CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA RESEARCH

Edited by Laura Peja, Nico Carpentier, Fausto Colombo, Maria Francesca Murru, Simone Tosoni, Richard Kilborn, Leif Kramp, Risto Kunelius, Anthony McNicholas, Hannu Nieminen, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt

edition lumière

CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA RESEARCH

Edited by: Laura Peja, Nico Carpentier, Fausto Colombo, Maria Francesca Murru, Simone Tosoni, Richard Kilborn, Leif Kramp, Risto Kunelius, Anthony McNicholas, Hannu Nieminen, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt

CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION
AND MEDIA RESEARCH

Grief and pity. Investigation of the social impact of photography

Fausto Colombo

Abstract

The content presented in this paper is part of a larger work, aimed at describing, formalising and interpreting the model of spreading and sharing images (photographs in particular) via the Web. Starting with the story of the photos of the little Alan Kurdi, a boy who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea in September 2015, I will describe first of all the circulation of the photos through legacy and social media, recognizing five different moments typical of so-called digital firestorms: a spark, small fires, an explosion, contagion and normalization. I then try to describe the forms of memeing the photos, transforming them into motifs shared in order to express, or provoke, passions and emotions. I will then point out the steps of cultural elaboration, through which a significant number of media users are allowed to learn Alan's story, to make sense of it in a wider context (and thus extend their knowledge of certain phenomena) and to remember the story of the child, finding a place in their personal and collective memory. Eventually, I interpret the effects of images on political choices and public opinion, in both the short and medium-to-long term.

In my conclusion, I try to explain differences and analogies between the circulation of epoch-making images through legacy media and that typical of the digital media environment.

Keywords: photography, social media, digital firestorms, social emotions

1. Premise

The little boy is lying face down. His left arm, the only one visible in the photograph, rests on the sand, the palm of the hand turned up. The left side of his face is visible and we can see his hair is clipped short. The ear is clearly visible. It is hard to decide whether his eye is open or closed in deep sleep. He is wearing a red T-shirt, rucked up above his midriff, a pair of blue shorts with a small pattern or embroidery on the leg. His shoes look black and you can see the soles clearly.

From the waves lapping around him we realize that the child's position is such that the lower part of his body is almost dry, while his face is caressed by the waves. He could be sleeping, as we see him, but he will never wake.

The photo is one of many images (around 50) that make up a journalistic feature about the shipwreck of a boatload of migrants.

The photos have different subjects. Adults, children. Scenes of despair and moments of rescue. Some of the images are terrible, without showing corpses: dresses are seen piled on the sand, or survivors are weeping.

By contrast, the child appeared in a small photo gallery, destined to have a separate history. His body abandoned on the beach, alone, is portrayed in another image, a reverse view of the first: the body is horizontal, the feet on the left and the head on the right, the nape of his neck exposed to the viewer.

Image 1: Source DHA

In another picture two policemen are close to the body, no more than two metres away. They are standing. The one on the left side turns his back to the camera filming him; the other is holding a camera and seems to be moving away from the waterline.

In a further image (actually two, very similar to each other) one of the policemen is holding the child's body. He is bowed slightly forward and wearing rubber gloves. His gestures are full of delicacy and respect.

Image 2: Source DHA

The child was named Alan Kurdi (although his name was reported in the early days as Aylan), and he had drowned during the night, after the sinking of the rubber dinghy that was to take him and his family from Bodrum, Turkey, to the Greek island of Kos.

The photos of him travelled around the world and the Web. They had consequences, elicited statements and led to political decisions. A wave of reworkings of the photo and comments took over Twitter and other social media. There were reconstructions and controversies about the child's family, his father's decision to undertake the fatal journey, immigration and its risks. Artists in every country reworked the image of the abandoned little body in various ways, submitting it to the consciences of millions of inhabitants of the planet.

This paper is part of a larger work, ongoing for over two years, in which I try to reconstruct the story of the photos of Alan from a broader perspective, ranging from philosophy to politics, from the history of photography to that form of action and communication that we could call "humanitarian ideology". Here, I will give a brief account of the circulation and assimilation of the images, in four steps:

1. **Journey of a photo,** in which I explain how the photos of Alan circulate through various legacy and social media;

2. **Online practices,** in which I analyse how the photos of Alan were used by their first viewers through symbolic-material actions[1] as a form of reaction to the visual and emotional impact of the whole story;

3. **Cultural elaboration,** in which I reconstruct the steps that allowed a significant number of media users to *learn* Alan's story, to *make sense of it* in a wider context (and thus extend their knowledge of certain phenomena) and

---

1   On this theme, in general, see the first two parts of Carpentier, 2017.

then to *remember* the story of the child, finding a place in their memory – personal and collective;

4.   **The consequences,** in which I investigate the effects of images on political choices and public opinion, both in the short and medium-to-long term.

I have almost always used rich literature on the subject, and I have largely cited research conducted by others. But I have tried to give an original reading, and to systematize the knowledge in a form useful for other future investigations into the role of the media today, the circulation of news and the effects of information.

