gradually been taking over the responsibility for search and rescue from European states and Frontex; a development which is symptomatic of the fraught nature of state sovereignty under conditions of globalization (Sassen, 2008). While Frontex and EU member states undoubtedly have much greater capacities to conduct SAR and control the vast maritime space, non-governmental organizations such as MSF are taking on an important aspect of sovereignty, namely, deciding on matters of life and death (Agamben, 1998; Fassin, 2012).

Faced with a humanitarian tragedy in their own backyard, how do European policing agencies approach this space and build authority in it? Moreover, how do humanitarian NGOs approach the same space and claim authority in relation to state actors? By examining the two-sided nature of the border spectacle, the article reads the mediated representations of migration as a source of authority building and as a means of strengthening of organizational legitimacy of the actors involved. When different emotions are set in motion in communications about the situation at the EU's southern border, stories are being created not only about migrants and their suffering, but also about authority, sovereignty, values and legitimacy.

## **Background and methods**

NGO search and rescue activities are a relatively recent phenomenon. According to Cuttitta (2018) the number of NGO rescue vessels rose during the so-called refugee crisis (from four in 2015 to 13 in 2016) as a reaction to tragic numbers of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean as well as reluctance from European states to initiate adequate rescue activities. According to Carrera and Cortinovis (2019) more than 46,000 migrants were rescued yearly in 2016 and 2017 close to the Italian coast by NGOs and civil society actors. The numbers declined to 5204 in 2018. NGOs were, nevertheless, still the largest single actor in search and rescue operations in the area (Carrera and Cortinovis, 2019: 6). By comparison, Frontex rescued 13,616 people in 2016, 14,976 in 2017 and 4046 in 2018 (Carrera and Cortinovis, 2019: 6).

Médecins Sans Frontières, one of the largest NGO actors in the field, report in their overview of search and rescue activities of having ‘assisted more than 80.000 people since 2015’.<sup>1</sup> The organization was founded in 1971 and has been in the past decades one of the most prominent humanitarian global actors, not least acknowledged by the reception of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999 for its commitment to providing medical assistance in acute crises. They started their SAR operations in 2015 after Italy and the EU reduced their capacities. In 2019, the organization had an income of 1632 million euros, mostly provided by private donations and companies. Donations from states and public organizations represented 1.2% of the income. However, with 3,506,574 euros expenditure, SAR operations represent a comparatively small programme in the organization’s budget.<sup>2</sup>

Frontex, on the other hand, is a relatively young EU agency. It was established in October 2004 and became operational the following year. Its overall mission is to promote and coordinate the management of the EU’s external borders. It does so through its main activities, among others, the coordination of operational cooperation between member states, the training of border guards and, most visibly, through joint return operations, and joint air, sea and land border initiatives (Franko, 2020; Gundhus and Franko, 2016; Perkowski, 2018). Frontex (whose headquarters is in Warsaw) has had strong political support from the European Commission for a remarkable growth in its tasks and responsibilities, and in its staff and resources. Its budget skyrocketed from 6 million euros in 2005, when the agency was established, to 460 million euros in 2020.<sup>3</sup> Also, its staff numbers have seen a steady increase. In 2016, the revised European Border and Coastguard Regulation came into force and made Frontex into the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, greatly enhancing its authority. However, Frontex’s transformations have not only been related to the expanding size of its operations and an expansion in jurisdiction. According to the agency’s self-presentation, it has transitioned into ‘Europe’s first uniformed law enforcement service’,<sup>4</sup> a transition which has been reflected in a greater focus on crime-fighting tasks and law enforcement (Franko, 2020).

The two actors studied in this article have in recent years both undergone considerable transformations. MSF’s Mediterranean initiatives were formed in the aftermath of the so-called migration crisis and partly coincide with the organization’s decision to aim towards greater independence from state funding. Like other NGOs, MSF’s activities in the Mediterranean have been countered by EU member state actions including threats of criminal sanctions and confiscation of vessels (FRA, 2018). Unlike MSF, Frontex has always been present in the Mediterranean. Its joint operations at sea have since its inception been one of the most prominent sides of the agency’s activities and an important reason behind its remarkable growth in resources and tasks. The agency’s activities in the Mediterranean are also among its most controversial, exemplified by several accusations of involvement and complicity in illegal pushbacks.<sup>5</sup>

