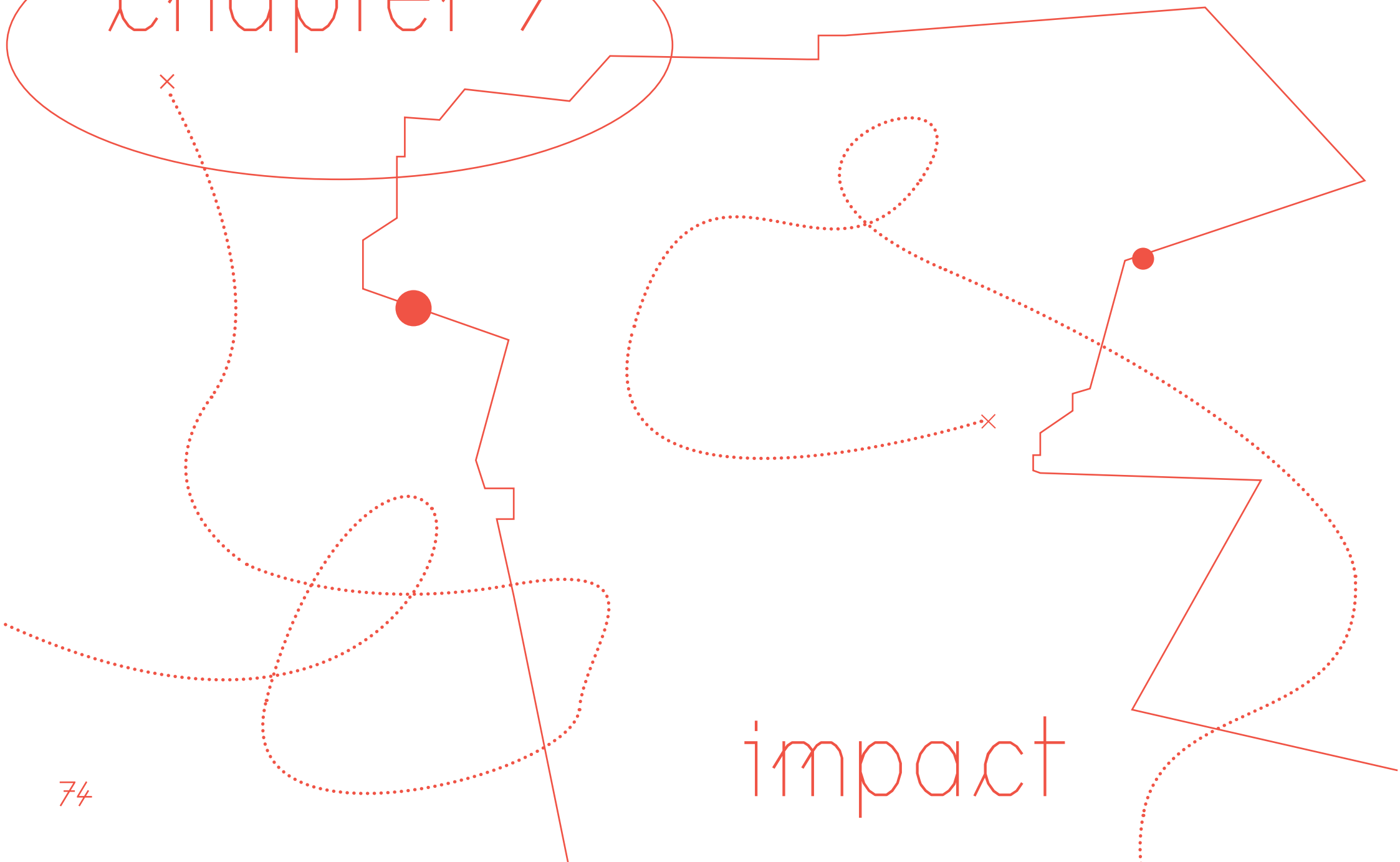


# chapter 7



impact

# impact

The final part of the storytelling process begins the same moment you press ‘save’ on the computer. Having arrived at the end of the production phase, only one thing remains: that the story gets out to readers, listeners and viewers. This includes people who know very little about migration as well as experts on the topic. It also includes everyone who was interviewed for the piece, and now gets to see their input in the larger context of the story. The moment of publication is also when a story starts to have an impact. All that was done so far now comes to the test: the research phase and interactions with people, choices when crafting the story, and details or quotes that were either included or left out.