2.   Journey of a photo

It was 2 September 2015 when two Turkish agencies, DHA (Dogan Haber Ajansi) and Diken, published online, between 8.42 and 9.10 a. m., news of the collapse of a rubber dinghy which had capsized in an attempt to reach the island of Kos. The consequences were dramatic, although not comparable in numerical terms to other catastrophic shipwrecks in the Mediterranean in previous months (and unfortunately also the following ones): 12 Syrian refugees drowned, their bodies were carried ashore by the waves, onto the beach at Bodrum. In particular, the DHA published 50 shots by a photographer, Nilüfer Demir, showing the remains of the dinghy, including some corpses and in particular the photos of Alan Kurdi (whose name was initially altered to Aylan), which I have described in the Premise.[2]

The Web was rapidly activated, with a fairly characteristic explosion, of the type that the literature terms a 'digital firestorm' (Rost, Stahel, Frey, 2016). Here I will sum up the main steps, seeking to highlight the features of each:

a) The spark
In the first place the news was posted on Twitter by a Turkish journalist and activist, Michelle Demishevich, but it did not spread widely. However, his tweet was the first to report Alan's image. It was the first mention – in that avatar of public opinion that is the platform – of the reception of the event.

b) Small fires
The news was picked up by some agencies, and above all by Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian sources. On Twitter there began to be an observable movement of modest local circulation, clearly shown in Figure 1.

---

2   For a reconstruction of the spread of the photographs on the Web, I have drawn on a report by the Visual Social Media Lab (Vis 2015). About the social role of photographic journalism that lies in the *sfondo* of this paper, see: Tomanić Trivundža 2015.

Figure 1: Source: Visual Social Media Lab, 2015 (D'Orazio, 2017)
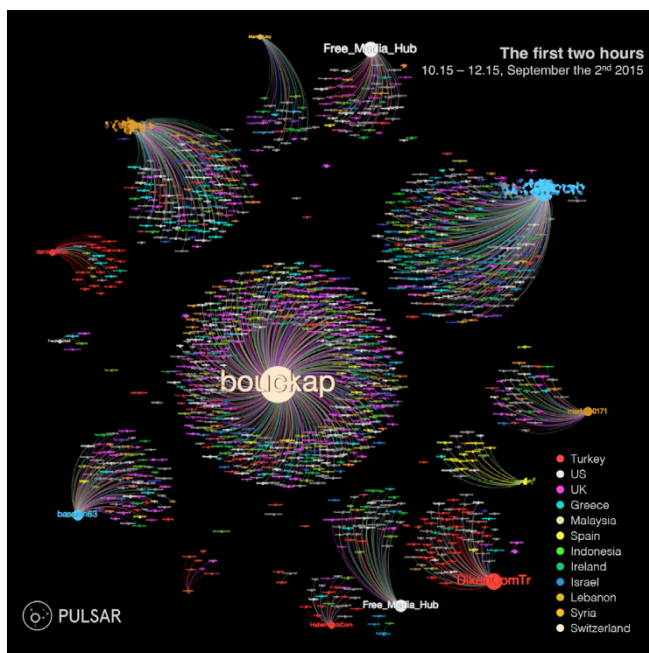
As can be seen, at this point we can observe the "directive" ability of some nodes, evidently already configured by their own system of relations to carry out the function that the theory of the two-step flow of communication[3] assigns to opinion leaders. The Web is potentially always democratic, but in reality it rarely is: there is (even in this case) a rigid power law (Réka, Hawoong, Barabási, 1999), so that the most established nodes, or the largest ones, or those capable of attracting links, tend to become increasingly powerful. Even Twitter is a great field of communication in which many compete but few win, earning visibility and ability to spread themselves and their content.

c) The explosion

At 12.45 Liz Sly, Bureau Chief of the Washington Post, Beirut, repeated the news on her account @Lizsly, and her tweet was retweeted over 7,000 times. This was a small detonation that whipped the fire into a blaze, not surprisingly the work of a journalist affiliated to an internationally important newspaper. Figure 2 gives a clear image of the metaphor of the explosion, and it shows how much the staff member of a credible and famous newspaper can do to gain increased visibility.

---

3   Katz, Lazarsfeld, 1955.

And the same figure tells us how specious the contrast between old and new media is when it comes to information. In reality, Twitter and the mainstream media ricochet news off each other in a big pinball game where everyone wins, thanks to the accounts of journalists and newspapers, which constitute a world of continuous and sometimes circular relationships and references. On top of this is the positive feeling experienced by someone who is riding the wave of a mounting news story, as well as the fear of being excluded from the wave itself, or getting to it late. It is thanks to these tendencies that the image of a three-year-old can become a symbol that even hundreds of drowned people failed to become, because it matched that desire for emotion that viral news stories nurture and feed on.

***Figure 2: Source Visual Social Media Lab, 2015 (D'Orazio, 2015)***
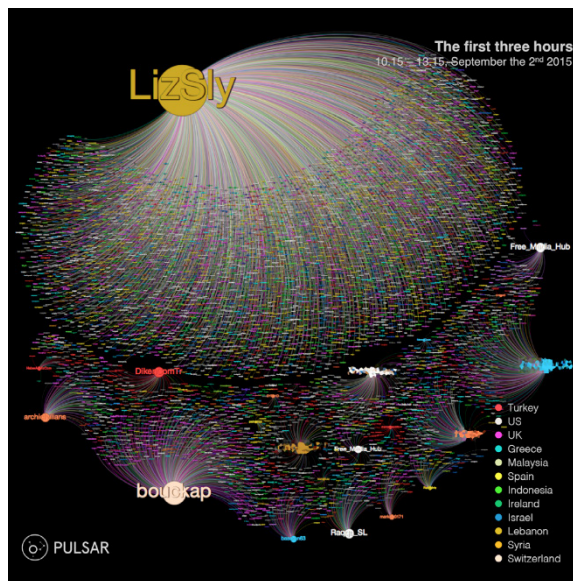
d) The contagion

