Solidarity, Social Media, and the "Refugee Crisis": Engagement Beyond Affect

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The images of Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old who drowned in the Aegean Sea in 2015, and Omran Daqneesh, a five-year-old covered in dust and blood waiting shell-shocked in the back of an ambulance in 2016, both symbolize the horror and suffering endured by civilians throughout the "refugee crisis" in Europe and the civil war in Syria. Yet, the circulation of these images mobilized different outcomes. Kurdi's image engendered solidarity that was supported by action, whereas Daqneesh's image did not result in the same effect. This article reflects on the potential for solidarity of images circulating on social media by placing them in relation to the context in which they are embedded. The results of our study show that although shocking images can awaken compassion toward the oppressed, they do not necessarily translate into movements of solidarity, but can rather degenerate into ineffective forms of pity.

Keywords: refugees, crisis, mediation, activism, solidarity

Solidarity is a principle that can inspire and guide action. (Arendt, 1973)

No one puts their children in a boat. Unless the water is safer than the land. (Warsan Shire, quoted in Bausells & Shearlaw, 2015)

In August 2016, the wrenching image of an eerily semiconscious Omran Daqneesh dominated global front pages and news items. The five-year-old sat confused in the back of an ambulance after being rescued from a collapsing building in Aleppo (see Figure 1): caught between a rock—the campaign of violence mounted by Bashar al-Assad and his deadly allies against the defiant city—and a hard place—the brutally inhumane refugee policies and Fortress Europe. Mediating unimaginable suffering, the widely shared image also illustrates the taunting impact that visual forms can have. It had the potential to activate solidarity and awareness because we had seen such digital-visual affect produced before, and also in the context of Syria. Just one year earlier, the viral image of the three-year-old Syrian Alan

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Kurdi, who washed up, face down, on a Turkish beach, had energized demonstrations across Europe with chants of "Refugees Welcome" (see Figure 2). It stimulated new modes of activism and mobilized grassroots engagement, and therefore showed the relevance of the argument that social media increase commitment through emotional drives, of digital media giving *affective affordance* (Alcalde & Portos, 2018; Papacharissi, 2015).

Figure 1. Front pages worldwide with images of Omran Daqneesh.

Figure 2. Front pages worldwide with images of Alan Kurdi.

However, the two images mobilized different outcomes: one a solidarity, which effectively guided action, and the other a form of affect that remained passive. Why? Did both not portray shocking situations, and were they not heavily disseminated both online and through newspapers? We must account for the contextual differences to fully deconstruct the potentials of each photo, whether for the public at large or activist initiatives, such as European border politics in one and (anti-)warfare in another. And yet, the varied responses to the images of Omran Daqneesh and Alan Kurdi invite us to reflect on assumptions about the power of digital media and critically review the potential of visual politics. The comparison is helpful because it is broadly agreed that the viral nature of digitally mediated images in 2015, and especially the image of Kurdi, was iconic because it marked a shift in popular interest (Bozdag & Smets, 2017), and caused a shift toward a more humanitarian refugee policy (Lenette & Cleland, 2016, p. 69). The virality of the image of Daqneesh shows us that although there is a correlation between political engagement and digital infrastructures, it is not causality. Some images

have the power to awaken a sense of compassion toward the oppressed and, with other contextual factors, motivate solidarity (as in the case of Alan Kurdi). Other images, equally strong, can awaken a sense of compassion at first, but lack support and become the perversion of compassion (this was the case of Omran Daqneesh). We are therefore especially interested in how the portrayal of shocking images works with other digital strategies that together favor the narrative of refugees and translate into action or, conversely, become manifestations of orientalist clichés that demobilize.

We come into this discussion as academics from the fields of anthropology, migration studies, and communication studies. We also take cues from own experiences as radicalized minorities and engaged activists. We bring anthropological theories and media studies together so as to develop an integrative reflection. Thus, while we draw on critical theories from anthropology and build on ethnographic insights, we engage conceptually with insights from communication studies and activism (De Genova, 2017; Heller, Pezzani, & Stierl, 2017; Stierl, 2017); for instance, studies that discuss the "refugee crisis" (Bhimji, 2016; Cabot, 2016; De Genova & Tazzioli, 2016; Hage, 2016; Kallius, Monterescu, & Rajaram, 2016; Milan, 2018; Prøitz, 2015; Rakopoulos, 2016). Specifically, we consider the links between digital mediation and solidarity (Keller, Mendes, & Ringrose, 2016) because this relation, in particular, raises questions about the changing nature of activism.

The photo of Alan Kurdi, shared millions of times online, caused a shift in focus that led to a global intensification of public engagement with the topic of refugees. The photo has become an icon in a short time, comparable to other photographs of children in times of humanitarian crises. Examples include the 1973 photograph of Phan Thị Kim Phúc taken during the Vietnam War or the 1993 photo of a starving little Sudanese girl fallen on the ground while a vulture lurks nearby (Bozdag & Smets, 2017). In this article, we argue that these kinds of political transformations happen most clearly when images that carry metonymic power overlap with mass protests; therefore, we widen the scope of investigation beyond the sphere of social media.

The photograph of Kurdi contributed to a shift from passive commentary to active engagement. This has been explained in different ways. Azoulay (2016, para. 3) interprets the massive response to the refugee crisis in part as the historical continuity of an imperial relation, toward a "different contract between descendants of colonized and the colonizers," that engenders an opportunity to transform the violent legacy. One relevant result is that the attention of the general public has since been directed to these individual refugees' quality of life (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Rogers, 2015). Moreover, when left-wing governments took over in Greece at the backdrop of the financial crisis, this opened new channels of support for solidarity (Della Porta, 2018, p. 9).

