

A Dead Boy on a Beach

Kirstine Sinclair

News

On 2nd September 2015, the attempt to escape the Syrian civil war and pursue better life opportunities in Canada went horribly wrong for the Kurdi family. Their boat capsized on the Mediterranean and three of four family members drowned. Only the father of the family survived. The death of the family's three-year-old made headlines and created international stir as the body of the boy – Aylan Kurdi – was photographed, first, lying on a Turkish beach and, later, as it was picked up by a Turkish gendarme. Within 24 hours, the photo of the boy was referred to as a symbol of the Syrian refugee crisis.

Summary

On 2nd September, three-year-old Aylan Kurdi drowned as the boat carrying him, his family and other refugees from Syria, capsized on the Mediterranean. His body washed up on a Turkish beach where a Turkish gendarme found it and carried it away. This news analysis takes a closer look at the photo of young Kurdi and the debate it sparked. It was a debate that raised profound ethical questions as well as questions about the role of visual imagery in reporting and understanding human suffering.

Key Words

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

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Analysis:

On 2nd September, three-year-old Aylan Kurdi drowned as the boat carrying him, his family and a group of 11 other refugees from Syria, capsized on the Mediterranean. His body washed up on a beach in Bodrum, Turkey, where a Turkish gendarme found it and carried it away. The following day, he was buried by his father in the family's hometown of Kobane in the Kurdish part of northern Syria, next to his brother and mother.¹

Since the civil war in Syria broke out in March 2011 following a series of peaceful but growing Friday demonstrations in which the Syrian population demanded more freedom and better living conditions, around 9 million Syrians have fled their homes. Around 3 million Syrians have settled temporarily in neighbouring countries and around 6.5 million have become internally displaced in Syria. Only about 200,000 have reached Europe in their search for a better and more peaceful future. Aylan Kurdi's family were part of this more resourceful group.²

In Europe, politicians and heads of governments responded to the crisis quite differently. For example, Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron was accused of dehumanising the refugees by referring to individuals arriving to Europe and Britain as "swarms of migrants" by which he not only compared people to insects, but also failed to distinguish between refugees and other types of migrants.³ The difference between someone fleeing a civil war and someone seeking better job opportunities is of course significant. Offering an alternative view of Syrian refugees arriving in Europe, the Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven stated at a public rally that his "Europe builds no walls" (author's translation) and that Europe should be able to deal with an increased number of refugees as long as all countries contributed.⁴ In a similar vein, Germany's Chancellor,

¹ Astrup, Søren: "Her er historien om barnet, der døde på vej til Europa" in *Politiken*, 3rd September 2015: http://politiken.dk/udland/fokus_int/Flygtningestroem/ECE2824150/her-er-historien-om-barnet-der-doede-paa-vej-mod-eu/ (Last accessed 12th October 2015)

² <http://syrianrefugees.eu/> (Last accessed 12th October 2015)

³ Walton, Gregory & Ross, Tim: "David Cameron insists that describing migrants as a 'swarm' wasn't 'dehumanising'" in *The Telegraph*, 15th August 2015: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/11804861/David-Cameron-says-describing-migrants-as-a-swarm-wasnt-dehumanising.html> (Last accessed 12th October 2015)

⁴ Löfven quoted from here: Lindstrøm, Merete: "Sveriges statsminister: Flygtningesituationen er et fælles europæisk ansvar" from *dr.dk*, 8th September 2015: <http://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/sveriges-statsminister-flygtningesituationen-er-et-faelles-europaeisk-ansvar> (Last accessed 12th October 2015)

Angela Merkel, has pleaded to her European colleagues to demonstrate a larger degree of humanism and take their share of refugees.⁵

In the following, I take a closer look not at the war or the refugee crisis per se, but rather the debate following the circulation of the image of Aylan Kurdi lying dead in the sand, face down, in his red t-shirt, shorts and sneakers. Already on 3rd September, the photo was referred to as a symbol of the war and the refugee crisis, and journalists, NGOs and politicians were discussing whether or not to show the photo. What could possibly be gained by showing something so horrific and meaningless?