Several participants spoke about the importance of sharing quotes with the interviewees before publishing. Omar Saadeh, who filmed videos for an NGO in Lebanon, said that people featured in stories should always get a chance to see the material. “Even getting it translated word by word, like, ‘this is your story, these are your quotes, this is the general introduction,’” he said. Shehrazad, the student and writer from France, said that she always wants people to read her features: “I want to make sure that I didn’t make any mistakes or misunderstood something. Usually we think it’s enough to get people’s consent but it’s important to check afterwards too.” This, Shahrazad added, depends on whom you interviewed: “If you were talking to a rapist for example, then no. But it is always important when you interview marginalised communities.”

Staying aware of the power dynamics of each situation helps to guide in these choices. Is the storyteller in a position of power vis-à-vis the interviewee? Then, yes, the people quoted should get a chance to see and agree with how they were cited. Or is the opposite true? If the person quoted is in a position of power – perhaps an official spokesperson or a politician speaking on the record – then the roles are reversed and the information should be published the way it was originally related.



Besides checking quotes and citations with interviewees, there are other ways to make sure that people are represented in accurate ways. Rayan Sukkar from Campji said that she always asks herself a number of questions before publishing a story: “Are the people in the story happy about how you portrayed them? If they are refugees and migrants, will it lead to any change in their lives? What will those reading or watching the video think?” Something, she said, should “connect them to the people in the story.” Inga Hajdarowicz, the PhD candidate researching migration, said that her articles must be true to the experiences of people: “They need to work. I need to be able to reflect the experiences of the women I meet, as well as the organisations that opened their doors for me.” Hajdarowicz said that what she writes “must be powerful enough so that it inspires other people to do similar work.” This, she concluded, “is a huge responsibility.”

“Are the people in the story happy about how you portrayed them?”

But it happens that storytellers and media outlets fail to respect the intentions and wishes – sometimes the safety – of people. In 2018, researcher Johanna Foster and lawyer Sherizaan Minwalla published a [study](#)<sup>14</sup> on the experiences of Yazidi women who were interviewed by journalists documenting sexual violence. Eighty-five percent of the women said that journalists had done something unethical, such as pressuring them to speak or failing to protect their identities. During the 2019 terrorist attack on a hotel in Kenya’s capital Nairobi, many international media outlets were criticised for publishing images of people who were killed, even as the attack was ongoing. “African victims of atrocities [...] often get their death displayed for consumption with little to no regard for their privacy or the grief of their family members,” media and mass atrocities fellow James Siguru Wahutu [said](#)<sup>15</sup> to the BBC then. A similar criticism was raised against The New York Times in 2018, when the paper featured a story about mental health in post-war Sri Lanka. A [thread](#)<sup>16</sup> on Twitter questioned if it was ethical to publish images of people with mental health – even if, as the paper said, they had given formal consent. Some suggested that had a local photographer contributed to the story, the approach could have been different.

14 | [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277539517301905](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277539517301905)

15 | [www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46889822](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46889822)

16 | [www.twitter.com/garikaalan/status/1070173084420730880?s=21](https://twitter.com/garikaalan/status/1070173084420730880?s=21)

Laure Makarem from ARM described an incident where a journalist did not respect the safety and integrity of the migrant woman she interviewed: “The discussion was first very broad, she asked to know the person’s story and why she was in Lebanon.” But then the vibe changed, Makarem said. The person was applying for asylum, and could not return to her country for political reasons. “Apparently the journalist knew that, but kept asking questions even though she was not comfortable.” Afterwards, the interviewee realised that she had said more than what she wanted to say. But she knew neither the name nor the phone number of the journalist. “We managed to find it and ask to keep some information off the record. But we don’t know because she never shared what she wrote with us,” Makarem said.