We agree that digitally mediated images carry important suggestions, but still regard visual drama and its digital infrastructures with a healthy dose of skepticism. For instance, whereas the emphasis is mostly on the "positive" changes, less attention is paid to the negative ramifications of digital mediation. During the eruption of support, we simultaneously witnessed antirefugee tendencies online. Thelwall (2015, p. 31), for example, demonstrated this through the popularity of hashtags and keywords in unsympathetic responses. This paradox shows that online media and iconic images matter

most when visual expressions connect with existing discursive frameworks.[1] Analysis of media discourse indicates clearly how migration has increasingly been framed as a security issue in the West (Humphrey, 2013; Ibrahim & Howarth, 2016). For example, an estimated 10,000 refugees had temporarily settled in the French border town Calais. The self-governed semiautonomous community clearly threatened the status quo and was in fact destroyed in October 2016 when the French government forcibly displaced the informal settlement (Cowen, 2017).

The circulation of digital images also suggests that there are different sorts of agencies at play, partly caused by the geopolitical ramifications of the Syrian uprising, that saw a shift in regional power relations and (proxy) wars, which increased the sense of urgency. But how urgency is manifested online differs. In fact, Chouliaraki (2013) points to the increasingly narcissistic form of engagement and argues that

> the publics of solidarity, too, are today called to enact solidarity as an individualistic project of contingent values and consumerist activisms—ironic solidarity being precisely a solidarity that, in recognizing the limits of its own legitimacy and efficacy, avoids politics and rewards the self. (p. 2)

We present these paradoxes to understand the shift from collective solidarity to divisive politics, and provide an analysis of the negative media portrayals of refugees as related to the different functions and effects of digital technology on solidarity. The affect produced by the photographs of Omran Daqneesh (2016) and Alan Kurdi (2015) was haunting, turning shock into culpability. The problem with the lack of positive action following the former photograph does not lie in a lack of sympathy per se, but in its ineffective affect. We argue that there was never a straight dynamic vis-à-vis the mobilization of solidarity, that positive actions should rather be understood as selective moments that are rooted in their own contemporary contexts. Only then can the different outcomes of these shocking images be understood. We therefore propose to analytically combine the sociopolitical settings and the technologically afforded affect, as well as the intervention of people (of activists, photographers) themselves. Via this multilayered approach, we can discuss solidarity as part and parcel of contemporary politics of crisis.

To develop our argument, in the first two sections, we present the sociopolitical settings: We explain how the convergence of these different conditions pushed political boundaries that caused complex implications vis-à-vis solidarity. For instance, a sense of political crisis is relevant both as a metaphor and as a state of affairs. This dual meaning leads us to share the belief that solidarity is also the "other side of crisis" (Cabot, 2016, p. 152). In the third section, we introduce reflections on the second element of our multilayered approach. More specifically, we discuss the repercussions of *techno-orientalism*: the presumption of refugees as originating from a region of destitution, meaning that refugees taking selfie images or having smartphones are not tolerated. We finally focus on the tactics

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[1] Our understanding of visual mediation benefitted from the content and quantitative analysis offered by the Picturing the Social databases. We extend our gratitude to Farida Vis for welcoming us to use the content and maps. Available online: http://visualsocialmedialab.org/projects/picturing-the-social

of different actors, by uncovering the conflicting phenomena by identifying this alongside the rehumanizing potential of digital contestation (including the choices of individuals such as photographers), or the ways in which momentum relies on the ability to seize the moment. Such a framework allows us, in the final section, to reflect on the conditions through which affective (online) affordances can become *inaffective* and initiate apathy.

Whose "Crisis"?

> Crises surrounding the rights of refugees and the provision of asylum in a world of thickening borders; crises of indigenous peoples' lands and sovereignty in the face of transnational extractive industries; crises regarding local livelihoods in an economy organized through speed and flexibility in trade across vast distances. (Cowen, 2017, p. 1)

> Crisis is di order of di day. (Johnson, 1983)

The summers of 2015 and 2016 confirmed that social media have an ambivalent role in the management of the mobility of migrants. The instrumentalization of panic, of a "crisis" hitting Europe, has been at the center of this discursive trait. The growing flow of forced migration since 2014 saw thousands of men, women, and children drowned in the Mediterranean Sea on their way to Europe (Hernandez & Stylianou, 2016; Tomlinson, 2015). When related to the Syrian refugee situation, this elevated to global proportions. In 2015, protest movements pushed several EU states to open their borders. Policies did (temporarily) shift in response to what became a global public outcry (Devichand, 2016). This, however, is not what the aftermath in 2016 showed, which seemed to signal a reversal of the generosity seen in 2015: By then, Greece shut its doors and Germany brokered a controversial EU deal with Turkey.[2] In this period, more than 1 million individuals made it to Europe on foot or by boat. This is widely referenced as the largest movement of people since the Second World War. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, approximately 80% of Mediterranean Sea arrivals came from Syria (49%), Afghanistan (21%), and Iraq (8%; Wright, 2015). Most refugees went to countries with existing networks of exiles (Sweden), or where genuine outrage had led heads of state to announce a sanctuary (e.g., Germany; Siciliano, 2015).

Although one might expect the perilous sea routes to discourage others from taking the risk, sea crossings consistently increased because the conditions from which people sought refuge did not change and, in many cases, had worsened. The United Nations Refugees Agency estimated that more than 2,000 people had already drowned while crossing from Libya in the summer of 2015, when the world came to know the dangers of crossings (e.g., Lampedusa, Italy; Squires, 2016). Long before the "crisis" moment in 2015, those seeking asylum were detained and imprisoned in notorious "detention centers" (Amnesty International, 2014, 2015). Therefore, forced migration is not unconventional, but combined with the political violence and extreme suffering that people were escaping, and the fact that they arrived at the doors of Europe *en masse*, did have considerable implications.

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[2] In the same period, columnist Katie Hopkins (2015) stated, "No, I don't care. Show me pictures of coffins, show me bodies floating in the water. . . . I still don't care" (para. 1). Two boats had already capsized (on April 13 and 19) during which more than 1,000 people died.

