

## **Photojournalism: Journalistic Reality and Necessity**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Aylan Kurdi, a three year old Syrian boy's image carried on the front pages of newspapers and magazines in September 2015 was enough to stop the world in its tracks. It embodied the ravages of the Syrian war which has made headlines in newspapers and in the mass media in the past few years. Photo journalism is "Journalism in which written copy is subordinate to pictorial presentation of news stories or in which a high proportion of pictorial presentation is used, is broadly news photography" according to Miriam Webster's dictionary. News photography sears, it captures reality. It is a necessity in this world which requires evidence and substantiation. This paper aims to study the photos related to the war in Syria; especially photos of Aylan Kurdi a three year old boy washed ashore while escaping with his family from Syria. The impact of these photographs on readers has been made through a qualitative study with in-depth interviews. The disturbing nature of the photographs, the knowledge about the war in Syria, the need and necessity of using of such photographs in media, feelings evoked, and the impact of the photographs by being shown on social media was gauged through a questionnaire and in-depth interviews.

**Keywords:** Photojournalism, impact, social media, war

### **Introduction**

The Syrian war has been chaotic to say the least; with a number of different organizations from inside and outside the organization playing a role in the war. This war in Syria is being fought over the past four years. More than 200,000 persons have been killed in the war in the last four years and millions of persons have been displaced. A number of contenders have joined the fray to make the situation more chaotic.

President Al-Assad has ruled Syria with an "iron hand" according to rebel forces: "President Assad's counter-insurgency strategy has appeared to involve targeting the civilian population and medical facilities in rebel areas, in order to deprive the armed opposition of its support" says Glass, chief Middle East correspondent for ABC news and a veteran of the Lebanon war. He has provided a record of sorts with his book "Syria Burning: ISIS and the Death of the Arab Spring" published by OR Books, 2015.

Glass further distributes the blame into what is now a seemingly intractable war: “Armed men were a minority among dissidents” at the start of the conflict he feels and they “gained ascendancy by the force of their actions and the international support they gained for their choice of the rifle over the banner.” And in came the rifles and the war spread. “Saudi Arabia and Qatar...poured in weapons and money. Turkey opened its border to arms, rebels and refugees. Clandestine training and logistical help came from US, Britain, France. Protests turned to civil war.”

This was a deadly game. Britain and France initially and then USA contributed to the machinations in the Middle east and resulted in the expelling of over 100,000 Syrians from their homes when Israel seized the Syrian Golan. Hezbollah joined the already chaotic fray. Aylan Kurdi’s family was one such family which had to flee Syria due to this war. They were part of the terrible exodus resulting from the civil war in Syria against its President.

### **The Role of Photojournalism:**

Photojournalism has been termed as “Visual truth”. David Finklestein says: “It participates in the maintenance and reinforcement of cultural narratives- the images embedded in daily, weekly, monthly newspapers, magazines and journals create and sustain social constructions of self, identity and nationhood and challenge and confirm world views imbibed by consumers of our media.” Further he clarifies the role of important photo journalists: “Photojournalism is most closely identified with the active adrenaline-driven dash to record war and human conflict, embodied in the work of such war photography veterans as Robert Capa (214)”.

Sontag to explain Photojournalism: “To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s mortality, vulnerability, mutability.” And to take photos of war is even more lethal according to Ron Haviv, the journalist in Darfur:

For years, the new media have displayed photos of Syrian refugees: images of the dead wounded and displaced. But few of them seem to have made much of an impression- until last week, when people around the world saw photos of a 3-year-old boy named Aylan Kurdi, whose lifeless body washed up on a Turkish beach.

The boy had drowned, along with his brother and mother, while trying to get from Turkey to the Greek island of Kos. The Wall Street Journal published an image of a Turkish officer carrying Aylan’s dead body, with the boy’s face not quite visible and the man looking away, as if not able to bring himself to look at the child. Other news organizations published an even starker photo of the dead little boy, face down in the surf. (Ref. 1)

This was an unusual image to say the least. It was a heart rending picture and most unusual and therefore it attracted immense attention. “Once in a while, an image breaks through the noisy, cluttered global culture and hits people in the heart and not the head,” says Douglas Brinkley, a professor of history at Rice University. This was one such extraordinary picture which struck out from the rest.