This article draws on a study of Frontex and Médecins Sans Frontières sea operations’ (MSF\_Sea) official Twitter accounts over a period of two years, between October 2018 and October 2020. As well as coinciding with the changing pattern of SAR operations, the two-year period was chosen, due to the fast pace of change in the field, to provide the most up-to-date information. The communications were systematically collected and compiled into distinct files, two containing textual and visual messages and separate files

containing only visual materials (photographs and video footage). The Norwegian Data Protection services (NSD)<sup>6</sup> have been notified about the project and the two organizations in question have been informed about the nature of the data collection by e-mail. The collected tweets were then subjected to a discourse analysis and visual analysis. The textual material was coded according to particular topics of interest, as well as keyword frequency. Although the keyword-based or automated computational analysis is in some respects a crude method of analysis that does not capture meaningful nuances in texts (Kim et al., 2018; Zamith and Lewis, 2015), it is useful for analysing Twitter communications, where due to the 140 character limit, the possibilities to develop longer narratives are limited and users often rely on various shortening devices.

Visual representations were analysed according to topic, style and framing in order to study visual sensibility towards specific issues. Previous criminological scholarship has pointed to active and creative aspects of image taking—defined as a ‘will to representation’—as a ‘new kind of causal inducement to law- and rule-breaking behaviour’ (Yar, 2012: 245; see also Sandberg and Ugelvik, 2017). Both state and non-state actors are through visual and textual self-representation producing a particular imagined understanding of the self (Yar, 2012). The actors are through social media forming particular organizational narratives, directed outwards, to the public, and inwards, to their own members and employees. Visual and text messages are, therefore, not just about representations, but are performative acts of active creation, and are examined as political acts (Linnemann, 2017). As Mawby (2013: 1–2) points out, police image work has ‘always been related to the legitimation process, entwined with the seeking and retaining of legitimacy’. The data collected are, therefore, analysed as documentation of particular forms of governance, authority, identity building and legitimation.

It should be noted though that the empirical material presented here does not primarily give us insight into *internal* institutional logics and values, but can tell us instead something about how the two organizations chose to communicate with external audiences and represent their identity to the world. Such communications with external audiences may, of course, be a reflection of internal values and logics. Twitter may also function as a channel for the recruitment of future employees, which is particularly relevant in the case of Frontex. The messages and images analysed in this article have been communicated by the organizations’ official Twitter accounts and were meant to be widely circulated. In that respect they represent the organizations’ ability to speak to the world, as well as to their own employees and important others, such as donors. In that respect, Twitter communications are methodologically better suited to analyse frontstage rather than backstage practices of transnational actors (Boer and Stolk, 2019), particularly their performative aspects.

Twitter has in recent scholarship been recognized as a rich site of ethnographic observation (Marwick, 2013; Stewart, 2017). As Stewart (2017: 254) points out, Twitter communications are particularly apt for capturing cultural meaning making and ‘enable and demand individual cultivation of influence, visibility, and audiences’. This study draws on the strength of Twitter as a site of observation of performative aspects of social interaction. Due to space constraints, it does not explore its potential for studying networks and relational qualities and, therefore, does not contextualize Twitter communications within the larger mediascape, which includes other forms of social media (Marwick, 2013).

It should be noted though that Frontex and MSF are two quite different organizations in terms of their professional identities, and their Twitter communications, naturally, are a reflection of that. Some of the findings of the article—that there are fundamental differences in their narrative framings—should, therefore, not come as a surprise. Yet, the article also sheds light on how the two organizations relate to issues and values that might be viewed as universal, particularly the imperative of saving of life, which is also defined as a fundamental human right in the European legislation (European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), art. 2).

Moreover, the two organizations exercise their professional skills in a shared geographical and political space and in relation to the same populations (i.e. migrants crossing the Mediterranean). This is a space where few members of the public may encounter these actors in person. In such a context the mediated representations become all the more important. It is fair to assume that messages function in a variety of ways, and have effects on several levels. The article does not examine in detail the organizations' professional narratives and identities as such, but focuses in particular on their framing of the shared geographical and social space and the strategies they adopt to claim authority and create legitimacy. The focus of the analysis is, therefore, on the framing of the migrant issue, especially in relation to security and border deaths, what kind of emotional responses do the Twitter messages invite and what kind of actions following these responses? Drawing on the work of Boltanski (1999), Carrabine (2011: 8) points out that each and every act of representation sets 'conditions of possibility for public action' and it is these properties 'we need to analyse so as to understand just how media texts may contribute to promoting and ethics of care and responsibility, or indifference and apathy towards distant others'. Following on this line of reasoning, the various mediated framings of migration, and the border as a political space, invite distinct normative frames of action. Although, theoretically, questions of responses and mediation have been mostly framed in terms of 'distant suffering studies' (Chouliaraki, 2015; see also special issue of the *International Communication Gazette* 77(7)), the nature of human suffering examined in this study is both distant to the global audiences and viewers of Twitter messages, yet very proximate to the members of the organizations involved.

