

The Dead Boy & the Aftermath

Kirstine Sinclair

News

The photo of the body of young Aylan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach went viral in September 2015. In the following weeks, a heated discussion took place regarding whether or not a photo of a dead child should be circulated. Charity organisations claimed that Europeans' wish to help Syrian refugees increased due to the circulation of the photo, but after a month the effect was reduced. Seemingly, Europeans are growing numb to crises in the world.

Summary

In October 2015, I wrote a news analysis about the photo of Aylan Kurdi and the debate surrounding the circulation of the photo. Now, I am taking a closer look at what happened after the initial circulation of the photo as I ask the question: What can be said about any possible long-term effects of this particular photo?

Key Words

Aylan Kurdi, Syria, Syrian Refugee Crisis, visual symbols, European Media

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Analysis:

On 2nd September 2015, the photographer Nilufer Demir was on duty on the beach near Bodrum, Turkey, ready to take pictures of refugees and migrants as they arrived. The arrival of refugees and migrants had been an almost daily occurrence throughout the summer and was creating headlines all over Europe. It was Demir who spotted the body of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi and took the picture of the Turkish gendarme who carried the dead boy away from the beach.¹ She explained her reason for taking the picture to Turkey's English newspaper Hurriyet Daily News as follows:

*"The best thing to do was to make this tragedy heard. At that moment, when I saw the three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, I was petrified. He was lying lifeless face down in the surf, in his red T-shirt and dark blue shorts folded to his waist. The only thing I could do was to make his outcry heard. When I realised there was nothing to do to bring that boy back to life I thought I had to take his picture ... to show the tragedy."*²

And to the French daily Le Monde she continued by saying:

*"I was really shocked to start with but I pulled myself together very quickly. I told myself that I could bear witness to the plight of these people. I had to take this photo and I didn't hesitate to. I was sad because it was the body of a child - but it could also have been the body of an adult and I have photographed that many times already. I hope the impact this photo has created will help bring a solution."*³

As discussed in my news analysis from October 2015, what was so remarkable about Demir's photo was the fact that it showed a drowned 3-year-old as news audiences around the world had already grown accustomed to pictures of drowned adult migrants. Because of the photo showing a dead child, Demir's photo had been circulated in all major European newspapers within 24 hours and the picture had become a symbol of the humanitarian crisis in Syria.

The circulation of the photo sparked a heated debate with two main positions: 1) The photograph should not be shared out of respect for the dead boy, his family, and other children and families in a similar situation, and 2) The photograph should be shared as

¹ Rossington, Ben: "Photographer who took the picture of drowned toddler Aylan Kurdi says she has to "Make this tragedy heard", in: *The Mirror*, 4th September 2015, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/photographer-who-took-picture-drowned-6380991> (last accessed 7th January 2016).

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

widely and broadly as possible in order to make sure nobody is allowed to ignore the suffering of refugees and the war causing the suffering. The first position was held by NGOs such as Save the Children and a number of news editors, but the second – Demir’s position as seen in the above – dominated.

According to the British daily *The Independent*, already on 3rd September charities providing aid for refugees saw an increase in donations from British citizens:

“Refugee and aid charities across the country say they have been inundated with offers of support, after a shocking image of a drowned Syrian child focused the public’s attention of the grim reality of the refugee crisis.

Grassroots groups are springing up across the country as local activists arrange protests this weekend, call on local councils to welcome refugees and send aid to refugees across the Middle East and Mediterranean.”⁴

A collaboration between various European newspapers and news websites – all part of the European Journalism Observatory Network – put together an overview of how the refugee situation was covered and here it was also found that the image of Aylan Kurdi’s body being removed from the beach sparked reactions all over Europe:

“Newspapers in Western Europe (Germany, Italian, Portugal and UK) devoted more space to the crisis and covered it in more detail. All countries in this group published the moving photographs of Aylan Kurdi’s body (apart from one German newspaper, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung).

In Germany, Italy and Portugal positive humanitarian stories about migrants increased three-fold immediately after the photographs were published. In the UK the number of positive humanitarian stories across the three newspapers studied also increased, but by less, from 6 positive stories in the two days before the 2 September photographs, to 13 positive stories in the two days after the 2 September (plus two objective).”⁵

Having stated an immediate positive reaction in terms of increase of aid to refugees and positive (i.e. sympathetic) coverage of the refugee situation on the Mediterranean, the study also found that the positive humanitarian stories had decreased within 2 weeks:

⁴ Merrill, Jamie, ”Refugee Aid Charities see a Surge in Donations after Image of Drowned Syrian Toddler Aylan Kurdi Moves the Nation”, *The Independent*, 3rd September 2015:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/refugee-aid-charities-see-surge-in-donations-after-image-of-drowned-syrian-toddler-aylan-kurdi-moves-10484953.html> (last accessed 7th January 2016).

