

Media and Image of a Toddler

A Study of an Image of a Lifeless Body that Changed History

Gaurav Shah

Ubiquity and an unprecedented number of media channels have made it possible for single events to influence people's perception of politics and society. Media has been instrumental in building public opinion pivotal in changing the course of history not only of a society or a nation but sometimes of the entire world. The image of the death of Alan Kurdi, a three year old Syrian boy of Kurdish ethnicity, is a glaring example of the media's role in doing so. The dissemination of his image in print, electronic and social media compelled the world leaders to see the plight of refugees through a new and fresh perspective. The tragic image of the little boy gave rise to waves of compassion amongst people throughout the world. The image came as a jolt to governments of many European countries (Sinha, 2015). Countries that were once averse to taking in refugees are now willing to provide them with asylum. This monograph is about how an image of a three year toddler (found dead with his face-down on the shores of Turkey) through the media lens triggered the formation of public opinion and persuaded world leaders to address issue of Europe's worst refugee crisis post Second World War (Ibid).

In Syria, unbridled civil strife that started in 2011 has triggered the exodus of millions of Syrians to neighboring countries. To save themselves from the civil war escalating in Syria, a Syrian Kurdish family boarded a boat on 2 September, 2015, to reach the island of Kos in Greece. The boat capsized about five minutes after leaving a beach at Bodrum in Turkey. This resulted in the death of 12 persons on the boat, including three year old Aylan Kurdi, his five year old brother, Galip and their mother, Rehan. The image of Aylan Kurdi found dead on the shores of Bodrum, was taken by a photo reporter Nilufer Dermi around 6:00 a.m. on September 2. Nilufer works for Turkey's Dogan News Agency (DHA) and covers the migrant crisis in Aegean resort town of Bodrum. Soon the image got viral on social media and the next day it became a headline on the front pages of prominent newspapers across the world (Lee, 2015).

Argument

The issue of the refugee crisis in Europe has been permeating international news media from quite some time (Erlanger and Smale, 2015) but it galvanized the public and governments into action after the diffusion of the image of Aylan Kurdi in print, electronic and social media. This shows the influence of media image. According to McComb and Shaw, "what we know about the world is largely based on what the media decide to tell us" (McComb, 2000). Walter Lippman says that "the news media are a primary source of those pictures in our heads about the larger world of public affairs, a world that for most citizens is "out of reach, out of sight, out of mind" (Lippman, 1922). Supporting Lippman, McComb argues that "the pictures in people's minds about the outside world are significantly influenced by the mass media, both what those pictures are about and what those pictures are" (McComb, 2000).

Agenda-Building-Media is often blamed for highlighting those issues that cater to the interests of media itself. Especially in the political arena, media is believed to set and build the agenda in favor of particular politicians (Scheufele, 2000). As the Agenda Setting theory of mass communication research says "the media (mainly the news media) aren't always successful at telling us what to think, but they are quite successful at telling us what to think about" (Cohen, 1963). For three decades, the notion of agenda setting (Walgrave and Aelst, 2006) has provided one of the most influential and fertile paradigms in media and communications research. Therefore in context of the image of Aylan Kurdi, researcher here argues that the media built up and gave priority to the agenda of the refugees in Europe, not for any vested interest but to form a public opinion that could ameliorate the miserable condition they are in.

Explanation and Research Question

In order to enlarge our understanding of the developments in Europe, there are numerous questions we can ask ourselves. If we are to ask why an image of a small boy created so much stir across the world, McComb and Shaw's theory of Agenda Setting can be thought of as one of the plausible explanation. Why media gives so much importance to this image? Why this image appeals so much unlike others? Does the image able to build up a public opinion? To what extent, the image helpful in building a public opinion and influences various governments of Europe. To put it more specifically, the research question can be: To what extent does the image of the toddler help in the formation of public opinion, conforming to the Agenda setting theory of Mass Communication Research?

