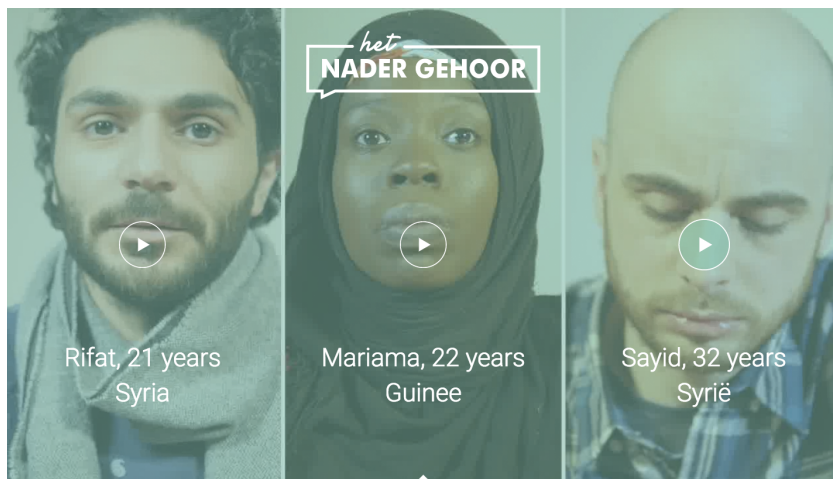
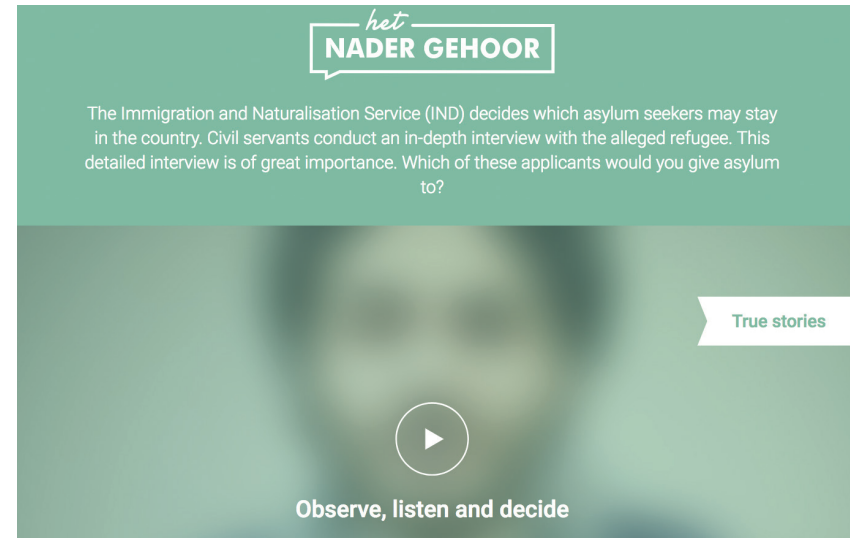


## 10 A DECISIVE CONVERSATION

Ludo Hekman



**Choose a story and**



Ludo Hekman Interactive Film, 2016  
<https://en.nadergehoor.nl/>  
Headphone, Screen

An interactive film in the Netherlands puts people in the interviewer's chair at the asylum agency. Its producers discuss the importance of new forms of storytelling in breaking down barriers to understanding.

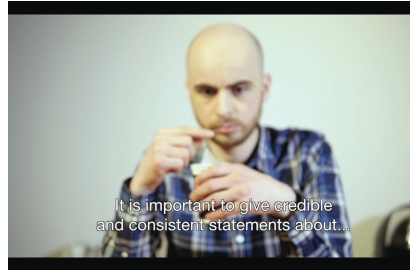
Who is entitled to asylum status in the Netherlands? Who will be welcomed as a refugee and who will be rejected? The outcome of these questions is highly politicized, but the process by which they are made is poorly understood

by the public. As a society, how do we decide who stays and who does not? What if we could put ordinary Dutch people in charge of making a decision like this, what would they learn? These were the questions we had in mind when we decided to bring this decisive conversation to life in the form of an interactive documentary for smartphones called A decisive conversation.



Like many countries in Europe, Holland is receiving an enormous number of asylum applications. At Lighthouse Reports we investigated how the process works with a view to providing new perspectives and new ways of telling stories.

New means of storytelling are called for because of tensions surrounding the topic in Holland. People tend to see asylum seekers as either freeloaders or victims. In order to make people aware of the complexity of accepting or



rejecting someone, we decided to make an interactive documentary—a documentary that enables them to experience the tension between a human story and the policy rules. If someone's papers aren't sufficient for the authorities to make up its mind, the decision to grant or reject some asylum is based on an in-depth interview. Our research showed us that the manner of the interview relies heavily on the official involved. Some civil servants are comforting and soft; others can make it feel like an interrogation. In both cases,

it's the intention of the interviewer to collect as much information as possible, to inform their decision. We felt it would be great if we could explain not only the dynamics of this interview but also enable you to feel these dynamics at play. So we started looking for a way to make the audience members' interest, their questions, their focus a decisive part of a real asylum seeker's story.

Seeing the recent surge in mobile video, we also decided it should be targeted primarily at smartphones. But adding a layer of interaction on top of mobile video was a technical as well as a storytelling challenge. Smartphones detect the video on a website and, once it's full screen, rule out the option of an extra layer. We solved this by software-decoding (in JavaScript) the video stream to a canvas element, thereby bypassing the regular video player. So we basically make your device believe you're seeing a regular website—while you're de facto watching a video. It gave us the opportunity to add interaction to the video on a smartphone. We solved our technical problem, but interaction is still needed to deliver in narrative as well as technological terms. The question was, how does it help the story? On a superficial level it might give users some sense of control of the story, or tickle their curiosity. On a deeper and more conceptual level though, we needed the interaction to be part of the storytelling itself.

Since we were targeting mobile phones, the design we aimed for had to be intuitive and minimal, too. For that reason we chose to make the subtitles an active part of the story, and by doing so, stressed the role and interests of the official in that conversation. Effectively, we made some words in the subtitles function as hotspots. If you click on them, they move upward. Every active word in the subtitles is an entrance to a short clip. These clips are edited to fit each other in a variety of ways. This enables the audience to process the story in a unique tempo, with a unique route too. If viewers do not click on any of the subtitles, they will still get the whole story but just a core version of it. If they

click and watch more, the story leads them into side-stories, nuances or new perspectives. By doing so we were able to tell an time-elastic story that fitted the interest and arc of tension of the user. And it will make you understand that your role as the user (your interests, your decisions) is part of the story you'll hear and see. So, when you have to make a decision in the end whether to accept or reject the asylum seeker you are aware of this dynamic. The stories are based on transcripts of real interviews. So when you finally make the decision, you'll get to see how and what the Dutch government decided in each case.