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The Iconic Image in a Digital Age

Editorial Mediations over the Alan Kurdi Photographs

Mette Mortensen, Stuart Allan & Chris Peters

Abstract

This article investigates selected newspapers' editorial mediations over contrasting perceptions regarding the significance of a controversial set of 'iconic' news photographs, namely images of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian refugee, whose drowned corpse washed ashore in September, 2015. Specifically, this study examined individual editorial items, published by leading Danish, Canadian and British newspapers over a four-month period, engaging with and reflecting upon this imagery. Our analysis revealed several key deliberative features of editorial self-reflexivity, with three especially salient themes shown to be emergent across the coverage: a) instantaneousness and historical photographic precedents; b) social media's perceived influence on photojournalism; and c) normative associations of affective qualities for this imagery. By elucidating these features of editorial self-reflexivity within a convergent digital media ecology, this article offers original insights into how and why the epistemic values governing visual communication are being reconsidered and redrawn under pressure from institutional imperatives.

Keywords: editorials, photojournalism, refugee crisis, social media, iconic images

Introduction

In the current era, journalism appears to be increasingly driven by visual priorities, with the sheer volume, spread and re-inflection of newsworthy imagery expanding exponentially, particularly across social media platforms. This complex, uneven digital ecology poses challenging editorial questions for news organizations, not only in terms of authenticity, verification and credibility, but also where questions of societal significance and impact are concerned (Allan 2013, Mortensen 2015, Pantti et al. 2012). Such questions, while pertinent to photojournalism in general, are thrown into sharp relief where photographs widely regarded to be 'iconic' come to the fore. Iconic images are often credited with the ability to mobilise public opinion and influence political decision-making processes, due in no small part to their perceived emotional appeal and symbolical force. However, they are also criticised for simplifying and diverting attention away from institutional power structures, which seem to be effectively 'ex-nominated' from representational framings (Barthes 1973).

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This article investigates how the editorial coverage published in a selected group of newspapers mediated contrasting perceptions of the role and impact of a controversial set of news photographs widely deemed to be 'iconic' in their power to galvanise public opinion in decisive ways. We address how issues pertinent to their editorial processing were communicated, viewing such self-reflexivity as a discursively-constituted part of the way news organizations signal their social positioning, that is, their normative, cognitive, practical and narrated roles (Hanitzsch & Vos 2017).

Editorial self-reflexivity, especially when directed outward to intended readers (as opposed to inwards, typically in the name of professionalism), can be thought of as the editorial frontstage – to adapt Goffman's (1959) metaphor – upon which journalism performs. This stage is about more than the opinion-formation function of the press; it is an important part of how these key members of journalism's interpretive communities assert their authority, negotiate normative boundaries, and gain legitimacy with diverse publics (Berkowitz 2000, Carlson 2015, Peters & Broersma 2017, Zelizer 2010).

The changing visual ecology of newsworthy imagery invites this editorial reflexivity to rationalise its priorities and protocols. For photojournalism, this meta-reflection is particularly critical where 'iconic' imagery is concerned. The social relations of iconicity emerge in and through public engagement over time, especially where a given image's epistemic status proves controversial by provoking outcry from diverse communities of interest.

Accordingly, we take as our empirical point of departure a set of photographs taken on September 2, 2015 documenting a tragic scene on a beach in Turkey, where the corpses of drowned Syrian refugees had washed ashore. In one, three-year-old Alan Kurdi is shown face down on the sand, while in another, a Turkish police officer, who had recovered the child's lifeless body, cradled it tenderly in his arms. The photographs, taken by photojournalist Nilüfer Demir for the Dogan News Agency, quickly went viral across social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. In many of the subsequent news and editorial accounts describing the images, they were proclaimed to be 'iconic', a 'game-changer', a 'turning-point' even 'a culmination of the refugee crisis'. Although the Syrian civil war and the parallel 'Refugee Crisis'[1] were covered extensively in the press from 2011 onwards – with countless photographs documenting the events circulating worldwide – the appearance of the Kurdi imagery represented a clear moment when public, journalistic, and political attention suddenly converged on a global scale.

Research examining reporting of the refugee crisis has underscored the ideological import of imagery (Berry et al. 2015), with the Kurdi photographs, in particular, being studied in terms of their spread and reception on social media and the frames employed (European Journalism Observatory 2015, Fehrenback & Rodogno 2016, Mortensen & Trenz 2016, Vis et al. 2015). In this regard, our enquiry is guided by a principal research question, namely: How does the editorial content in our selected newspapers reflect on the perceived significance and impact of the 'iconic' Kurdi imagery and its possible influence shaping public perceptions?