### **Migrant suffering: Between hyper-visibility and denial**

Not surprisingly, images of the Mediterranean Sea are a common feature in the visual analysis of Twitter messages of the two actors. Migrants gazing out over the sea and Frontex officers inspecting it with binoculars indicate that the two organizations inhabit and exercise their professional tasks in a shared geographical space. Yet, despite a few common visual elements the communications are marked by stark contrasts in how this shared space is portrayed. Ships and boats that often feature in the images offer contrasting narratives. While Frontex vessels are portrayed as fast, technically advanced and powerful, the vessels featured by MSF\_Sea are either unseaworthy rubber boats, or industrial trawlers crammed with people, signalling a sense of urgency and of unfolding tragedy. For one actor the sea appears to be a tragic space of humanitarian emergency, for the other it is a space to be controlled and conquered by technology.

Other than a co-existence in a shared maritime environment, the textual and visual communications of the two organizations display few commonalities. One of the most striking features is the difference in how they frame and relate to migrant suffering. This is to some extent natural, since one is a humanitarian actor whose *raison d'être* is precisely the alleviation of suffering (Fassin, 2012), the other a border control agency. Yet, the differences are also surprising. This author's previous research has shown that Frontex has been careful to pay at least discursive attention to humanitarian sentiments (Aas and Gundhus, 2015). The findings of the article also run contrary to Pallister-Wilkins' (2015: 66) observation that 'Frontex can talk in humanitarian terms'. Although 'fundamental rights' are mentioned 14 times, migrants and migrant suffering rarely feature in Frontex's visual and textual communications. Of the 589 visual items<sup>7</sup> used in Frontex communications in the chosen period, only 23 featured migrants (four of those were a repetition of the same image of a female officer playing with a smiling child). Migrant suffering, particularly death, hardly feature in the textual communications. The agency used the words 'dead' or 'deadly' only twice in the two-year period. The words 'death' and 'drown' were not used at all. In that respect, Frontex communication strategies reflect several of the strategies of denial, such as 'turning a blind eye' or 'looking the other way', described in Stanley Cohen's (2001) influential work *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*.

By contrast, MSF\_Sea communications are characterized by what could be termed a hyper-visibility of migrant suffering. Migrants feature in a large proportion of the images and most textual messages have a communication about some form of migrant suffering. Migrant fatalities are frequently mentioned in the communications. The words dead/deadly are used 84 times, in addition to variations of the word 'death' which are used 70 times, while the word 'drown' (including drowned/drowning) is used 74 times. The messages are often framed in a tradition of bearing witness to suffering, and are infused with dramatic elements and a sense of urgency. In addition to the tragic situation in Moria, and conditions in other refugee camps, drowning at sea and other dangerous aspects of migrant journeys, particularly torture and human rights abuses in Libya are a common theme.

MSF\_Sea's textual and visual messages might be described as filled with pathos. Particularly so since, as Carrabine (2011: 17) points out, 'pathos in ancient Greek tragedy was understood as an emotional pull toward the spectacle of death—where the very dynamic of knowing yet not acting is central to the drama'. Frontex communications, on the other hand, are marked by almost complete silence about border deaths. The same tendency is visible also in other Frontex publications such as its risk analysis reports and is reflected in the agency's unwillingness to count border deaths (Aas and Gundhus, 2015). For example, *Risk Analysis for 2020* mentions death only twice (in connection to the COVID pandemic and the death of 39 Vietnamese migrants in Essex), while drowning accidents in the Mediterranean are not mentioned at all. Although previous scholarship has shown that migrant deaths are a concern for Frontex officers (Aas and Gundhus, 2015; Perkowski, 2018), this is not reflected in the agency's Twitter communications. As we shall see below, Frontex communications do have dramatic elements. These, however, are not marked by pathos in a sense of trying to 'cause feelings of sadness, especially because people feel sympathy'.<sup>8</sup> Instead, the dramatic elements mainly refer to law



enforcement action. Videos of SAR operations are shot from the air and are often accompanied by rhythmic and powerful music, creating an impression of an action movie.