The documentary filmmaker Ken Burns admitted that he once worried that the still image had been devalued, “that a picture was no longer worth a thousand words because there were so many of them.” But the photos of Aylan Kurdi are a reminder, he says, that “the

power of the single image to convey complex information is still there. It has that power to shock and arrest us. To make us stop for just a second and interrupt the flow.”

The photograph appeared on the cover of The Independent in the U.K. among other titles, and in Le Monde, the only French newspaper to publish it quickly. Nicholas Jimenez director of photography at le Monde says: “I’m convinced that until you’ve shown this photograph, you haven’t shown the reality of this crisis. We’d written about it in the past, but we hadn’t shown it in such a hard way. I feel that to show like this is an important step.”

The photograph was also widely circulated on Twitter and Face book and other social media sites. Pinney further adds that viewers and readers may forget the conflict but when “they realize that this is about real people and about the fact that people will risk everything-the lives of their children to cross open waters” the pathos and tragic element of the migration becomes evident.

In fact this photograph and the others of the little boy Aylan Kurdi which followed highlighted the tragedy of little children in the migration from Syria. The pathos and heart rending tragedy was clearly evident.

### **Methodology:**

Five photographs of the Aylan Kurdi stories were chosen from international newspapers who published the story on their front pages: These newspapers were: The [www.intentblog.com](http://www.intentblog.com), The Guardian, Reuters and [www.express.co.uk](http://www.express.co.uk) as given in Reference 1.

The choice of photographs was based on the fact that these were published on the front page of well-known newspapers, read by millions of readers. With the help of a questionnaire and in-depth interview of 10 persons, the impact of the photographs was gauged.

### **Findings:**

The questionnaire and in-depth interviews were taken between 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 2015 and 14<sup>th</sup> December, 2015. Reactions of readers were recorded and tabulated Findings were charted and compiled. The photographs shown to 10 respondents elicited several interesting facets. The follow up intensive interviews conducted were to gauge the impact of the photographs and their effect on the viewers.

### **Demographics:**

There were three respondents over the age of 60 years, two respondents aged 29-32 years and 5 respondents were between the ages of 35 and 40 years. There were 5 male respondents and 5 female respondents.

Regarding occupation, 5 respondents are university lecturers, 1 a retired medical doctor, one respondent is a regional marketing executive, one a freelance translator and one respondent is a chief finance officer.

### **Findings and Discussion:**

Seven respondents had seen the photographs before while 3 respondents had not seen the photographs before the interview. Seven respondents knew about the baby in the photograph while 3 respondents did not know about the child in the photograph and were not familiar with the child's name or background.

Regarding awareness of the war going on in Syria all respondents said that they were aware about this war which was going on in Syria. Most of the respondents seemed well aware of the war which was going on in Syria for the past four years though the intricacies were not too clear. However they were aware that this was a war which had led to the migration of many people.

Regarding their knowledge about the war in Syria, two respondents had very little knowledge; another respondent had deep knowledge while the rest 7 respondents had only satisfactory knowledge about the war in Syria.

When questioned whether such images should be shown in the media (newspapers, magazines, television and internet) only one respondent said that images such as these should not be shown on media, 8 respondents said that this image should be shown on the media. One respondent from these 7 respondents also said that though very disturbing these images should be shown in the media.

The last and most important question was regarding the feelings which these images evoked: Respondents were asked to express their feelings openly and to be eloquent regarding them. One respondent said: "Very disturbing and show the effects of religious fanaticism on innocent lives. War leads to war!"

"Touching, heart rending photographs, reality of the situation where such innocent lives are lost," said one respondent. "It is pathetic where such innocent lives are lost and a situation is created by warring factions resulting in such misery and terror and difficulties which lead to such an exodus of people fleeing from the atrocities of war."

Another respondent opined that – He had great sympathy for the people affected by this war. War was useless and not a solution to the problem. Peace should be kept and problems solved. He also said that it was heart rending that races should be affected in this manner and this issue was humanitarian and should be addressed at once.

A young respondent said "I feel sorry for the boy". Another respondent who was vocal and vociferous said "War is sad and leads to suffering. It should be stopped since kids and families separate. Institutions like the United Nations, UNICEF, and European Union should find ways to stop the war. Innocent children do not know about the war and they suffer the most. This photograph has been shared many times on social media especially Twitter and Face book. It made us think that war should be stopped and there should be peace and kids who are innocent should not be affected by this terrible war."