The Photo

The photo of three-year old Aylan Kurdi is at once a dramatic and deeply evocative press photo. At first glance, with his dark hair, red t-shirt, blue shorts and brown sneakers, Aylan may look like a normal sleeping toddler as he lies there flat on his stomach on the beach. Toddlers sometimes sleep in awkward positions. At second glance, however, he does not look like a toddler asleep. The left side of his face is not merely resting on the sand, it is buried in the sand, and there is something unnatural about the way his arms are stretched down along the side of his body with the palms of both hands facing up. He is not sleeping. He is dead.

Children represent the future and are expected to outlive their parents and secure the survival of the human race. Therefore, the death of a child is perceived as unnatural. And the death of a child which could have been prevented or avoided is perceived as not only unnatural or unfair but morally indefensible. Aylan Kurdi's death could have been avoided had the Syrian war not escalated, had foreign governments and armies intervened, had his family not had to flee, had the trafficking of his family not taken place, had the coast guards rescued the passengers before the family's boat capsized. Something. Someone could have and should have done something. This seems to be both a logical and natural reaction to the death of Kurdi.

Hence, the photo through Kurdi seems uniquely powerful in encapsulating the plight of Syria and its fleeing population and, at the same time, appealing to universal values.

Within 24 hours, the photo had been circulated in all major European newspapers and had been referred to as a symbol of the humanitarian crisis in Syria. On 3rd September, for example, *Time Magazine* brought a news analysis of Kurdi's death under the head-

⁵ Paterson, Tony: "Refugee Crisis: Nearly half of Germans say Merkel's 'welcome' policy is wrong" in *The Independent*, 11th October 2015: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/nearly-half-of-germans-say-angela-merkels-refugee-policy-is-wrong-a6689966.html> (Last accessed 12th 2015)

line: “The Child Who’s Become a Symbol of Europe’s Migrant Crisis”⁶, and on the same day, *Wall Street Journal* carried documentation of news media from around the world who had shown either the photo of Aylan Kurdi described above or another picture taken by the same photographer showing Kurdi being lifted from the beach by the Turkish gendarme. One of the headlines was: “Photo goes viral”.⁷

The Debate

The massive attention given to the photo of the dead boy on the beach sparked an intense debate on social media and in the printed press revolving around one question: could the sharing and printing of the Kurdi photo be justified? In an analysis of prominent positions in this debate, published in “*Journalisten*”, Danish Journalist Jakob Sheikh quoted a colleague from *Washington Post*, Liz Sly, saying: “If it takes photographs of dead children to make people realize children are dying, so be it”.⁸

Jakob Sheikh also referred to extensive discussions in Danish editorial newsrooms concerning two contradictory positions: The necessity to share the brutal image or the necessity to avoid sharing the photo in order to protect relatives and fragile audiences. Since no Danish newspaper did show the photo, the collected masses of Danish editors seem to share the opinion that protecting the feelings of relatives and readers should be the primary concern. According to Sheikh, many found that the photo of the dead boy showed disproportionate brutality. Amongst the supporters of this view were the international NGO Save the Children and its Danish counterpart “Red Barnet”. To this argument, Sheikh made the point that social media outlets are flooded with imagery of new-born babies stabbed to death or decapitated by Syrian regime soldiers, not to mention the heavily circulated images of Islamic State’s violence.

Representing the opposite view were representatives of other NGOs, for example Crisis Coordinator with Human Rights Watch, Peter Bouckaert, who blamed the EU and the general lack of initiative amongst European Heads of State for Aylan Kurdi’s death: “Some say, this photo is too offensive to share online or print in our papers. I find it

⁶ Berenson, Tessa: “The Child Who’s Become a Symbol of Europe’s Migrant Crisis” in *Time*, 3rd September 2015: <http://time.com/4021759/aylan-kurdi-migrant-child/> (Last accessed 12th October 2015)

⁷ Parkinson, Joe: “Image of Drowned Syrian Boy Echoes Around World” in *Wall Street Journal*, 3rd September 2015: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/image-of-syrian-boy-washed-up-on-beach-hits-hard-1441282847> (Last accessed 12th October 2015)

⁸ Sheikh, Jakob: “Derfor bør vi vise billederne af Aylan” in *Journalisten*, 7th September 2015: <http://journalisten.dk/derfor-boer-vi-vise-billederne-af-aylan> (last accessed 12th October 2015)

more offensive that drowned children wash ashore on our beaches, when more could have been done to prevent them dying”.⁹