Proceeding in four main sections, the article first presents a theoretical framework to illuminate several pertinent issues regarding the moral tenets of photojournalistic iconicity, ethical dilemmas of graphic imagery, and editorial challenges in relation to current mobilisation processes on social media. We then outline our empirical case study and methodological approach before analysing editorial content focusing on key

deliberative features of editorial self-reflexivity concerning questions of instantaneity, social media's perceived influence on photojournalism, and the affectivity of imagery. The conclusion reflects on the broader significance of our findings, including with regard to how news organizations generate and convey authority through editorial reflection on 'iconic' photojournalism in a digital era.

Reformulating photojournalistic icons

Precisely what makes a news photograph sufficiently embedded in our public culture to be recognised as 'iconic' is a question that has attracted considerable attention from media commentators and academic researchers alike.

Perlmutter's (1998) formative study of iconicity points to several key editorial factors shaping how and why certain images provoke strong, evocative reactions across diverse publics: from *prominence*, where its 'greater likelihood to achieve a higher rank in our collective memory is influenced by its place order in the agenda of media'; to *frequency*, suggesting recurrent repetition across varied media contexts underwrites the assumed power of the image; *instantaneousness*, in keeping with the perception that icons typically achieve eminence immediately; *transposability*, which highlights how the 'quoting' of an icon from one media source to the next facilitates retention, even when stripped of its original context; *metonymy*, namely the employment of an image as a metonym to exemplify general conditions, a 'summing up' quality; *primordiality and/or cultural resonance*, how the icon may tap into a 'deeper human sensibility', possibly calling to mind past archetypes and themes; and, lastly, *striking composition*, which includes visual factors as well as telling juxtapositions, tensions, and a certain sparseness. In this way, Perlmutter points to how simplicity – in the accessible, affective, communicative and compositional senses of the term – seems to go 'hand-in-hand' with iconicity (1998:13ff).

Building on this approach, Hariman and Lucaites (2007, 2015) advance a complementary line of enquiry into what makes certain images iconic by considering the framing of definitional limits. Icons as public images recast social knowledge, they argue, creating a web of social connections opening up multiple paths for identification and criticism, often serving to 'mark, frame, and otherwise set the tone for later generations' understanding of public life' for a given period (2007:11). They 'are capable of situating understanding within a particular scene and a specific moral context', where 'events and political decisions become personalized', effectively 'orienting the self within civic life' in embedded, normative terms (ibid.). More than displaying publics to themselves, Hariman and Lucaites maintain, icons provide 'performative guides for public judgement and action', thereby suggesting that a respective image will offer a corresponding model of citizenship (ibid:12).

However, as the image highlights certain roles and relationships, it necessarily renders others less vital, intelligible or legitimate as a result. The rhetorical power of iconic images revolves around their capacity to interpolate certain preferred forms of citizenship consistent with photojournalism's commitment to underwriting a liberal-democratic polity. 'We believe that photojournalism provides resources for thought and feeling that are necessary for constituting people as citizens', Hariman and Lucaites contend, 'motivating identification with and participation in specific forms of collective life' (2007:13).

At a time when declarations of iconicity are increasingly blurring into claims made regarding the 'viral' in social media discourses, familiar assumptions invite active reconsideration. Not only is the presumed centrality of mainstream news organizations increasingly open to question, attention also turns to consider how social media users may uphold – or, equally possible, subvert – pertinent social relations of signification by ascribing certain images iconic status, and in so doing actively re-inflect their circulation, even mobilisation.

'Iconic' photographs thus represent something of a paradox in the current age of image abundance, with the continued deployment of familiar conceptions of iconicity denounced by some critics as a (modernist) longing for the lost aura of the single, isolated image (see Kennedy 2015, Tulloch & Blood 2012). Social media users now play a pivotal part in shaping iconicity, for instance by sharing the image in question, commenting on it, using hashtags that promote algorithmic selection and visibility, and so forth. In other words, the activation of these sorts of indicators, such as 'retweets', 'trending', 'sharing', and the like, now act as new markers of iconic impact. Once the moral commitments of photojournalism were presumed to drive its adjudication and valorisation of iconicity. Social media are recasting the normative rationales informing news organizations' editorial self-understanding and performance in mediating competing priorities.

To the extent news organizations find their proclaimed monopoly on visual authority under challenge, if not outright threat (not least when 'every citizen with a smartphone is a photojournalist'), alternative strategies of curation, interpretation, and contextualization become evermore pronounced, including in efforts to reaffirm this authority through editorial self-reflection on such imagery's public significance (Allan 2017b, Pogliano 2015, Solaroli 2015).

Researchers examining the Alan Kurdi case in this light have secured useful insights into social media mobilisation in this respect. Vis et al. (2015:10), via quantitative data, chart the circulation of the images to answer, among other questions, how they could 'travel from a beach in Bodrum to the screens of almost 20 million people across the world in the space of 12 hours and thirty thousand tweets?' Even though 'the speed of "virality" in the pre-internet era cannot be compared with our own', Fehrenback and Rodogno (2016) remind us, 'this is a difference of degree rather than kind' (2016:1129). By contrast, Mortensen and Trenz (2016) contend that the Kurdi case illustrates how social media users' involvement in shaping discourses of global justice surrounding iconic imagery entails new practices of civic engagement, which might ultimately redefine the boundaries of solidarity.

