A Radical Journal of Geography
ANTIPODE

Covert Borderwork: Managing Borders and Migration through Secrecy

Josh Watkins

Global Studies, National University of Singapore, Singapore, Singapore, poljrw@nus.edu.sg

Julia Van Dessel

Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

Abstract: In this article, we analyse secretive practices of border and migration management we term *covert borderwork*. Covert borderwork comprises techniques of border and migration management which adopt varying forms and temporalities of secrecy in their design, implementation, and/or performance. Through primary source documents and interviews, we detail and analyse the European Commission, EU member states, and the Australian government's use of fronts such as the UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration, and private firms, as well as the use of incentivised agents and unbranded materials to obscure or conceal their involvement in their own migration information campaigns. We describe and analyse secretive forms of direct engagement with potential migrants and their communities to spread anti-migration sentiment in Africa and the Asia-Pacific. We show this covert borderwork to be facilitated through various astroturfing techniques designed to obscure and conceal the involvement of states in these campaigns.

Keywords: covert borderwork, migration management, migration information campaigns, astroturfing, ignorance studies, secrecy

Introduction

Many would recognise public-facing and spectacularised "borderwork" (Rumford 2008) to be a common feature across the Western world. In the last decade, borderwork by states and nativist movements to "send the message" to certain migrants and refugees that they are unwelcome has become ever more brazen. Mass demonstrations, border walls, migrant raids and arrests by masked agents, detention, and deportation all contribute to such efforts. These practices serve as elements of overt "border spectacles" of migrant control, racialisation, criminalisation, intimidation, and discouragement (De Genova 2013). Western states also send migrants "the message" through border externalisations (Ardalan 2025; Gazzotti et al. 2022; Watkins 2017b). Externalisations are publicly legitimised, even celebrated, by their advocates as "smashing people smuggling networks", "stopping the boats", and/or stymieing "migrant invasions" (Blitzer 2018; Sneed 2025;

Antipode Vol. 0 No. 0 2025 ISSN 0066-4812, pp. 1–23 doi: 10.1111/anti.70089

Turnbull 2023). In 2025, for example, the United States initiated an offshore migrant detention program in El Salvador, triumphantly advertising it through officials holding press conferences in front of imprisoned peoples abroad (Olivares 2025).

In this article, we shine a light on a different kind of border and migration management through analysing practices of *covert borderwork* which embrace secrecy over spectacle. "Borderwork" is a concept originally developed by Chris Rumford (2008) to direct scholarly attention to the role of citizens in border and migration management. Since then, it has come to refer to not just the borderwork of citizens but also the work of states and other non-state actors in "envisioning, constructing, maintaining, and erasing borders" (Rumford 2008:2). By "covert borderwork", we mean techniques of border and migration management which adopt varying forms of secrecy in their design, implementation, and/or performance. In using covert borderwork, actors may seek to conceal their activities from publics, governments, intergovernmental organisations, non-state actors, and even from the targeted (potential) migrants themselves. Covert borderwork can be used to either enable or constrain migration and is adopted when particular processes, practices, or policies could be illegal, may be frowned upon by certain publics, or when open knowledge of it may be detrimental to achieving its objectives.

To further demonstrate and analyse what we mean by covert borderwork, below we assess the European Union (EU) and Australian governments' use of covert borderwork in their migration information campaigns. Migration information campaigns are communication strategies designed to identify, communicate with, and influence migrants and potential migrants through advertisements, community engagement, and interpersonal interventions. While often associated with the print and digital ads they circulate, migration information campaigns in fact encompass a variety of migration management techniques, including diverse forms of direct engagement with potential migrants and their communities (Maâ et al. 2023a; Marino et al. 2024; Vammen 2022; Van Dessel 2021; Watkins 2020, 2025). Across the article, we document and analyse ways the EU and Australia have utilised covert forms of direct engagement with potential migrants and their communities to spread anti-migration sentiment in Africa and the Asia-Pacific.

We demonstrate this covert borderwork to be facilitated through various astroturfing techniques explicitly designed to keep state involvement in these campaigns obscured or hidden from their audiences. "Astroturfing" refers to political activities and communications strategies that conceal their sponsor and deceptively manufacture the perception that they are grassroots initiatives (Durkee 2017; Lits 2021; McNutt and Boland 2007; Walker 2014). Astroturfed campaigns are initiated by non-local actors attempting to hide who they are, where they come from, and why they are furthering an agenda.

In the sections below, we analyse the European Commission, EU member states, and Australia's covert, often deceptive, use of fronts, incentivised agents, and unbranded materials in their own anti-migration campaigns. Examining the EU and Australia's covert borderwork shows how secretive strategies are becoming central to contemporary bordering practices. Producing and maintaining

secrecy, withholding information from entire publics, whether indefinitely or for a period of time, is an act of power. Investigating covert borderwork is thus vital to understanding the scope of tactics, temporalities, and technologies actors are using to assert power and agency over others' migration capabilities and aspirations. Examining the covert borderwork of states is particularly important as it shines a light on the tactics states are using to limit public knowledge, debate, and, ultimately, accountability for the true breadth, impact, and efficacy of their migration policies.

Migration Information Campaigns

Since the 1990s, Western governments have used campaigns in migrant source and transit countries to target and discourage potential migrants and asylum seekers. Designed to act upon potential migrants' perceptions and emotions (Nieuwenhuys and Pécoud 2007; Vammen and Kohl 2023; Williams and Coddington 2023), migration information campaigns have been analysed as border externalisations (Maâ et al. 2023b; Paynter and Riva 2024; Van Dessel 2021; Watkins 2017a), "soft" tools of migration control (FitzGerald 2019), and as "symbolic" bordering practices (Jinkang et al. 2023; Musarò 2019). Campaigns circulate anti-irregular migration advertisements across media of all kinds, as well as using various on-the-ground "migrant intermediaries" (Maâ et al. 2023a) and other "credible messengers" to target and discourage potential migrants (Watkins 2025). The literature on the effectiveness of migration information campaigns in influencing migration decisions is divided: qualitative studies tend to dismiss their deterrent effects (Oeppen 2016; Rodriguez 2019), while quantitative studies suggest an impact on (declared) migration intentions (Dunsch et al. 2019; Morgenstern 2024). Scholars have primarily examined campaigns funded by the EU and its member states (Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2020; Gammeltoft-Hansen 2017), the USA (Kosnick 2014; Williams 2020), and Australia (Coddington 2024; Watkins 2017a). Scholars have also emphasised the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) use as a paid contractor hired by states to design, implement, and evaluate campaigns (Heller 2014; Pécoud 2010; Watkins 2020).

The empirical data we present similarly highlight the IOM's involvement, but also that of the UNHCR and private firms. These actors are shown to serve as contractors facilitating campaigns utilising covert, astroturfed approaches. Below, we first elaborate on and contextualise covert borderwork. We then further explain what differentiates astroturfing from other communication and political practices. This is followed by our empirical sections on Australian and EU adoption of covert borderwork in their migration information campaigns.

Covert Borderwork

We began this article by highlighting overt border spectacles. We did this as our focus on covert borderwork lies on the other, less examined, end of the spectrum —secret, clandestine action. However, much lies in between. Borderwork is often

hybrid, producing spaces and temporalities that are strategically designed to oscillate between and/or simultaneously incorporate spectacle and secrecy. Take offshore migrant detention. While offshore detention is publicly advertised as a signal that governments are tough on irregular migration (Matera et al. 2023), we also know that offshore detention, and externalisation more broadly, leverages extraterritoriality to operate mostly outside of public, media, and judicial scrutiny —in relative secret (Ghezelbash 2022). Alternatively, consider the borderwork of migrant rights activists. Certain activists in the USA, for example, publicly advertise that they leave food and water along desert migrant trails. Yet these same activists may keep their operations secret from certain audiences, as US border police have been documented dumping water and destroying food (Solis 2023).

