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The power of photographs in framing contests

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Can images change our minds?

The ways in which social and political issues are framed matters. The will to exert control over a public narrative to build consensus around a proposed course of action is apparent across the political spectrum, and in countries around the world.[1]

While all forms of media are of course relevant when it comes to considering how framing takes place, photographs have a particular saliency in this quest for argument supremacy. Consider, for example, what we have seen following the earthquake that struck Turkey and Syria on 6th February 2023, resulting in over 47,000 people dead, and leaving 26 million people in need of assistance.[2] As details, stories, and videos have emerged of rescue efforts, tales of survival and the utter destitution of survivors who have lost loved ones and their homes, one image has perhaps come to define the tragedy of the disaster. The photograph, taken by photojournalist Adem Altan, is of Mesut Hançer, a middle-aged man clad in an orange jacket and blue trousers, sitting amidst the rubble of his destroyed home holding the hand of Irmak, his dead 15-year-old daughter.[3] It is, undeniably, heartbreaking. It also brought home to people around the world the human cost of the tragedy in a way that everything else that has emanated from Turkey and Syria has not.

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We do not yet know if the photograph of Mesut and Irmak will help stimulate increases in humanitarian aid or shift public policy. However, we do have evidence of the impact of other iconic photographs. When I saw the image from Turkey, I was immediately taken back to another tragic photograph from that country, that of lifeless 3-year-old Alan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach in September 2015.[4] That image, taken by Turkish photojournalist Nilüfer Demir, immediately captured the humanitarian tragedy of the European migration crisis in a way that the millions of words and thousands of images that had previously been produced could not. The effect was immediate. Donations to charitable organisations drastically increased and, in the UK at least, the dominant discourse in the media shifted markedly. For example, on 17th April, 2015, British tabloid

1   See, for example: Ansari S M, Wijen F and Gray B (2013) 'Averting the "tragedy of the commons": An institutional perspective on the construction and governance of transnational commons', *Organization Science*, 24: 1014–1040; Fiss P C and Zajac E J (2006) 'The symbolic management of strategic change: Sensegiving via framing and Decoupling', *Academy of Management Journal*, 49: 1173–1193

2   Holmes O, Morressi E and Sheehy F (2023) 'Thousands dead, millions displaced: the earthquake fallout in Turkey and Syria', *Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/20/thousands-dead-millions-displaced-the-earthquake-fallout-in-turkey-and-syria

3   Narli D and Jones S (2023) '"My eyes were full of tears": Shooting the defining image of the Turkey earthquake', *Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/11/turkey-earthquake-defining-image-adem-altan

4   Smith H (2015) 'Shocking images of drowned Syrian boy show tragic plight of refugees', *Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/shocking-image-of-drowned-syrian-boy-shows-tragic-plight-of-refugees

The Sun published an article proclaiming: "What we need are gunships sending these boats back to their own country… Some of our towns are festering sores, plagued by swarms of migrants and asylum seekers, shelling out benefits like Monopoly money. Make no mistake, these migrants are like cockroaches".[5] While extreme, this sentiment was by no means unusual with politicians also using terms like "swarms" and "hordes"[6] to describe those supposedly threatening our lifestyles – and even our lives. *The Daily Telegraph*, another right-leaning newspaper, though less sensationalist than *The Sun*, reported similar concerns, suggesting that "local services are said to have reached 'breaking point'", as the number of asylum-seeking children in Kent county council's care rose from 368 in March to 629[7] and reporting: "Channel chaos as migrants exploit strike to get to Britain".[8]

By contrast, in the week following Alan Kurdi's death, a very different narrative characterised the debate across the political spectrum. An op-ed in the left of centre newspaper *The Guardian* noted: "The image of the three-year-old, face down in the sea, has finally made visible the fact we have so often ignored – that thousands of refugees die in their desperate attempts to reach safety – we finally see the 'swarms' of 'migrants' as people. Human beings, just like us, but in need of help."[9] There was also a marked change in coverage from those media firms on the political right wuth The *Daily Telegraph*, for example, reflecting that: "The pictures encapsulated the human cost of the crisi and prompted debate over whether Britain was accepting its 'fair share' of refugees."[10]

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What is interesting in the case of Alan Kurdi was how a single photograph could shift the framing of a national conversation, and potentially government policy, so quickly. It also illustrates how social and political issues are not objective facts but are rather layered with meaning by those who have designs on particular outcomes. Therefore, to understand how frames are used to shape particular outcomes, we need to appreciate that the framing of issues is usually constituted by an ongoing struggle for power - and heavily influenced by the media that are able to help contour support for a particular position.