For researchers seeking to reassess journalism's moral responsibilities where iconicity is concerned, then, one crucial area of debate concerns the ethical priorities and dilemmas presented by the increased circulation of graphic iconic images online. Chouliaraki and Blaagaard (2013:254) underscore the performativity of an 'ethics of images', in so far as photojournalism contributes to the 'moral education' of Western publics situated as witnesses to the suffering of distant others. Other scholars query whether the publication of such imagery is disrespectful to the victims and their next of kin, possibly overstepping public norms for the exposure to violence or, in the worst situations, contributing to 'compassion fatigue' (Moeller 1999). In discussing the publication of the Kurdi imagery, Sam Gregory (2015), program director of the human rights organization Witness, reflected such concerns:

> Of course, at Witness we believe in the right to free expression, but also the importance that human rights discourse places also on individual dignity and integrity and how we protect people who have suffered violence already from further re-victimization. But it is also a conversation about the power of these images to break through the chatter, incite discussion and mobilize change, and how we balance these imperatives. (Gregory 2015)

Decisions on whether to publish such graphic imagery thus involve intense, pragmatic deliberations over how best to maintain this balancing act under typically fraught circumstances. While it is worth remembering that norms are historically changeable, with photographs of 'dead, dying or suffering children' not being regarded as taboo in Western contexts until the 1980s (Fehrenback & Rodogno 2016:1124), longstanding conventions threaten to unravel in digital contexts. This ethical dilemma was acute when deciding how to handle the Alan Kurdi images, not with respect to whether to republish the images – they were already widely available via social media platforms – but rather with respect to how to present them so as to direct the symbolic power of their impact.

Accordingly, while existing research contributes to our knowledge of the social media logics and meaning-making potential behind the mobilisation of graphic imagery, how news media publicly position their editorial role in the circulation of iconic images in today's media environment remains largely unexplored. Pertinent forms of meta-reflection may be a growing tendency in the face of commercialisation and fragmentation, some researchers have argued (Carlson 2015, Kristensen & Mortensen 2017, Peters 2011), with others pointing to the provision of democratic value through backstage insights into the current conditions for news production (Singer 2007).

At the same time, such metanarratives have been criticised for reflecting the news media's inclination to self-centeredness, devoting too much attention to questions of journalistic form and process over and above the substance of the actual issues and events being reported (Arnett 2011, Wahl-Jorgensen 2017). Bearing these tensions in mind, researching the public communication of editorial processes can help to clarify a given news organization's investment in securing the purchase of its preferred definitions, the relevance of its mode of address being subjected to constant scrutiny and assessment.

Research design

Recognising that a myriad of collective professional factors influence editorial processes in the newsroom – from 'news values' (Harcup & O'Neill 2016) to 'role perceptions' (Hanitzsch et al. 2016) and 'journalistic doxa' (Schultz 2007) – this article centres on editorial content as the 'frontstage' upon which news organizations elaborate and perform normative values publicly (Karlsson 2011). Such editorial self-reflexivity forms the public record of how organizations intervene in and potentially shape debates as well as making a claim to the democratic necessity and sociocultural value of such mediations.

While research into editorial processes typically focuses on 'backstage' elements giving shape to content (conducting interviews with editorial staff explaining their practices, for example, or by gathering first-hand observations of daily routines), scholarly

insights need to extend beyond the newsroom. Therefore, this article strives to complement existing scholarship by foregrounding the public mediation of news organizations' editorial evaluations.

In the case of photojournalism, to appreciate how the current period of paradigmatic change is impacting upon its forms, practices and epistemologies, an examination of how editorial priorities and decision-making are communicated to publics (implicitly and explicitly) warrants close attention. The impassioned responses to the Alan Kurdi photographs were exceptional in this regard, being so intensely debated they became newsworthy in their own right (Allan 2017a, Prøitz 2017).

This article, in recognising this strategic opportunity to investigate editorial deliberations over photojournalistic inflections of iconicity, proceeds to study these processes on four interweaving levels: 1) editorial leaders, outlining news organizations positions on and reactions to the Kurdi images; 2) editorially-sanctioned debate, in the form of columns/opinion pieces by journalists employed by one of these organizations; 3) guest columns, wherein the news organization invited extended contextualisation from outside expertise; and 4) letters to the editors, in which a selection of responses were assembled to be indicative of public reflection and debate.

Given the specifics of the Alan Kurdi crisis event, we focused our data-gathering on major newspapers, choosing national titles from Denmark, Canada and the UK – namely, Jyllands-Posten, Berlingske, and Politiken (Denmark); Globe and Mail, National Post, and Toronto Star (Canada); and The Guardian, The Telegraph and The Times (United Kingdom) – so as to foreground elite opinion formation across the relative left-of-middle to right-of-middle political spectrums.