The notions of crisis and migration have always been closely connected. Events in recent years shed important light on this intersection of crisis and migration. Blaming the victim has been an integral part of the refugee crisis, framed as a wave of panic hitting Europe. Tabloids projected frail refugees as a major challenge. Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos, political leaders such as the former French Prime Minister Manuel Valls declared that Europe was in danger of being "totally destabilised" if refugees fleeing war zones were allowed in (Chrisafis, Elliott, & Treanor, 2016). As anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2016) argues, addressing refugees as a "crisis" is part of an older, colonial feeling in the West of being "under siege" (p. 40). It is a framework that allows one to remove oneself, as if alien to the roots of crises and yet bearing the (disproportionate) brunt of tragedies.[3] Neither is true. A critical analysis of the refugee crisis considers mass media as embedded in the twin fault of capitalism/imperialism (Aouragh & Chakravartty, 2016), and the media coverage of the refugee crisis has "everything to do with place, history, class, capitalism and imperialism," as Khiabany (2016, p. 756) argued.

The figures speak volumes. Neighboring countries host 80% of all refugees (of which 70% are Syrians): Turkey 39.0%, Lebanon 19.0%, Jordan 11.3%, and the European Union 8.2% (all of Europe 11.4%).[4] There is no room for self-pity, to quote Hage (2016) again: "How far are we, in western nations from this figure, and yet we think that disaster is looming. We are a joke. Everything we say oozes privilege and self-indulgence."[5]

At heightened moments, the complex realities behind these developments are invisible, but sometimes the terms we use add to the confusion too given that the people we refer to compose various groups and communities. Some refer to themselves as refugees for tactical reasons, and others vehemently reject the term for reactionary reasons. Many scholars have pointed to the normative assumptions vested in terms such as *migrants*, such as assuming disingenuous motives (economic migrants) or pacifying notions of the term *refugee*. In this article, we acknowledge these arguments, especially the risk of reproducing inequality in terms and labels, and recognize the value of alternative, nonhegemonic terms.[6] Therefore, the

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[3] This sentiment gratefully taps into the mythology of the "White man's burden," exposed by philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon (1952) as nourishment for the superiority complex of the West.

[4] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Global trends: Forced displacement in 2014, available at http//:www.unhcr.org/2014trends/. For 2015–2016, see also De Bel-Air (2016). The United Kingdom, a key supporter of a war that contributed to the rise of ISIS and the absence of safe routes in the region, accepts 0.2% of the total refugees.

[5] See https://www.facebook.com/ghahagea/posts/10153905454697963, September 11, 2016, with permission from Ghassan Hage.

[6] Alternatives such as *made refugee* or *refugeeness* are interesting but do not matter much beyond our specialist niche, nor are these value-free. We agree with Kallius et al. (2016) that "the distinction between categories such as refugees and migrants became blurred as Afghans, Iraqis, Kurds and Syrians were joined by Bangladeshis and Pakistanis, all of whom had crossed several borders by car, train, foot, or boat to reach safe haven in western Europe" (p. 26).

terms *refugee* and *migrant* are employed in this article not as an accepted reference or reflective of a subjective identity, but for reasons of clarity, as it is the most common *self*-reference.[7]

The convergence of *crisis* and the different forms of terminologies about migration in use are also related. Greece, a state severely abused by Eurozone austerity and derisively blamed for the "Eurocrisis," and yet one of the main entries for refugees and migrants, is where Chloe Haralambous (2016) shows a deliberate differentiation between the apolitical "refugee" in need of salvation and the "migrant" as problem and outsider. Such definitions lost sight of earlier radical discourses of the migrant as the basis for radical political subjectivities with empowering potentials (Kallius et al., 2016, p. 3).

The fact that there was a shift from hostility to "migrants" to empathy for "refugees" confirms that the heterogeneous experience of forced migration does not allow for terminological reductionism. The previous shifts are an important reminder that terms and their meanings are not static. But this does not mean that we do not need adequate language and concepts. As the case of Syrian refugees illustrates, (visual) framing can redirect focus; thus, certain categories assist certain policies. Put simply, dominant media frames condition what audiences accept or reject, as research on racism shows (van Dijk, 1991). Media language is extremely ideological and contributes to political stigmatization or even determines the legal fate of refugees (Diedring & Dorber, 2015). This is a familiar dynamic and shapes how messages are decoded, how audiences can sometimes become desensitized to the subject.

The use of "cockroaches" by antimigrant celebrity Katie Hopkins was deliberately shocking (Williams, 2015), but not really unrelated to the vocabulary of "respectable" politicians such as then British Prime Minister David Cameron, who referred to refugees as "swarms" (Walton & Ross, 2015). Thus, terminology and framing coconstitute our primary—activist, legal, scholarly—parameters.

It therefore matters how the notions of "refugee" and "asylum seeker" tie activists to the legalistic frameworks or the liberal institutions that confer such status. Reframing the act of migration of people as a crisis and transferring the blame for the failure of asylum policies to the very group of people who need solidarity engender demoralizing and devastating effects. Some people are liable to the status of refugee one day, and yet could lose any form of protection when rendered "illegals" the next. This inevitably undermines solidarity work. An example of such redefinitions is the first attacks on prorefugee solidarity enacted through the exclusion of entire nationalities (Iranians, Afghans, and Iraqis) from potential solidarity on the Greek island of Lesbos (Haralambous, 2016). Della Porta (2018) argues that solidarity is influenced by international crises that came to the surface at a critical juncture during the "long summer of migration in 2015" (p. 2).

The term *crisis* is a popular frame in media analyses related to the Syrian conflict and Syrian refugees. But the notion "crisis" in describing these human tragedies has dehumanizing effects on refugees by extracting their personal and collective struggles from dictatorship and overall imperial systems of oppression. Meanwhile, in popular lingo right-wing agitators compare refugees with a terrible "tsunami" that

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[7] The label *refugee crisis* is fairly normalized. Another suggestion is *coercive engineered migration* (Greenhill, 2016, p. 320).

is shaking Europe to its core (Stone, 2015). The dominant framing for these developments is deliberately dramatic and does not shy from inducing fear.