A senior respondent felt that this was a terrible situation where innocent children suffered due to no fault of their own. War could happen anywhere at any time and kids were the victims. However this situation where kids were victimized should never be tolerated and kids should never be subject to this terrible fate and to such sadness. War is terrible and should stop immediately, said the respondent. The apparent terror which war evoked and

the resultant violence were abhorred by the respondent and the feeling was that children became innocent victims who were torn due to no fault of their own.

Another respondent said that it was extremely disturbing to see these images on social media. The respondent added: "Not only disturbing but sad as well. Media should be used to raise awareness, not to raise bias. I can only imagine the distress it must have caused for the family of the victim."

Another respondent intensely felt that though Syrians were welcomed by Saudi Arabia they prefer to migrate to Europe. He felt that millions of Muslims have died due to infighting among Muslims and interference of Western countries. Turkey has added to the fighting in Syria and so has ISIS a militant group which he feels is funded by western countries. If peace is to prevail in the Middle East such migration should stop and western forces should stop buying oil from ISIS and leave the area.

A respondent opined that the images made her sad and realize how terrible the situation was. Syrians were risking their lives and the lives of their families by escaping. The photos were the photos of a single parent but there must be several other people in a similar situation and she hopes that media can help raise awareness to help children like the one shown in the pictures.

Another saddened respondent at the state of affairs in Syria said that he felt grateful as well to be brought up in an affluent country which gave all opportunities to succeed in life. Though these pictures are alarming he said that "I think it's important to educate society as to these kinds of atrocities around the world. Although these pictures may be alarming, for better or worse, it's these types of pictures and stories that will make others realize what is happening in other parts of the world...I do believe however, that the more media exposure it receives, the more people will hopefully make an effort to put a stop to it and to offer assistance to those in need of it."

## **Conclusion**

The cataclysmic war in Syria has caused untold damage to millions of people in the country and led to mass migration. This has been reflected in the photographs chosen for this study. The photo graphs evoked a mixed response: Barring two respondents all others found the images disturbing. However they all agreed that such images should be shown in the media like newspapers, television, internet and social media.

A number of respondents focused on the futility of war and its terrible aftermath especially on children. The victimization of young kids as a result of war was a focus of discussion and response. Innocent children who are unaware of disturbing events in the world around them yet died: They aroused the ire and sympathy of viewers and media consumers like the respondents of this study.

The role of important world organizations like United Nations or European Union was pointed out. The responsibility for dissipating war or stopping it was also the responsibility of these bodies. However, the withdrawal of western powers from the region was opined giving a holistic view to the entire problem.

The repeated focus of most respondents was the circulation of these images on social media. Not only did the social media display the images, they promoted debate, censure and discussion about the war and the resultant migration of innocent people. The images were disturbing and distressing. According to Hugh Pinney, Vice President at Getty Images, a distributor of news images, says: "The reason we're talking about this photograph is not because it's been taken or not because it's been circulated, but it's because it's been published by mainstream media. And the reason we're talking about it after it's been published is because it breaks a social taboo that has been in place in the press for decades: a picture of a dead child is one of the golden rules of what you never publish."

The photograph has appeared on the cover of "The Independent" in the U.K., among other titles, and in Le Monde in France. Nicholas Jimenez, director of photography at Le Monde says:

We'd written about it in the past, but we hadn't shown it in such a hard way. I feel that to show like this is an important step. This is an image people have to see. This is an image that can galvanize attention around a crisis that has been ignored for too long."

The idea behind showing the image was not to shock said many editors of leading media from UK and Europe; it was to focus on stopping senseless deaths in the Mediterranean. If it succeeds in doing that, the image will have contributed a lot to the world.

Maxwell McCombs has discussed the role of media as setting the agenda or agenda setting model of mass communication. This model enumerates that the media sets an agenda or focus which help the general public to focus on issues and form opinions about what they see in the media in the long run. The model is applicable to the present study- The media has indeed set an agenda by displaying the images of Aylan Kurdi and his family.

The possible effects will permeate down to all sections of society since they have been picked up by internet and other social media. The power and influence of photographs is thus reiterated and re-emphasized. Its permeating role is brought to the fore and the enormous responsibility of media personnel also requires being emphasized. Which image is "right" or which is "wrong" is a debate which needs to be studied in the future. What can be said at this juncture is that mass media has an important responsibility and that is to focus and sustain interest on issues which matter and which require the limelight.

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Images for illustration (as provided by author)