At 1.10 p.m. the mainstream media appeared on the scene: first the Daily Mail, then followed about 500 articles published online on the sites of The Independent, The Huffington Post, The Guardian, The Mirror, Mashable, ITV, CBS, NBC, Al Jazeera, NBC, Metro, El Mundo and Reuters, all of course retweeted, and therefore with a strong power of dissemination. The flow ended at around 11 p.m. Table 3 gives a fairly complete idea of the dimensions of the 'digital firestorm''of the Alan story, as shown by the rebound of the news spread on Twitter (and taken from mainstream media) to a new version of the same news now accredited to the

mainstream media and relaunched by a galaxy of Twitter accounts: journalists on newspapers and freelancers, NGO workers, commentators and intellectuals, ordinary people and – no doubt – ordinary individuals looking for a moment of fame or self-invested with the task of circulating a news story deemed important and worth circulating.

Figure 3: Source Visual Social Media Lab, 2015 (D'Orazio, 2015)
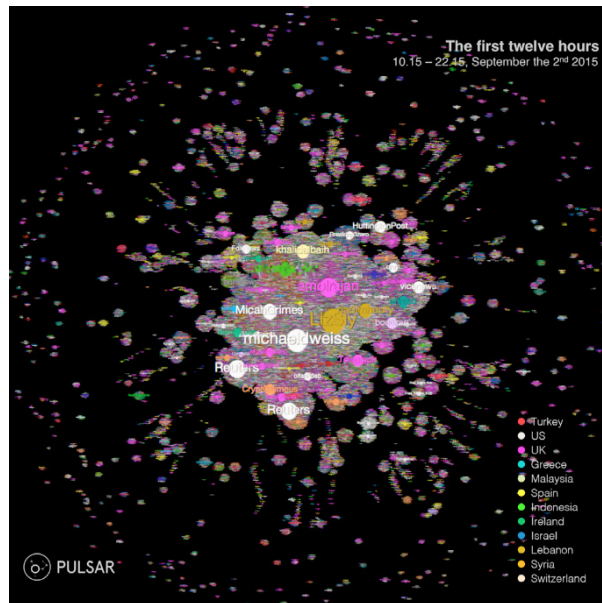
e) Normalization

The following day, 3 September, the trend of news on Twitter and news media was still significant. It began to decline towards 8 p.m., and then gradually dwindled over the following days. Also, in this, the microblogging platform reveals its consonance with the mainstream media, and their logic: the primacy of recent news, the value of storytelling, the hypothesis of the impact on the public. In fact, as we will see later, the decline on Twitter and mainstream media does not mean a collapse of the story, which glided onto other platforms, and more generally into what we might call public opinion. And yet, the process of normalization not only brings with it a decline in the occurrences of tweets, but also an important change of register: for example, agency photos, which accompanied most of the tweets and retweets, began to be replaced by less crude developments. Probably, as Francesco D'Orazio wrote, 'The need for sharing the impactful images and the concerns over hurting the sensibility of the audience have led, within the first 12 hours, to the

creation and diffusion of surrogate Aylan Kurdi images designed to mitigate the brutality of the original images in order to sustain the visual narrative of the story and its diffusion.' (D'Orazio, 2015)

3.   Online practices

Unlike the history of the long analogical phase of photography, in which an image produced by a professional photographer was simply circulated via traditional media, which repeated it unchanged and multiplied its viewings, in the age of social networks, or rather in the platform society,[4] this photo was complicated as it travelled via the actions of users.

Some of these actions consisted of sharing or retweeting images. Others, more highly articulated, were expressed as verbal comments. But the specific point, in our case, is naturally actions that affected the photographs. In fact, these are also very common on Twitter and on social media in general. Sam Gregory (2015) makes some interesting observations on the reasons why images so emotionally charged as these are shared on the Internet. Here, I would like to focus on some other aspects, particularly related to the practices to which the images were subjected during the sharing process (meaning cases in which it was not the original photos that were shared, but some of their elaborations).

The ease of digital editing and therefore the technical facility of what have been known since the 1930s as photomontages (let us only mention the anti-Nazi works by Heartfield[5]) now makes it possible for photos of great impact to be continually edited and relaunched through various practices that we can distinguish on the basis of two factors: the intensity of editing of the photo and the function attributed to the editing itself. We will start with intensity. The photograph of Alan was retransmitted in both its original version and in reworked versions, with alterations ranging from minimal to professional. In all cases the model followed by this form of virality is *meming*, or the transformation of an image into a repeatable object shared by a large public of network users, who contribute to its spread. Such phenomena are obviously widely studied in the sociology of culture: they include the mechanisms of mass success through word of mouth, the spread of jokes, urban legends or fake news.
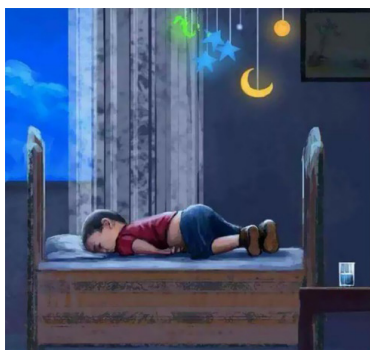
There is a vast literature on memes on the Web. Usually they draw on Richard Dawkins' famous book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) which discusses the viral potential of images, ideas or other cultural objects, capable, so to speak, of working for their