The two actors thus frame the situations happening in the same physical space through very different narratives. Nowhere are these deeply divergent discursive patterns more visible than in the communications (or lack of) about the situation in the Moria migrant camp on the Greek island of Lesbos. The now infamous camp, designed for fewer than 3000 people but housing 13,000 asylum seekers including children, was in September 2020 destroyed by a fire. In the aftermath, Greek police prevented migrants from leaving the camp despite terrible living conditions there.<sup>9</sup> The events on Lesbos received considerable attention in most European media outlets and were, as we saw above, frequently reported by MSF\_Sea (Moria is mentioned 118 times in the messages). Yet, the situation in Moria is mentioned only once by Frontex in the following message, which also expresses support for the Greek authorities and inhabitants:

Frontex stands ready to support Greece in dealing with the consequences of the massive fire at the #Moria camp on the island of Lesbos. Our thoughts go out to all those who lost the roof over their heads and all the people on the island.

(Frontex, 9 September 2020)

In contrast to MSF\_Sea's emotionally charged visual material from the fire-stricken camp, the message was not accompanied by an image. Curiously, Frontex posted a year earlier a message (with an image) about a different fire on a Mediterranean island, symbolically indicating with a hashtag (#EUProtects) who is the main subject of Frontex protection, namely, EU citizens:

The residents of a small hillside village were in danger because of approaching forest fire. The Lithuanian boat that is part of a #Frontex operation in Italy took 10 people on board and brought them to safety in the port of San Vito Lo Capo #EUBorderGuard #EUProtects.

(Frontex, 11 July 2019)

When migrant suffering is mentioned in Frontex communications, this is most often in connection with a discourse on trafficking and thus put into a frame of organized crime. Images that accompany such reports do not include migrants, or in rare cases when they do, the visual representations do not include a face. Of the 23 visual representations of migrants, several were aerial images of migrants on boats, while on the frequently used image of a Frontex officer playing with a happy child, the child is not looking into the camera. Although this may be due to privacy protection reasons, it is worth noticing that the approach is in stark contrast to the one chosen by MSF\_Sea, whose tweets are replete with images of black and brown faces, often children, eyes looking directly into the camera. According to Levinas' (1961/2004) philosophical analysis, it is the human face that calls the subject into giving and serving the Other. Drawing on his work, Butler (in Carrabine, 2011: 15) observes that 'it is the face of the other that demands an ethical response'. A question can be asked then about how we can interpret Frontex's reluctance to use images of migrants, especially facial ones.

MSF\_Sea communications undoubtedly aim to stir our compassionate and ethical sensibilities, presumably, as a call for action. As Valier and Lippens (2004: 319) point out, images of suffering victims carry 'a potent affective charge, levying an unassailable demand for our concern and commanding urgent action'. As the following message shows, images are used by MSF as a direct documentation and justification for humanitarian action:

'Preserving the right to asylum is as vital as protecting health', says #UN High Commissioner for Refugees. @FilippoGrandi also told @repubblica that the shipwreck photo captured by #SeaWatch, showing a man's dead body, renders debate over the need to rescue immoral & abhorrent.

(MSF\_Sea, 17 July 2020)

Frontex strategy, on the other hand, seems to be precisely the opposite. Its visual representations of migration are often photos taken from the air or images of charts and videos titled 'Migratory situation', which are summarizing the findings of Frontex reports. The focus is on numbers and the changes in migratory flows. This 'cooler' bureaucratic style of reporting is in stark contrast to MSF's 'hot' and emotional language, which even when using numbers imbues them with a sense of urgency, like in the following message:

The last two weeks in the #CentralMed:

- 439 people rescued by NGO ships, who are working to fill the gap in lifesaving SAR capacity ruthlessly created by Europe;
- 1095 people forced back to #Libya by the #EU-funded Libyan Coast Guard;
- 13 people missing, presumed drowned.

(MSF\_Sea, 30 June 2020)

## **In celebration of sovereignty**

While the MSF\_Sea's communications portray the border as a space of unfolding humanitarian catastrophe, Frontex messages, on the other hand, frame the Mediterranean border as a space of criminal activity that needs to be conquered by the means of effective police action. Efficiency and effectiveness of police co-operation are thus key features of the messages. Frontex describes itself as the 'EU's most dynamic agency' (13 January 2020), as well as 'one of the fastest growing EU agencies' (3 January 2020). The large proportion of its visual and textual communications is thus directed towards presenting and building a positive self-presentation as a strong and dynamic policing agency. Messages frequently feature interviews with smiling officers talking about their daily tasks and professional satisfaction. Although MSF\_Sea's account also features similar 'on the job' reports, unlike these, Frontex reports rarely include officers in interaction with migrants or performing their tasks in migrant camps.