It is also important to understand how the ideological stance of different media organisations will shape how they frame an issue. Janina Klein and I explored these ideas in a study that examined the response in the UK to the Alan Kurdi photograph.[11] What we found has clear implications for those interested in the ways in which policy construction takes place.

Erving Goffman, a Canadian-born American sociologist who did the empirical work for his doctoral dissertation in the Shetland Islands, defined frames as "schemata of interpretation" that allow us to bring together numerous pieces of information in a way that allows us to quickly make sense of even

5   Hopkins K (2015) 'Rescue boats? I'd use gunships to stop migrants!', *Sun*, archived at: http://www.gc.soton.ac.uk/files/2015/01/hopkins-17april-2015.pdf

6   BBC News (2015) 'David Cameron criticised over migrant "swarm" language'. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-33716501

7   Watson L and Boyle D (2015) 'Calais crisis: Riot police officer in hospital as 1,700 migrants try to storm Channel Tunnel', *Telegraph*. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/11779615/Calais-crisis-Chaos-in-parts-of-Kent-and-the-Channel-Tunnel-under-siege-live.html

8   Whitehead T, Barrett D and Samuel H (2015) 'Channel chaos as migrants exploit strike to get to Britain', *Telegraph*. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/11694134/Calais-crisis-Illegal-immigrants-shut-down-all-Channel-traffic.html

9   Okolosie L (2015), 'A backlash against dehumanising refugees has begun – we must seize the moment', *Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/07/dehumanising-refugees-migrants-aylan-kurdi

10 Dominiczak P et al (2015) 'Britain will take in thousands of new Syrian refugees, David Cameron to announce', *Telegraph*. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/nicola-sturgeon/11841808/David-Cameron-insists-he-cares-about-refugees-amid-criticism-from-Tories.html

11 Klein J and Amis J (2021) 'The Dynamics of Framing: Image, Emotion, and the European Migration Crisis', *Academy of Management Journal*, 64(5)

potentially complex issues.[12] Photographs are particularly powerful in this process because they are able to convey a lot of information instantly, in contrast, for example, to the sequential consumption of written or verbal text. They are also able to elicit an emotional response that can engage us with an issue in a way that is qualitatively different, and often more piercing, than pure cognitive understanding.

It is also important to recognise that photographs, even those that are deemed to be iconic in that they become widely used representatives of an event or issue, never stand alone. They are always positioned as part of a broader political conversation that is ideologically conditioned. One of the most famous examples of this is the image of a naked and terrified nine-year-old child, Phan Thi Kim Phúc, fleeing a napalm attack during the Vietnam War.[13] This photograph not only depicted the suffering of war on a very personal level, it was also used by some opposed to the war to position it as an unjust and immoral intervention in a foreign country.

> **"Prior to the death of Alan Kurdi, the dominant language in all 10 newspapers framed those attempting to access the UK, predominantly from North Africa, as migrants"**

When we see certain photographs, such as those of Phan Thi Kim Phúc, Mesut and Irmak Hançer, or Alan Kurdi, it seems that they convey a message that is so incontrovertible and emotionally powerful as to surpass any ideological positioning. To some extent this is true, but what we found in our work on the photograph of Alan Kurdi is that in fact the nature, duration and intensity of the impact will vary depending on the ideological and political stance of those involved.

In our research, we saw a notable shift in the framing of the European migration crisis following the publication of the photograph. Our work drew on the 10 most popular newspapers in the UK, of which *The Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Star*, *Daily Express*, *The Times*, and *The Financial Times* are ideologically to the right, *The Guardian* and *Daily Mirror* to the left; The Independent, online only at the time of our study, positions itself as in the political centre. Prior to the death of Alan Kurdi, the dominant language in all 10 newspapers framed those attempting to access the UK, predominantly from North Africa, as migrants. According to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), migrants are defined as those who "choose to move not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but mainly to improve their lives by finding work, or in some cases for education, family reunion, or other reasons".[14] Language used in these newspapers tended to be homogenising, and often dehumanising, in its classification of people as constituting the 'other'; people very different from the supposedly more 'civilised' citizens of the UK and Europe. An editor of a 'quality' newspaper told us, in line with our analysis, the language that was used across various media outlets was "dehumanising" with the "public representation of [these people] as animals". Consider, for example, this quote in *The Daily Telegraph*:

> **"The prime minister, who is on a visit to Vietnam, faced controversy when he said the problem [with migrants] had become worse in recent months because "you have got a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life, wanting to come to Britain."[15]**

12 Goffman E (1974) *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*, Harvard University Press

13 Thi K (2022) 'I hated that photo but the world needed to see it', *Times*. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/vietnam-war-napalm-girl-kim-phuc-phan-thi-interview-0twbw0nl2