---

4   Van Dijk, 2013 and 2017.

5   During the '30s, John Hearthfield produced, in Germany, very strong satirical photomontages about Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. See, for instance, John Berger's analysis (2008).

own survival. The theory is variously accepted and challenged, but it has been applied to the Web with some success, particularly in certain studies of marketing (Marshall, 2012; Kempe, Kleinberg, Tardos 2003). Here I would like to put forward a different interpretational model, bound up with more traditional cultural forms, applied to the technological innovations brought about by the Web and platforms. This model is based on the concept of a 'motif', which is a recurrent visual element in the production of cultural objects. The concept is valid for a single artist, but also for a 'school' or even a culture. A 'motif' tends on the one hand to be repeated unchanged, while on the other it can act as a basis for very different meanings, adaptable to historical and social circumstances.

The novelty introduced by the Web in this case would essentially be a matter of time: viral models on the Web, as the example we are working on confirm, have very short spread times, and therefore motifs tend to proliferate almost instantly. In the case of the photos of Alan, the meming focused above all on photos of the child's solitary corpse, with the addition of elements of context or interpretation. This is the case with some of the basic productions put online by BoredPanda[6] in the early days of the spread of the photograph, as in the following two images, which essentially express feelings of sympathy and pity:

Images 3 and 4, by Steve Dennis and Khaled Yeslam, available at https://www.boredpanda.com/syrian-boy-drowned-mediterranean-tragedy-artists-respond-aylan-kurdi/

As for the function attributed to the act of sharing, it can vary from a simple informative and socializing function (where what matters is that others see what I have seen) through an emotional function (sharing the emotions experienced in seeing the images, as evidenced by the photos already reported above), to a more prop-

---

6   https://www.boredpanda.com/.

erly political-polemical function, as in the following two photos, published by the site BoredPanda and attributed, respectively, to Valeria Botte Coca and Umm Talha:

In these two cases, it is evident that the authors of the images and their followers who shared their images with others intended to stress the guilt of the institutional powers, and therefore an evident political purpose underlies the process of sharing.
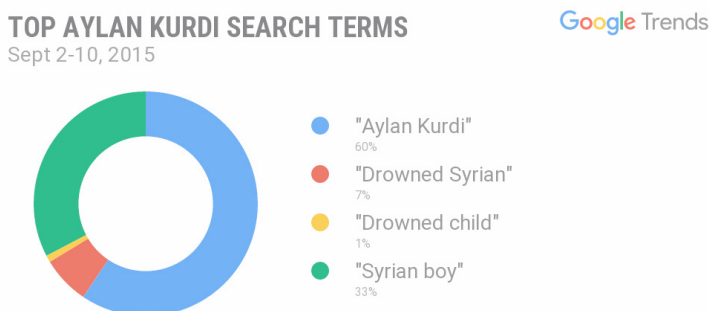
4.   Cultural elaboration

At the time of its spread, basically reproducing and rendering more complex the traditional circulation of news in the legacy media, a progressive cultural elaboration follows it (though we should rather say combines with it), in the sense of a set of strategies aimed at making the photos of Alan perform the traditional functions that we attribute to culture: a knowledge of the facts and laws that regulate reality, the relation with the past, a symbolic (artistic or popular) elaboration and correlated attribution of significance to events, a scansion of time through socially recognized and institutionalized moments.

a) In-depth information
Let's start with an account of the facts. What happened in the case of the photos of Alan followed the typical methods of in-depth information. It starts from a contact with the news, which – through its particular ability to arouse intellectual curiosity or emotions such as shock or empathy – leads the reader or the viewer to seek a deeper understanding. A good indicator of this dimension is offered by the intensification of Google searches related to the child, which was rapidly given greater depth: from the first queries, in which the name Aylan Kurdi was accompanied by more general terms such as Drowned Child, Drowned Syrian, Syrian Child and Syrian Boy, we pass in a little over a week to a more precise focus on the child's name, as shown in Figure 4:

Figure 4: Source Visual Social Media Lab (Rogers, S. 2015)

TOP AYLAN KURDI SEARCH TERMS
Sept 2-10, 2015

Google Trends

- "Aylan Kurdi" 60%
- "Drowned Syrian" 7%
- "Drowned child" 1%
- "Syrian boy" 33%

The results of the in-depth process lead to the development of different strategies of understanding. A first one, which strikes me as significant, was bound up with the request for framing: can Alan Kurdi's story be contextualized? What are its remote causes, which go beyond his individual story?

Simon Rogers (2015), for instance, brings out the link between queries on Google and two rather interesting phenomena. The first was the growth in searches about migrants in different countries of the world, with an interesting semantic shift between the term 'migrants' and the term 'refugees', as shown in Table 5.