By emphasising covert borderwork, we are seeking to focus scholarly gaze on the intentional use of secrecy to produce and manipulate borders, deliberate strategies to obscure, conceal, and make certain audiences ignorant of borderwork. In this sense, we can contextualise covert borderwork within broader discussions of secrecy and ignorance in migration and border scholarship. Scholars have long pointed to the role of knowledge and expertise in migration management (Andrijasevic and Walters 2010; Pécoud 2015; Scheel and Ustek-Spilda 2019). Of late, this has been complemented with analysis of ignorance and non-knowledge (Aradau and Canzutti 2025; Aradau and Perret 2022; Borrelli 2025; Boswell and Chabal 2023; Lindberg et al. 2022; Mica et al. 2021; Perret 2025).

A recent special issue of *Geopolitics*, for example, has furthered an understanding of ignorance, not-knowing, and non-knowledge in border–/migration-making as productive resources, primarily conceptualised and studied as a contingent effect of socio-technological and/or governance complexities rather than intentional agency (Aradau and Canzutti 2025). This comports with Walters' (2021) call for an actor-network inspired approach to investigating secrecy and ignorance, one less concerned with the "contents" of what is concealed, or why, than the "thick description" of the material practices producing secrecy. Yet other works have successfully melded the two, documenting the practices designed to produce secrecy while carefully analysing the intention and motivation to keep things secret (Davies et al. 2017, 2023; Glouftsios 2024a, 2024b; Ostrand and Statham 2022).

In advocating for the study of covert borderwork, we are focused on exploring and exposing the "content" of what is being concealed, how it is being concealed, why, and to whose benefit. Our focus on the intentional concealment of borderwork is perhaps most inspired by agnotology—the study of the "political geography" of ignorance as an "actively engineered" and "deliberate plan" (Proctor 2008:9). Proctor (2008:8) advocated for examining how ignorance is "made, maintained, and manipulated", for investigations of how actors work to induce ignorance to preserve their power, entrench hierarchies, and otherwise further their interests. We also believe that the intentional use of secrecy to manage borders and migration can be documented and discerned through evidence. Additionally, we believe that through designing and executing research to do so, scholars will be better able to understand the ways actors seek to shape migration

capabilities and aspirations, the underlying social and governmental logics driving this, and how border and migration management evolves through time.

In developing this focus, we are influenced by Davies et al.'s (2023) work on the epistemic violence of states concealing border pushbacks. These scholars document deliberate efforts by states and intergovernmental bodies to keep secret certain knowledges and experiences of state-induced border violence, a phenomenon they term "epistemic borderwork" (Davies et al. 2023). In specifically representing states' efforts to keep knowledges of border violence secret, "epistemic borderwork" is an important and related but more narrowly circumscribed phenomenon than covert borderwork. Covert borderwork is used by states, citizens, and other non-state actors alike. It may be used to either secretly discourage and constrain migration or to secretly advocate for and enable migration and migrant agency. The empirical cases we present below analyses states, private firms, and intergovernmental agencies' covert borderwork to discourage potential irregular migrants. Yet an important counter to this is the covert borderwork of citizens, private firms, other non-state actors, and even states to facilitate migration and erase the borders that restrict migrants' access to forms of social, cultural, and economic citizenship in their host countries.

Astroturfing

In his examination of the US tobacco industry's attempts to keep secret the effects of cigarettes, Proctor (1995, 2008) documented the communication strategies the industry used to try to confuse the public. Our findings demonstrate similar efforts in migration information campaigns. Our analysis of EU and Australian campaigns demonstrates willful attempts to keep states' involvement in migration management obscured or secret through astroturfing tactics designed to make migration information campaigns appear as local, grassroots initiatives. Used in this way, the term "astroturfing" goes back to the mid-1980s when US Senator Lloyd Bentsen used it to describe a fake letter writing campaign initiated by corporate interests to influence him (Lits 2021). "Astroturfing" has come to refer to deceptive communications, public relations, and political activities to sway public opinion through manipulatively forging perceptions that the agenda has local origins and/or popular support.

Klotz (2007), for example, emphasises that astroturfing tactics choreograph the perception of local, spontaneous support where it does not authentically exist. Correspondingly, several studies have shown how astroturfing campaigns operate to conceal elite interests through deceptively "local" front organisations (Bsumek et al. 2014; Durkee 2017; Lits 2021; McNutt and Boland 2007; Mix and Waldo 2015). Astroturfing also can manifest through communications campaigns that lack a front organisation. This includes a diversity of communications strategies, from manipulating social media (bots, buying followers, faking identities/posts, etc.) to phony letter writing campaigns and capturing news media, to choreographed events, to paying phony protesters/counter-protesters (Keller et al. 2019; Lits 2021; Wright et al. 2014).

While astroturfing tactics are diverse, Walker (2014) argues they utilise at least one of three approaches: incentives, fraud, or masquerading. Through using incentives, astroturf campaigns offer participants material compensation or other forms of reward for their support, and/or threaten participants with detrimental consequences for not participating. An example of incentivising would be secretly paying people to participate in a protest march. Through using fraud, astroturf campaigns forward false claims. An example of fraud would be forging legally required signatures on a petition. Through masquerading, astroturf campaigns conceal their actual patrons' identities and fake popular, grassroots support to further an elite agenda. An example of masquerading would be creating a new or co-opting an existing "local NGO" as a front organisation to secretly forward an external agenda.

The Covert Borderwork in the Australian Government's and European Union's Migration Information Campaigns

In this section, we demonstrate how the EU and Australia have used astroturfed migration information campaigns as covert borderwork. Through our cases, we found evidence of masquerading and incentivising. We did not find evidence of fraud. The evidence presented below is drawn from research conducted individually by each author. We begin with the Australian case and then move to the EU one.

The Australian case is drawn from research conducted by Josh Watkins. The dataset is overwhelmingly comprised of primary source campaign materials released through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, as under the 2015 Border Force Act, Australia has required the government officials, consultants, and contractors involved with campaigns to sign non-disclosure agreements with potential prison time for those breaking secrecy provisions. The EU case is based on field research conducted by Julia Van Dessel between 2018 and 2022. It draws on approximately 100 semi-structured interviews carried out in Niamey, Dakar, and Brussels with actors responsible for funding, designing, and/or implementing EU migration campaigns in West Africa. Some interviews were conducted virtually during the COVID-19 period; this is always specified.

These distinct methodologies—FOIA disclosures and semi-structured interviews—are particularly well-suited to uncovering forms of covert borderwork. FOIA disclosures provide access to internal government materials not intended for public circulation, while interviews with implementers and policymakers can shed light on informal practices and the rationales behind strategic omissions in official narratives. Below, we show that despite Australian and EU campaigns targeting different audiences—asylum seekers in the Australian case and both asylum seekers and potential irregular migrants in the EU case—the EU and Australia employ similar astroturfing tactics of covert borderwork to obscure or conceal state involvement in migration information campaigns.

Australia's Astroturfed Migration Information Campaigns

The Australian government has used migration information campaigns to deter asylum seekers since 1994. Successive Australian governments have used campaigns to target forcibly displaced peoples in source and transit countries in the Asia-Pacific, Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. Governments have also run domestic campaigns targeting the "ethnic" communities in Australia associated with asylum-seeking (McNair Ingenuity Research 2013). Of the three approaches to astroturfing identified above, Australia's campaigns have utilised incentives and masquerading. These astroturfing tactics are used as covert borderwork designed to obscure or conceal the Australian Government's involvement.