Although refugees' attempts to find safety are far more pressing, these are almost invisible in the popular framings. The shift of focus from structural policies and violent policing of state borders to smugglers and individual crimes is part of this reverse.

During the spread of the image of Alan Kurdi, D'Orazio (2015, p. 11) detected a transformation in the vocabulary used on social media from migrant to refugee, which changed the overall debate. The shift from the category of migrant to refugee also helps us understand how text and image can simultaneously *de*humanize and *re*humanize. Negative or positive framing does not automatically generate response but depends on a larger setting that is already one of contradictions. The extent to which activist movements are able to mobilize support beyond the likeminded and increase legitimation and validation of their claims has been described as the media opportunity structure (Cammaerts, 2012). This relates to the balance of forces between mass media and activist mediation. The media opportunity structure is important because it points at the process through which media and communication define structural opportunities and constraints for activism, and helps understand what may be called a general "social mood" and the general conditions of solidarity. The earlier mentioned conditions that mark the different photos therefore matter in how they mobilize protest and shape a certain political entanglement among activists, whether this means allowing for broader shared consensus or, rather, producing a sense of helplessness. We explore this dynamic in Sections 3 and 4, but first we look more closely at the concept of solidarity.

Conceptualizing Solidarity: Contradictions of Capitalism

Discussions on solidarity and notably reflections on how this resonates with (anthropological) concepts such as kinship, reciprocity, and gift have offered a rich contribution to research about migrants' conditions and the so-called "refugee crisis."

As illustrated in a number of excellent studies, solidarity inspires community-based support, which imbues new constitutions of alliance and support systems of kinship (Arendt, 1973; Cabot, 2015; Chouliaraki, 2013; Papataxiarchis, 2016; Rorty, 1989).

Solidarity is at once a concept and a principle—relevant on a normative level and to be applied as a grassroots organizational strategy. Many have also argued that proactive solidarity and reactive pity are often different sides of the same coin. Solidarity work can objectify refugees or engage with them for self-promotion, and as such sometimes maintains unequal power relations. The excellent critique of Robbins (2013) and the recent contribution of Danewid (2017) speak volumes to scholars of solidarity and the relation with studies about migration. Yet, we are equally aware that in the predominating discursive field of our privileged academic spaces—at a time when already much of the political activism is being questioned—these arguments can have the opposite effect.[8] Moreover, the study of migration finds itself in

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[8] A solidarity-rendered suspect invokes pessimism and risks demobilizing engagement, especially combined with social media-invested calling out, produces counterproductive results: Politicizing one issue can

a "double crisis" of anthropology under neoliberalism: an internal crisis about the direction of the field and an external economic crisis (Cohen & Sirkeci, 2016).

Its historic relation to charity and/or dominance by the nongovernmental organization sector aside, the political origins of solidarity are especially found in struggles of the civil rights, antifascist, anticolonial, and antiapartheid movements. By allowing solidarity to inhabit both the tactics of survival and strategies of shared resistance, it is also a principle that can guide action, as famously noted by Hannah Arendt (1973). We wish to understand how a solidarity that is not based on self-interest converges with collective and individual agency (of photographers, policymakers) and is interdependent on other (sociopolitical or technological) conditions, which together bring about public consciousness, and in some occasions also instigate revolt. We draw on Mohanty's conception of solidarity, namely, as a relation that is negotiated across power imbalances (Boudreau Morris, 2017; Mohanty, 2002). This view is crucial to our nondeterminist approach. We also find such an approach among anthropologists, for whom solidarity is a concept that bridges and that suits action and reflects dynamics of contagion (Rakopoulos, 2016, pp. 142–145).

This approach helps to grasp how images become viral and fuel solidarity, how the speed and wide dissemination of the images of Kurdi and Daqneesh via social media, respectively, succeeded and failed to stimulate solidarity toward refugees.

The abovementioned metaphors, contagion and bridging, are very palpable in the global circulation of photos and videos. Some of these enable connective emotions and activism to gather momentum across Europe, as mentioned above. Yet, eliciting solidarity through the use of these images is a double-edged sword. Some of the images "do the trick" and move the consciences of the public and governments, as in the case of Alan Kurdi, whereas other equally distressing images, such as the 71 Syrian refugees (59 men, eight women, and four children) found dead in a lorry in the late summer of 2015 in Austria, can pass by largely unnoticed on the global scale ("Chief Rabbi," 2015; cf. Milan, 2018, pp. 199–200). The sense of compassion in the face of the suffering does not alleviate the humanitarian needs of people whose lives are constantly on the line (O'Hagan, 2015). Although some images awaken compassion, they do not all lead to solidarity. This is why Arendt (1973) distinguishes between solidarity (principle) and compassion (passion). When these images do manage to generate a reaction within the civic conscience, they may also breed feelings of pity toward the oppressed, which for Arendt constitute the perversion of compassion. The difference between solidarity, compassion, and pity, and the complex relationship that exists between these concepts is why the images of Alan and Omran had such different effects, and is exactly why we consider digitally mediated solidarity with skepticism.