Figure 5: Source Visual Social Media Lab (Rogers, S. 2015)
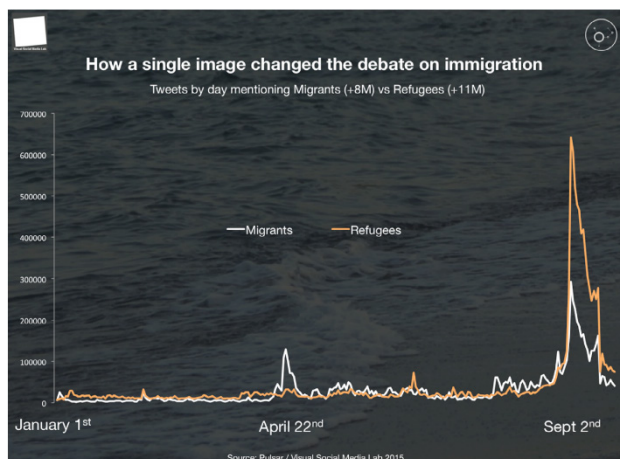
The second phenomenon emphasized by Rogers is what we might call the *geopolitical embedding* of queries, in the sense that the interest shown by the queries and the form itself of the queries depended on the involvement that individual countries had in the phenomenon of migration, as countries affected by either emigration or immigration. Furthermore, in different countries, different search terms were favoured, and they could also be referred to specific national cultural interests. In short, if observation of the spread reveals a global phenomenon, deeper study shows a close connection with national cultures and framing processes.

b) Storytelling

Another mode of cultural elaboration, aimed at attributing meaning (individual and collective) to the photos of Alan, is the construction of narratives that insert his story into codified and comprehensible scripts. Although the death of a child is, as Dostoevsky reminds us, a trauma impossible to justify or understand, it is inevitable that the reaction of those faced with such traumatic images is to seek to

construct significance, to set the victim in a story that accounts for it, even quite simply to enable them to remember it.

In the case in question, a first overview enables us to identify different scripts, and in all of them Alan is naturally a victim, but with contrasting interpretative consequences. For example, a first narrative script is that of the fate of the family, the Kurdis, of whom only two survivors are capable of recounting the event: Alan's father, Abdullah – who when the boat sank also lost his other son, Ghalib, slightly older, and his wife Rehana – and his aunt Tima, who had emigrated to Canada and had already tried unsuccessfully to enable her brother's family to join her there. In this case, the story is that of a united family, cut short by an adverse fate (the rough sea) and human responsibility (the Canadian authorities, who denied asylum, the suppliers of the raft, guilty of providing poor quality life-jackets).

But the journalists exploring the story also gathered the testimony of another (Iraqi) woman who survived the shipwreck, Zainab Abbas. She accused Alan's father of being the steersman of the boat, and therefore also the organizer of the crossing.[7] To this is added the news claiming that the main reason for the family crossing was the desire to move to Greece for dental treatment. The result is a completely different narrative, in which the father is responsible for the death of the other members of his family, with varying degrees of culpability (either for being careless or as a people trafficker).

Finally, a third script is a properly political one, which sees in the attitude of Western governments and in the weakness of the United Nations and the European Union the fundamental responsibility for all the victims of migration, hence also for little Alan. Acceptance of these scripts depends on several factors, which include the social and political opinions of the readers (a reader with a more humanitarian attitude will obviously embrace the first or third, while a reader frightened by the phenomenon or politically inclined towards a defence of national borders will mainly embrace the second). Here, however, I would like to focus on the issue of the narrator subjects and their influence on the selection of scripts.

Touching on this question means quickly dwelling on the concept of symbolic hegemony, namely that sort of warfare waged on the level of meanings by social subjects to make their own script prevail. Without going too deeply into this topic, which rests on Gramsci's ideas, and in itself would require lengthy discussion, I would like to point to the important role of some intermediate subjects[8] – con-

---

7   C. Booker, Aylan Kurdi's father, is a people smuggler, woman claims, in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 September 2015. Available at http://www.smh.com.au/world/migrant-crisis/aylan-kurdis-father-is-a-people-smuggler-woman-claims-20150911-gjkt2m.html.

8   'As their name implies, NGOs also need to be viewed in the context of the government against which they seek to distinguish themselves. As "non-governmental" organizations,

stituted relatively recently in historical terms – such as NGOs, in accrediting the humanitarian narration as a potentially dominant storyline in public opinion with two main purposes: to show the ineptitude of governmental public intervention and stress the importance of their own role. I think that an analysis of this point would clarify concepts such as 'impromptu public of moral spectatorship', used for example by Mortensen and Trenz (2016) to illustrate the symbolic impact of the photos of Alan. It is a question, in short, of identifying who influences public discourse and manages to make their own scripts prevail, rather than imagining the spontaneous birth of a humanitarian *Weltanschauung* (which Mortensen and Trenz term a 'transnational politics of pity').