Australia's Unbranded Ads. Within their campaigns, Australian governments have consistently used overt advertisements (Watkins 2017a). The majority of Australian-funded advertisements have featured government branding. The Australian government has seen branded advertisements as a means of "educating" potential asylum seekers about the government's tough anti-asylum-seeking policies (ACBPS 2010a, 2010b; Department of Home Affairs 2021). Yet some ads have not included the Australian government's logo or otherwise indicated that Australia was the sponsor (unbranded ads). For example, a leaflet campaign in Malaysia used unbranded leaflets to try to trick refugees into thinking they were from actual people smugglers, thus making them more likely to be read (Porter Novelli 2011).

A different example comes from an Australian campaign in Indonesia. This campaign was designed to discourage fishing communities from transporting refugees to Australia. The ads and other campaign materials featured either just the IOM's logo or, as in Figure 1, the IOM, Indonesian Ministry of Immigration, and Indonesian National Police's logos. Despite being Australian funded, approved, and designed in conjunction with the IOM and its subcontractors, campaign ads did not feature Australian government branding. While the Indonesian government

Figure 1: "I know smuggling illegal immigrants is wrong!"—Advertisement from an Australian-funded campaign in Indonesia lacking Australian government branding (source: IOM Indonesia 2014:5; reproduced here with permission)

did approve the campaign, Australia initiated, funded, and helped design and manage the campaign. It was an Australian campaign outsourced to the IOM with the objective of reducing asylum seeker arrivals to Australia. Thus, it was disingenuous, covert borderwork, not to feature the Australian government's logo or to further the idea that this was an Indonesian or even IOM campaign. Being a front to enable masquerading is a service the IOM specialises in offering to states. The IOM has been a front for the Australian government for years, running various anti-irregular migration activities and campaigns that the Australian government initiated, funded, helped plan, approved, and determined when to cease.

Australia's On-the-Ground Operatives. Australian campaigns have expanded beyond passive advertisements to include on-the-ground tactics of covert borderwork. As part of this direct engagement, the Australian government has used paid consultants, including the IOM and private firms, obscuring or concealing that this borderwork was being done on Australia's behalf. Additionally, the Australian government has utilised paid, or otherwise incentivised, local actors to facilitate unauthentic, choreographed, astroturfed forms of community engagement designed to discourage asylum-seeking migration.

Outsourced field research to determine potential migrants' motivations constitutes one dimension of this covert borderwork. The Australian government commissions research in source and transit countries to determine who influences potential asylum seekers' migration decisions (ACBPS 2010a, 2011; Department of Home Affairs 2022; Watkins 2025). The goal of this research has been to determine whom potential asylum seekers trust so that they can be covertly instrumentalised as assets, technologies of government, in anti-migration campaigns. This covert borderwork incentivises trusted community members, local organisations, and authorities to spread anti-migration sentiment while concealing or obscuring that they are doing so on Australia's behalf.

While it is impossible for us to know what contractors in the field have told potential irregular migrants, official documentation indicates that contractors conducting research for Australia in source and transit countries have not always (perhaps as a practice never) disclosed that they are gathering information for Australia (IOM 2010; IOM Indonesia 2014; IPSOS Indonesia 2012; Porter Novelli 2010, 2011; Wise Strategic Communication 2010). For example, in 2010 Australia contracted Wise Strategic Communication to gather information about the persecuted Hazara minority group in South Asia. In Afghanistan, Wise hired local Hazaras to conduct interviews and focus groups to "minimize any potential distrust" among Hazara participants (Wise Strategic Communication 2010:5). In both interviews and focus groups, these contractors used the following statement to introduce the project:

> Good morning/afternoon/evening my name is…and I work for an independent public-opinion research institute. I am one of the members of the research team which is studying the relationship between media and people's knowledge about immigration. (Wise Strategic Communication 2010:56, 59)

Note that per this script, Wise failed to disclose that they were conducting this research for Australia, nor is there evidence that it was disclosed that the results of this research would be shared with the Australian government. Identifying solely as an "independent public-opinion research institute" is a masquerading tactic concealing Australia's involvement. Documents describing similar research conducted for the Australian government in Indonesia and Malaysia also show no evidence of disclosure (IOM 2010; IPSOS Indonesia 2012; Porter Novelli 2010, 2011). It seems the government has different rules regarding transparency when it comes to Australians, however, as the scripts from interviews with Australians included disclosures that the research is being conducted for the government (McNair Ingenuity Research 2013:86).

Covert Messengers. To implement campaigns, the Australian government has consistently used the IOM, private firms, local NGOs, influential local community organisations and leaders to mask or obscure Australian involvement. As Walters (2021:120) argues, outsourcing migration management creates a "patchy and fragmented regime" of public visibility as it introduces corporate secrecy and commercial confidentiality into border control. Indeed, significant portions of campaign documentation released by Australia are redacted under the logic of corporate competitiveness and confidentiality (Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2016:4–5). Yet outsourcing also enables on-the-ground covert borderwork that conceals or obscures Australia's role in their own campaigns. In Malaysia, for example, Australia has used NGOs and schools to disseminate anti-migration messages to refugees, including explicitly targeting refugee children as conduits to their parents (ACBPS 2010c; Porter Novelli 2010). Contractors working for Australia referred to this as "direct grassroots engagement" (Porter Novelli 2011:27).

Australia's covert borderwork is deeply reliant on the IOM. The use of IOM "community liaison officers", particularly, but not exclusively, in Indonesia, has been another tactic to obscure and/or conceal Australia's role in spreading anti-migration ideas. Australia contracts the IOM to employ community liaison officers. These officers work for the IOM, yet Australia funds these programmes. Officers operate in source and transit countries at Australia's expense to "raise the level of understanding and awareness among … [potential migrants] of Australian Government policy and its implications for irregular migration" (Department of Home Affairs 2013). Again, it is not possible for us to know what these officers have told potential migrants. Yet given they represent the IOM, this at least obscures, if not conceals, Australia's role in using community liaison officers to spread anti-migration messaging.

Messengers' Secret Motive, Money. Incentives are another tactic of Australia's covert border work. As mentioned above, the Australian government has consistently sought to target, influence, and utilise key influencers of potential migrants and other key stakeholders in targeted locales as "credible messengers"

(Watkins 2025). One way Australia has operationalised this is through monetarily incentivising their participation in campaigns (AMCOR 2016; IOM 2010). This includes at least local government officials, community members, community leaders, and religious figures (AMCOR 2016; IOM 2010). The IOM-run campaign in Indonesia designed to deter fishing communities from aiding refugees, referenced above, provides an instructive example. Despite being funded by the Australian government, this campaign's incentive scheme was wholly facilitated by the IOM. The list of local peoples paid or otherwise compensated to support and help facilitate this campaign is long, mobilised under the logic that it was vital to use "members of the community" to make "communities feel they were driving the agenda, fostering ownership and encouraging long term community support for key messages" (IOM 2010:3).

Firstly, Indonesian government officials were paid to take part in anti-people smuggling workshops (IOM 2010). They also participated in pre-recorded "TV dialogues" produced to appear as authentic interviews with independent journalists (documentation does not indicate whether the officials or journalists were directly paid for this specific activity). Figure 2 shows a scene from one "dialogue". Note the campaign slogan, "I know smuggling illegal immigrants is wrong!" is on the right-hand side of the poster behind the speakers. These "dialogues" were described by the Australian government as creating "awareness and develop[ing] buy-in using the prestige of government leaders" (ACBPS 2011:8).