The British daily *The Telegraph* used the photo of Aylan Kurdi on the beach to ask the following questions and point to the lack of perspective in “1st world problems”: “The lifeless body of Aylan Kurdi has changed everything. How can we care about the inconveniences that befall holiday-makers when three-year-olds are washing up on beaches? How can we stress about Tube strikes and house prices and whether or not Taylor Swift’s latest video is racist because it is set in Africa but only features two black people?”¹⁰

In this manner, the photo of the dead boy on the beach was used to raise questions about political perspectives and global inequalities, but in French and Danish contexts it also reignited debates about freedom of expression. This happened when the Parisian satirical magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*, published two cartoons with reference to Aylan Kurdi’s death. One shows Jesus walking on the water next to the dead boy on the beach and states: This proves Europe is Christian – Christians walk on water, Muslim children drown. While the other one shows the boy on the sand under a billboard from McDonald’s offering two children’s menus for the price of one.¹¹ On a similarly different note, the image of the dead boy was also used by the terror organisation Islamic State to emphasise the potential negative outcome of attempts at fleeing Islamic State controlled territory.¹²

Returning to the two main positions in the debate: 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 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. While the first position was held by all Danish news editors,

⁹ Peter Bouckaert quoted from his blog by the Danish Daily *Berlingske* (author’s translation) Holm, Line “Et ubærligt billede” in *Berlingske*, 3rd September 2015: <http://www.b.dk/globalt/et-ubaerligt-billede> (last accessed 12th October 2015)

¹⁰ Gordon, Bryoni: “The lifeless body of Aylan Kurdi has changed everything” in *The Telegraph*, 4th September 2015: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/11844086/Migrant-crisis-The-lifeless-body-of-Aylan-Kurdi-has-changed-everything.html> (Last accessed 12th October 2015)

¹¹ Asher-Schapiro, Avi: “Drowned Migrants Cartoon Pisses People off – Julie as ‘Charlie Hebdo’ Likely Intended” in *Vice News*, 15th September 2015: https://news.vice.com/article/drowned-migrant-cartoon-pisses-people-off-just-as-charlie-hebdo-likely-intended?utm_source=vicenewstwitter (last accessed 12th October 2015)

¹² Ackerman, Spencer: “Islamic State uses Image of Aylan Kurdi to threaten refugees for fleeing” in *The Guardian*, 9th September 2015: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/09/islamic-state-alyan-kurdi-photo-magazine-dabiq-syrian-refugees> and Paraszczuk, Joanna: “A Drowned Syrian boy as ISIS Propaganda” in *The Atlantic*, 11th September 2015: http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/aylan-kurdi-isis-propaganda-dabiq/404911/?utm_source=SFTwitter (Both sources last accessed 12th October 2015)

the second position won the popular vote. The images of the boy on the beach were circulated widely on all social media platforms by both human rights NGOs and politicians, as well as by private individuals.

Conclusion: From “A Dead Boy on a Beach” to “The Dead Boy on the Beach”

The widespread and very, very rapid viral circulation of the photo bearing witness to the tragic and all too early death of Aylan Kurdi and not least the fact that the photo was labelled “a symbol” of both the refugee crisis and the humanitarian crisis in Syria within 24 hours, points to the fact that visual representations seem to be particularly powerful in drawing attention to, understanding and exposing political events and their consequences.

Apparently, it takes an image for many of us to take in the state of affairs in the world and help us relate to reality: We need simple images to illustrate chaos, and we need something which mobilises strong emotional reactions in order to draw attention to wars and human crises. Perhaps because we are exposed to them constantly? Perhaps because of media agendas so heavily marked by bad news, bombs, bombs and more bombs? Seemingly it takes something as extraordinary as the Kurdi photo to stir reactions.

Regardless of the reason, the image of the dead boy on the beach did something. According to the British daily, *The Independent*, the response to the image was extraordinary in the weeks after its circulation, and “[a] third of those donating money, dropping off goods or volunteering their time [to help refugees, the author] said that they were moved to act following the publication of images of three-year-old Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi, washed up drowned on a beach in Turkey.”¹³

¹³ Withnal, Adam & Dathan, Matt: “Revealed: The Public’s extraordinary response to the Syrian refugee crisis and how it shames David Cameron” in *The Independent*, 23rd September 2015: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/refugee-crisis-the-true-extent-of-the-british-publics-extraordinary-response-revealed-10514341.html> (Last accessed 12th October 2015)