Kurosawa (2015) underlines precisely the link between a narrative of suffering and the discourse of NGOs, summing it up in the following table:

Figure 6. Source: Kurosawa, 2015
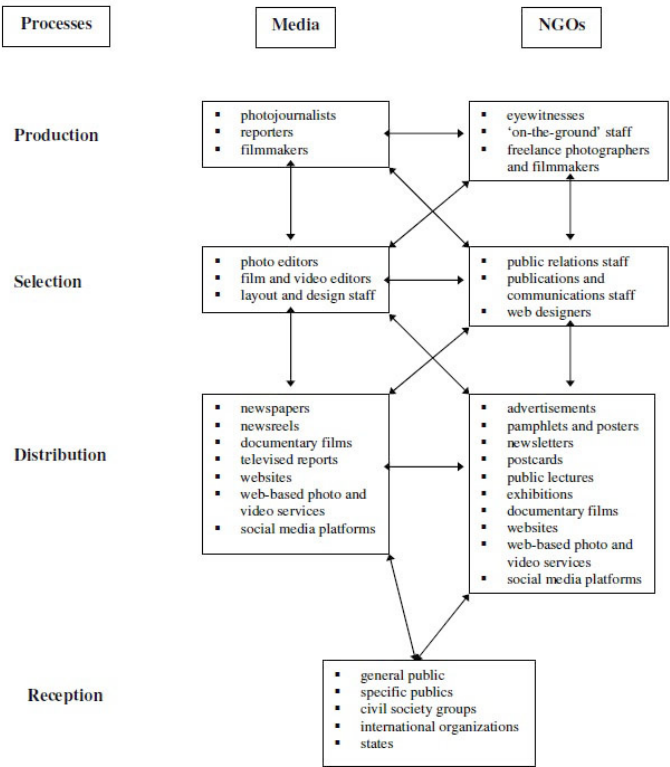
NGOs are conditioned by, and gain much of their legitimacy from, their relationships with government' (Lewis, 2009).

I would like to point out that I do not intend to equate the NGOs' struggle for symbolic hegemony with the ideological forms which it opposes (for instance the retrograde and egoistic narratives of states fiercely averse to the reception of migrants or those expressed in the Australian media and analysed in Bleiker, Campbell, Hutchinson and Nicholson, 2013), but only to remind the reader that public discourses cannot be produced without blocs and social subjects belonging to them, and it is therefore impossible to accept them.

c) Symbolization

While storytelling takes the news and inserts it in a narrative sequence that transcends it, the process of symbolization condenses an entire vision of the world or an aspect of it into an image: in this case a child suffering as a synecdoche of the suffering of part of the world's population.

Kurosawa (2015) has recently argued that 'the socio-historical analysis of the constitution of Euro-American visual regimes of representation of humanitarian crises, and of the social actors participating in the creation of these modes of representation (…) can contribute to a more analytically precise and less normatively sweeping treatment of the topic of depicting distant suffering'.

In his essay, Kurosawa identifies four decisive icons, linked to pictorial masterpieces that he identifies as Ur-Icons, which recur in every symbolization of humanitarian suffering: *Personification*, *Massification*, *Rescue*, *Care*. Kurosawa's analysis is highly complex and deserves a study which goes beyond our scope here. But I would like to focus on the photos of Alan to bring out an aspect not emphasized by studies of the case: the dialectic between the photos of the child's body (an example of *Personification*) and those of its removal from the beach by a Turkish policeman (corresponding to the icon of *Care*).

The former elicits, first of all, inexpressible grief. The dead child seems to be sleeping. He is wearing Western clothes. The starkness of the image contains a vein of respectful pity associated with the fact that the face is concealed, but the image itself is intolerable. It is significant that professional and/or amateur artistic practices concentrated principally on this image, as shown in the previous point. But it is the photos of the policeman carrying away the body that perfectly represent the humanitarian iconography to which Kurosawa refers. Hence, the loneliness of the dead body is contrasted with care and pity, found in many representations of humanitarian catastrophes, such as the very famous ones with which James Nachtwey revealed the consequences of famine in Somalia in 1992.

This dialectic seems to me an essential key to understanding the emotional impact of the series of photos of Alan, because the reverential act represented by the policeman's humane gesture does not console or correct, but rather heightens the sense of the tragedy that has just happened, and makes it possible for viewers

to imagine they are involved in that unavailing, yet deeply human, gesture that consists in caring for the dead.

d) The memory

A photographic analysis can hardly ignore the question of time. Not only -as John Berger points out in a famous essay (2013)- does every photo interpret an event by condensing a portion of it into the shot, but it is itself an object in turn available for processes of memorization, individual and/or collective .

Here, I would like to focus on two aspects of the public memorization of Alan's death: its legitimacy as artistic content and its configuration as a *public event*. On the first point – apart from the artistic practices immediately devised on the Web, which I will deal with in the next section – I would like to mention the works by Oguz Sen and Justus Becker in Frankfurt and the celebrated photo by Ai Weiwei, both reproduced below,

Images 5 and 6: Justus Becker and Oguz Sen; Ai Weiwei

without forgetting the statue of Alan by an Italian artist (Luigi Prevedel), which Pope Francis donated to the FAO in 2017.

In all the cases mentioned (and in others that could be cited), works of art use the image of Alan as a 'motif' that enables us to allude to the photos that made known his tragedy and through them the event of Alan's death, both by turning it into a public event and by bringing out its character as a shared memory. As we saw above, the social construction of this motif also took place immediately through a series of online practices.

