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#AlanKurdi: Presentation and dissemination of images of suffering on Twitter

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1 Introduction¹

On the morning of September 2, 2015, photojournalist Nilüfer Demir captured the image of a drowned three-year-old Syrian refugee, Alan Kurdi (henceforth Alan), washed ashore on a beach in Bodrum, Turkey. Spread virally through Twitter, the image quickly achieved iconographic status, becoming a symbol of multiple ‘crises’: the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean, the Syrian civil war, the failure of European Union (EU) protection, et cetera.

A Turkish news agency first published the images of Alan the same morning his body was discovered on the beach. Two hours later, a Turkish activist was the first to tweet his image, which was then retweeted throughout the Middle East. Within just two hours of appearing on Twitter, Alan’s image was retweeted 500 times. His image subsequently reached a global audience when it was tweeted by influential users focusing on Middle East and North Africa (MENA) issues, most notably Human Rights Watch (HRW) Emergency Director Peter Bouckaert and Washington Post Beirut Bureau Chief, Liz Sly. The traditional news media and other independent journalists and advocates on Twitter then picked up the story of the viral image. By the evening, Alan’s image was posted at a maximum rate of 6,000 tweets-per-hour and the story was mentioned at a peak rate of 20,000 tweets-per-hour (D’Orazio 2015: 15). The same day Alan’s dead body was found washed ashore and photographed, the global public responded, quickly and rapidly sharing the image on Twitter. The image of Alan’s dead body went viral.

Alan’s case almost instantaneously became metonymic for the plight of refugees. In the months that followed the discovery of his body and the image’s viral spread through Twitter, there was optimism that the image of this drowned boy—and all that it represented—could be the necessary wake up call across Europe and the globe to respond to the plight of Syrian refugees and the crises in the Mediterranean. According to a December 2015 report by the Visual Social Media Lab, Alan’s image contributed to a discursive shift from ‘migrants’ to ‘refugees’ on Twitter (D’Orazio 2015: 11). The same month the image of Alan went viral accounts for the ‘highest ever global search volume for the topic of refugee in Google search history’ (Rogers 2015: 20). The image of Alan shaped global public discourse on the refugee crisis and is purported to have had political and social influence, including on the UK resettlement scheme (BBC 2015), the Canadian elections (CBC News 2015) and increases in humanitarian donations (Elgot 2015).

Over a year later, the name Alan Kurdi remains familiar and is often invoked; his image is still a symbol for the crises in the Mediterranean. Yet more than a symbol of political and social change, it is now a reminder of ‘how little has changed’, to borrow the words of a Syrian taxi driver in a refugee camp in Greece (Kingsley 2016). According to *Guardian* correspondent Kingsley (2016), ‘small shifts in policy and discourse have proved temporary’. Devichand (2016) argues that ‘[d]espite the evident rise in public concern over the past year, other statistics tell a darker story’. Journeys across the Mediterranean may have decreased, but they have also become deadlier, with over 4,600 dead or missing so far in 2016 (UNHCR 2016). The EU resettlement scheme agreed upon just days after Alan’s death has been deemed a failure, with merely 4,500 of 160,000 resettled as of September 2016 (Harris 2016). Perhaps the greatest positive outcome of the image of Alan is the surge in grassroots campaigns to respond to the crises in the Mediterranean, many of which

¹ This working paper is a revised version of research project completed in the spring of 2016 as part of our coursework in the MSc in Refugee and Forced Migration Studies at the University of Oxford. We are grateful to Dr Tom Scott-Smith for his guidance and support throughout this project.

continue to grow over a year later (Kingsley 2016). Even though the call for political accountability and change that he initially represented has largely failed to materialize, the image of Alan maintains a presence in the discourse around these crises.