The Danish case served as the starting unit of analysis, with the Canadian newspapers added for purposes of potential contrast in terms of perceived impact. That is, soon after Kurdi's death, it was reported his family had been rejected for asylum in Canada, which became a salient issue in the country's federal election campaign in September and October 2015. Including the British newspapers was deemed beneficial in order to contrast starkly polarised media debates regarding the refugee crisis within the context of EU policy-making on immigration.

Editorial content was gathered for the selected nine newspapers from 2 September 2015 to 2 January 2016, a period spanning the initial emergence of the Kurdi photographs, their editorial treatment over subsequent months, and their inclusion in end-of-year retrospectives. The Infomedia search engine was used to gather the Danish editorial items, while Nexis was used to collect the Canadian and UK items. All publications, except two, expressly include both online and print material. While the Nexis source record for The Globe and Mail and National Post does not specify this distinction, manual searches of items for each confirmed that all appeared online.

Following initial pilot testing, three separate sets of search terms were identified as sufficient to generate comprehensive datasets: 'Kurdi'; 'drowned' and 'boy'; and 'boy' and ('refugee' or 'Syria' or 'Syrian') and 'beach' proving to be especially salient. Editorial content was then separated from news and other forms of non-editorial coverage, such as features and background articles, leaving a collection of 35 items from the Danish newspapers, 116 in the Canadian titles, and 76 for those in the UK (see table 1). These items were analysed systematically, with empirical sorting documents for each county, noting: date, editorial genre, title, author, key themes and passages. Once

completed, these items were analysed again to help identify recurrent themes, relative emphases, and significant points of contrast.

For the purposes of this article, we have chosen to focus primarily on a smaller subset of editorial coverage, namely that which addressed questions surrounding the public significance of the imagery, and its perceived journalistic relevance for visual reportage. This means, for example, that we refrain from reflecting on issues concerning national identity, humanitarian policy, and political impact, which were manifest in much of the Canadian editorial material, because this issue emerged as a substantial one during the election campaign. Following the comparative rationale informing our research design (see also Livingstone 2003), findings are not presented country-by-country but rather along these dimensions. This approach was determined at the pilot stage when it became apparent that reflections on editorial processing of the imagery were more consistent across the national settings than originally anticipated. Our analysis, in this regard, attempts to engage in early stage theory-building, as opposed to simply cataloguing national findings.

Letters to the editor were collected as part of our data set, given that such letters are not 'objective' representations of public opinion but, in fact, are evidence of editors actively constructing it (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001). Considered in the initial phase of analysis, the selection of readers' responses across the nine selected newspapers mostly spoke to questions of humanitarianism and government policy. These excerpts – in the Canadian and UK titles, typically presented as a collection of (often short) reflections on a given story – while interesting, were deemed to be mostly tangential to this article's research focus. Apart from one exception, we do not engage with them in the following sections, as these deal explicitly with editorial reflections surrounding iconic imagery specific to the digital era, and such reflections were largely absent in letters to the editor.

Table 1. *Editorial content*

	Denmark	Canada	United Kingdom
Editorial leaders	7	21	11
Staff opinion columns	10	59	37
Guest columns	14	27	24
Letters to the editor	4	9	4
Total	35	116	76

Findings: Communicating editorial challenges

The sudden emergence of the Alan Kurdi imagery prompted each of the newspapers in our study to self-reflexively address and, to varying degrees, redraw their preferred editorial boundaries. Faced with the 'extreme situation' and 'the horror of reality', as the Danish paper Jyllands-Posten (Sept. 4)[2] expressed it, editors were compelled to consider amending their newspaper's customary mode of address and corresponding public idiom where the acceptable limits for disturbing photographs were concerned. This pertained especially to long-held editorial guidelines about not publishing graphic images showing dead bodies, especially those of children. Tellingly, at least one of the newspapers selected from each of the three countries ran meta-reflexive editorials explicitly explaining and justifying their decision to print explicit imagery.

Despite the fact that difficult issues of editorial judgement demanded swift resolution as the images rapidly proliferated across the mediascape, time was nonetheless taken to think through the implications. Thomas Borberg, photo editor-in-chief of the Danish newspaper Politiken, disclosed the decision to publish was based on discussions for 'several hours to be sure of what we are doing. It is a delicate balance' (Politiken Sept. 3). In the case of the UK paper The Guardian, an impromptu editorial meeting was held shortly after the images came across the news wires at 11:30 am. 'We didn't rush to publish', deputy editor Paul Johnson explained. 'We verified the photographs and waited for a full story before publication.'