We can now pass to the more properly public media memorization, manifested first of all in the process of 'anniversarization' generated by the media, which – like thematization by artists – institutionalizes the event precisely by remembering it, transforming it into an event capable of marking an epoch, using the strength of those photographs that Umberto Eco, in the '70s, termed *epoch-making images.*(Eco 1977). Perhaps, however, the exemplary process of constructing a public memory is provided by the Wikipedia page in which the headword is not 'Alan Kurdi', but 'Alan Kurdi's Death' (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Alan_Kurdi), in an exemplary reconstruction of the specific nature of an event that became public precisely because of its intrinsic symbolic power (a child's death) and the surge of indignation that shook public opinion when it happened:

Image 7: Source Wikipedia.en

5. The consequences

The last point I would like to discuss is the effects that the circulation of the photos of Alan have had on political choices and public opinion.[9] Since they first spread, it was clear, as Lucy Mayblin (2015) points out, that the potential political impact of the photos was potentially very high. In fact, many political statements (for ex-

---

9   The subject in general is discussed for example in Schill, 2012.

ample in Canada, England, Scotland; see Burns, 2015) undercored the atrocity of the fact and the shock caused by the images of Alan. Lin Prøitz (2015) showed the short-term effects on Norwegian politics and elections in the period immediately following the events.

However, I believe that a deeper assessment needs to be made of the movements of public opinion. For example, research by YouGov, cited by The Independent,[10] reveals the rapid waning of the effects on public opinion, and a backlash (withdrawal after an emotional surge capable of modifying public opinion) has even been observed in some European countries in a series of research projects:

'A change of opinion (...) can be made to coincide with a single event and a single image: the photo of the body of Aylan, a small Syrian migrant fleeing his country, lying on a Turkish beach. Within a few days, public opinion changed. The percentage of people concerned about immigration fell to 35% in September. Faced with the straightforward alternative between acceptance and rejection (Fig. 3), 61% of Italians preferred the logic of solidarity, even though a few months earlier the majority had closed their doors to possible entry by sea (51%). The attitude towards working together in dealing with the refugee emergency in Europe, or at least a part of it, also changed, even in the leading country, Germany, which until then had not been responsive towards the demands of the Mediterranean countries." (Bordignon, Ceccarini, Turato, 2015: 198).

This change, however, precisely because it is emotional, was modified by other events with contrasting implications in the following months (e.g. the Bataclan massacre), and over time feelings of insecurity seem to have prevailed. For example, a recent Demos report on immigration and security in Italy saw the percentage of respondents agreeing with the statement 'Immigrants are a danger to public order and people's safety' rising from 33 per cent in 2015 to 46 per cent in 2017.

It can be deduced that the political effect of Alan's images, though intense in the early stages, has faded with time.

From another point of view, the consequences of the wide diffusion of Alan's photo can be considered stronger. I am thinking here about the role played by the images in order to reinforce what we could call the 'humanitarian imaginary' (Kurosawa, 2015). It calls sensitive people (individuals or groups) to make a concrete commitment to helping refugees (by funding NGOs, creating new associations, changing their own opinions about migrants and so on). Those kinds of consequences could be considered pre-political factors of impact or change, and they obviously allow a more general and more complex evaluation of the real effects of the diffusion of the photographs over time.

10 http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/refugee-crisis-surge-of-sympathy-for-refugees-in-britain-likely-to-be-fleeting-study-says-a6689316.html.

6.   Conclusion

My analysis (which still needs further analysis of numerous points) reveals the complexity of the phenomenon of the 'photo of Alan Kurdi'. I have gradually reconstructed its spread online through some of the characteristic phases of a typical digital firestorm: the role of practices of sharing photos in themselves and their variants; the slow and multiform process of cultural elaboration, with the emergence of perspectives of institutionalization in the media discourse and the attempt at symbolic hegemony of the humanitarian discourse; finally, the ambiguity of political effects, intense in the first period but destined to fade over the medium to long term.

My final opinion can be summed up in some simple statements.

First of all, the photos of Akan Kurdi are certainly an example of what Umberto Eco in the '70s termed 'epoch-making images': somehow they are anchored in the collective imagination and become an essential landmark in the representation of refugees in the opening years of this century.

Second, the strength of the images is due to three main factors: their structural power, among other things brought out by the dialectic between the violence of the display of the child's body and the reverential gesture of the policeman who holds it; their ties with an iconography of the child victim, which is typically affirmed in the humanitarian discourse and in particular supported by the communication strategies of the NGOs; the initial force of the media coverage, both in the legacy media and social media, with a distinctive intertwining of strategies.

Third, if the impact on general public opinion was largely short-term, those photos and through them Alan Kurdi's story have undergone a profound cultural assimilation, guaranteeing a considerable memory of it (through artistic celebration, anniversarization by mainstream media and the eventization brought about, for instance, by Wikipedia), and making them capable of being active over time for the whole humanitarian *Weltanshauung*, which is reflected in them and thus reinforces their symbolic value through their own discourses.

In conclusion we can say that, if Alan Kurdi is still a symbol in refugees crises, despite the apparently minor dimension and casual nature of his death (against the thousands of victims, and hundreds of child victims, the phenomenon has seen caused in recent years), it depends on the particular circumstances of the diffusion of his images, and on the peculiar role played by legacy and social media in making them visible, interpreting them, and entrenching them in the collective memory.

References

Berger, J. (2008) *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Book.

Berger, J. (2013) *Understanding a Photograph.* New York: Aperture.

