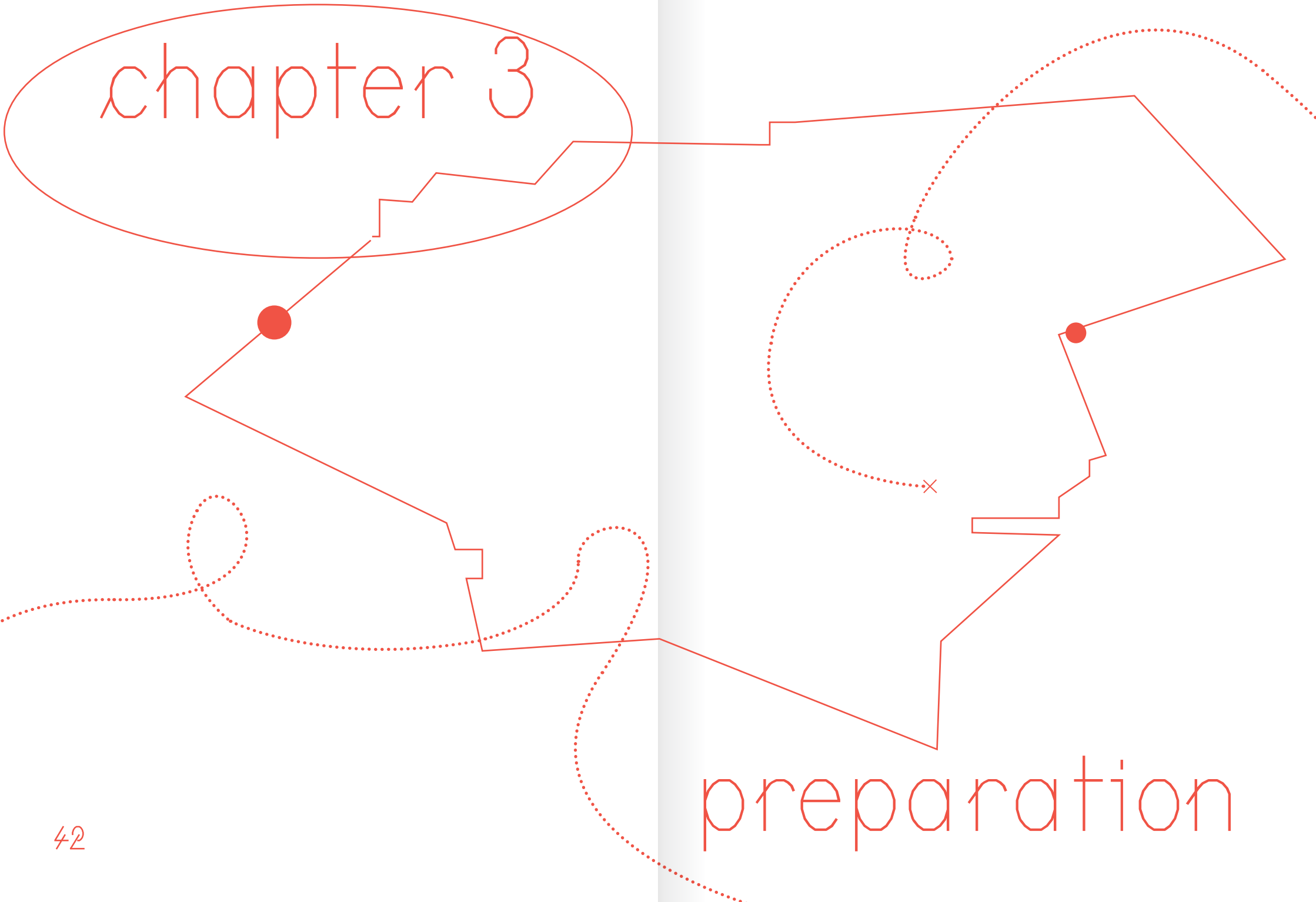


chapter 3



preparation

preparation

The next step in the storytelling process, preparation, is closely linked to the process of selecting the topic. Most of the time, the preparatory phase starts when storytellers begin asking themselves what topics are interesting and important to cover. Once these questions are asked, they begin to think about the topic analytically and critically and start placing it in context. The preparatory phase lays the groundwork for the story and can be done in different ways, including research in the form of readings and listenings, arranging for interviews and spending time in neighbourhoods and places related to the story.

“The main thing is to listen to people.”⁹

“The main thing is to listen to people and read about the topic,” Shehrazad Siraj, the writer and student from France, said. “If you want to ask about migration, you have to read about it beforehand.” This idea, that storytellers research topics they work on, comes naturally to many. But it is not only a matter of doing readings, it is also about the nature of those readings. Omar Saadeh, the filmmaker with an NGO working with refugees in Lebanon, said that he often met people from abroad, both visitors to the NGO and journalists, who came with preconceptions in mind. “The types of questions they asked were always very basic and lead to the same patterns in stories.” This attitude, he said, had to do with a lack of research on their behalf and stereotypes they had about the topic: “They came with a premeditated image of the country, they did not come thinking ‘let’s find out what is there.’”