Agenda Setting Theory

The term 'agenda-setting' was coined by McCombs and Shaw (1972, 1993). The core idea was that the news media indicate to the public what the main issues of the day are and that this gets reflected in what the public perceives as the main issues. According to Allison Adams, Allison Harf and Riley Ford "The Agenda Setting theory of mass media communication attempts to determine how the popular agenda of the media affects society and attempts to explain why mass media has gained so much power over the thoughts of people everywhere" (Adams, Allison and Ford, 2014). Supporting the above argument, McComb says that, "The power of the news media to set a nation's agenda, to focus public attention on a few key public issues, is an immense and well-documented influence" (McComb, 2000). In order to educate ourselves as to how pictures affect us and our mind through mass media and later on form a public opinion related to image, McCombs taking into account example of politics comprehensively enunciates:

The pictures in people's minds about the outside world are significantly influenced by the mass media, both what those pictures are about and what those pictures are. The agenda-setting effects of the mass media also have significant implications beyond the pictures created in people's heads. In the original, traditional domain of agenda-setting, the salience of public issues, there is considerable evidence that the shifting salience of issues on the media agenda often are the basis for public opinion about the overall performance in office of a public leader. In turn, the salience of a leader in the news also is linked with whether an individual holds any opinion at all. At the second level of agenda-setting, the salience of affective attributes intertwined with the public's cognitive pictures of these leaders represents the convergence of attribute agenda-setting with opinion formation and change. Beyond attitudes and opinions, the pictures of reality created by the mass media have implications for personal behaviors, ranging from college applications to voting on Election Day.

Plight of Refugees and The Image

Aylan Kurdi is believed to have been born in Kobani, Syria. Kobani, a city in the northern part of Syria has been devastated due to fierce battle between ISIL and regional Kurdish fighters (Khan and Estrada, 2015). To escape from war and save

themselves from the atrocities of ISIL, Kurdi's family took shelter in Turkey for three years. The family returned to Kobani at the beginning of 2015, but returned to Turkey in June 2015 when ISIL attacked Kobani again. To keep himself and his family safe and to live a better life, Kurdi's father Abdullah Kurdi applied for asylum in Canada but his family's refugee application was rejected by the Canadian authorities. Abdullah then set out for Europe but the boat he was sailing in capsized before reaching Kos, the Greek island.

Refugees are individuals who suffer or fear persecution in their country of origin on account of their race, religion, nationality, political ideology or are escaping the ravages of war. While refugees have existed through the ages, at present we have a whopping 19 million people displaced from their homeland and seeking a place to live in safety, amongst which over 366,000 persons have entered Europe, having crossed the Mediterranean Sea. The refugees are currently fleeing war, political persecution or other kinds of violence in places like Syria, Libya, Somalia and Myanmar. Today, the Syrian civil war is undoubtedly the largest factor contributing to the growing number of refugees (Aiyanna, 2015).

The conflict in Syria between the government of Bashar al-Assad and various other groups, that broke in the spring of 2011, continues to cause displacement within the country and across the region. By the end of 2014, an estimated 7.6 million Syrian people were internally displaced and 3.7 million others had fled the country since the conflict began (OCHA 2014; UNHCR 2015a). The scope and protracted nature of the Syrian conflict has made the situation for Syrian refugees and their host communities exceedingly difficult. Syrian refugees face tension amongst host community populations and struggle to secure basic needs like security, food, and shelter. With the humanitarian situation caused by the Syrian conflict continuing to deteriorate, Syrians are increasingly seeking asylum in states outside the region (Ostrand, 2015).

In 2013, Syria became for the first time the main country of origin of asylum seekers in the 44 industrialized countries in Europe, North America, and the Asia Pacific region (UNHCR 2014d).⁴ An estimated 56,400 Syrians requested refugee status in the 44 industrialized countries in 2013, more than double the number of Syrian asylum claims in 2012 (25,200) and six times the number in 2011 (8,500) (ibid.). In 2014, the number of Syrian asylum seekers in the 44 industrialized countries reached 149,600, the highest number recorded by a single group since 1992 (UNHCR 2015h). Steven Erlanger and Alison Smale from The New York Times, citing report from United Nations, say that 310,000 refugees and migrants have crossed the

Mediterranean to Europe, about 40 percent more than in all of 2014. Quoting Melissa Fleming, Spokeswoman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, they say that around 2,500 people have died trying to reach Europe this year (Erlanger and Smale, 2015). These figures show the enormity of the refugee crisis in Europe.