⁵ <http://en.ejo.ch/research/research-how-europes-newspapers-reported-the-migration-crisis?print=print>

“(...) in all four (...) countries [Germany, Italy, Portugal and Britain] the number of positive humanitarian stories had decreased nearly to the level they had been before the photographs by the 11/12 September. This demonstrates that the surge in sympathetic coverage after the photographs did not signify a long term shift in media opinion, but appeared to be, as some analysts had suspected, a short-term, emotional reaction to Aylan Kurdi’s story.”

Thus, between 2nd and 15th September 2015, seemingly, there was a common perception that the photo of Aylan Kurdi would somehow change things – that the drowned boy represented an all-time low in the Mediterranean refugee crisis and that the tide would change. However, this did not happen. At the end of September 2015, everything had returned to normal in terms of news coverage of the refugee situation and numbers and sizes of donations for NGOs providing aid for refugees.

The fact that a two-year-old boy was amongst the first migrants to drown in the sea between Turkey and Greece in 2016 while trying to make it to Europe in a rubber vessel together with 39 others only proves this point: No major changes in the refugee situation can be detected between September 2015 and January 2016.

Detectable Impact?

So, the question remains: What impact – if any – did the death of Aylan Kurdi and the circulated photo of him have on political and other public responses to the Mediterranean refugee situation?

On a political and societal macro level, no changes can be detected. Clearly, the refugee situation is not any closer to a resolution today, four months after the death of Kurdi. On the contrary, the EU has not yet managed to coordinate and distribute arriving asylum seekers and furthermore, the Schengen-agreement is widely ignored as individual states are re-introducing (temporary?) border control hoping to regulate the number of arriving refugees. Between January and August 2015, 350,000 migrants arrived to Europe and according to the International Organization for Migration the total number of migrants arriving to Europe in 2015 was 1,005,504⁶ – most of them fleeing war in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan.⁷ So far, there is no sign of this number decreasing in 2016.

⁶ Chan, Sewell: “How a Record number of Refugees made their way to Europe”, *The New York Times*, 22 December 2015: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/23/world/europe/migrant-crisis-europe-million.html> (last accessed 14th January 2016).

⁷ “Why is EU Struggling with migrants and refugees?”, *BBC*, 21 September 2015: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24583286> (last accessed 11Jan2016).

On a micro level, the Kurdi family is struggling with the consequences of the fatal attempt to cross the Mediterranean in the autumn of 2015. The father of the family – the only survivor – went back to Syria to bury his wife and two sons and settled in Iraq afterwards. The rest of the family is split between Syria, Turkey, Germany and Canada and those still in Syria and Turkey are hoping to make it to Europe or North America eventually.⁸

If we say, for the sake of analysis, that the photo of Aylan Kurdi constitutes a meso level, perhaps changes have occurred here. Based on distribution and usage, it is safe to say that the photo of Aylan Kurdi has gained a special status. The photo is known, remembered and still referred to. Also, the scene with the dead boy on the beach has been re-enacted and documented by various NGOs and activists aiming at securing and maintaining public attention and means for helping refugees. Here an example of how a Moroccan NGO paid tribute to Aylan Kurdi:



And in Gaza, Palestinians paid tribute to Kurdi by building a giant sand sculpture of him in his characteristic blue and red clothes. As the sculpture was located close to the spot where four Gazan children playing on the beach were killed by an Israeli air strike during the last Gaza war, this particular tribute to Kurdi was also used to draw a parallel

⁸ Barnard, Anne: "Syrian Family's Tragedy goes Beyond Iconic Image of Boy on Beach", *The New York Times*, 27th December 2015: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/28/world/middleeast/syria-refugees-alan-aylan-kurdi.html?mtrref=query.nytimes.com&_r=1 (last accessed 14 January 2016).

to other children killed in war and conflict.⁹ Thus, the status of the photo of Aylan Kurdi is intact as the image still symbolises the war in Syria and the crises faced by the millions of people fleeing the civil war and hoping for a more promising future on the other side of the sea.

The image has been added to icons reminding us of the meaninglessness of war. Another such image of iconic status shows the nine-year old girl, Pan Thi Kim Phuc, running down a road after having been burnt on her back by napalm bombs dropped by the US-backed South Vietnamese air force. The photo is commonly referred to as “The Napalm Girl”.

However memorable and effective in terms of short-term emotional responses, any long-term effect constitutes a struggle with a common compassion fatigue. Immediate emotional responses have to beat this fatigue and develop into action. However, the struggle is lost in most cases. As humans we do respond to images of dead or wounded children, but we also shut down such responses after a short while in order to carry on with our lives and protect our own sanity in an insane world. So, what impact did the photo have? If nothing else, it has been added to a shared catalogue of images symbolising human suffering and the meaninglessness of war.

⁹ “A Tribute to Aylan Kurdi that Spoke a Thousand Words”, *AFP*, 8 September 2015: <http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/gazans-moroccans-pay-tribute-to-aylan-1215319> (last accessed 14 January 2016).