Frontex communication focuses particularly on two aspects of the agency's professional identity: the positive value of EU co-operation and the importance of crime fighting. When it comes to the latter, Frontex has been at pains to craft itself as a proper policing agency. An important element in the agency's remarkable growth has

been precisely its transformation from a border control actor—or, better, an enabler and coordinator for EU member states—into a fully fledged crime control and security agency with an ability to govern migration through crime (Franko, 2020). Crime is, thus, mentioned 55 times in Frontex communications, in addition to smuggling (13 times), terrorism/terrorist (seven times), fraud/fraudsters (11 times) and trafficking/traffickers (20 times). The Mediterranean border is defined as a dangerous space to be dominated by police action, as evident in the following message:

WATCH The waters surrounding Europe are always busy with activity. But there's also a number of risks they are exposed to, such as people smuggling, terrorism, illegal fishing and other types of crime. Where do we come in? #Frontex #EUCoastGuard #EUBorderguard.

(Frontex, 15 January 2020)

The communications convey both the dangerousness of the border and the power of state actors. Also, visual communications underline the action-filled law-enforcement sides of the agency's identity. The many images of vessels, aircraft and vehicles display their speed and technical abilities. The videos are complemented with action-movie music and create an impression of strength and masculine policing identity. In that respect, Frontex communication strategies resemble the dimension of 'sovereign awe' pointed out by Brown (2010: 103–104), through which state border control actors not only aim to 'encase the nation as a protected compound' but also 'present to the outside world a mighty national shield'.

The message of strength and control of the border is particularly prominent in the visual framing of the agency's activities in so-called trophy shots (see Figure 1). Images of confiscated weapons, vehicles, drugs and cigarettes often accompany the messages. Police trophy shots, as Linnemann (2017: 59) points out, (re)produce police power through the power of the visual and demonstrate 'the state's prerogative to search, seize and accumulate private property'. Part of long historic hunting traditions, trophy shots display 'white man's domination over nature and 'uncivilized' people' (Linnemann, 2017: 67). In the case of Frontex, police domination over the border is communicated through images of seized assets, such as weapons and drugs, but also of officers standing with goggles and observing the landscape.

Police trophy shots reveal a 'binary relation of the police power, being that of *hunter* and *hunted*, *predator* and *pray*' (Linnemann, 2017: 67, emphasis in original). Frontex tweets, for example, often communicate victory and hunting prowess as evident in the following message accompanied by an image of a car boot filled with drugs: 'Well hidden beneath the tyre in the car boot, they found 25 plastic bags with 11 kilos of heroin worth more than EUR 2 million. Busted! 🚗 #EUProtects #EUBorderGuard' (Frontex, 18 September 2019). Similarly, the following message was illustrated by a photograph of three officers standing in front of a stolen car:

Criminals don't rest on weekends and neither do we! Last weekend kept our officers at various land border crossing points busy. They've spotted two stolen cars, two fake driving licenses and a person trying to enter the EU using someone else's ID.

(Frontex, 29 July 2020)



**Figure 1.** Frontex officers in front of a stolen boat (28 October 2020; credit: Frontex, the European Border Coast Guard Agency).

As mentioned above, in addition to crime fighting, another vital aspect of Frontex tweets and re-tweets is the praise for the EU and the value of international co-operation. As an EU agency, Frontex frequently asserts the value of other EU agencies and its co-operation with member states in various operations and training events. Their communications, however, not only praise co-operation, but often also celebrate and affirm the value of sovereignty more generally. One symbolic way of praising sovereignty is frequent messages congratulating EU member states on their national days ('Today we celebrate the National Day of Sweden', 6 June 2019). Sovereignty is also affirmed in visual terms through images of flags and official state representatives shaking hands and signing documents with the Frontex Executive Director. These communications not only convey respect for the EU and other member states and international organizations, but also confirm Frontex's importance as an actor on the international stage.

## The moral economy at the border

While Frontex communications are unequivocally praising state sovereignty, MSF\_Sea is directly challenging it, particularly through intense blaming and accusations of the EU and its member states. The following message is typical in this respect:

Update! More than 350 rescued people on board #SeaWatch4 urgently need a place of safety. Some survivors were rescued over a week ago. #MSF & @seawatch\_intl provided an emergency response where #EU states are failing, abandoning people to drown. Now, we are stranded at sea.

(MSF\_Sea, 30 August 2020)

The language is strong and unambiguous and puts the situation in the Mediterranean into a moral framework, where actions of some actors are clearly defined as good and

legitimate, and others as bad. The aforementioned situation in Moria was described as follows:

‘Let’s be very clear, there is no question as to the cause of this fire: it’s the years-long orchestration of human suffering and violence produced by European and Greek migration policies that are to blame.’ Aurelie Ponthieu, @MSF advisor on displacement.