According to Nilufer Dermi, the photographer who captured the image of Aylan, "At that moment I saw the three year old Aylan Kurdi, I was petrified. He was lying lifeless face down in the surf, in his red t-shirt and dark blue shorts folded to his waist. The only thing I could do was to make his outcry heard." Earlier also many images related to the pathetic conditions of refugees (Syrian refugees) struggling to get into Europe have been in the domain of media but none of them were able to create so much impact as this image has done.

Media Stimulates

The image of dead Aylan, have been published as the top headlines in almost all the major newspapers of the world and the image of drowned child has been extensively written about. Media takes on the image of the child to make it an agenda to stimulate people to express and form an opinion that can be heard and could subsequently change the global attitude towards the refugees. Indian express (Tobgyal, 2015) writes:

This is the point where a photographer's image, channelizes the world, its thoughts and opinions, its anger - and its hope - an outburst that brings about change. This time, the outburst has made the world to rethink the current humanitarian crisis in the Middle East and Europe. The single photograph of Aylan Kurdi, has given voice to all the other children, all the other stories of sadness and human tragedy, has validated each and every other photograph taken of the crisis, has invoked everything that has been forgotten or omitted in the last five years of the conflict.

Bryony Gordon of the Telegraph explaining pathetic condition of refugees says:

It all seems so laughable now, doesn't it? All that fuss about the people forced to spend a shocking five hours on a Eurostar train in sweltering carriages with no lights? The stories of passengers, terrified by the "migrants" climbing on the roof of the train, as if they were

zombies or vampires ready to suck the life out of everyone, rather than young men desperate for a life that doesn't involve beheading and raping?

Explaining the impact of the image, she is of the view that

These images have galvanised people. Some Labour leadership candidates have held up signs saying "Refugees Welcome". Hundreds of thousands of people have signed petitions calling for the Government to allow these refugees in to the country. All week we have (rightly) been talking about what we can give to these displaced people - can we buy them tents, jackets and sleeping bags? - but the more I see of this humanitarian crisis, the more I realise that these refugees have something incredibly valuable to give us. They can teach us about stoicism, humility, bravery and patience. They can teach us perspective. From these people we can learn that all that really matters is family, health and safety (Gordon, 2015).

Ross Douthat from The New York Times writes "The image of a dead Syrian boy washed up on a Turkish beach has inspired a wave of Western soulsearching, with much talk about how "the world" failed 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi, who drowned along with his mother and brother while trying to escape their country's civil war" (Douthat, 2015).

Live Mint praising the photographer who shot the kid with her camera, states that "Without Nilufer Demir, we wouldn't have woken up to the awful tragedy unfolding before our eyes as thousands of people risk their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean in search of a safer home for their families" (Khanna, 2015). Kim Murphy, the assistant managing editor of The Los Angeles Times for foreign and national news says "The image is not offensive, it is not gory, it is not tasteless - it is merely heartbreaking, and stark testimony of an unfolding human tragedy that is playing out in Syria, Turkey and Europe, often unwitnessed," she said. "We have written stories about hundreds of migrants dead in capsized boats, sweltering trucks, lonely rail lines, but it took a tiny boy on a beach to really bring it home to those readers who may not yet have grasped the magnitude of the migrant crisis" (Mackey, 2015).

The Washington Post reports that "The dramatic influx of refugees this year has led to handwringing in European capitals, heated protests from some on the right of

the political spectrum, and a great outpouring of support on social media" (Tharror, 2015).

Social Media has also been very responsive as soon as the image of dead Aylan got uploaded on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. The hashtag "KiyiyaVuranInsanlik" - "humanity washed ashore" - became the toptrending topic on Twitter (Tharror, 2015). The particular hashtag was used for 200,000 (Reuters, 2015) times within 24 hours of online publication of the image. Tweets like "Mankind has proven to be the most destructive species In the world..#AylanKurdi rest in peace you little angel..", "We must not avert our eyes from #refugees like #AylanKurdi who are dying in search of safety. We must act. youtube.com/watch?v=c6514o..." and "EU member states are establishing new refugee quotas following the death of #AylanKurdiyoutu.be/naN_dGvAnx4?t=..." shows the sympathy and anger which the social media users expressed on the death of the little child (Twitter, 2015).