Additionally, the IOM stood up a "local champions" programme. These "local champions" were residents of the target locations who were paid to support and help implement campaign activities in their communities. Local champions received a monthly payment of US$110 plus US$55 for "communications costs" (IOM 2010:4). The IOM described this as taking a "grassroots approach", utilising "[p]eople-to-people community programs rooted [in] the understanding and acceptance of key messages" (i.e. anti-migration messages) (IOM 2010:iii).

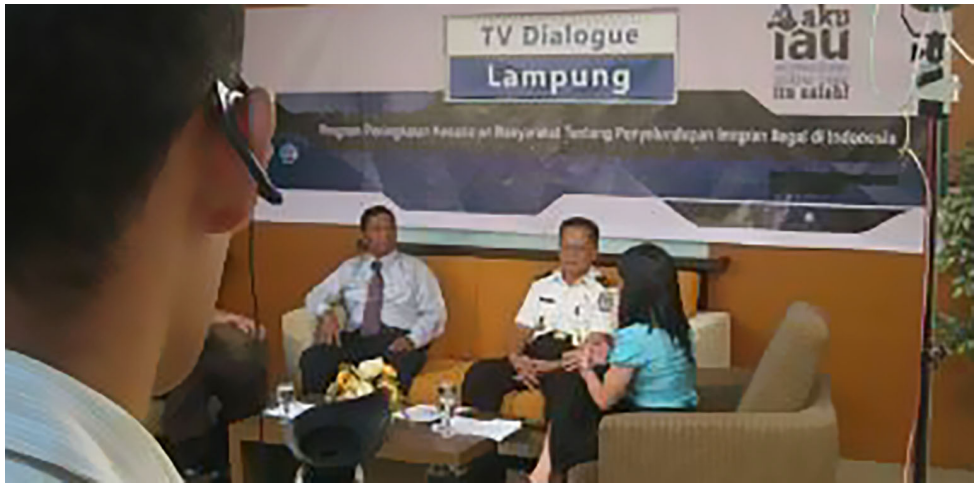

Figure 2: "Behind the scenes" image from an astroturfed "TV dialogue" (source: IOM Indonesia 2014:5; reproduced here with permission)

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of this covertly sponsored, astroturfed, fake "grassroots approach" was the incentivising of local religious leaders to develop and spread religious-themed messages designed to securitise refugees. The key focus of the campaign was, in fact, associating asylum-seeking with immorality and criminality (Watkins 2020). Over 100 religious leaders were paid "honorariums" to workshop anti-people smuggling themed messages, prayers, and sermons (IOM 2010). Ultimately, the IOM rejected these and hired external agents to produce sermons for sermon booklets (Islamic and Christian) distributed in the target regions (IOM 2010:66). Using these sermons and other IOM-provided materials, the incentivised local religious leaders did, however, deliver anti-people smuggling and asylum-seeking prayers and sermons to their congregations (IOM 2010).

The European Union's Astroturfed Migration Information Campaigns

The EU and its member states have funded migration information campaigns since the late 1990s. In the mid-2010s, the European Commission began experimenting with new approaches to migration information campaigns in Africa, with the EU Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs, and Citizenship declaring in 2015 that "bottom up" campaigns have more impact than "institutionalised" campaigns (European Commission 2015). Below, we show how EU campaigns in West Africa have used incentives and masquerading to fake "bottom up" grassroots authenticity. We focus on three actors who were hired to design and implement EU campaigns and who deliberately tried to conceal or obscure their origin —the UNHCR, the IOM, and Seefar. Like Australia, the EU and its member states have also used unbranded ads to obscure the source of their anti-migration messages. The sections below will not focus on the content of ads, however. Rather, we focus on the strategies adopted by the UNHCR, IOM, and Seefar to facilitate covert borderwork that embeds state messaging within seemingly local initiatives, astroturfed forms of choreographed community engagement.

UNHCR, "Telling the Real Story". In 2014, the European Commission launched "*Telling the Real Story*", a pilot campaign contracted to the UNHCR to deter asylum seekers from Ethiopia and Sudan (European Commission 2014). For this campaign, the UNHCR adopted a strategy that minimised its own visibility in favour of promoting testimonies from asylum seekers about the abuses and hardships they faced en route to Europe. While all testimonials were voluntary, a UNHCR informant shared that there were internal concerns that compensating vulnerable refugees for their dramatic stories might expose the organisation to criticism (Virtual interview, April 2021).

The campaign also relied on refugee "community leaders", volunteers recruited in refugee camps to raise awareness among their peers. These volunteers received about $70 a month "to cover for water, if there's any transportation need, and because they have to contact quite a lot on their phones…" (Virtual interview,

April 2021). As refugees are not formally allowed to work, this sum was not described as a salary, though it served as a significant incentive to participate in the campaign. Another key factor was refugees' asymmetrical dependency on the UNHCR, which encouraged collaboration in hopes of gaining material or symbolic benefits—especially access to UNHCR resettlement programmes.

In addition to using incentives, "Telling the Real Story" adopted a masquerading approach by deliberately minimising the visibility of UNHCR branding in the campaign material. The UNHCR employee quoted above explains:

> I'd say the "peer-to-peer" approach started really … because we needed to be sure that there would be some sense of ownership from the community, and that the project was not perceived as another humanitarian or UNHCR speaking to refugees. So even if you look at the website, there's very little UNHCR branding, and the communities actually identify it, they do know it's a UNHCR project, but they don't identify it as UNHCR in that sense. (Virtual interview, April 2021)

By minimising UNHCR branding and having its messages embodied by refugees, the UNHCR actively sought to present the campaign as an endogenous grassroots initiative, obscuring the UNHCR and the EU's role. A follow-up report from the European Commission validated this astroturfing strategy, arguing that it allowed "*Telling the Real Story*" to be perceived as "an unbiased platform for refugees to share their stories. Without the perception of being a deterrence measure or harbouring any political agenda" (European Commission 2020:23–24). This deliberate concealment of the EU's interest in reducing asylum claims exemplifies a form of *covert borderwork* in which migration control strategies are hidden behind local actors.

IOM, "Migrants as Messengers". As with the IOM's Australian-funded campaigns, the use of fronts, co-opting of local actors, and other masquerading tactics are central features of the IOM's EU and EU member state-funded campaigns in Africa. This is perhaps most notable in West Africa with the IOM's flagship "Migrants as Messengers" campaign. Originally launched in Senegal in 2017, this campaign attempted to deflate migration aspirations through recruiting voluntarily returned migrants to share with their communities the hardships they faced while attempting to reach Europe irregularly. An IOM employee in Senegal explained showcasing returnees as a strategy to conceal the IOM's role and its sponsor, the Dutch government:

> So, we can do activities, we can make videos, we can make posters without even putting IOM on them if we want … The donor is never mentioned, never displayed, there's no logo … People work on it for three days without even knowing who the donor is! (Translated from French, Dakar, September 2021)

Like the UNHCR case detailed above, the IOM compensated the returnees with small daily allowances (i.e. reimbursement of transport, food, and accommodation on working days) rather than a formal salary, a practice that led to considerable dissatisfaction among the returnees (Marino et al. 2024). Nonetheless, as with refugees

reliant on UNHCR support, returnees were also incentivised to participate in the campaign by their desire to please IOM officials who were in charge of allocating their reintegration assistance after supervising their voluntary return.