The degree to which such editorial justifications were formally acknowledged varied. In the case of the Canadian newspapers, the Toronto Star (Sept. 2) and National Post (Sept. 2) published warnings at the top of their initial online news reports, advising readers that 'graphic images' of a dead child appeared below. However, in subsequent stories using these photos following soon thereafter, this warning disappeared (e.g. Post Sept. 3a, Star Sept. 3). The Globe and Mail, conversely, never posted such a warning but instead explained their deliberations, pointing out that even though the images were upsetting, they were a 'true representation of reality', which outweighed related concerns:

> In a world filled with graphic horrors, the Western media have become increasingly squeamish about showing what war, famine or death actually look like. There is an understandable fear of upsetting the audience, and a well-founded reluctance to be seen making a market out of the suffering of others. But some upsetting images demand to be seen, precisely because they are a true representation of reality. They show us the world as it is, its cruelties exposed, and not the world as we would wish it to be. And by the shock to our eyes, our conscience may be stirred. (Globe and Mail, Sept. 2)

In this respect, while editorial voices stressed how and why the decision to publish the Kurdi imagery was not taken lightly, the ethical necessity of doing so was widely professed. Moreover, the extent to which iconic images can rewrite conventional editorial rules was acknowledged, for instance by Guardian columnist Roy Greenslade. 'It was such a shocking image', he wrote, 'that even those editors who have run anti-refugee propaganda for week upon week felt they must give it full measure' (Guardian Sept. 3a). This justification cut across numerous editorial items in all three sets of newspapers in our study, with repeated assertions that despite the unclear long-term impact, the rapid shift and swell in public sentiment accompanying the spread of the photographs worldwide was undeniable.

Similar reflections were offered in the 'letters to the editors' published in the selected newspapers. Some, like a Guardian reader, were 'shocked and dismayed to see the images of a dead refugee child published on your website' (Guardian Sept. 3b), and critiqued such choices either for reasons of the photographs' upsetting character or their potential political/communicative impact. However, most reader responses addressing questions of editorial appropriateness directly acknowledged the value of such imagery, despite it being troubling. 'The Globe was right to publish the front-page picture of the drowned toddler in Turkey', a reader wrote (Globe and Mail Sept. 5b), before adding: 'The body of one small child on a beach cries more loudly for action than a whole volume of statistics.' In this way, the scope of public responses signalled by the range of

letters selected for inclusion reinforced the demarcation of editorial boundaries around recognised tension points in the coverage more generally: the shocking nature of the images, their significance for furthering public understanding of the issues at stake, and uncertainties complicating editorial deliberations in this regard.

This study's examination of the ensuing editorial coverage documented the extent to which these tension points continued to be prioritised for deliberation and debate. Moreover, it was similarly possible to detect the presence of editorial self-reflexivity focused on what this incident revealed about news photography's projected authority and relevance.

Specifically, our analysis discerned three interrelated themes: a) instantaneousness and historical photographic precedents; b) social media's perceived influence on photojournalism; and c) normative associations of affective qualities for this imagery. Taken together, they could be read as indicative of the newspapers' varied attempts toward reconciliation of conflicting demands when negotiating the fluid contingencies of iconicity in a digital era.

Instantaneousness and historical precedents

Circulation of the Kurdi imagery was spreading worldwide by the evening of the second of September (European-time), such that by the morning of the next day, Alan (initially misspelled Aylan) Kurdi's sad demise was widely known. Apparent from the outset of the editorial coverage were references to the global impact of the photographs, with several of the newspapers in our study labelling them 'iconic' within the first editorials and opinion columns (e.g. Berlingske Sept. 4; Globe and Mail Sept. 3a, 5a; Guardian Sept. 3a, 5, 6; Jyllandsposten Sept. 2; Post Sept. 4; Star Sept. 4; Telegraph Sept. 3). References to the Kurdi-images as 'iconic' became self-fulfilling in so far as the newspapers, by using this term, performatively took part in constituting them as such (Mortensen 2015).

The recognition that the Kurdi imagery had attained near-instant iconic status meant that the photographs were regarded as newsworthy not only on account of their grim depiction of the refugee-crisis, but also because they represented a shared reference point for transnational publics (Mortensen 2016). The tendency to quickly pronounce the images as iconic was apparent, to varying degrees, in each of the newspapers in our study, frequently coupled to differing perceptions of impact measured in terms of geographical spread and historical significance.

Concerning geographical spread, editorial content published by the nine newspapers emphasised how far and fast the images were disseminated. For instance, the chief editor of Jyllands-Posten (Sept. 4) observed: 'The image of the dead Kurdish boy on a European beach has iconographic power, which has already turned it into a subject of conversation all over Europe.' This presumed global focus directly spurred on by the reach of the photographs was widely asserted in all publications. In the Canadian newspapers, the imagery was believed to 'thrust the long-simmering Syrian migrant crisis into the global consciousness' (Post Sept. 3b), generating a 'swell of compassion for the drowned boy whose picture has captivated the world' (Post Sept. 4b), with many lamenting that 'it took the image of a dead boy on a beach to galvanize attention' (Star Sept. 4). In the UK titles, Telegraph opinion columnist Allison Pearson referred to 'the

now-famous photograph of Aylan, washed up like detritus on the beach, his sturdy little shoes a piercing reminder that a living boy had been running around in them just hours earlier'[3], before making the point that the image 'has prodded a dormant international conscience, and rightly so' (Sept. 8).