(MSF\_Sea, 9 September 2020)

Such moral dimensions of communication reveal that the border is structured according to a particular moral economy (Fassin, 2005), where distinctions between morally right and wrong hold a potent structuring force (Franko, 2020). Within this economy, the creation of moral distinctions has directly productive effects and increases the authority of those making the distinctions. In this respect, the above-mentioned systematic association of migration with crime by Frontex increases the agency’s legitimacy and serves to support the production of punitive regimes and police interventions at the border. Similarly, MSF\_Sea’s communications are also creating distinctions between morally right and wrong; however, these distinctions are radically different from those presented in the Frontex narrative.

As I listened to the people—whose bodies were an atlas of abuse, mapping moments during their journey when their humanity had been assailed—I knew each torture scar, burn mark, bullet wound or disfigured limb could have been avoided. But Europe looked the other way.

(MSF\_Sea, 15 September 2020)

While the EU and its member states are praised by Frontex, they are the villains in the MSF\_Sea’s narrative. Libya, one of the morally most problematic actors in the MSF\_Sea’s account (mentioned no less than 885 times), is mentioned only once in passing by Frontex. Like border deaths and drowning, torture and abuse happening there, which feature so prominently in the MSF\_Sea’s narrative, are not mentioned at all by Frontex. Torture is mentioned 39 times in the MSF\_Sea tweets and only once by Frontex in connection with an arrest of two suspected Bangladeshi criminals:

A moment to be proud of. The information collected by #Frontex during the Joint Operation #Themis in Italy led to the arrest of two suspected Bangladeshi criminals. They are accused of serious crimes, such as kidnapping for ransom, torture and people smuggling.

(Frontex, 23 July 2020)

While morally contentious issues, particularly those pertaining to state action, are silenced and subjected to strategies of denial (Cohen, 2001) in the Frontex narrative, they are hyper-visible in the MSF\_Sea’s communications.

According to Boltanski (1999), the media’s use of images and language invites three distinctive emotional states and modes of engagement with distant suffering: indignant denunciation of evil perpetrators, charitable sentimentalism and sublime awe. While the

first two respectively call for a 'regime of justice' and a 'regime of care', the latter invites visual and aesthetic responses which sublimate the suffering. As Carrabine (2011: 8) points out, the emotional responses of those receiving media messages are shaped by particular 'values, which are embedded in the text, supervising how viewers should relate to the images and narratives'. Following this line of reasoning, it could be suggested that Frontex communications, systematically silence the suffering at the border and invite the viewer to be in awe of and admire (from a distance) the technological power of its equipment. When inviting emotional responses, these seem to draw on the 'regime of justice' of punishing criminal offenders such as people smugglers. MSF\_Sea's communications, on the other hand, are permeated with highly emotive cues that invite both the viewers' indignation towards perpetrators of suffering as well as pity and 'charitable tender-heartedness' towards the victims (Carrabine, 2011: 7). The following MSF\_Sea tweet is clearly an example of the latter:

I was afraid for myself & my family. It's not easy for someone to take his family on that risky journey. But we have no choice. We have to leave #Libya. We don't need any more torture . . . to be a slave anymore. We just want to be free. – Emanuel rescued Nov, 2019 #OceanViking.

(MSF\_Sea, 3 January 2020)

Interestingly, the two actors do not directly mention each other in the data collected in this study, although they have made fierce accusations against each other in other contexts. NGOs have been, for example, accused by Fabrice Leggeri, Director of Frontex, of 'playing into the hands of human traffickers'.<sup>10</sup> Such rhetoric reveals profound disagreements concerning central aspects of governance pertaining to border control and mortality, as well as a competition concerning moral authority. Sovereign authority, as Keally McBride (2007) points out, consists both of practical arrangements (institutions, actors, etc.) as well as principles, combining the ability to use force with ideals. Exercising power and authority according to democratically agreed principles and ideals is an essential element of any legitimate political order, and becomes particularly relevant when it comes to penal power, such as the use of police force. A question can be asked then what happens to this authority when private actors challenge it in practical terms and its normative foundations?