Therefore, the differential impact that the images of Alan Kurdi and Omran Daqneesh had on their audiences, beyond the momentary (and somewhat unpredictable) gut-level response (shocking images), confirms the ambivalence of the digital era. For Chouliaraki (2013), the engagement-cum-solidarity becomes that of the "ironic" spectator who is at once "skeptical toward any moral appeal to solidary action and, yet,

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depoliticize another. We agree with the differentiation between critical theory and intellectual activists by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014), and regard knowledge through activism as key for "global cognitive justice."

open to doing something about those who suffer" (p. 2), This resonates with the dual character of solidarity and of digital technology. In our analytical approach, the sociopolitical settings as well as digital mediation and the intervention of people themselves (e.g., activists and photographers) hinge on each other. This sheds a different light on the intricate relation between digital technologies and attempts to garner solidarity. We are reminded of the term *technologization*, which Chouliaraki describes as

> to the capacity of digital media to incorporate the moral imperative to act on vulnerable others within digital platforms that render solidarity a matter of tweeting personal emotion, downloading the message of our favourite celebrity, web-streaming our preferred Live 8 bands, clicking on the donation link of ActionAid or clicking "like" on a Facebook wall. (p. 16)

But under conditions of neoliberal capitalism, these contradictions are not aberrations, and, especially related to the notion of crisis, we observe two dynamics. On the one hand, solidarity—when reflecting charity as suggested by Kallius et al. (2016, p. 3)—is embodied exclusively in the action of the state, precluding any room for agency of the refugees, who are represented as passive victims. On the other hand, when engagement reflects activism in opposition to hegemonic forms of solidarity, crisis can also mobilize citizens to work independently and against the state. This form of engagement operates in close contact with refugees, sheltering them, protesting with them, and transporting them to the Western borders. The idea of crisis as a prerequisite is therefore relevant in what Papataxiarchis (2016) describes as a solidarity "reborn in austerity." That is why areas with high concentrations of progressive movements and intellectuals amplify their potential for solidarity activism; moreover, it is in these spaces that preexisting migrant and antiracist organizations are part of or even the initiators of local solidarity initiatives (Della Porta, 2018, p. 13).

Within this perspective, sharing images is functional to activism and solidarity, because it illustrates the suffering underlying the message of the oppressed, and disseminates it even further, allowing a larger number of citizens to know what is happening. As Arendt (1973) argues, by establishing a relationship between the people who suffer and those who decide to remove the suffering, a community of interest with the oppressed and exploited can be established.

The presence of digital mediation is not determinant, and the massive online sharing of images is partly related to people's own usage of digital media devices. Many activists in Syria organize digital and visual dissemination of their collective struggles, and refugees for instance document their personal journeys, which is often shared with international networks. In the process, media reports and news items on the use of smartphones by refugees and the role of technology increased in 2015. One of the unforeseen consequences of the fascination with how refugees use digital technologies during their journeys is the specific framing of refugees and digital technology as something ambiguous. It inspires a cliché representation of refugees, which consequently sets the tone for who are supposedly (in)sincere refugees.

Digital Technology: Orientalizing the Refugee

As we suggest above, technology is imbued with (social) contradictions. Besides the repressive potentials represented in its material infrastructural nature,[9] we also identify an ideological politics of representation fueled by digital mediation. In a sense, there are two sides to consider about technology: the way refugees use digital technologies themselves (e.g., as the coping mechanisms we discuss later), and the antirefugee discourse popularized on social media that we discuss here. From a mediation perspective, these pertain on one side to the process of self-mediation, that is, the use of technology by the refugees themselves to produce content; on the other side, it relates to the media representation of refugees by the mainstream media (Cammaerts, 2012).

Because of the shock or surprise many visuals and stories provoke, they often overshadow an informed political discourse. As shown in similar studies, these kinds of framings essentialize people to their detriment (cf. Aouragh, 2015; Roh, Huang, & Niu, 2015). One consequence of this relational process in our inquiry is the kind of affect they produce, which can best be described as a fragile politics of solidarity. Images of Middle Eastern people (black and brown Muslims in particular) increasingly shape the epistemological discourse about the refugee crisis. These technology-driven frames are associative vehicles that negatively influence dominant media reports about refugees.

When photos did not show pitiable, wounded, or famished people, but people carrying and using smartphones, they were regarded with suspicion. It seemed as if through the popular photos that illustrated refugees' digital utilizations, the expensive equipment of the refugees deemed them unworthy of sympathy. Owning a mobile phone determined whether one was eligible for discursive refugee status, rather than for instance, the persecution or violence one had endured. The ownership of classed technology clashed so aggressively with the orientalist imagining of the refugee that some Europeans felt deceived (O'Malley, 2015).

However, these occurrences, and in some ways actual shifts in public opinion, were not inevitable. A section of the media and right-wing populist figures contributed to fostering this antimigrant climate. According to a study conducted in 2016 by the Pew Research Center (Poushter, 2016), most Europeans believe that the influx of refugees will increase the likelihood of terrorism. In particular, refugees leaving Syria and Iraq are perceived as a serious threat. Surveys also show that negative views of refugees are closely tied to negative perceptions about Muslims, and thus to Islamophobia as a form of racism (Poushter, 2016).

Nevertheless, as mentioned, sometimes a photo can cut through many layers of stigmatizing stereotypes and assumptions, and rehumanize refugees. Alan Kurdi's image was not viral like the kind of mediation that depended on clickbait, but became meaningful in the distillation of the political context and

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[9] Digital surveillance systems such as Eurosur and Eurodac represent computerized collection, analysis, and exchange of data of people crossing the external borders of the European Union (European Commission, 2014). Although presented as tools that can fulfill humanitarian purposes, these are principally employed as instruments to prevent the arrival of migrants and asylum seekers (Bigo, 2014).

conditions it released. Kurdi's photo was metonymic, imbibed with meaning beyond the sum of its composition, an image that became potent and shaped offline engagement. As Seymour (2016) notes, "occasionally a single photograph has the ability to cut through, to crystallise and transcend a moment, to say something larger about our shared existence" (p. 75).

This evidences the rare capacity of images to construct valuable meaning and broadens solidarity (Baym, 2015). It communicates the "soft structures of engagement," which according to Papacharissi (2015, p. 115) become affective affordances, by which public displays of affect are also part of the realm of activism. But a discourse delivered through shocking snapshots avoids complex realities, and perhaps even weakens the aims for justice in the long term. Thus, despite the abundance of references to technology, this topic still raises the question about the political potentials of digital media. In the remainder of the article, we look at how, on the one hand, digital media became part of the way mass media have influenced perceptions about refugees and engendered a powerful wave of grassroots solidarity. On the other hand, the final section considers how digital technologies facilitated an increase in fake news about refugees and stimulated the flow of sympathetic media.

