The Boy on the Beach

Carrie Hetland

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Writer's Comment: When I read the prompt for this essay, inviting me to analyze the documentary work done by a published photograph, I knew immediately I wanted to write about the photo of Alan Kurdi. The fact that the photo had stuck in the back of my mind for five years spoke to its power. This essay taught me more than I planned to learn about the complex ethics of humanitarian photography. I had always held the belief that capturing the private horrors of one person was generally worth it if it benefitted the cause as a whole, but after the research I did for this essay, I found myself reevaluating what I thought I knew about sensationalized photos and the capacity of human empathy. This paper also allowed me to explore the modern concept of tragedies going viral and their struggle to make a lasting impact amidst all the stories the media presents to us daily.

Instructor's Comment: I organize my advanced composition class (UWP 101) around the idea of "documentary work," as defined by psychologist and documentarian Robert Coles, who argues that anyone doing "documentary work," that is, attempting to represent actual people's lives and events in as truthful a way as possible, has to make choices about the subjects they represent. Photographers, for example, have to choose what to shoot (and what not to shoot), how to frame the subject, how (or whether) to crop the image, and where (and how) to publish the image. When the image is published, it appears in the context of other images, text, commentary that may add more meaning. All of which means a given published photograph has layers of potential meaning. For their second major assignment, I ask the students to choose a significant, published photograph and write an essay that explores the layers of meaning in that photograph. Carrie chose a controversial subject: the photograph of a Syrian refugee child who drowned when the

boat his family was fleeing in capsized. Her essay sensitively explores the controversy, helping us to understand the photograph from various points of view—that of the photographer, the boy's family, the media, and the public. She draws on a variety of resources, choosing just the right details and quotations to illustrate her points, and then analyzing the commentary further. I am particularly impressed with her conclusion, which manages to draw together the various strands of her analysis in a satisfying way and leave the reader with serious questions to reflect upon.

—Pamela Demory, University Writing Program

On September 2nd, 2015, Turkish officials reported that twelve Syrian refugees had died after their boats capsized off the shore of Turkey (Smith). Though doubtlessly a tragedy, the story likely would never have reached a global, or perhaps even local audience had it not been for the photo of a toddler's corpse captured by Turkish photographer Nilüfer Demir.

Photo Credit: Nilüfer Demir

Nilüfer Demir works as a press photographer and frequently reports on refugee stories. The day the photo was taken, she had been sent to the beaches of the Bodrum Peninsula to document a group of Pakistani refugees who were reportedly going to be setting off from the beach that afternoon. Instead, Demir and her crew were met with a horrific scene—bodies of drowned Syrian refugees were spread along the coast (Griggs). In an interview with the Turkish branch of CNN, Demir recalled the event: "There was nothing left to do for him," she explained. "There was nothing left to bring him back to life" (Demir qtd. in Griggs). The boy she refers to is, of course, the toddler in the viral picture, the first victim found on the beach that day. He was clad in a red t-shirt and blue shorts, with tiny shoes still on his feet. He lay twisted on his stomach, his face half-buried in the sand, still within reach of the waves of the bay. After realizing there was nothing she could do to save the little boy, Demir did what she had originally come to that beach to do—she started taking pictures (Griggs).

Demir captured many photos of many victims on the beach that day, but only one went viral. The public latched on to the picture of the little boy found dead in the sand, clad in universally recognizable toddler-sized clothes and shoes, curled up on his stomach in a way that suggested he could have simply been sleeping had he not been found washed up on a shoreline. Several news outlets ran only the alternate picture, the one that captured a Turkish police officer cradling the small body in his arms, as if this disguised the fact that the audience was looking upon the preventable death of a three-year-old. On social media, however, the image that left the officer out of the frame and showed only the toddler's body continued to spread far and wide (Devichand).