The Twitter communications by the two actors can be read as attempts at the staging of moral authority, which are structured according to radically different rationalities and normative frameworks. Frontex is defining its authority, also in moral terms, through its ability to conquer a perceived criminal opponent and create safety for EU citizens, while systematically silencing migrant suffering. The word 'protect' is mentioned 83 times in the tweets, often as a hashtag #EUprotects. Its communications invite the viewer to be in awe of its military strength, and the trophy shots document the agency's ability to dominate its opponents and are, ultimately, connected to the sovereign ability to incur death (Linnemann, 2017). As a humanitarian actor, MSF, on the other hand, is defining its authority through the ability to save life, unconditionally. Tellingly, the words 'rescue' and 'save' are used 566 and 64 times, respectively in MSF\_Sea's communications, and only 35 and three times by Frontex. In comparison, the agency uses

the word 'control' 48 times. Although crude in their mode of analysis, these numbers offer an indication of the agency's priorities in terms of what aspects of sovereign power it wishes to communicate to its followers and the general public.

## **Conclusion: The ethical dilemmas of the mediation of suffering**

This article has embraced the encouragement that 'criminology needs to rethink its relations with the ascendant power of spectacle' (Carrabine, 2012: 463). Through textual and visual analysis of Frontex and MSF\_Sea's Twitter communications the article explored the two-sided nature of the border spectacle (Andersson, 2014). It has outlined the split nature of communication which is, among others, visible in radically different understandings of reality, particularly of migrants' journeys and living conditions. This supports Debord's (1995: 25) observations that disappearance of unifying aspects of life and separation are the 'alpha and omega of the spectacle'. The spectacle is, according to Debord, a never-ending monologue of self-praise and the opposite of dialogue. These observations also chime in with the more recent scholarship on echo chambers and the creation of closed systems of communication (Jamieson and Cappella, 2008; Pariser, 2011). They also challenge previous findings 'that humanitarianism and policing are not two separate or competing practices' (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015: 65).

Although humanitarian sentiments may feature in the (backstage) motivations of individual officers (Aas and Gundhus, 2015; Perkowski, 2018), Frontex Twitter communications, in the chosen period, reveal fundamental differences with those of humanitarian actors. This underlines the importance of paying attention to both frontstage and backstage behaviour of institutional actors, including their performative aspects in terms of how they chose to present themselves to global audiences. Their frontstage behaviour, namely, shows that Frontex and humanitarian NGOs are waging a fierce media battle for moral authority where they use widely diverging strategies of claiming authority. Through its awe-inviting displays of masculine strength and efficacy, the Frontex strategy seems to support Brown's (2010) thesis that state actors are committed to maintain at least the symbolic and theatrical aspects of sovereignty. MSF\_Sea's approach, on the other hand, through the intense focus on migrant suffering, stages the Mediterranean border as a contest of morals and legitimacy.

Both strategies come with particular costs and ethical challenges. For Frontex and, by implication, the EU the show of sovereign strength at the border comes with a denial of suffering and, therefore, at the expense of moral authority. The saving of life as a universal value, protected also by EU legislation, is systematically silenced in the Frontex narrative for the purpose of showcasing sovereign strength. For MSF, on the other hand, the ethical costs of the struggle are of a different kind. The NGO's power and authority lie to a large extent in maintaining the principled aspects of its authority and the strength of its shaming strategies (Murdie and Urpelainen, 2015). One of the strongest means at its disposal is the vocal and often graphic portrayal of migrant suffering, which carries inherent ethical difficulties, particularly when put into a broader historic and social context.

Debord's (1995) seminal text, namely, points also to another aspect of the spectacle, which is relevant in the context of the Mediterranean border: its post-colonial

implications. The Mediterranean Sea, in which the two organizations analysed in this article conduct their occupational activities, is a liminal space between Europe and Africa. Contemporary migration control practices often draw on colonial trajectories (Bosworth, 2015; Franko, 2020; Stambøl, 2020). Moreover, an extensive body of historic and anthropological work has documented the role of photography in the imperial othering of subject peoples (Edwards, 1991; Ryan, 1997).

The liminal space between Europe and Africa is not only marked by Frontex's fantasies of conquering and domination of space, which are visible in its action-movie aesthetics and trophy shots. The space and the people traversing it are also governed by the humanitarian actors and rationalities (Fassin, 2012) with an overwhelming focus on salvation, which also has distinct theological connotations. As Michael Barnett (2011) shows in his informative historic study, contemporary humanitarianism has its historic roots in the 19th-century missionary and anti-slavery movements. The ideological appeal of anti-slavery is clearly visible in MSF\_Sea's communications. The words slave or slavery are used eight times in the texts and allusions to slavery are also present in several texts, such as the re-tweeting of Al Jazeera's article on 'animal cargo ship' and the following description of conditions on the ship as 'dirty cattle cages':

Europe's inhumane policy in action. A cargo ship that rescued 52 people on Friday has been denied access to Malta & Italy. Two people were medically evacuated but the captain is now forced to host the rest in dirty cattle cages. Many need medical care.<sup>11</sup>

(MSF\_Sea, 6 July 2020)

Also, conditions in Libya are described in terms of slavery:

“. . . fewer have reached the shores of Europe. But instead countless people died in the desert . . . sold on slave markets . . . tortured, raped . . . or were caught amidst violent conflict. No one in their right mind can call this a success. This policy is morally & financially bankrupt.”