Mediating Solidarity

The previous section illustrated how digital arenas are simultaneously sites of contestation and solidarity. In this section, we show how these are influenced by the digital tactics enacted by refugees themselves. Our understanding of digital tactics and ideologies sees these as linked, yet separate strategies that impact refugees.

The popularization of image-centric (Instagram, Snapchat) and dissemination (Twitter, Facebook) platforms is part of the enormous growth of image sharing and online visual content (Faulkner, Vis, & D'Orazio, 2018). The available research we found includes both large data sets using computational methods as well as small sets for qualitative interpretative works, with inquiries that are sensitive to specific context and motives. We find that images become meaningful through their relationship to other discourses, and sometimes through how the image itself contributes to producing meaning. This is why the image of Kurdi has been so influential. Public knowledge about political events is traditionally susceptible to visualization, especially in news reporting. In fact, public opinion about refugees is not formed on a tabula rasa, but rather is decoded through preexisting experiences (such as European fascism and the stories of refugees during and after the Second World War). This section interrogates the (tactical) ways in which momentum relies on the ability to seize the moment. The emotional nature of images about refugees' journeys and the ordeals endured frames political discussions and shapes social attitudes. Certain images have become generic representations of complex stories.

Studies from Australia regarding dramatic images of refugees arriving by boat, by which time many had drowned, provide an important comparative lens for Europe (Bleiker, Campbell, Hutchison, & Nicholson, 2013). In-depth analyses of newspaper and media visuals show that refugees are primarily represented as large groups or simply as boats on the horizon—humans with recognizable features are rare. They also show that individuals evoke compassion, whereas images of groups at a distance do not. Studies of Australia are very on-point in how they show that the way refugees are imagined intersects with deep-seated colonial

and racist theories (Lenette & Cleland, 2016, p. 71). The interpretative dynamics are also gendered: Close-up portraits of "woman with child" invoke more sympathetic reactions than groups of brown men on boats. And images tend to invoke compassion when the subject of the image is distressed, has a name, and the tagline of the photo provides actual information and context (Bleiker et al., 2013, p. 415). Bleiker et al. (2013) show that the design of stories and visual portrayals based on positive clichés (suffering and survival) activated acceptance, whereas negative frames (anger and "illegality") promoted rejection.

In 2015, four widely shared and published photographs appeared, with a different kind of visual mediation that did not follow these cliché depictions (Lenette & Cleland, 2016, pp. 75–76). The theme was not illegality, but the consequences of closed borders, not the anonymous or threatening masses, not panic or anger, and precisely therefore went viral. One portrayed a father clutching his two children with an expression that is a mix of anguish and relief during their arrival in Kos after a dangerous journey by boat; in two photos, children inhale teargas with discernible pain at the border near Hungary. Here, the way in which the distressing nature of a message conveys political agency is crucial.

The final photo was the image of Alan Kurdi, with his arms folded under his red-shirted tummy. This was one of those rare images that can transcend particularities and become a global and historic commentary. The emergence of compassionate visuals in relation to migrants is a testimonial comparison; besides the "Syrian Boy" meme, memes of migrants on boats or at borders influenced the way these issues were addressed. Design collectives of memes played a role in helping express shared ideas, which were also at the backdrop of the protests in similar ways political posters used to be (Tomljanović, 2016). This photo was retweeted thousands of times within minutes and appeared on millions of screens the same day.

The Visual Social Media Lab at the University of Sheffield conducted a study on the role of social media in relation to the tragic photographs of Alan Kurdi (Vis & Goriunova, 2015). The project was remarkably comprehensive, with data collected through keywords disseminated in online forums and blogs, as well as historical Twitter data covering the initial weeks of September 2015, Google data sets, and cross-media analysis of images shared through social media. In an analysis of Google searches, it becomes clear that the discussion shifted and that people's awareness changed after the image began to circulate (Rogers, 2015, p. 15). As Farida Vis (2015) was able to demonstrate through an analysis of a hundred of the most shared images of Alan Kurdi on Twitter, significant emotional and political charge was generated through these exchanges, depending on the countries considered and whether it was an image of Kurdi alive before his journey or dead on the beach.

The Visual Social Media Lab project shows that a year after Alan Kurdi's death, public awareness attested to an increase in interest in the refugee crisis. Analyses of Twitter found four times more tweets on the topic in comparison to the previous year (Vis & Goriunova, 2015). Yet, to see it simply as a direct effect of the images and their circulation underplays the political economy and ideological context at play. A study by Bozdag and Smets (2017) among Twitter users in Belgium (Flanders) and Turkey found that the photo of Alan Kurdi supported preexisting discourses on refugees rather than simply causing a positive shift in the representation of refugees. We argue that the shifts and constraints in the discourse toward refugees were related to particular technosocial relations and specific moments in the political process. To understand this, we need to zoom out of particular platforms or tools and appreciate the agency of people too.

The potential of images depicting the suffering of distant people to elicit solidarity does not reside merely in the emotional charge that they are able to generate. In fact, the emotions generated by social media dissipate rapidly when a structure for long-lasting forms of solidarity is not created, that is, when it is not converted into practical measures by governments or documented by humanitarian organizations and citizen-activists. This happens through the engagement of photographers, volunteers, and refugees themselves, through a stable flow of information that can ensure a reduction of the emotional distance between donors and beneficiaries.