Given this sustained presence over a year following Alan's death, it is an opportune moment to look back with the benefit of hindsight at *why* the image of Alan's dead body washed ashore went viral in the first place. Why did Alan's image reach and resonate with an audience of millions, among countless other harrowing images capturing the crises? Existing literature on images of suffering offers accounts of why certain images invoke more responsiveness than others (Butler 2007; Campbell 2004; Ignatieff 1998; Moeller 1999; Sontag 2004). However, these accounts have been insufficiently applied to the discursive space of Twitter. While we understand the mechanisms of how the image went viral (D'Orazio 2015), we explore what it is about the medium of Twitter that enabled the image of Alan to reach viral status and equally fleeting substantive outcomes. This analysis of the Alan phenomenon—the photo, his story, its viral spread throughout Twitter, the conversations that ensued on Twitter, his sustained presence—provides insights into the responsiveness to images of suffering and Twitter as a medium for social change.

Methods & methodology

In order to understand why the image of Alan went viral, we analyze the first 12 hours of the phenomenon's digital life – the period of time in which the image of Alan went from an unknown photograph to a global symbol of the crises in the Mediterranean. We argue that the ways in which the narratives surrounding the image of Alan unfolded are critical to understanding why the image of Alan went viral.

It is critical to understand why the image of Alan went viral for several reasons. First, the image interacted with broader social discourses beyond Twitter related to the aforementioned crises. When Twitter users responded to the image by switching their language from 'migrant' to 'refugee', this change implied that the global public had begun to conceptualize—at least in the months that followed—people seeking asylum differently. This corresponds to how Hall (1997: 4) describes discourse: a process of 'constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice'.

Secondly, the primary medium through which the image was circulated—Twitter—is a discursive space of the global public. While it is comprised of a self-selecting group and should not be understood as representative of how the wider global public responded, Twitter has emerged as one of the primary contemporary social spaces with over 313 million active users (Twitter 2016). Influential users have the ability to reach thousands with a single click. In order to understand why the image of Alan went viral, it is thus important to consider the particular mechanisms by which it could be seen. Our use of data, what scholars call 'digital objects' (Murthy 2013: 53-4), collected from Twitter, involves considering the unique linguistic tools and limitations of digital language, such as images, hyperlinks and text.

Finally, our research focuses on what critical discourse scholars refer to as the 'meaning-making' function of discourse (Fairclough 2013: 4). As discursive texts, the tweets, re-tweets, captions and images distributed on Twitter related to Alan exhibit the multiple and sometimes incongruent ideas of what the phenomenon represents. We thus consider the meaning of some of these digital objects without producing a singular understanding of the global public's subsequent response.

Our research is divided into two parts: (1) a visual analysis of the image independent of its Twitter context, and (2) an analysis of the overarching narrative strategies that users employ in select

tweets that either contain or are about the image. We begin with a visual analysis to better understand the framing of the image and the responses it invokes on its own. Drawing upon literature on images of suffering, we contend that the simplicity, anonymity, and seeming peacefulness of the image renders it one that a broad audience can relate to. Alan's image is an ideal representation of the innocent, irreproachable body worthy of grief. The image of the boy who appears as if he could be peacefully sleeping, in contrast to other iconic images, masks the violence that has been done, lending itself to multiple and flexible interpretations.

We then move to an analysis of the ways in which the image was framed and reframed on Twitter. This second part of our research follows the chronology of the first 12 hours of the dissemination of Alan's image on Twitter as described by the Visual Social Media Lab's data. We divide this analysis into four parts, each a moment when new groups of users entered the conversation, taking on the image, disseminating it and framing it using particular narrative strategies. These four parts are: (a) the origin of the digital image, (b) the spread beyond the region, (c) the global promulgation by traditional news media, and (d) the image of Alan as a ubiquitous phenomenon. For each part, we examine the tweets of a subsample of influential users. These users reached a larger than average audience, critically shaping the development of the phenomenon (D'Orazio 2015). In the context of Twitter, we argue that the multiple interpretations of the image, in combination with users' abilities to shape and point to specific framings of the image, creates the opportunity to position Alan's death as grievable for multiple audiences.

This project is mindful of the tensions involved when analyzing depictions of death. As researchers based in the West, we are mindful of our own distance from the realities of pain, suffering, and grief that are being invoked through this image. Our research is not outside these dynamics of violence, inequality, and power.