A further dimension of editorial projections of impact revolved around the photographs' declared historical significance, a somewhat paradoxical assertion in light of newspapers also announcing the immediacy of their iconicity. This line of argument surfaced, for example, in speculations about this icon's lasting centrality. As an opinion column in the Guardian maintained:

> This is the kind of iconic image that will surely be republished for many years to come because it encapsulates, in a single frame, the tragedy of people fleeing from oppression and willing to take extraordinary risks in order to reach safety in the west. (Guardian, Sept. 3a)

Historical resonance was also accentuated by drawing comparisons to the enduring impact of previous icons. As the public editor of the Globe and Mail*,* Silvia Stead, explained to readers:

> [A]s difficult as it is to look at, it is worth remembering that a newspaper has a responsibility at times to show the horrors of war and death – but never to do it lightly. There have been times throughout history when the publication of a photo has changed the public understanding and/or opinion of a world event. They are iconic photos that, yes, can shock and appal readers. (Globe and Mail, Sept. 3a).

This projection of iconicity, complexly intertwined with cultural memory and intericonicity, i.e., reference to preceding icons (Hansen 2015), is a recurring trait in editorials and opinion columns striving to fathom how and why certain images resonate so powerfully with diverse publics. In the case of the Kurdi photographs, this meant that opinion leaders at the various publications looked to history to make sense of why they were engendering an impact, and what it might mean. Amongst the various 'iconic', 'world famous' or 'unforgettable' photographs identified in relation to the Kurdi imagery, reference was often made to Nick Ut's 1972 'Napalm Girl' photograph taken during the Vietnam war, documenting a naked, severely burned nine-year old girl, Kim Phuc, running from a napalm attack. Such comparisons raise searching questions about what determines iconicity in a digital age and, quite crucially, to what extent its associated temporality is being transformed, both with respect to the pace at which a photograph imprints itself on the public imaginary and then continues to resonate.

Other editorial voices, while recognising the existence of such parallels, were more circumspect about their influence. A historical exploration in The Globe and Mail (Sept. 5a) argued that: 'Occasionally a news photograph's influence proves far-reaching and long-lasting – […] Joe Rosenthal's unabashedly stirring image of the 1945 flag-raising by U.S. Marines on Iwo Jima [is] in this rarefied category – but usually there is little ongoing or even retroactive impact.' In reflecting on the instantaneity, spread and endurance of the imagery, editors and columnists could be seen to be grappling with how to adjust a concept grounded in an analogue, black-and-white era to the realities of the digital age. Several adopted a 'curatorial' role attempting to contextualise the (emergent) processes of iconisation they were taking part in while, at the same time, restating grand

claims concerning iconic photographs' (historic) ability to move emotions to galvanise public opinion and thereby drive political decision-making.

Social media's perceived influence

The rapid spread of the Kurdi photographs afforded an entry point for editorial reflection on the news media's shifting societal roles, prompted in part by the concession that mainstream newspapers no longer hold an exclusive right to determine which images become iconic. While the authority of the newspapers' traditional gatekeeping was proving open to challenge, however, new opportunities were seen to be emerging within the digitalised, convergent media landscape. Several of the newspapers in our study sought to render explicit the importance of their presumed role in reporting on how such images traverse across social media, including how they are shared, re-inflected or challenged by members of their digital publics.

Interestingly, the publication of the images was accompanied by a sense of inevitability in certain instances of the editorial coverage. 'The images of three-year old Aylan Kurdi have, since they were made public Wednesday, practically been impossible to avoid, even if one would want to do so', an editorial in Jyllands-Posten noted (Sept. 4). By contrast, other editorial voices questioned the underlying social media logics behind these images standing out, when a 'flood' of '27,000 photographs of Syrians beaten and tortured in Bashar Assad's dungeons, smuggled out by regime dissidents in an operation known as Project Cesar, do not seem to have made any difference at all' (Post Sept. 4c). In a few instances, publications also queried whether newspapers were beholden to counterbalance this (e.g. Globe and Mail Sept. 3b; Post Sept. 5) or whether ethical self-censorship was in vain due to the spread on social media:

> [M]any ask – like they asked most recently after the photos of drowned Syrian children or after the killing of two American journalists on live TV– if it makes sense at all to maintain a form of ethical self-censorship when shocking images flourish in the online sphere anyway? (Berlingske, Sept. 4)

Such public assessment of ethical guidelines allowed editors to illustrate the challenges social media present when considering whether to bring the images into print, in effect positioning their editorial strategies in relation to the contemporary global, digitalised media landscape.