Bleiker, R., Campbell, D., Hutchison, E., Nicholson, X. (2013) 'The visual dehumanisation of refugees', *Australian Journal of Political Science,* 48(4): 398-416. doi: 10.1080/10361146.2013.840769

Bordignon, F., Ceccarini, L., Turato F. (2015) 'Migranti e cittadinanza al tempo delle crisi globali', *la Rivista delle Politiche Sociali / Italian Journal of Social Policy*, 4

Burns, A. (2015) 'Discussion and Action: Political and Personal Responses to the Aylan Kurdi Images', pp. 38-49, in Vis, F. and O. Goriunova (Eds.). *The Iconic Image on Social Media: A Rapid Research Response to the Death of Aylan Kurdi*, Visual Social Media Lab.

Carpentier, N. (2017) *The Discursive-Material Knot. Cyprus in Conflict and Community Media Participation.* New York: Springer.

D'Orazio, F. (2015) 'Journey of an Image: From a Beach in Bodrum to Twenty Million Screens Across the World', pp. 11-19, Vis, F. and O. Goriunova (Eds.). *The Iconic Image on Social Media* cit. (available at: https://www.pulsarplatform.com/blog/2016/journey-of-an-image-from-a-beach-in-bodrum-to-twenty-million-screens-across-the-world/)

Dawkins, R. (1976) *The selfish gene.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eco, U. (1977) 'È bastata una fotografia', *L'Espresso*, 29 May. English Trans. 'A Photograph', in *Travels in Hyper Reality*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1986.

Gregory, S. (2015), *'When Should We Share Distressing Images?', pp. 61-63, in* Vis, F. and O. Goriunova (Eds.). *The Iconic Image on Social Media*, cit.

Katz, E., Lazarsfeld, P. (1955) *Personal Influence*. New York: Free Press.

Kempe, D., Kleinberg, J., Tardos, É. (2003) 'Maximizing the spread of influence through a social network', Int. Conf. on Knowledge Discovery and Data Mining. ACM Press.

Kurasawa, F. (2015) 'How Does Humanitarian Visuality Work? A Conceptual Toolkit for a Sociology of Iconic Suffering', *Sociologica*, 1: 1:1-59 (doi: 10.2383/80396).

Lewis, D. (2009) 'Nongovernmental Organizations, Definitions and History', pp.1056-1062, in Anheier, H.K., S. Toepler, R. List (Eds.) *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society.* New York: Springer

Marshall, G. (2012) 'The Internet and Memetics'. School of Computing Science, Middlesex University. (Downloaded 30 November 2012).

Mayblin, L. (2015) 'Politics, Publics, and Aylan Kurdi', pp. 42-44, in Vis, F. and O. Goriunova (Eds.). *The Iconic Image on Social Media*, cit.

Mortensen, M., Trenz, H.-J. (2016) 'Media Morality and Visual Icons in the Age of Social Media: Alan Kurdi and the Emergence of an Impromptu Public of Moral Spectatorship', *Javnost: The Public*, 23(4): 343-362. (http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2016.1247331.

Prøitz, L. (2015) 'The Strength of Weak Commitment: A Norwegian Response to the Aylan Kurdi Images', pp. 40-42, in Vis, F. and O. Goriunova (Eds.). *The Iconic Image on Social Media*, cit.

Réka, A., Hawoong, J., Barabási, A.-L. (1999) 'Internet: Diameter of the World-Wide Web', *Nature,* 401: 130-131 (doi:10.1038/43601)

Rogers, S. (2015) 'What Can Search Data Tell Us About the Story of Aylan Kurdi Spread Around the World?', pp. 19-26 in Vis, F. and O. Goriunova (Eds.). *The Iconic Image on Social Media*, cit.

Rost, K., Stahel, L., Frey, B. S. (2016) 'Digital Social Norm Enforcement: Online Firestorms in Social Media', *PLoS ONE*, 11(6).

Schill. D. (2012) 'The Visual Image and the Political Image: A Review of Visual Communication Research in the Field of Political Communication', *The Review of Communication*, 12(2): 118-142.

Tomanić Trivundža, I. (2015) *Press photography and visual framing of news*, Ljubljana: Faculty of Social Sciences

Van Dijk, J. (2013) *The culture of connectivity. A critical history of social media.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Van Dijk, J. (2017) 'Conceptualising-media-platforms-from-a-culture-of-connectivity-to-a-platform-society' Media/machine (http://mediamachines.org/log/2017/7/31/conceptualising-media-platforms-from-a-culture-of-connectivity-to-a-platform-society).

Vis, F., Goriunova, O. (Eds.) (2015). *The Iconic Image on Social Media: A Rapid Research Response to the Death of Aylan Kurdi*, Visual Social Media Lab (http://visualsocialmedialab.org/blog/the-iconic-image-on-social-media-a-rapid-response-to-the-death-of-aylan-kurdi).

Biography

Fausto Colombo is Full Professor of Theories of Media and Communication, Head of the Department of Communication and Performing Arts and Director of Master's in Communication, Digital Marketing and Interactive Advertising at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan.

He was Coordinator of the Section 'Cultural Processes and Institution' of the Italian Association of Sociologists (AIS) from 2011 to 2014, and a Member of the Board of ECREA from 2013 to 2016. He was Visiting Professor at Celsa, Université Sorbonne (Paris, 2014), and at Université Lumière (Lyon, 2018). He also chaired the Unesco Chair in International Communication at Université Stendhal (Grenoble, 2015).

Since 2016, he has been a member of the Academia Europaea – The Academy of Europe, in the Film, Media and Visual Studies section. In 2017 he was nominated a member of the section committee.

Email: fausto.colombo@unicatt.it