We mentioned at the outset of this article that the shift between 2015–2016 from sympathy and activism to apathy and rejection confirms that social media cannot be the only explanation. What does this mean for those photographers producing these emotional triggers in the crucial periods of 2015, when the role of mediation was one of momentary disruption? Their explicit engagement and support provide another (more empowering) side of the coin. Many photographers in fact played a crucial role, as we know from the photo of Alan Kurdi taken by Nilufer Demir. She posted the photo online; only then was it picked up by media outlets to appear on practically all front pages (Devichand, 2016). This political–visual relation has a rehumanizing potential, and this ability to produce solidarity is key. The fact that she did not claim it as her intellectual property and allowed it to be uploaded to Twitter increased the image's influence, and in turn the potential for building solidarity. This was also the case with the picture taken of Omran Daqneesh by photojournalist Mahmoud Raslan.

Photographers are part of a social performance that aims to garner support but is not limited to public perception, which often does not lead to action. In an exceptionally honest edition of the *British Journal of Photography* (titled *Unseen*), several photographers opened themselves to criticism. They decided to bear witness but rejected the demand to be objective and intended to change reality. As photojournalist Alessandro Penso (2016) put it, What is "objective journalism when media coverage is already weighted against the migrants?" (p. 32). For some photographers, the issue of migration and refuge to Europe had a personal connotation, because they themselves were exiles or children of asylum seekers. As pointed out in the analysis conducted by Milan (2018, pp. 185, 202–203), when investigating the politics of solidarity, the background of activists is also to be taken into account. Direct experiences of displacement and uprooting are important factors for engagement.

Reading the different accounts, it becomes clear that 2015 was a personal tipping point. Thus, former refugees, activists, and others formed an organic constituency of political moments (Alcalde & Portos, 2018, p. 161). They were "not parachuted into but spring from structures of mutuality" (Rakopoulos, 2016, p. 143) as the growing interdependence of solidarity and survival showed in Greece. We suggest that when opinions plus motivation converge, they may eventually push toward a tipping point and reach an intersection of digital media and (counterhegemonic) awareness, creating a critical mass, and removing the usual hurdles of grassroots mobilization in the existing hegemonic frameworks (Huggler, 2015; Leivada, 2016). In the summer of 2015, the synchronization of grassroots solidarity and online media widened the discursive spaces that (temporarily) allowed for the rehumanization of refugees. The pressure from below contributed to the suspension of the Dublin Regulation for Syrian refugees and alleviated conditions in the southern European arrival spots in the Balkans, Greece, and Italy (Cendrowicz & Wright, 2016). People were

able to demand significant political change through grassroots campaigns such as #RWTN (*refugeeswelcometonorway*; Prøitz, 2015).

The work of photographers can be understood as part of an ecology that gears toward sympathetic expressions and encourages protest. These photojournalists know that their work plays a double role: Photography can humanize the subject, or on the contrary, dehumanize it, fostering negative responses. The visual coverage in coastal places shows a stark paradox with other common political photojournalism that depicts faraway conflicts and war "there." The pressing issue is "here," in the picturesque coastal towns of Kos and Lesbos or resorts of the Costa del Sol. This is where migrants are washing up on beaches or young men are trapped on high fences overlooking manicured golf courses. It is not about happy sunbathing people, but about death and survival to which photographers become the main witnesses.

Some of these photographers know that their choice in how to visually frame these moments might affect the parameters of political debate. The image of Alan Kurdi was clearly changing the framing. It promoted solidarity through digital mediation—from a burdensome crisis to a humanitarian cause that requires public support—suggesting that perhaps digital mobilization can be a form of activism. The other lens through which to learn about digital strategies and tactics is the experience with technology of refugees, as we discuss next.

By 2015, an increasing number of people sought refuge in the European Union. Many of them were students or professionals with digital awareness, using modern technologies.[10] A study on the level of mobile phone ownership and types of Internet-based services in the Za'atari Syrian Refugee Camp in Jordan (Benardete & Thakkar, 2016) showed that 86% of the sampled young refugees owned mobile phones and SIM cards. For these refugees, WhatsApp, for example, was the main way to stay in touch with those left behind in Syria (Ram, 2015).

Thus, although common tools for people in Syria and elsewhere, technology became a crucial part of the toolkit for refugees, both for their survival and "difference between life and death" (Gillespie et al., 2016, p. 2) and for mediation to mobilize solidarity. The apps and special Facebook groups offering hour-to-hour updates for boat voyages are derived from a technosocial environment, confirming in a practical way that technological infrastructures are an integral part of migration (Gillespie, 2016; cf. Seymour, 2016, p. 77). This kind of conjoined assistance was not the result of the attractive power of digital media itself, but of the EU states failing to offer help to those on the road or refusing to take responsibility to protect the people who were aiming to reach their ports.

Yet, what if by its ability to engender affect, digital media can also generate the opposite, promote ineffective politics, or an affordance that is about antiaffect? Indeed, digital media have also aided the curtailment of migration, used to demobilize support and deter refugees. We saw this when Denmark's immigration ministry published derogatory advertisements in Lebanese media aimed at discouraging migrants from choosing Denmark as a destination (Taylor, 2015). Hence, the same medium of digital media

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[10] A survey in Greece between April and September 2015 marked that 43% of the refugees had university-level education. See, for instance, Nelson (2016).

that helped provoke sympathy and support was also integral to the essentialization of refugees and engendering orientalism. We bring these issues together within a broader political context, including the role played by political leaders and mainstream media platforms in the next section. We argue that in such a dialectical relation, the discourse of human rights and pity is thin, a fragile affect that may become ineffective in the long run.

Ineffective Affordances: Between Apathy and Rejection

The influx of refugees in Europe has seen a significant rise in Islamophobic attitudes ("Islamophobia Rising," 2016). The regurgitation of Islamophobic tropes widens the empathetic distance between European public opinion and the empathy with refugees, which makes the daily lives of refugees even more insecure.