(MSF\_Sea, 21 November 2019)

References to slavery are also visible in visual communications (see Figure 2). Frequently used images of ship storage rooms, with people lying there in darkness, are reminiscent of imagery of slave ships (e.g. MSF\_Sea, 30 August 2020). While black bodies are all but erased from the Frontex communication, they are hyper-visible in MSF\_Sea's visual narrative.

The strong language is, as shown above, intended to provoke the moral conscience of the public and to convey strong condemnation of EU policies. It, nevertheless, raises some important ethical dilemmas. As Chouliaraki (2015: 708) points out, human vulnerability poses specific ethical dilemmas as an object of mediation: 'can the body-in-need be turned into a spectacle at all?' The question is even more salient when the body-in-need is racialized. In his analysis of visual representations of human suffering and torture, Carrabine (2011: 17) points out the tendency of western culture to aestheticize the tormented body and transform it into an ideological object. The theme of 'beautiful suffering' has in European classical art tradition all too frequently 'justified imperial





**Figure 2.** Survivors on board SeaWatch 4 (30 August 2020).

Source: MSF\_Sea.

ambition, colonial conquest, and belief in racial superiority, while eroticizing bodies in pain' (Carrabine, 2011: 19). Seen in this perspective, the visual representations of migrant suffering may, unwillingly, invoke colonial connotations.

These observations confirm one of the central tenants of the so-called visual turn in criminology that there are 'distinctive ethical questions posed by visual representations of harm, suffering and violence that feature so prominently in these multi-mediated times' (Carrabine, 2012: 463). The overwhelming focus of MSF\_Sea's narrative is to challenge the ethical credibility of EU institutions, at the same time as it tries to give voice to migrant suffering. Videos featuring migrant voices, often speaking in their native tongue, have a prominent place in MSF\_Sea's communications. Yet, power relations seem to shape their Twitter communications despite these efforts.

Power relations are an inherent part of humanitarianism (Fassin, 2012) and define the engagement of northern audiences with vulnerable others (Ong, 2015). The 'digital divide between viewing West and suffering South' (Chouliaraki, 2015: 713) is thrown into relief in MSF\_Sea's communications by the numerous, often deeply poetic, and artistically framed photographs of dark-skinned faces and bodies. Aestheticization is, as Debord (1995) points out, a central aspect of society of the spectacle, where images become of utmost importance (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998). The artistic image of a dark-skinned child, imploringly looking straight into the camera, surrounded by what appears to be a golden fabric, accompanied by the text: 'Council of Europe @CommissionerHR calls on member states to refocus on humanitarian and human rights aspects of the #Mediterranean crisis' (MSF\_Sea, 19 June 2019) summarizes in this respect MSF\_Sea's profound ethical dilemma of how to bear witness and how to create appropriate connections between trauma, images and ethical responsibility (Valier and Lippens, 2004).

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## Notes

1. <http://searchandrescue.msf.org/>.
2. Source: [https://www.msf.org/sites/msf.org/files/2020-06/MSF\\_Financial\\_Report\\_2019\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.msf.org/sites/msf.org/files/2020-06/MSF_Financial_Report_2019_FINAL.pdf).
3. [https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Key\\_Documents/Budget/Budget\\_2020.pdf](https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Key_Documents/Budget/Budget_2020.pdf).
4. <https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news-release/frontex-welcomes-new-standing-corps-recruits-ILr9os>.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/24/eu-border-force-complicit-in-campaign-to-stop-refugees-landing>.
6. <https://nsd.no/personvernombud/en/notify/meldeskjema?eng>.
7. The Frontex dataset in the chosen period includes 525 images and 64 videos. Some of the items are used several times and are thus also counted several times.
8. Cambridge English Dictionary, at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/pathos>.
9. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54082201>.
10. <https://www.dw.com/en/frontex-director-fabrice-leggeri-border-control-itself-is-not-a-panacea/a-40153595>.
11. Marked with ! by Twitter.

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