2 Visual analysis



The dead body of Alan lies face down in the sand. Alan's hidden face anonymizes him, allowing the viewer to imagine any child's face on Alan's dead body. This detracts from the particularity of Alan's body, as the viewer cannot be certain of Alan's race and gender. In the up-close photograph the left side of his head is visible—his eye, cheek and wet black hair—but the rest of his face remains obscured. The image of a child connotes a perceived pureness that allows for sympathy. Traditionally, children are not ascribed with political agency, making them an ideal representation of the innocent, irreproachable life that is deemed worthy of ethical responsiveness and public grieving (Butler 2007: 953). At first glance, there is a simplicity to the image of Alan, one subject, foregrounded against the waves. As Moeller (1999: 36) argues, '[s]imple pictures, emotional pictures[...]can drill into the minds and hearts of their audiences'. The photograph transforms the reality of the ugliness of a child's death into 'something [that] may be beautiful—or terrifying, or unbearable, or quite bearable—as it is not in real life' (Sontag 2004: 68). Alan is a tabula rasa for viewers to project their own fears onto, imagining the children they love lying dead on the surf in his place. The personal, political and historical dynamics of Alan's life become obscured.

In the refugee context, Malkki (1995: 13) argues, humanitarian images of refugees often 'eras[e] the specific, historical local politics of particular refugees, and retreat[] instead to the depoliticizing, dehistoricizing register of a more abstract and universal suffering'. This process of decontextualization allows for straightforward sympathy. Yet, Sontag (2004: 91) describes the sympathy that such images elicit as 'impertinent', borderline 'inappropriate', usually falling woefully short of action. She argues, '[w]e can't imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes. Can't understand, can't imagine' (ibid: 113).

As the personal particularities of Alan's dead body are lost, he becomes a metonymic figure that represents the deaths of countless others, and those who continue to die as they attempt to reach Europe by unseaworthy vessel. The image of Alan has been likened to historically iconic photographs, including Kevin Carter's 1993 photograph of a vulture stalking a child during the famine in Sudan and Nick Ut's 1972 photograph of a nine-year-old girl running down the street

naked following an aerial napalm attack in South Vietnam (cf. Feneley 2015; Laurent 2015; Logan 2015; Pensiero 2015). Yet the photograph of Alan differs. The enactor of harm is not present; there is no cocked gun, no debris, no dinghy, no floating dead in the water. Grains of sand are visible by the soles of Alan's shoes, sand clings to his right elbow, small shallow waves—seemingly harmless—surround him. The positioning of his body masks a violence done, but now unseen. The viewer is not subjected to a child's limbs broken into impossible angles which might force one 'to turn away from the trauma' but instead to a child seemingly peacefully asleep (Moeller 1999: 37).

Sontag argues that while photography has the ability to haunt, it does not enable us to understand in the way that narrative can, in part because a narrative can offer an interpretation and forces the reader to look and feel for a longer period of time (Sontag 2004). Butler (2007: 952), responding to Sontag, argues that a photograph already has an interpretive frame, a 'political background', regardless of accompanying text. Yet these frames are often invisible. In what follows, we examine the ways in which users on Twitter cast and recast the inherent frame of the image.

3 Twitter context

Sontag (2004: 72) explains, 'photographs objectify: they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed'. Twitter, as a discursive space, has figurative and literal terms and conditions guiding how digital objects spread. This arena of 'tweets', 'retweets', 'hashtags' (#), 'followers', 'following', 'replies' and 'mentionings' (@) is guided by users who are familiar with Twitter's digital language (Geser 2010; Murthy 2013; Papacharissi 2015). After initial users disseminated the image of Alan, digital 'hubs'—individuals who have 'an exceptionally large number of social ties'—brought it to the attention of the traditional news media (Goldenberg et al. 2009; Kwak et al. 2010). Professional journalists and print news sources, who scholars argue are still responsible for the widest and most authoritative dissemination of information on Twitter, engage with the image of Alan as a digital object in ways critical to its eventual virality (Moon & Hadley 2014; Murthy 2013; Sung & Hwang 2014; Thrall et al. 2014; Wu & Shen 2015). As the image moves from the digital periphery to the Twitter mainstream, our genealogy traces how different users—at different inflection points—framed and politicized the image of Alan, his body and his life.