The photo's virality originated on Turkish social media, following its publication by a Turkish news agency (Devichand). It trended alongside the hashtag "#kiyiyavuraninsanlik," which translates to "humanity washed up ashore" (Devichand). This hashtag intends to express the heartbreak and anger that surrounded the photo as it circulated through the Turkish audience. The photo was not isolated in the Turkish sphere of influence for long. Within twelve hours, the image of the drowned Syrian toddler had reached twenty million screens worldwide, with fifty-three thousand new tweets per hour sharing or discussing it (Vis). Notably, the use of the term "refugee" was much more common than "migrant" in describing the boy, despite the fact that media data showed the terms were used

about equally before the release of the photo (Vis). In the days after the photo went viral, Syrian refugee relief funds saw a substantial increase in donations (Merrill). These changes highlight the role the photo played in humanizing the Syrian refugee crisis, if only for a moment. After all, it is much harder to dismiss a group of people—as opportunistic migrants, as terrorists—when they are represented by a dead toddler.

Who was this dead toddler, anyway? His father identified him shortly after the photo's publication. His name was Alan Kurdi, he was three years old, and he had died alongside his mother and brother when their inflatable Greece-bound boat capsized just after launching off the shore of Turkey. The family was fleeing war-torn Kobani, Syria, which had been decimated in the Syrian Civil War (Walsh).

Was it ethical to publish Alan's photo when his face could be identified? The identification of Alan Kurdi created a new subsection of discourse. Although much of the public sympathized with the tragic story revealed alongside the boy's name, others used the reveal as a platform to tarnish the photo's apparent message. Alan's father, Abdullah Kurdi, was ripped apart by critics. Australian Senator Cory Bernardi claimed Kurdi unnecessarily put his family at risk: "The father sent them on that boat so he could get dental treatment," he argued. "They were in no danger in Turkey" (Bernardi qtd. in Khan). Kurdi was also accused of profiting off the tragedy by selling Alan's clothes to a museum, and others still claimed that he had faked the incident entirely (Khan). On top of the building slander, Kurdi was contacted repeatedly by countless media outlets, all begging him to tell them again, in gory detail, the story of the worst day of his life. In one interview, he was described as unfocused, unable to look away from his phone as he scrolled through thousands of comments on the photo of his dead son. "I should have died with them," he finally snapped, before walking out of the interview (Khan).

The additional pain Abdullah Kurdi faced as a direct effect of Demir's photo raises a question: What is the cost of identifying the subject of a tragic photo, and is it worth whatever positive outcome might follow? Tom Junod's article about the photo "Falling Man," which depicts a 9/11 jumper, astutely tackles this issue. The "Falling Man" received a far less concrete identification than Alan Kurdi, but the trauma that families had to relive while the identity was investigated is all too similar. I would argue that the image of the man falling from the Twin Towers is powerful in exactly the same way regardless of whether any of his possible identities

is the truth. The photo of Alan Kurdi is the same. A picture of a helpless, drowned refugee toddler is impactful and heartbreaking and memorable no matter the name or story of the child within it. A name simply gives the press a familial connection, someone to chase down for the story that sells.

On the other hand, a name can be a rallying cry for the public. #AylanKurdi (his name was initially misreported as Aylan instead of Alan) trended right alongside every other tag the day the boy's corpse went viral (Devichand). Names humanize people, and the tragic backstory reported with Alan's name kept people talking. Some evidence even suggests that when humanitarian photos feature a subject with a confirmed identity, people are more likely to donate to the relative cause (Sohlberg). Of course, the reason Alan went viral in the first place was not his name, or even his story. It was the picture taken of him by Nilüfer Demir. If the public was captivated by only names and stories, then surely Alan's brother, Galip Kurdi, would have gone viral as well.