Several participants also said that journalists and communicators with NGOs sometimes feel pressured to reproduce images of refugees or migrants as vulnerable, passive or weak. Doha Adi said that her NGO has a strategy for when donors ask for this kind of material. “We say that we have policies and internal codes of conduct that dictate not showing individuals in vulnerable positions, children crying or women as weak individuals. We only show dignified content, not the inside of a dirty or messy house, for instance.” Such images, Adi said, may be used for internal documentation but not for media purposes. “We use different formats for different things. Detailed material is usually shared only with donors. Then we feature other kinds of stories on social media.”

Numbers and statistics, which media outlets often rely on to underpin their stories, should also be used with similar caution. Presenting accurate data on migration and refugees is important and comes with a lot of responsibility. Numbers mean little if not put in context, and they can easily be used to promote political agendas. When presented as ‘true’ or ‘final,’ we sometimes forget that statistics and data are always subjective representations of reality, and need to be accompanied by reflections and people’s stories.



For many journalists there is an idea, or at least hope, that their work will lead to change or betterment in the world. But it is hard, if not impossible, to measure the impact of a story. Effects are long-term and indirect, if any

at all. “As a journalist, you always want your stories to have an impact and help people’s lives. But in reality they often don’t. Sometimes they do, even if it’s just by making people happy that someone has heard their story,” the journalist Abby Sewell said. Fatima Alhaji, the journalist in Berlin, said that journalism should be relieved from the ‘burden’ of always having to lead to change: “Just do your work and show what’s happening. Be gentle with people and what they are doing.” Alhaji said that she thought a lot about whether or not journalists can contribute to social change: “At one point I got the answer. As a journalist, it is not you that make the change. You can only support people in what they want to change.”

“It is not you that make the change. You can only support people in what they want to change.”

Still, storytelling does retain the power to create change. As mentioned in several chapters, it raises issues and directs people’s attention. In this sense, it can be a force of both bad and good. Adi from Sawa for Development and Aid said that storytellers can function as connectors between people featured in their stories and those in power. “Most refugees we work with may not have a way to reach donors and decision-makers. So we play a role, let’s say, as a microphone.” In the long run, she said, this can have an effect: “We have shared many interviews and testimonies with donors who actually have an impact on authorities and governments.”

“We play a role, let’s say, as a microphone.”

Rayan Sukkar and Samih Mahmoud from Campji described how their relationship with people grew over the course of them working in the neighbourhood. “At the beginning we didn’t have that big of an impact, but now we do. We have a program called ‘News from the roofs’ where we look critically at the news coverage. If there’s an issue that we don’t bring up, people write to us and ask why,” Mahmoud said. “They then continue the discussion on their own, criticising politicians and mocking them.” He described how once, a young man died from an electric shock in one of Beirut’s camps: “His brother called us to speak and release all the tension. This is how important independent media is for citizens and refugees.” Sukkar said that, “Sometimes people scold us, asking ‘Why don’t you come to our neighbourhood, we haven’t seen you here for a while.’ We are happy when they do this, because if they didn’t, it would mean that they don’t like our work.”

The close connection Campji maintains with the community allows them to see the immediate impact of their stories. “When we go and ask about something – social or economical issues for instance – the person we interview might be someone’s neighbour. So they will add their own perspective and a discussion starts, discussions about things that no one asked about before.” This, Mahmoud said, has changed the general image of journalists among residents of the camps: “Now people come up and ask to be interviewed. The camera has become part of their lives.”



Regardless of whether storytellers are connected to the people and communities they cover or not, their work is bound to have some kind of impact. It might be on a small scale, as in providing opportunities for people to talk about matters that are important to them, or raising issues locally. Sometimes the scope is larger, as in bringing light to oppression and injustice, and ultimately impacting on political decisions. In either case, the kind of impact a story has reflects the entire process of storytelling from start to finish: if it was inclusive, reflective and thoughtful, or if it was done in ways that did not respect those involved. Many journalists and others hope that their work will create change and positive impact. A storytelling process that makes many stops on the way, with chances for critique and self-reflection, raises the stakes for that considerably.

## Questions in this chapter

What kind of impact can migration stories have beyond their publication?

How might people interviewed and portrayed in a story be impacted by it?

What are ways for storytellers to be preemptive about the impact of their stories?