We identify three thematic complexities that emerge when considering how those responsible for the image's virality exposed what Butler (2007: 953) calls 'the framing of the frame'. First, while the affective implications of the photograph inform the global public's reaction, calls to emotion are shaped by different Twitter users' framing. Second, the image of Alan allowed for Twitter users to call attention to the personal, political and historical processes by which his body ended up on the beach. However, the ostensibly peaceful visual can equally, as Ignatieff (1998: 295) explains, 'depoliticize[] moral relations'. This moral depoliticization, which involves the historical erasure of what Malkki (1995: 13) calls 'the specific', waxes and wanes as users attribute different meanings to the image. Third, the extent to which the image is iconographic and, indeed, emblematic is intertwined with the image going viral. Here, Butler sheds particular light in the Twitter context where different types of users employ different narrative strategies: (1) emblemizing, (2) (de)historicizing/(de)politicizing, and (3) appealing to affect.

The origin of the digital image

The unique positionality of initial Twitter users as activists, with followings ranging from 7,000 to 200,000, is essential to the genealogy of why the image of Alan went viral. Even before the Alan phenomenon, the profiles of Michelle Demishevich, a freelance journalist and activist, and Free Syria Media Hub, a collection of journalists and community organizers, featured tweets about the Syrian civil war, the plight of refugees in the Mediterranean, and the EU's failure to protect. Another critical early user was Raqqa_SL who represented the 'Syrian Campaign Against ISIS and Assad Regime in Raqqa'. These earliest tweeters of the image applied their activist-oriented approach to Twitter as a digital space, but invoked different themes when framing Alan's image.

Broadly, the tweets exhibited two narrative strategies: (1) appealing to universal affect, and (2) grounding the image in a historical and political context. Sometimes these strategies are complementary. At other times they may be in conflict, particularly when the affective approach depends upon a process of depoliticization and dehistoricization that runs counter to the political specificity of some of the tweets.

Activist users immediately framed the image as both emblematic and political: Alan was constructed as metonymic from the start. Demishevich, asked if:

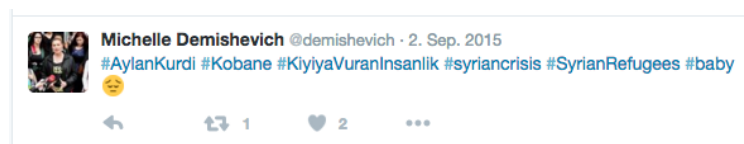


Free Syria Media Hub tweeted:



A series of 16 additional tweets came later that day from Free Syria Media Hub. The then-nameless boy was a 'victim'—he did not end up dead on this beach by happenstance. Further, he was a 'victim' of 'their' [Europe's] inability to save him', a framing that clearly situates his life in a historical and political context. Moreover, the world's 'brand[ing]' of him and Europe's 'attitude' towards 'refugees' implies that this boy represented a broader set of concerns. Almost immediately in the Twitter context, Alan became and was expressly described as symbolic. Yet, these users ensured that he was not just a symbol, but also a tragic emblem of particular historical and political circumstances that could universally appeal to human sensibilities.

Strategically deploying Twitter language, the user Demishevich tweeted:



Demishevich subsequently tagged several other popular activist users. Another appeal to affect was made by Bassem Naim, a former Hamas minister:



These tweets call attention to a kind of human responsibility and grievability that this child ought to evoke. These framings encourage viewers to empathize—to think they ‘get it’ and can ‘imagine what it was like’ by seeing Alan’s death as equivalent to the death of their baby (Sontag 2004: 113). At the same time, the framing could be understood as dehistoricizing and depoliticizing the image. As users transform Alan into an anonymous infant onto which viewers’ affect can be projected, they diminish the particularities of Alan’s life and plight.