As with their work for Australia in the Asia-Pacific, the IOM also uses fronts to facilitate campaign evaluations in West Africa. To research the effects of campaign materials on migration aspirations, the IOM recruited two Senegalese marketing agencies to approach young people in the streets of Dakar and invite those with migration aspirations to screenings of the campaign's anti-migration film. As Figure 3 shows, the recruitment materials for the study failed to disclose their actual sponsors, using Senegalese firms as fronts to conceal the involvement of the IOM as well as the Dutch and UK funding behind it.

The use of fronts, masquerading, and other practices of concealment is not uncritically supported by all within the IOM. An employee of the IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC) expressed regret over the lack of transparency in both the execution and evaluation of "Migrants as Messengers":

> Ethically, it is an issue. I mean, people should have the opportunity to find out who's paying the bill. [Removing institutional logos] was mainly a decision taken for efficiency. Because obviously, if people think that there are some institutional interests associated with this, then they're less likely to believe what they're hearing, even though what they're hearing might be true. But I think ethically this isn't a good situation … In academia you have to go through a sort of ethics review before doing a study. You have to get ethical clearance. And in most of the international affairs world, you don't. And that is a problem where, with our studies, with our data collection, I was always asking, "Well, where do I go with this for ethical clearance?". Somebody should look at this that is not me and say, "Should we do this?". And there is no one. And it's a real problem. (Virtual interview, January 2022)

As the Australian case mentioned above illustrates, some states appear to apply different standards of disclosure when conducting research on their own citizens, while showing a willingness to use migrant source and transit countries as "living laboratories" (Tilley 2011) for testing their campaigns. If campaign funders do not require adherence to ethical standards, and such standards are not mandated —or are weakly enforced—by the countries where the research is conducted, it becomes unclear who will hold intergovernmental organisations accountable to common principles of ethical human subject research. This lack of oversight is further compounded when implementation is outsourced not only to intergovernmental organisations but also to private actors. As the case below shows, states' outsourcing of border and migration management to private firms enables covert borderwork to be hidden within webs of subsidiaries and subcontractors, making states involvement even more opaque and difficult to trace.

Seefar, "The Migrant Project". Seefar (previously known as Farsight) describes itself as a "social enterprise" dedicated to "transform[ing] the lives of vulnerable people" (Seefar 2024). Since its founding in 2014, Seefar has become deeply

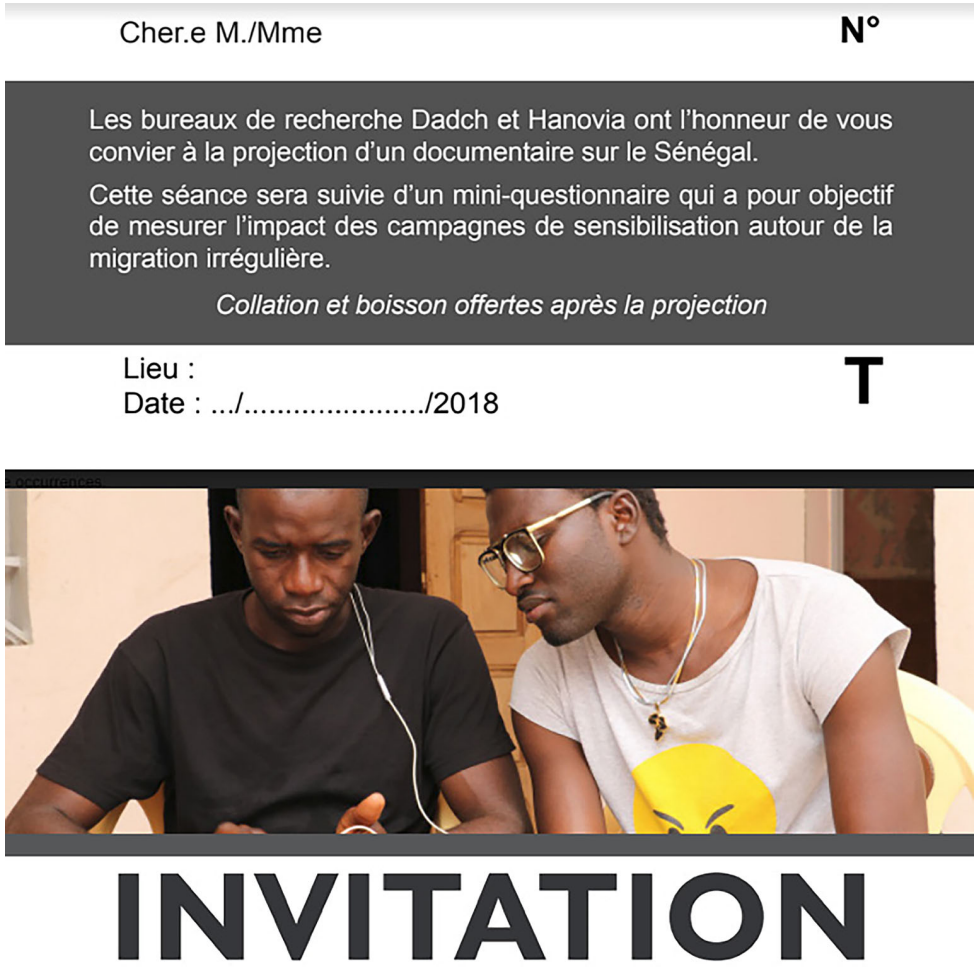

Figure 3: "The Dadch and Hanovia research offices are pleased to invite you to the screening of a documentary on Senegal. This screening will be followed by a mini-questionnaire designed to measure the impact of awareness-raising campaigns on irregular migration. Snacks and drinks available after the screening"—Invitation cards for the event displayed in the IOM impact evaluation report of "Migrants as Messengers" (source: Dunsch et al. 2019:21; reproduced here with permission)

involved in the design and implementation of migration information campaigns. Over the past decade, the EU and its member states have funded Seefar's campaigns in several African countries, notably in Niger (2018) and Senegal (2021). Seefar's founder and director—who previously worked for the Australian Department of Home Affairs—has developed a signature approach to migration campaigns. The similarities between this approach and the tactics employed by both Australia and the IOM, tactics such as the use of "local champions", "community mobilisers", and "community liaisons", are striking. As with the strategies described above, Seefar relies on "*word-of-mouth counselling*" delivered by agents

recruited from within potential migrants' communities. Seefar focuses on establishing trust between these salaried counsellors, who are typically influential local figures, and the potential migrants they are paid to discourage from migrating.

In addition to employing paid counsellors, Seefar masquerades its involvement in campaigns by operating through multiple sub-identities, such as "On The Move" or "The Migrant Project" (Dearden 2022). These fronts allow it to conceal its own role: for example, "The Migrant Project" website does not disclose any link to Seefar, instead portraying the initiative as if it were an independent NGO. The "Who We Are" section on the campaign website reads:

> The Migrant Project aims to provide accurate and complete information on irregular migration, thereby enabling migrants and potential migrants to make informed decisions. We provide facts and current news on migration in multiple languages, for those at home or on the journey. We use channels that are easiest to access and most influential among likely migrant communities. That includes phone lines where migrants can talk to a counsellor in their own language; a website optimised for browsing on a smartphone; social media; and informational events hosted in local communities. The Migrant Project is active on the ground in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe. (The Migrant Project 2025)

Seefar also paid local media outlets and communication-focused NGOs in Niger and Senegal to represent its campaigns on the ground. These partnerships enabled Seefar's campaigns to appear as local initiatives, and to leverage existing networks for favourable media coverage. In its "3E Impact Guide" dedicated to "Ethical, Engaged, and Effective" migration campaigns, Seefar promotes the use of undisclosed fronts for campaigns as a means of covertly engendering a sense of local, grassroots, support:

> 3E Impact prioritises helping local television, radio and online news outlets to broadcast stories consistent with campaign messages, unattributed to the campaign. These messages are more influential than paid-for media advertisements, because they are delivered by trusted sources in a factual way. In practice, this involves training journalists on the issue of irregular migration, pitching stories and participating in interviews and talk shows. (Seefar 2018:41)

Seefar's masquerading strategy allows the firm to conceal not just its own role behind campaigns, but also its governmental sponsors. This has proven particularly popular among EU member states, who regularly require their campaigns be strictly unbranded. A Seefar employee explains:

> Member states are quite careful, and this has always been one of the main things that has been made clear from the donors, from the start, that they don't want any branding … Of course there is branding, but it's never connected to any country, European country, and some donors … have been quite insistent and … insisting very strongly that there is no way that it's traced, like the campaign being implemented in the field is traced back to them as implementers. (Virtual interview, February 2021)

While individual EU member states have long taken advantage of the masquerading opportunities offered by Seefar, such discretion was not always possible for

the EU itself. In an interview, two representatives from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs—who have worked with Seefar for their campaigns—expressed frustration that their repeated calls for unbranded campaigns were often ignored by the European Commission:

> Yes we raised it many times … That's why they changed it.
>
> We raised it with the Commission, because we actually participate and we co-finance a campaign under AMIF … And we saw at one point that one requirement was that the [EU] logo would be on all the campaign items. And we said, "Why are you doing this?" We know that this doesn't work, and this is actually counterproductive … And up to today, I don't really know what they have done with it … And the other side of that is of course that people can ask, "OK you give this message to people, but you don't tell them who is financing it, so you're not being honest". So, you know, if they really ask, in the end, they should be able to know who finances it. (The Hague, January 2020)

Although we cannot verify whether potential migrants targeted by unbranded campaigns can inquire about the funders behind these initiatives, this extract indicates a clear effort to align EU-level practices with covert communication strategies. However, unlike its individual member states, the EU is supposed to adhere to strict rules regarding its external communication. These state that "All recipients of EU funding have a general obligation to acknowledge the origin and ensure the visibility of any EU funding received", which is done through the systematic use of the EU flag (European Commission 2022). Exemptions are only permitted for exceptional situations, for example, in conflict zones or during election periods. Although the formal rules remain unchanged, a Commission representative revealed that a new informal exemption has been adopted internally: concealing funding sources by omitting the EU logo in migration information campaigns (virtual interview, February 2021). Making potential migrants unaware of the sponsors and the underlying anti-migration agenda has therefore become an EU-endorsed strategy, now included in a "best practices" guide commissioned by the EU and authored by none other than Seefar. One of the official recommendations reads:

> You should not brand your campaign with the name of the donors [such as governments] and/or international organisations if possible. Instead, your campaign will benefit from a standalone brand that is trusted in the communities. (European Commission 2021:75)

Thus, masquerading and the use of incentivised members of potential migrants and refugees' local communities have been normalised in the EU as necessary practices to win the trust of the target audience. Indeed, as the quote above indicates, campaign funders now require their campaigns' front organisations and agents conceal, or at the very least obscure, the EU and EU member states' involvement. The goal of this "best practice" is to manage migration through astroturfing, a form of covert borderwork in which migration control is carried out by secretly disguising state interventions as seemingly grassroots initiatives.

Conclusion

Above, we demonstrated how Australia, the EU, and EU member states employ astroturfing tactics to deceptively lend grassroots authenticity to their anti-migration campaigns in the Global South. This involves outsourcing campaign implementation to fronts such as intergovernmental organisations and private firms that deliberately conceal, obscure, or otherwise minimise the involvement of state and supranational funders. Across both empirical cases, we identified the use of two astroturfing techniques.

The first is incentivisation. Australia's campaigns use "local champions", "community mobilisers", and "community liaisons" who were remunerated to disseminate deterrent messages designed by the state, an approach mirrored in Seefar's use of paid "word-of-mouth counsellors". In other EU-funded campaigns in Africa, refugees and returned migrants were provided with non-salaried "allowances", while operating within structures of asymmetrical dependency with the UNHCR or IOM, further blurring the ethical lines surrounding their "voluntary" participation.

The second astroturfing technique is masquerading, the use of fronts, unbranded and deceptively branded campaigns. Australia has long deployed fronts in its campaigns, a practice European funders have adopted through hiring private actors like Seefar. Seefar was shown to create standalone campaign identities that obscure or conceal Seefar's role and that of their sponsors. This strategy initially seduced EU member states and was later formally endorsed by the European Commission: the EU's official "best practices" guide now advises against using donor and international organisation branding, effectively institutionalising masquerading as a communication policy for migration information campaigns.

Despite their overlaps, which also reflect a transnational circulation of migration information campaign norms, Australia and the EU exhibit differences in institutional constraints and degrees of transparency. As a sovereign actor with a centralised migration control apparatus, Australia enjoys greater autonomy in conducting its campaigns abroad. In contrast, the EU's supranational character generates tensions between its formal commitments to transparency and the covert tactics employed in its campaigns. Yet the internal adoption of exemptions to transparency rules, which now permits unbranded communication strategies, underscores a widening gap between official norms and actual practices.

The covert borderwork we described in this study portends to another gap as well—the gap between states' overt practices of border and migrant management, which shape most public knowledge and debate about migration policy, and the totality of tactics states are deploying to govern migration. Seemingly, all borderwork becomes known to some audience at some point. As we have shown, covert borderwork is strategically designed to control which audiences become aware of what borderwork, when, and under what circumstances. The evidence of covert borderwork detailed here, and in the growing literature on secrecy in border and migration management outlined above, thus further clarifies ways that borders are "sites of epistemic struggle" (Davies et al. 2023:169).

The datasets used in this study trace covert borderwork in migration information campaigns back to the late 2000s. Yet surely states have long adopted techniques of covert borderwork to conceal certain policies and practices from particular audiences, and it is likely this has only been furthered through many Western states' growing embrace of privatisation and outsourcing. Through the EU case, we were able to demonstrate shifting rules and norms around transparency, yet we are unable to determine if this reflects a growing trend of transparency backsliding in states' migration management. Only as opaque and clandestine practices of covert borderwork continue to be uncovered will we come to understand how and for how long actors have sought to govern migration flows through information flows, how migration and borders are governed through spectacle and secrecy, knowledge and ignorance alike.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their help improving this article. We also would like to thank the Managing Editor and Editor for their aid and support.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

References

ACBPS (2010a) "Minute Paper—People Smuggling: New Direction in Strategic Communications." Australian Customs and Border Protection Service https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/foi/files/2011-2014/2012-018673_Document02_Released.pdf (last accessed 9 October 2025)

ACBPS (2010b) "Maritime People Smuggling Strategic Communications Strategy 2011/2012 and 2012/2013." Australian Customs and Border Protection Service https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/foi/files/2011-2014/2012-018673_Document03_Released.pdf (last accessed 9 October 2025)

ACBPS (2010c) "People Smuggling Public Information Campaign Status, 1 December 2010: Communications to Dissuade Afghan and Sri Lankan Irregular Immigrants from Using People Smugglers." Australian Customs and Border Protection Service https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/foi/files/2011-2014/2012-018673_Document10_Released.pdf (last accessed 9 October 2025)

ACBPS (2011) "Strategic Assessment of Counter People Smuggling Communications Activities, November 2011." Australian Customs and Border Protection Service https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/foi/files/2011-2014/2012-018673_Document04_Released.pdf (last accessed 9 October 2025)