Five-year-old Galip was also found on the beach that day and photographed by Demir (Mattus). His photo was published at the same time as his brother's, but most people have never seen it, or ever heard his name. Alan's photo is heart wrenching, but in a way, also very censored. His clothes and shoes still properly cover his body, his face is mostly hidden, and the warmer lighting makes his skin appear a healthy color. In fact, many paintings and drawings were created of Alan in exactly the same position as he is pictured, but lying in a crib or on a blanket instead of on a beach (Devichand). In other words, the audience knows Alan is dead, but the photo leaves room for hope. Galip's picture is a different story. He is shown lying in the surf on his back, with his grey shirt ridden up around his neck. His head lolls to the side but his face is fully visible. His right arm stretches out to the side and his right leg bends out at the knee. Wet sand covers the front of his blue cargo shorts. His exposed stomach is sunken and his skin has a blue-grey undertone. In journalist Maria Mattus's words, "Galip seemed too dead." When it comes to humanitarian photos, there is a balance to be met. Too repulsive, and people will simply refuse to look, bombarded by a feeling of hopelessness. If it has gotten that bad, then maybe it is already too late. Not repulsive enough, and it will not catch the public eye, blending in with the dozens of other horrible things news reporters tell us every day (Chouliaraki qtd. in Mattus). Demir just so happened to strike that perfect balance in only

Alan Kurdi's photo.

In addition to this balance, several other factors contributed to the popularity of Alan's picture. Perhaps most important was the fact that he was a young child. Children (the younger the better) generate the most sympathy from a global audience because of their innocence (Mattus). In 2015, data was collected on audience interaction with photos of Alan Kurdi, Cecil the Lion, and a photo of 71 dead immigrants found in the back of a truck. The first two photos were found to be substantially more impactful than the latter (Mattus); the perceived innocence of animals as well as children works to garner their photos more sympathy and attention. Additionally, when people are photographed in groups, they tend to lose their individuality. They become more of a statistic than an isolated, tragic story that a viewer can latch on to (Mattus).

Admittedly, I am as guilty of this as anyone else. In 2015, news reports about the crisis in Syria were little more than depressing background noise coming from the TV. However, when a picture of a drowned toddler popped up on my cell phone screen, suddenly I could not stop myself from crying. It is clear, then, that the photo of Alan Kurdi brought global attention and sympathy to the Syrian refugee crisis like nothing before it. This leaves us with one final question: Was it enough?

A poll of more than thirty thousand Swedish citizens found that during the month Demir's photo was published, support for more welcoming refugee policies was up nearly 25% from what it had been three months prior. Three months after the photo, however, average support had decreased to even lower than it was initially (Sohlberg). This study is summarized by the claim that "change following Kurdi's death endured for at least a month, but no longer than three months, and it did not move public opinion to a new, more permanent level of support" (Sohlberg). This finding is easily corroborated by the events following September 2015. In the year after Alan's death, the number of refugees who died trying to reach another country increased by 20% (Devichand). In 2016, the photo of five-year-old Omran Deqneesh, who had been caught in the Russian bombing of Aleppo, went viral just as Alan's photo had. One Instagram user depicted the photo of Omran next to the photo of Alan, alongside the caption, "If you stay, if you go," highlighting the hopeless situation so many Syrian children found themselves in (Devichand). A year after Alan's death, his aunt, Tima Kurdi, gave her insight on the impact of her dead nephew's photo. After a few months

of seeing the photo, she explained, "everyone went back to business." And yet, she stressed that the situation in Syria was "getting worse, not any better." She concluded her interview with a mention of Omran and Alan's photos: "Every day thousands of children are dying, but the media can only take one picture" (Kurdi qtd. in Devichand).

Robert Coles describes documentary work as a "pursuit of human actuality." I believe that Demir's photo of the drowned boy on the beach reveals more about the human actuality of the audience than the boy himself. Overall, I would like to believe humans are inclined to help each other, especially someone as innocent as a child. The problem arises when it is thousands of children who suffer, and it becomes tempting to write off the problem as too big and too far away to be helped. Perhaps, from a western point of view, we need photos like Demir's, if only to focus us for a moment and give us hope that maybe our help can have an impact. Alternatively, if we listen to actual affected Syrians like Abdullah and Tima Kurdi, it seems that the human actuality is suffering itself, and these photos exist only to capture what we have never succeeded in preventing.

Art Credit: Khalid Albaih

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