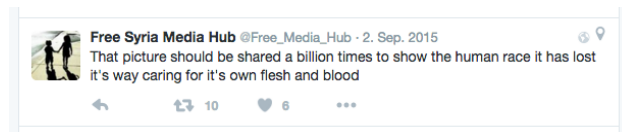
This universalizing appeal allowed the image to be first and foremost affective. While Twitter users could be struck primarily by the image’s emotional might, the activist orientation of these users often linked the image’s affect with political discourse and even policy. As Sontag (2004: 104f) argues, images can lead one to ‘reflect’ but they cannot ‘dictate a course of action’. Free Syria Media Hub proclaimed:



With similar emotional urgency, Raqqa_SL tweeted the phrase ‘Save the Syrian People’ alongside the image of Alan on the beach. Raqqa_SL makes clear that the tragic nature of Alan’s death reflects a broader group of refugees who need assistance, as does Archicivilians with the hashtag ‘#SyrianRefugees’:



Archicivilians conjures both the emotional gravity of this ‘little Syrian boy’, and emotional distance through Alan’s anonymity. Free Syria Media Hub emphasizes the universality of the tragedy through reference to the collective ‘human race’:



Predictive of the image’s future virality, this tweet urges that the photograph of Alan would be ‘shared a billion times’ in order for a sense of moral responsibility and grievability to emerge.

The spread beyond the region

Following these first tweets, Bouckaert and Sly’s tweets constitute the first inflection point of the day, whereby Alan’s image was transformed from a regional story to a viral and global phenomenon (D’Orazio 2015: 13f). Bouckaert and Sly both joined twitter in 2009, and as of November 2016 have tweeted over 12,000 times, and have over 41,600 and 64,300 followers respectively. Their tweets typically do not exceed 100 retweets, making the viral nature of their tweets about Alan all the more extraordinary. Bouckaert, tweeting from Geneva, was the first to share the up-close image of Alan outside of the Middle East and his tweet was captured by a global Twitter audience and retweeted over 2,300 times. Just 14 minutes following Bouckaert’s initial tweet, Sly tweeted the same image. It was Sly’s tweet that went more viral than any other about Alan that day, receiving 7,421 retweets and generating in just 30 minutes the ‘same amount of tweets that had been generated in the previous two hours’ (ibid: 14). Over the course of the day, a Twitter conversation ensued and Bouckaert and Sly actively engaged with the Twitter public, personally justifying the ethics of their decision to tweet the image of Alan’s dead body.

The discursive framing of Bouckaert’s initial tweet presents the suffering of Alan as one that the entire globe can and should sympathize with. Bouckaert asks his audience to:



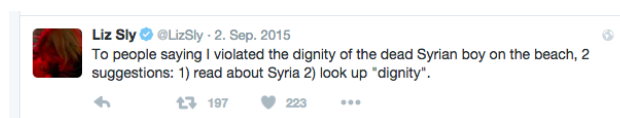
This request to ‘[j]ust pause 4 moment’ is important within the Twitter context as it asks the audience to slow down on a platform that is predicated on rapid scrolling through tweets. Through his narrative, Bouckaert obliges the viewer ‘to look, to feel’ for longer (Sontag 2004: 110). Millions of viewers who have never experienced armed conflict or forced displacement may have paused to

consider how they would feel if this was their child. Yet, this moment of sympathy and relatability is ultimately fleeting, with the perhaps subconscious understanding that a young boy who ‘drowned trying 2 flee #Syria war 4 safety of #EU’ could and would never be the viewer’s child. As Moeller (1999: 39) articulates, ‘we—and our children—are exempt.’