AMCOR (2016) "Second Interim Report." Association of Mobilizing Community Resources https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/foi/files/2021/fa-200900646-document-released.PDF (last accessed 9 October 2025)

Andrijasevic R and Walters W (2010) The International Organization for Migration and the international government of borders. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28 (6):977–999

Aradau C and Canzutti L (2025) Border agnotologies: Power, technology, resistance. *Geopolitics* 30(3):1009–1027

Aradau C and Perret S (2022) The politics of (non-)knowledge at Europe's borders: Errors, fakes, and subjectivity. *Review of International Studies* 48(3):405–424
Ardalan S (2025) US border externalisation through funding: Implications for the right to seek asylum and refugee protection in the United States. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 23(1):135–146
Blitzer J (2018) Donald Trump, the migrant caravan, and the manufactured crisis at the US border. *The New Yorker* 14 November https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/donald-trump-the-migrant-caravan-and-a-manufactured-crisis-at-the-us-border (last accessed 9 October 2025)
Borrelli L M (2025) Ignorance as political instrument? Integration discourses on migrant welfare recipients in Switzerland. *Geopolitics* 30(3):1150–1172
Boswell C and Chabal E (2023) *States of Ignorance: Governing Irregular Migration in Western Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
Brekke J P and Thorbjørnsrud K (2020) Communicating borders: Governments deterring asylum seekers through social media campaigns. *Migration Studies* 8(1):43–65
Bsumek P K, Schneider J, Schwarze S and Peeples J (2014) Corporate ventriloquism: Corporate advocacy, the coal industry, and the appropriation of voice. In J Peeples and S Depoe (eds) *Voice and Environmental Communication* (pp 21–43). London: Palgrave Macmillan
Coddington K (2024) The enforcement infrastructure of public information campaigns: Australia's No Way campaign, colonial logics, and the production of value. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 42(2):211–233
Davies T, Isakjee A and Dhesi S (2017) Violent inaction: The necropolitical experience of refugees in Europe. *Antipode* 49(5):1263–1284
Davies T, Isakjee A and Obradovic-Wochnik J (2023) Epistemic borderwork: Violent push-backs, refugees, and the politics of knowledge at the EU border. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 113(1):169–188
De Genova N (2013) Spectacles of migrant "illegality": The scene of exclusion, the obscene of inclusion. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36(7):1180–1198
Dearden L (2022) Company that advised Afghans not to flee before Taliban takeover was previously paid £700k by UK Government. *The Independent* 2 January https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/afghan-asylum-seekers-uk-websites-seefar-b1981905.html (last accessed 9 October 2025)
Department of Home Affairs (2013) "Joint Agency Task Force, Operation Sovereign Borders—IOM Contracted Activities in Indonesia." https://www.righttoknow.org.au/request/documents_from_previous_foi_requ (last accessed 9 October 2025)
Department of Home Affairs (2021) "Operation Sovereign Borders Enduring Talking Points." https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/foi/files/2022/fa-210900999-document-released.PDF (last accessed 9 October 2025)
Department of Home Affairs (2022) "Request for Quote—Australian Government Anti-People Smuggling Communication Campaign, July 2022–June 2023." https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/foi/files/2023/fa-230501395-document-released.PDF (last accessed 9 October 2025)
Department of Immigration and Border Protection (2016) "Decision Record." https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/foi/files/2016/20160119_2014-037309_Decision_Record.pdf (last accessed 9 October 2025)
Dunsch F A, Tjaden J and Quiviger W (2019) "Migrants as Messengers: The Impact of Peer-to-Peer Communication on Potential Migrants in Senegal—Impact Evaluation Report." International Organization for Migration https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/migrants_as_messengers_senegal.pdf (last accessed 9 October 2025)
Durkee M J (2017) Astroturf activism. *Stanford Law Review* 69(1):201–268
European Commission (2014) "Annex to the Commission Implementing Decision Concerning the Adoption of the Work Programme for 2014 and the Financing for Union Actions and Emergency Assistance within the Framework of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund—C(2014) 5652 Final." https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/

download/1832948d-ea94-4a61-bbeb-378c3b5f95c6_en?filename=Revised%20annual%20work%20programme%202014_en.pdf (last accessed 9 October 2025)
European Commission (2015) "Keynote speech of Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos at the first European Migration Forum, 27 January." https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_15_3781 (last accessed 9 October 2025)
European Commission (2020) "Factsheets—Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF)." EC Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-04/Compilation_AMIF.pdf (last accessed 18 December 2024)
European Commission (2021) "Study on Best Practices in Irregular Migration Awareness-Raising Campaigns—Final Report, written by Seefar, April 2021." EC Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/e282eddd-f985-11eb-b520-01aa75ed71a1/language-en (last accessed 9 October 2025)
European Commission (2022) "10 Ways for Recipients of EU Funding to Communicate and Ensure EU Visibility." https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/managing-your-project/communicating-and-raising-eu-visibility_en (last accessed 9 October 2025)
FitzGerald D S (2019) *Refuge beyond Reach: How Rich Democracies Repel Asylum Seekers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
Gammeltoft-Hansen T (2017) Refugee policy as "negative nation branding": The case of Denmark and the Nordics. In K Fischer and H Mouritzen (eds) *Danish Foreign Policy Yearbook* (pp 99–125). Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies
Gazzotti L, Mouthaan M and Natter K (2022) Embracing complexity in "Southern" migration governance. *Territory, Politics, Governance* 11(4):625–637
Ghezelbash D (2022) Technology and countersurveillance: Holding governments accountable for refugee externalization policies. *Globalizations* https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2022.2051274
Glouftsios G (2024a) Making pushbacks public: Secrecy, material witnesses, and devices of dis/appearance. *Security Dialogue* 55(1):3–21
Glouftsios G (2024b) Performing secrecy: Hiding and obfuscation in Frontex's pushbacks scandal. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 50(4):727–747
Heller C (2014) Perception management: Deterring potential migrants through information campaigns. *Global Media and Communication* 10(3):303–318
IOM (2010) "Final Activities Report—Public Information Campaign to Curb Irregular Migration and People Smuggling in Indonesia." International Organization for Migration https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/foi/files/2011-2014/2012-018673_Document05_Released.pdf (last accessed 9 October 2025)
IOM Indonesia (2014) "Combatting People Smuggling in 2013." International Organization for Migration Indonesia https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/migrated_files/Country/docs/IOM-Indonesia-Newsletter-for-January-2014.pdf (last accessed 9 October 2025)
IPSOS Indonesia (2012) "Integrated Report on People Smuggling to Australia No. 1310175: Qualitative and Quantitative Report." https://www.righttoknow.org.au/request/2693/response/7205/attach/2/2014%20037309%20Documents%20Released%20combined%20batches%20Part2.pdf?cookie_passthrough=1 (last accessed 9 October 2025)
Jinkang A, Cappi V and Musarò P (2023) "Back way" migration to Europe: The role of journalists in disseminating information campaigns in The Gambia. *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 38(6):901–918
Keller F B, Schoch D, Stier S and Yang J (2019) Political astroturfing on Twitter: How to coordinate a disinformation campaign. *Political Communication* 37(2):256–280
Klotz R J (2007) Internet campaigning for grassroots and astroturf support. *Social Science Computer Review* 25(1):3–12
Kosnick K (2014) Mediating migration: New roles for (mass) media. *Inmedia* 5 https://doi.org/10.4000/inmedia.761