The responsibility of newspapers, another Berlingske editorial (Sept. 4) insisted, needed to be reaffirmed by social media users, the latter being similarly accountable, at least in principle, for decisions taken when encountering images of this sort. Ethical ambiguities over questions regarding what types of imagery can be safely circulated, and how best to respect public sensitivities when they are likely to be upsetting or disturbing, eluded easy resolution.

This convergence of ethical spheres between newspapers and social media was also noted in a guest column penned for The Globe and Mail, in which Peter Boukaert, the Emergency Director at Human Rights Watch, explained that he 'thought long and hard before I retweeted the photo', and that 'it was not an easy decision to share a brutal image of a drowned child' (Globe and Mail Sept. 3b). Similar sentiments were echoed in the Telegraph by Bryony Gordon: 'In the age of social media, with nuanced debate

at an all-time low, it is all too easy to shout and scream before tiring and moving on to something else', he maintained. 'The empathy shown on social media in the last few days comes from a good place, but it is worth next to nothing if in a fortnight's time the reason for it is forgotten' (Telegraph Sept. 4). Several of the editors and columnists in our study offered meta-reflections on their newspaper's role in this regard, pondering over what it was about these particular images that caused them to resonate, not least on social media, as well as whether or not the public empathy engendered would continue to claim a purchase. In continuation of this thematic, many of these voices proceeded to frame questions of authenticity and symbolicity in relation to 'compassion fatigue' (Moeller 1999).

Normative associations of affective qualities

Several scholars have noted iconic images may be distinguished by their proclaimed 'authenticity' and 'symbolicity' (Brink 2000, Sonesson, 1999). Countervailing tensions between the authentic and the symbolic ran through several editorials in our study, including where the symbolic impact of the images versus the reality of the political situation and humanitarian crisis they represented was subjected to debate.

In Berlingske (Sept. 4), it was noted that 'Kurdi is another number and another destiny in a war, which has cost more than 10,000 children their lives.' The editorial continued: 'But Aylan Kurdi is different. Because a picture was taken – in fact, an entire series of shocking, heart breaking pictures – of him.' In the Post*,* it was pointed out that the personalisation and identification of the 'refugee crisis' offered by the Kurdi images might be more manageable than grasping the 'sheer "volume"' of distant suffering:

> [I]n a war, or under a dictatorship, there are so many 'little ones' – and many too who are not little, their suffering in no way less – caught in a murderous tangle. Perhaps it is the sheer 'volume' that has us turning away from what our minds actually grasp but which are – perhaps out of defensiveness, perhaps even cowardice – kept out of our more imperious hearts. (Post, Sept. 5b)

Other editors and columnists explicitly reflected on how to handle the symbolic impact of the images, counterweighing the risk of harm by providing more detailed information about the people being depicted (e.g. Post Sept. 4c, d.). Thomas Borberg of Politiken, explained to readers that when images of bodies of children started appearing on social media the week before, the newspaper had refrained from putting them into print. The images of Alan Kurdi, however, were different:

> When we get the name and thereby also the story of the boy and his family, this of course changes from an illustration to the larger story, for which we might as well have chosen a different image, to being its own, independent story. The boy has a name and at the same time he is a terrible symbol of what refugees have to go through. (Politiken, Sept. 3)

Borberg pointed to the way in which the imagery split between documenting the singular, tragic incident of the drowning of Alan Kurdi and acting as 'a terrible symbol'. Indeed, the fact that the Kurdi family members had been named in the press coverage was itself a telling departure from editorial convention. Until recently, as Ian Jack observed in his

Guardian opinion column, the western media 'felt easy' about using pictures of calamities as anonymous bodies.

> The Iraqi soldier burned to a crisp by an American air bomb in the first Gulf war; the little girl's face staring up from her grave after the Bhopal gas disaster in 1984: we never felt the need to know who they were. (Guardian, Sept. 8)

To name the family, it followed, was to 'represent a step on the journey to thinking of them as like ourselves', in Jack's view. As a columnist in the National Post asserted, 'Kurdi could have been anyone's child, which is why, I think, the image was so powerful' (Post Nov. 18).

In a more critical vein, other editorial voices raised the question whether 'reality' was being fairly represented by this photograph. One of them pointed out that: 'There were millions of refugees on the move inside Syria and out, long before little Alan Kurdi's body washed up on a Turkish shore to be photographed' (Post Sept. 5a). In the same publication, columnist Christie Blatchford argued that the Canadian government's emphasis on military solutions in response to the imagery 'was the responsible, intelligent and reasoned response to that picture, and on a day when others took an easier path, the one strewn with flowers, teddy bears, balloons and sentiment' (Sept. 4d). Other publications recognised that refugees are primarily young men, not children, as the photographs would lead us to believe. 'There is a word for showing pictures with an eye to changing opinions, and this word is not journalism', a Jyllands-Posten guest column noted. In the same column, it was argued that 'Something does not become true, because we have an image of it. From UNCHR we know that almost three out of four of the people arriving are young men' (Jyllands-Posten Sept. 13).