In a manner similar to some of the first tweets about Alan, both Sly and Bouckaert historicize and politicize Alan’s dead body in the context of the Syrian civil war and the failure of the EU to provide protection to those the war has displaced. In a series of tweets, Bouckaert calls attention to the fact that Alan ‘drowned trying 2 flee #Syria war’, that he is a ‘#SyrianRefugee’, and that ‘#Syrianlivesmatter’. He also emphasizes the EU’s responsibility for the death of Alan, suggesting that ‘deaths could have been prevented by EU action’ and that ‘[i]f we act 2gether, we can stop dying & suffering’. Sly similarly frames the image of Alan, articulating that Alan is ‘a Syrian boy’ and placing blame globally for his death:



Notably, she furthers the earlier framing of Alan’s image as an ‘emblematic’ one. In a second and emotionally charged tweet, Sly reinforces this contextualization and suggests her critics become better informed about the issue:



While the all-too-peaceful image of Alan washed ashore may not accurately represent the situation in Syria nor the crisis in the Mediterranean, the image is one that a western audience is capable of grappling and sympathizing with. Through their insistent historicization and politicization of Alan, Bouckaert and Sly turn his dead body into an emblem of the tragedy of the Syrian civil war and the West’s failure to respond to the refugee crisis.

The global promulgation by traditional news media

In the late morning the image went ‘mainstream’, jetting to fame among even those users who may have otherwise never been interested in Syria or the crises in the Mediterranean. The astronomical growth in the reach of the image is largely a result of the fact that at this point traditional outlets like *The Telegraph*, Reuters and the more web-centric *Huffington Post* shared the story. These users

occupy a unique and extremely influential position in the Twitter space and are among the largest hubs on Twitter with 1.88, 15.3 and 8.16 million followers respectively. As large, exclusive content producers, these users also exhibit what Geser (2010) describes as an asymmetrical Twitter relationship with many more followers and consumers than they follow and consume. These users have authority and voice in the Twitter discursive space that mirrors the offline dynamics between news media and society, granting news sources unparalleled authority over information (Moon & Hadley 2014). With their perceived legitimacy, trustworthiness and many followers, news outlet users are situated at an inflection point in the Alan phenomenon where they are responsible for increasing the size of the audience 25-fold (D’Orazio 2015: 15f).

In sharing the story of Alan, these users assumed the objectivity and authority afforded to their traditional media counterparts by styling their tweets in a traditional news fashion. Whereas the above-mentioned tweets are largely structured as brief, editorial comments, the news outlets’ tweets are linked to an article on their website and written in the style of traditional news headlines. Like headlines, these tweets are intended to grab attention and succinctly summarize a news piece and differ from typical Twitter language.

The resulting perceived objectivity and authority of these tweets, combined with the fact that news outlets style their Tweets to report on an ‘existing’ Twitter consensus, may legitimize the politicization of the earlier discourse and the emblematic nature of the phenomenon. *The Telegraph* and *Huffington Post* respectively tweet:



Through their use of the verbs ‘captures’ and ‘shows’, these users reinforce the fact that the image of Alan is emblematic of the larger crises.

The majority of these tweets put the image, rather than Alan, center stage as the subject of the tweet. The shift is evident in Reuters' tweets, which reflect the evolution of news coverage from being event-centered to photo-centered. They first report without an image that:



In Reuters' subsequent two tweets, they use 'image' or 'photo' as the sentence subject. For example:



In contrast to earlier tweets, these outlets employ traditional journalistic discretion in excluding the up-close photo of Alan in favor of photos in which his body is cut out of the frame or obscured by the paramilitary officer holding him. In so doing, these users frame the image as one that disturbs and horrifies, an image that would not pass a 'test of taste and decency' (Campbell 2004: 70). As the above tweet shows, tweets by Reuters are even accompanied by a warning message. In this way, the discovery of Alan's body is depicted idiomatically as the scene of a crime, shielding the reader from the full force of the image and the emotional response that accompanies it unless one chooses to click and look.

By reporting on the meta-news—the phenomenon of the photo—these news outlets engage in a typically modern Twitter dialogue by subsuming what they dub the ‘migrant crisis’ into just one image, making it digestible and sharable. The idea that clicking, seeing an image and being able to fully understand a phenomenon in a graphic, an enumerated list (listicle) or photo is a modern online media phenomenon. Clicktivism, participating in activism for a cause by clicking a link or ‘liking’ a page, is another manifestation of this. Traditional news media employ Twitter as a platform to expand the audience of the image of Alan, while still adhering to traditional standards. By packaging the image in a digestible and familiar way for their masses of followers, news outlets were able to further the image’s reach.