Lindberg A, Lundberg A, Rundqvist E and Häythiö S (2022) Governing through ignorance: Swedish authorities' treatment of detained and non-deported migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Feminist Legal Studies* 30:309–329.
Lits B (2021) Exploring astroturf lobbying in the EU: The case of responsible energy citizen coalition. *European Policy Analysis* 7(1):226–239
Maâ A, Van Dessel J and Vammen I M S (2023a) Can migrants do the (border)work? Conflicting dynamics and effects of "peer-to-peer" intermediation in North and West Africa. *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 38(6):995–1013
Maâ A, Van Dessel J and Van Neste-Gottignies A (2023b) Information directed towards migrants and the (un)making of borders: An interdisciplinary perspective between countries of origin, transit, and destination. *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 38(6):895–900
Marino R, Schapendonk J and Lietaert I (2024) The moral economy of voice within IOM's awareness-raising industry: Gambian returnees and migrants as messengers. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 50(6):1355–1370
Matera M, Tubakovic T and Murray P (2023) Is Australia a model for the UK? A critical assessment of parallels of cruelty in refugee externalization policies. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 36(2):271–293
McNair Ingenuity Research (2013) "Campaign Evaluation 'By Boat, No Visa'—Final Report of Findings prepared for Department of Immigration and Citizenship." https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/foi/files/2011-2014/FA140100210.pdf (last accessed 9 October 2025)
McNutt J and Boland K (2007) Astroturf, technology, and the future of community mobilization: Implications for nonprofit theory. *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* 34(3):165–178
Mica A, Horolets A, Pawlak M and Kubicki P (2021) *Ignorance and Change: Anticipatory Knowledge and the European Refugee Crisis*. London: Routledge
Mix T L and Waldo K G (2015) Know(ing) your power: Risk society, astroturf campaigns, and the battle over the Red Rock coal-fired plant. *The Sociological Quarterly* 56(1):125–151
Morgenstern S (2024) How do information campaigns influence migration decisions? *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 11(3):314–326
Musarò P (2019) Aware migrants: The role of information campaigns in the management of migration. *European Journal of Communication* 34(6):629–640
Nieuwenhuys C and Pécoud A (2007) Human trafficking, information campaigns, and strategies of migration control. *American Behavioral Scientist* 50(12):1674–1695
Oeppen C (2016) "Leaving Afghanistan! Are you sure?": European efforts to deter potential migrants through information campaigns. *Human Geography* 9(2):57–68.
Olivares J (2025) Human rights groups rebuke Kristi Noem's visit to El Salvador prison: "Political theater". *The Guardian* 27 March https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/27/kristi-noem-el-salvador-prison-visit-trump-admin (last accessed 9 October 2025)
Ostrand N and Statham P (2022) Liaison officers as influential "immigration risk" brokers in visa policy implementation: Intermediaries across institutional and national borders. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48(17):3985–4009
Paynter E and Riva S (2024) Performing border externalisation: Media deterrence campaigns and neoliberal belonging. *Geopolitics* 29(4):1272–1296
Pécoud A (2010) Informing migrants to manage migration? An analysis of IOM's information campaigns. In M Geiger and A Pécoud (eds) *The Politics of International Migration Management* (pp 184–201). London: Palgrave Macmillan
Pécoud A (2015) *Depoliticising Migration: Global Governance and International Migration Narratives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan
Perret S (2025) Violent ends for violent devices? Non-knowledge and the "unreflexive" practices of EU's border security design. *Geopolitics* 30(3):1125–1149
Porter Novelli (2010) "Malaysian Public Information Campaign—Interim Report." https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/foi/files/2011-2014/2012-018673_Document13_Released.pdf (last accessed 9 October 2025)

Porter Novelli (2011) "Malaysian Public Information Campaign—Post-Implementation Report." https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/foi/files/2011-2014/2012-018673_Document12_Released.pdf (last accessed 9 October 2025)
Proctor R N (1995) *Cancer Wars: How Politics Shapes What We Know and Don't Know about Cancer*. New York: Basic Books
Proctor R N (2008) Agnotology: A missing term to describe the cultural production of ignorance (and its study). In R N Proctor and L Schiebinger (eds) *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (pp 1–36). Stanford: Stanford University Press
Rodriguez A L (2019) European attempts to govern African youths by raising awareness of the risks of migration: Ethnography of an encounter. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45(5):735–751
Rumford C (2008) Citizens and borderwork in Europe. *Space and Polity* 12(1):1–12
Scheel S and Ustek-Spilda F (2019) The politics of expertise and ignorance in the field of migration management. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37(4):663–681
Seefar (2018) "3E Impact: Ethical, Engaged and Effective—Running Communications on Irregular Migration from Kos to Kandahar." https://3e-impact.org/ (last accessed 18 December 2024)
Seefar (2025) "Our Story.". https://seefar.org/our-story/ (last accessed 20 October 2025)
Sneed T (2025) How Trump calling immigration an "invasion" could help him stretch the law. *CNN* 31 January https://edition.cnn.com/2025/01/31/politics/immigration-invasion-trump (last accessed 9 October 2025)
Solis G (2023) Border agents destroy water and food left for people crossing border illegally. *KPBS* 21 April https://www.kpbs.org/news/border-immigration/2023/04/21/border-agents-destroy-water-food-people-crossing-border-illegally (last accessed 9 October 2025)
The Migrant Project (2025) "Who We Are." https://www.themigrantproject.org/about-us/ (last accessed 9 October 2025)
Tilley H (2011) *Africa as a Living Laboratory: Empire, Development, and the Problem of Scientific Knowledge, 1870–1950*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
Turnbull T (2023) How Australia wrote the "stop the boats" playbook. *BBC News* 18 March https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-64898507 (last accessed 9 October 2025)
Vammen I M S (2022) "When migrants become messengers": Affective borderwork and aspiration management in Senegal. *Geopolitics* 27(5):1410–1429
Vammen I M S and Kohl K S (2023) Affective borderwork: Governance of unwanted migration to Europe through emotions. *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 38(6):919–938
Van Dessel J (2021) Externalization through "awareness-raising": The border spectacle of EU migration information campaigns in Niger. *Territory, Politics, Governance* 11(4):749–769
Walker E T (2014) *Grassroots for Hire: Public Affairs Consultants in American Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
Walters W (2021) *State Secrecy and Security: Refiguring the Covert Imaginary*. New York: Routledge
Watkins J (2017a) Australia's irregular migration information campaigns: Border externalization, spatial imaginaries, and extraterritorial subjugation. *Territory, Politics, Governance* 5 (3):282–303
Watkins J (2017b) Bordering borderscapes: Australia's use of humanitarian aid and border security support to immobilise asylum seekers. *Geopolitics* 22(4):958–983
Watkins J (2020) Irregular migration, borders, and the moral geographies of migration management. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 38(6):1108–1127
Watkins J (2025) Migration information campaigns: Pastoral government and the credible messenger model. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2025.2556706
Williams J M (2020) Affecting migration: Public information campaigns and the intimate spatialities of border enforcement. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 38(7/8):1198–1215

Williams J M and Coddington K (2023) Transnational affective circuitry: Public information campaigns, affective governmentality, and border enforcement. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 113(10):2376–2391

Wise Strategic Communication (2010) "Afghanistan Counter People Smuggling Scoping Study—Final Report." https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/foi/files/2011-2014/finalreport-wisestrategiccommunicatoin.pdf (last accessed 9 October 2025)

Wright D, Jesko J and Effron L (2014) This protest rally is brought to you by big soda: When campaigns are funded by interest groups. *ABC News* 4 November http://abcnews.go.com/US/protest-rally-brought-big-soda/story?id=26664314 (last accessed 9 October 2025)