14 UNHCR (2016) 'UNHCR viewpoint: 'Refugee' or 'migrant' – Which is right?', news article. https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/7/55df0e556/unhcr-viewpoint-refugee-migrant-right.html

15 Farmer B, Barrett D and Swinford S (2015) 'Army ready to act over Calais crisis', *Telegraph*. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/11774634/Army-ready-to-act-over-Calais-crisis.html

The comments of prime minister David Cameron reflected a long-held Conservative position that was determined to stop the flow of migrants into the country, articulated in 2012 by home secretary Theresa May's ambition to create a "really hostile environment for illegal immigrants".[16]

Following the publication of the photograph of Alan Kurdi, the rhetoric changed dramatically. David Cameron, for example, stated that "as a father" he was "deeply moved" by the photograph.[17] He later announced that Britain would take 20,000 refugees from camps on the borders of Syria over the subsequent five years and that the UK would "live up to its moral responsibility towards people forced to flee Syria".[18]

Newsrooms across the country were also dramatically affected, with a senior photo editor at one newspaper telling us: "The picture was shown in our midday news conference… the room fell very silent… Everybody who saw that picture, in the first instance they were very shocked, really moved." An editor at a different newspaper told us, "people [in the newsroom] cried and were very upset by it". We saw a corresponding change in the framing of the European migration crisis by all ten newspapers, with those fleeing Syria and other countries now being predominantly depicted as refugees, defined by the UNHCR as "persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution".[19] Several newspapers started campaigns to help refugees who arrived in the UK, and to get more admitted.[20]

The long-term impact of the photograph is particularly interesting. In left-leaning newspapers, the refugee framing remained dominant for the entire year after the image was first published. In the right-leaning papers, the prevailing framing quickly reverted back from refugee to migrant. However, even in those newspapers that quickly readopted the migrant frame, the language changed, being less emotionally charged and more factual, with dehumanising language almost entirely absent. This shift in emphasis was also apparent at the policy level: for example, the Conservative UK government never did fulfil its pledge to take 20,000 Syrian refugees; rather, the dominant position quickly reverted to a desire to stop those trying to get to the UK from France, particularly in boats across The English Channel.

> **"those who are already sympathetic will likely find their desire to maintain that framing magnified by an emotion-laden photograph that supports their position"**

As an aside, there are two further issues that are important to reflect upon when considering the impact of such photographs. First, the publication of such a photograph is always accompanied by ethical debates as to if and how it should be released. While this goes beyond the scope of this essay, debates on whether and how to use such photographs are had in editorial newsrooms, at academic conferences, and are raised by members of the public.[21] A second issue is how race and ethnicity play into such pictures. The impact of Alan Kurdi, for example, was potentially increased in the west because he looked European and was not, therefore, 'otherised' but rather embraced as 'one of us.'[22] This issue has become prominent again because of how refugees

16 Hill A (2017) '"Hostile environment": The hardline Home Office policy tearing families apart', *Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/nov/28/hostile-environment-the-hardline-home-office-policy-tearing-families-apart

17 BBC News (2015) 'Cameron 'deeply moved' by Syria boy death'. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-34142245

18 Wintour P (2015) 'UK to take up to 20,000 Syrian refugees over five years, David Cameron confirms', *Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/07/uk-will-accept-up-to-20000-syrian-refugees-david-cameron-confirms

19 UNHCR (2016) 'UNHCR viewpoint: 'Refugee' or 'migrant' – Which is right?', *Guardian*. https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/7/55df0e556/unhcr-viewpoint-refugee-migrant-right.html

20 Media Mole (2015), 'From "cockroaches" to campaigns: how the UK press u-turned on the refugee crisis', *New Statesman*. https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/09/cockroaches-campaigns-how-uk-press-u-turned-refugee-crisis

21 Fahey, J. (2015), 'The Guardian's decision to publish shocking photos of Aylan Kurdi'. URL: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/07/guardian-decision-to-publish-shocking-photos-of-aylan-kurdi

22 El-Enany, N. 2016. Aylan Kurdi: The human refugee. Law and Critique, 27: 13–15.

fleeing wars in Ukraine and Syria have been treated very differently. Again, this is worthy of future consideration.

We can see that the framing of social and political issues really does matter to the way in which they are positioned. We can also see that photographs are particularly impactful in the framing process. However, ideology also matters: those who are already sympathetic will likely find their desire to maintain that framing magnified by an emotion-laden photograph that supports their position. By contrast, the impact on those that are opposed to this position, whether in the media or in government, will likely be short-lived as other ways to frame the issue in a way that supports the dominant ideology are found.

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