The image of Alan as a ubiquitous phenomenon

Coverage by the traditional news media ushered in with it the viral dissemination of the image on Twitter by a large and varied group of users who proliferated the many discourses around the image. In addition to the images of Alan on the beach, artistic renditions of the image, photos of Alan alive and well, as well as images depicting other aspects of the Syrian crisis all began to emerge on Twitter. Though it is challenging at this point to define and isolate narrative strategies even anecdotally, we can still observe users—influential users in particular—continuing to leverage the flexibility of the image and pursuing political, emblematic and affective narrative strategies.

For example, some of the most influential users as identified by the Visual Social Media Lab began to frame Alan in terms of a moral and collective failure, appealing to a wide Twitter global public. Nadim Houry, the Deputy Director of MENA for Human Rights Watch, tweets about the image as being an ‘indictment of collective failure’. Similarly, Micah Grimes, an American journalist, writes ‘this is our reality; our failure’. As more and more information about Alan became available, users were also able to discuss Alan as an individual in addition to being a symbol of the larger circumstances and politics of his death. An exemplary tweet, which was also the most visible one with 6,100 retweets, is by Michael Weiss, an American journalist for CNN. He tweets:



Weiss includes a photo of Alan, not dead on the beach as in the images used by earlier tweets. Rather, he was joyfully smiling with his brother and a teddy bear. Weiss’s tweet highlights personal details including Alan’s name, age, place of death and his brother, offering an alternative and

individualized narrative of Alan. These users are just a few of many thousands whose tweets transformed the image of Alan into a ubiquitous phenomenon through multiple narrative strategies, continuing well beyond the first 12 hours of the image's digital life.

4 Conclusion

Through a visual analysis of the image of Alan and examination of the first 12 hours of its digital life, this working paper attempts to understand why the image of Alan went viral on Twitter and continued to resonate with millions in the Twitter space for over a year. We argue that the particularities of the image of Alan in combination with the Twitter medium enabled users to employ multiple narrative strategies. These multiple narrative strategies, in turn, made the image go viral and allowed for the ensuing conversation to be sustained over time and geographical space.

In our visual analysis independent of the Twitter context we argue that the image of Alan is an ideal representation of the innocent, irreproachable body worthy of grief. The image of the boy who appears as if he could be peacefully sleeping, in contrast to other iconic images of suffering, masks the violence that has been done, lending itself to multiple and flexible interpretations and perpetuating its presence.

In the context of Twitter, users shape and point to specific framings of the image, positioning Alan's death as grievable for multiple audiences and causes. Focusing on the first 12 hours of the phenomenon's digital life, we divide our analysis into four sections in which new groups of users entered the conversation. We distill three different narrative strategies, which further help to explain why the image went viral. They are: (1) emblemizing, (2) (de)historicizing/(de)politicizing, and (3) appealing to affect. We argue that the virality of the image can in part be explained through the processes by which users on Twitter employed diverse narrative strategies in order to frame and reframe the image of Alan. The image of Alan was 'instrumentalized in radically different directions, depending on how it [was] discursively framed, and through what media presentation the matter of its reality is presented' (Butler 2007: 964).

The Alan phenomenon has been preceded and succeeded by other viral images of human suffering on Twitter like the recent image of Omran Daqneesh, a boy whose rescue from a bombing in Aleppo was videotaped and disseminated widely on social media. Comparative studies are needed to examine the extent to which our explanation of the Alan phenomenon is applicable to other images of suffering on Twitter. Further research is also necessary to understand the impact of the Alan phenomenon beyond the discursive space of Twitter. Though the phenomenon has sustained presence both on Twitter and in the minds of individuals, it seems to have had fewer sustained substantive effects on political action to respond to the crises in the Mediterranean. This raises additional questions for further consideration: Does the fact that the image of Alan appealed to multiple audiences and causes not only explain its virality but also why it may have failed to contribute to lasting and concrete improvement in the Mediterranean crises? Is Twitter just an echo chamber without the ability to drive action beyond its platform? Do—and should—viral images of suffering bring about political and social change?

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