Samih Mahmoud from the video platform Campji said that when reporters come from outside the camps, they often show a lack of knowledge: “They don’t do deep research beforehand, unless we are talking about journalists who spend time in the area to get to know it before writing their stories. But some rely only on sources and information written by outsiders, so the research is done from the outside looking in.” This, he said, is the consequence of a larger problem, one that goes beyond the storytellers themselves: “It is because there

is not enough input from the camps, from people living there, about how life really is.”

“There is not enough input from the camps about how life really is.”⁹

For journalists and others telling stories of migration, it might be an easy option to resort to readings that are widely available and published by well-known outlets and institutions. This is not wrong: these are often well-researched and comprehensive. But local, people-centred perspectives are many times missing in these publications. And if they are there, they are often narrated from ‘the outside,’ by authors coming from privileged backgrounds or parts of the West, not refugee and migrant communities. If storytellers rely only on such readings, they will miss important perspectives.

Preparing well for a story therefore requires looking further than what first meets the eye. This includes reading things that are locally produced and published, even if it means spending more time searching (and oftentimes translating). Such readings can be local newspaper articles, poetry and short stories, podcasts and material published on social media. Siraj spoke about the importance of looking beyond the traditional coverage: “Sure, mainstream media is a useful source, but we should also read blogs and other smaller platforms, especially if we want to understand how people live. If we want to write about a community, we have to read what people from that group write.” Social media, Siraj said, can be very useful to get a better understanding of people’s lives: “It lets you discover new things and opens your mind. Even if you are not friends with someone you can follow what they write. I learn a lot about people’s realities that way.”



Laure Makarem, who works with migrant worker communities at the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM) in Lebanon, said that research can impact the quality of interactions journalists and others have with people interviewed for their stories. “I have a good example,” Makarem said. “It was a person who had done a lot of readings and realised that there is a lot of knowledge out there. She wanted to explore how she could contribute to the existing literature.” This, Makarem said, was refreshing: “She didn’t come with a preset profile in mind for who she wanted to interview. Usually, this is what

people do. They come to us and say, ‘I want a person who was trafficked,’ or ‘I want access to the Filipino community,’ but she did not.”

Makarem described how storytellers and NGOs collaborate and rely on each other to produce stories on migration. When storytellers do features in areas they are not familiar with, the preparations partly depend on the resources and connections of NGOs working in those areas. Benefits can go both ways – storytellers can get access to places they don’t know well, and organisations can bring media attention to issues they work on. But this may also lead to a disconnect between the storyteller and the people featured in the story. “Reporters and journalists can sometimes be oblivious to the power dynamics that exist between them and the person they are working with,” Makarem said. “There is a lack of interest in engaging with that person beyond the level of collecting data or extracting a story for their article. The relationship then becomes one-way and very transactional.”

“Reporters and journalists can sometimes be oblivious to the power dynamics that exist between them and the person they are working with.”

Doha Adi from the NGO Sawa for Development and Aid recounted a case where good preparations made a big difference: “We did a series of testimonies of people who had been injured in the war or in accidents in Lebanon. It was a very tricky process, very scary, because how can people retell such stories without re-living the trauma?” Adi worked with a social worker and spent much time describing what the material would be used for to the potential interviewees. “It was hard to find people. Out of 30, only three wanted to talk to us. But they were very positive, which made it easy – and at the same time hard because you want to respect these people and their positivity,” Adi said.

Often, the ability to prepare is contingent on factors like the time and resources available to the storyteller. Neither is at any point endless, so choices and priorities have to be set. Rayan Sukkar from Campji said that if there is an alternative, she would not do features in regions she is unfamiliar with. “If I know someone from my area, I would speak

to them instead,” she said. There are always ways to prepare, she continued, even on tight deadlines: “I don’t think that time is really an excuse. It is easy to do research these days: there is information available in the community. There is technology. You can send long voice notes, talk over the phone, get to know the person you are interviewing. Check Facebook to see what they are interested in.” Otherwise, she said, “work on stories you have access to in your own area.”

That said, both journalists and storytellers from NGOs remain at the far end of the chain of power and influence within their institutions. Publishers and senior editors make the decisions in the newsrooms, and owners are responsible for securing the financial resources. NGOs, both large and small, rely at the end of the day on funders, often located far away. Makarem from ARM said that they acknowledge the situation for journalists who are asked to “write an article about a topic they didn’t sign up for and only have five working days to deliver the story.” It would be wrong, Makarem said, to tell them: “We are not working with you, go to another NGO and talk to a migrant worker there and do damage that is not on our premises.” Instead, Makarem continued, organisations can ask journalists to provide information about their purpose, main topic, interview questions, ethical considerations and publishing details beforehand. “This procedure, in our experience, gives journalists a kind of self-check, saying ‘I am being held accountable for this story.’”

For anyone telling stories about migration, the preparatory phase is when the blueprint for the entire story is drawn. This is when the direction of the story is set and the tone for what comes after is determined. Limitations in terms of time and resources are real, so storytellers will often find themselves forced to stop their research before having fully explored all possible angles. Still, as described by several participants, there are several steps a storyteller can take in order to, as Sukkar from Campji put it, “not come out of nowhere, knock a door and tell someone, ‘I want to interview you about this and that.’” If the preparations for a story are honest and sincere, chances are that the story will be too.

Questions in this chapter

What kind of research is often done by storytellers on migration?

How can storytellers prepare to do better and more diverse reporting?

What are some ways to do locally grounded research and preparation?