In this sense, tensions can be observed between those believing this imagery provided a much-needed humanitarian reminder and those who felt it might misdirect public opinion. Both perspectives, though, shared a common concern about its impact going forth. For Guardian guest columnist Anders Lustgarten, a London playwright, the refugee crisis ignited a 'compassion explosion' (Guardian Sept. 13), yet one that might not last.

Elsewhere in all three countries' newspapers in our study, the opposite standpoint was also advocated, namely that the images might cause 'compassion fatigue', a term that resonates in both journalistic and academic debates. Some columns and editorials relied on this analytical shorthand to describe how members of the public may gradually become de-sensitised and immune to caring about the plight of distant others, due to factors such as sensationalistic news coverage of crisis events. In her Guardian column, Suzanne Moore related this problem directly to the Kurdi imagery:

> The compassion fatigue said to have set in when we were shown images of famine is now a permanent motion sickness. Just keep staring straight ahead, don't look too hard, or you may see something other than detritus out at sea, or sleeping rough, or crowded into stations. You might see a child's face that reminds you of a child you know […] and you may indeed say that someone, somewhere, should do something, but not us. (Guardian, Sept. 3c)

This disavowal of moral reasonability, a refusal to confront the harrowing realities of the refugee crisis, was a recurrent theme. 'In truth, if we are honest with ourselves, our horror at this image actually says less about our concern for this poor little boy and more

about our concern for our own guilty consciences', Telegraph columnist Julia Hartley-Brewer maintained (Telegraph Sept. 3). Editorial deliberations over the symbolic impact of the Kurdi images thus pointed to pressing issues which may have otherwise eluded sustained attention, not least with respect to newspapers' framing of moral spectatorship on behalf of distant publics.

Conclusion

To close, this article has examined how editorial voices in several leading Danish, Canadian and British newspapers responded to the Alan Kurdi images, devoting particular attention to pertinent issues surrounding the mediation of their photojournalistic significance over a four-month period. In so doing, this study's enquiry was guided by a principal research question, namely: How does the editorial content in our selected newspapers reflect on the perceived significance and impact of the 'iconic' Kurdi imagery and its possible influence shaping public perceptions?

In the course of our interpretative analysis, we chose to focus on the intersection of points of tension in editorial deliberation, raising further issues about the contemporary role of news organizations in circulating and reflecting upon disturbing imagery, especially when such visuals are deemed to be 'iconic'. Our findings provide important insights into the strategies adopted by the selected newspapers to make sense of the visceral impact and public significance of the Kurdi images. Not only are such strategies worthy of analysis in their own right for reasons we have shown, they also help pinpoint features of an emergent media ecology where the norms and values governing photojournalistic relay are – by necessity – being actively reconsidered and redrawn under pressure, not least from social media influence.

Several pertinent scholarly enquiries into the significance of such editorial deliberations have recently focused around questions of gatekeeping or, more recently, gatewatching, highlighting how journalism is undergoing transformative change across digital landscapes (Bruns 2017, Meraz & Papacharissi 2016). The global reaction to the Kurdi imagery invites further elaboration of these debates, we would argue, especially with respect to the significance of such editorial processes for influencing public attention, and thereby governmental policy-making priorities. The widespread empathy perceived to have been engendered by these photographs – charitable donations to fundraising efforts for Syrian refugees increased dramatically (Slovic et al. 2017), for example – seemed less beholden to the editorial processes deployed by news organizations than to the affective qualities ascribed to the imagery itself, typically expressed in a manner blurring the 'iconic' into the 'viral' in social media terms. How these images felt was what mattered, editorial voices frequently pointed out, the hurt they caused demanding urgent action, albeit for reasons these same voices struggled to articulate.

Indeed, while the contours of editorial debate demarcated by the news organizations we studied served to project a readership compelled to respond in moral terms, the limits of possible engagement were drawn in highly restrictive ways. Challenges to Western countries' complicity in the structural violence underpinning the refugee crisis, our analysis has shown, were recurrently positioned outside this editorial consensus.

Notes

1. We use the term 'refugee crisis' because it was a recurrent phrase in the European and Northern American news media to address the human suffering and challenges related to refugees from Syria and neighbouring countries.
2. All Danish quotations were translated into English by Mette Mortensen. Newspaper articles are identified by their name and date of publication. For reasons of space, the full citation does not appear in the references; however, the complete list has been stored digitally by the authors on their university servers and is available upon request.
3. As noted, the spelling of Alan Kurdi's first name appears as Aylan in some of the early news coverage; where this happens in editorial items we examined, we have not corrected the spelling.

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