Impact of Image and Formation of Public Opinion

The basic claim of agenda setting theory is that people's understanding of much of social reality is copied from the media (Shaw, 1979). When mass media emphasizes a topic, the audience/public receiving the message will consider this topic to be important (Cohen, 1963; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Similarly policymakers follow reports by media as Stuart N. Soroka argues:

On one hand, the mass media are the primary conduit between the public and policymakers. Policymakers follow media reports on public opinion, and the media are the public's chief source of information on what policymakers are doing. In addition, the media are the principal means by which the vast majority of individuals receive information about foreign affairs, an issue for which personal experience is unlikely to provide much useful information (Soroka, 2003).

Britain initially allowed only 216 Syrian refugees to come to UK. Prime Minister David Cameron the day Aylan Kurdi drowned, insisted that Britain would not accept "more and more" migrants (Turner, 2015). But rally of one million Brits and signatures of more than 400,000 on the online petition 'Accept more refugees', forced Cameron to change his government's policy. Succumbing to public pressure he has now agreed to take in 20,000 refugees(Warburton, 2015). Thus we can see that at first media of UK was against the intake of refugees and was telling Britons to fear and

resist any immigration (Sinha, 2015) as for example the tabloid SUN of UK referred refugees as cockroaches but later Sun's front page and editorial urging the prime minister to help those in situations "not of their own making" saying: "Mr Cameron, summer is over ... Now deal with the biggest crisis facing Europe since WW2" (Harding, Oltermann and Watt, 2015). Here the agenda that Media builds up have a cumulative effect on formation of public opinion and subsequently on the policy makers of the nation.

Stefan Walgrave and Peter Van Aelst opine that "the alleged interplay between media and public opinion not only incites political actors to take on media issues but also stimulates them to embrace these issues as soon as possible. When pressing problems turn up "... whether or not feasible solutions are in sight. Action of some kind, even if it is merely symbolic, must be taken as quickly as possible" (Walgrave and Aelst, 2006). Be it Canada's prime minister calling the drowning of Aylan Kurdi as a truly "heart breaking situation" or Turkish President criticizing the western world for ignoring their responsibilities from refugees or emergency meeting of European foreign ministers, promptness of the world political leaders can be seen as soon as the image of Aylan Kurdi spreads across the media domain of the globe.

The impact that the image had in catching attention of world leaders can be seen as many nations like US got ready to take in 10,000 refugees, Australia to take in 12,000 refugees, United Kingdom to take in 20,000 refugees, France to take in 24,000 refugees (Ndtv, 2015), Canada to take in 10,000 refugees (Indian Express, 2015), Germany to take in 800,000 people (Harding, Oltermann and Watt, 2015), Hungarian authorities once impervious to intake of refugees eventually agreed to allow hundreds onto a train bound for the Austrian frontier (Ndtv, 2015).

However, blame on mass media for selecting issues, for more or less attention according to several pressures, especially those from interested elites, public opinion and real-world events (Mcquail, 2010), is reflected in the degree to which some media coverage has been given in other countries like Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey who have been dealing with this massive flow of Syrian refugees for a few years already. That's been written about but has never become a daily crisis story the way this one has (Erbenraut, 2015).

Conclusion

Douglas Brinkley, a professor of history at Rice University says "Once in a while, an image breaks through the noisy, cluttered global culture and hits people in the heart

and not the head," Adding to Brinkley's thoughts, the documentary filmmaker and historian Ken Burns admits 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" The photos of Aylan Kurdi are a reminder, he says, "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" (Wall Street Journal, 2015). Here we see the power of the image and how it becomes significant in changing the policies of various nations of west who earlier carried a myopic view of the refugees and were almost apathetic towards it. Walgrave and Aelst in their article quoting Schudson argue that the power of the mass media lies not in the direct influence of the mass media on the general public but in the perception of experts and decision makers that the general public is influenced by the mass media. Studies confirm that political actors tend to equate media with public opinion (Walgrave and Aelst, 2006).

Thus we see that public debate is represented by a set of salient issues (an agenda for action) and the agenda originates from public opinion in accordance with the Agenda setting theory of mass communication. Aylan Kurdi's image in death was widely published and broadcast and doing so served the larger good, and it did. As Tobgyal from Indian Express rightly says, "the power of one image has once again proved that there is still hope" (Tobgyal, 2015).

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