

Published: 9 September 2015

Region: Worldwide



Despite [not being the first of this kind](#), the photo of lifeless washed up body of Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian boy in a Turkish beach, with his face down and his sneakers still on, got the world's attention.

It caused even more talk and discussions about current refugees' crisis, but also about the human catastrophe unfolding in the Mediterranean for years. The publication of this photo posed also one of the most difficult ethical dilemmas for editors around the world – whether to publish distressing images of children, or not.

The majority of media codes of conducts recommend not using photos whose aim is to indulge into sensationalism and voyeurism, especially when anything could go viral into social media without any context provided, nor consent from the family granted.

This time, however, not many editors held back from publishing the photo of Aylan Kurdi, but pondering and then vocalising their choice, they consciously proceeded to show it to their readers. Social media did the rest, disseminating it far and wide and debating on the use of the image.

Aware of the challenges that different circumstances pose to journalists, what seemed to dominate in this case, was the awareness that that particular photo would shake the numb consciences that thousands of similar deaths – almost all of them photographed – have not spurred and ended in abstract debates.

“The enormous poignancy and potential power of the photographs was evident from the start,” stated the [Guardian’s deputy editor](#), Paul Johnson. “Could they be the images that provided a tipping point? Would public sympathy, and perhaps anger at Britain’s role as an apparent bystander in this saga, be moved by them? We decided that both of these were highly likely. Those factors had to be balanced against the real shock that some readers would feel.” The Guardian, like a number of other media, saw the publication of the photos of the boy as an exception judiciously justified by many factors.

The father of Aylan Kurdi, followed by photographers and reporters during his journey home to bury his family, was never asked the permission to the publication. As a late consent, he declared: "[We want the world's attention on us, so that they can prevent the same from happening to others. Let this be the last.](#)" But his aunt has asked people [to stop using the drowning photo and to remember his nephew smiling](#)

One of the reasons stated by some of the media for publishing the photo was to make world and readers, if not governments and world leaders, to react and do more. “The Independent has taken the decision to publish these images because, among the often glib words about the ‘ongoing migrant crisis’, it is all too easy to forget the reality of the desperate situation facing many refugees,” stated [the Independent](#).

Not only civil society organisations and grassroots groups, but media themselves seem to have shifted towards activism: plea for humanitarian actions, [campaigns](#) petitioning the British Prime Minister David Cameron to welcome a fair share of refugees seeking safety in Europe, information on [what ordinary people can do](#) to help, where and how to donate, are just some of the most visible actions. Indeed charities and NGOs have seen [massive surge in donations](#) attributed to the shocking images.

After having shouted against the numbers of migrants that Britain has not the capacity to take in, some tabloids seem – at least for the little Syrian boy – to have slightly [softened their voice](#) and showed [more compassion](#) towards refugees escaping war zones and promoted pro-refugees [petitions](#).

Challenged by the existing confusion in the [terminology of migration](#), and aware of the media language's power to shape our vision of the world, many journalists have also recently opted for a more careful choice of words, distinguishing between a migrant (*1. One that moves from one region to another by chance, instinct, or plan. 2. An itinerant worker who travels from one area to another in search of work*) and a refugee (*one who flees in search of refuge, as in times of war, political oppression, or religious persecution*).

[Al Jazeera](#) stated that it won't use the term migrant again: "The umbrella term migrant is no longer fit for purpose when it comes to describing the horror unfolding in the Mediterranean." Although aware of the difference, most of the media professionals, among which the [BBC](#), the [New York Times](#), and the [European Federation of Journalists](#), thought this generalisation clashes with the journalists' duty to be accurate.

The refugee crisis, with its staggering images and complex language, is posing new challenges in the newsroom. It is too early to tell the long-term impact of the poignant photos of Aylan Kurdi, but the media, like the society did, reacted and took the side of human rights.