The media played a role in reviving fears toward Muslims. Geopolitical agendas influenced what gets reported and how. Inaccurate reporting of events such as the Paris attacks and the New Year sexual assaults in Cologne (Germany) reflected negatively on refugees, linking them to antimigrant stereotypes. The insidious trend of fake news has offered case studies for promoting antirefugee sentiments. For example, a fabricated story about the rape of a teenager in Berlin by a Muslim refugee provoked outrage in Germany and Russia (Knight, 2016). Photos of refugees were edited or taken out of context in an effort to support the mythology of the dangerous refugee (Dearden, 2015).

The UK context during and after the Brexit referendum showed us that a change in collective mood and general sentiment matters. During this period, public engagement in the United Kingdom descended to its lowest level in a debate on whether children should be allowed to enter the United Kingdom and why a child ought to be regarded as a separate (vulnerable and therefore obliged to be helped) person in the first place.[11]

These media framings were a part of, and a source for, the worsening political climate. It is here that we may find the reasons that the iconic image of the little boy Omran in 2016—while striking a collective nerve and becoming the symbol of Aleppo (Barnard, 2016)—did not result in the effect that the image of Alan Kurdi had. It is in this light that we should understand why this picture led to a growing visual cynicism, which saw many adaptations of this image and memes that mocked the futility of all major councils and diplomatic lip service.

In this context, political leaders played a significant role, for they legitimized the negative stereotypes of refugees. For example, since the beginning of the refugee influx, the Hungarian state erected physical barriers along borders with Serbia and Croatia (Greenhill, 2016, p. 317; Tasch & Nudelman, 2016). We know from other cases that sometimes there are explicit governmental directives not to personalize refugees, and sometimes even privacy rules are used to restrict sympathies toward photographs of refugees (Bleiker et al., 2013). This matters because visual patterns reinforce the politics of fear, and journalists, photographers, editors, and policymakers are aware of this.

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[11] Calais is the main point in France from where refugees try to enter the United Kingdom (for more details on the debate on the definition of childhood, see, for example, Keyse, 2016).

Despite the tightening of laws and removal of legal options to enter the European Union, people continue to escape persecution. Hence, the dominant approach of a securitization of borders is perpetuating a vicious cycle that exacerbates human insecurity. Due to the limited options left for regular migration, the increase in irregular migration further feeds into phobic reactions and criminalization (Andersson, 2014). As pointed out by Ferrer-Gallardo and Van Houtum (2014), "The only two parties that gain from this circle are security businesses to whom the control is increasingly contracted out and political extreme-nationalists" (p. 300).

Over the years, the visual frame of boats and groups of non-White men came to represent "illegals," as pointed out by Francesca Falk (2015) and Tim Stokholm (2016): a "threat" to Europe, which reifies the distinction between "us" and "them." This suggests a contradiction: the mobilization of a culture of fear, some cases verging on the absurd, but jarred with momentary outbursts of support cultivating solidarity and unity.

Conclusion

Once there was an Aylan Kurdi whose death shocked the world, but there are still many
Aylan Kurdis. (Yovanka Perdiggo, quoted in Bausells & Shearlaw, 2015)

We discovered one recurring tendency during our research for this article: reductionism. Syrians reduced to "refugees," who are in turn reduced to "Syrians," who are in turn reduced to "crises." Syrians, while resisting dictatorship and surviving some of the most extreme conditions of this era—state violence, border policing, and racism (Islamophobia)—are important reminders of human resolve and courage. And yet, the contemporary "crisis" is in turn a reminder of the continuing crisis that preceded it. The so-called refugee crisis must be understood with the 2008 financial crisis in the background where austerity measures in the Eurozone benefitted right-wing and fascist parties across the continent; but the restrictions on migration themselves adhere to repressive measures post-9/11, which itself cannot be understood outside the curbing of migration to Europe amid global recession during the 1970s. These overlaps also mean that in some cases the narrative can be simplified: Let the refugees in, (our) European states are complacent, as illustrated in the image of Alan Kurdi, and the threshold is easier to cross; but in other cases, the objectives are more complex to disentangle—proxy wars that simultaneously serve imperial and pseudoimperial interests—where eventually leftist analyses may contradict leftist principles and higher political capital is an impediment to collective solidarity as suggested by the impact of the Omran Daqneesh image.

Hence, we argue that singular approaches obfuscate the agency of refugees, as well as the potential power of solidarity. We find inspiration in solidarity work in Hungary (Kallius et al., 2016), Bhimji's (2016) wonderful account about refugee activism in Berlin, the activism in Leicester and Oslo (Prøitz, 2015), the smuggling and sheltering of refugees in Germany and Iceland (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2016) and in direct defiance of the far-right and Freedom Party of Austria (Milan, 2018). There are also many examples of civil disobedience, including by those who only recently were on the road as refugees themselves, all of which were undeniably rooted in a sense of compassion and feelings of outrage.

In ongoing conditions of war and restricted immigration laws, we are tempted to invoke Agamben's (2005) notion of the permanent "state of exception," of refugees stripped of all basic conditions, as nonhumans, of bare life. When we shift our focus to solidarity, applying theories of refugees as biopolitical subjects hides their struggles and possibly abates solidarity. Powerful images can crystallize solidarity initiatives, but this article first suggests a better grasp when this can or cannot occur, and what the political–economic significance is of framing such occasions in relation to "crisis." We have investigated the role of digital mediation to illustrate how refugees' use of digital tools was portrayed, and how the infrastructures simultaneously helped advance solidarity and mediated orientalist clichés. In other words, the same infrastructure can be the detriment of refugees or ease their journey, or highlight their plight and provoke affect. These are the main characteristics of the context in which technosocial dynamics take place. We conclude that affective affordances are a variant of solidarity, but that digital mediation cannot configure social or political change in and of itself.

A number of the photographers that we mentioned, who had worked closely with refugees, suggest that through empathy one can open up a new language of engagement. As one said, "It is no longer about making people aware of the migrant's movements. They know. It's now something else, something more personal, something about empathy" (Penso, 2016, p. 37). The hope is that this will allow one to act on moral culpability. Another photographer suggests, "photography is actually a poor platform. What the volunteers do is amazing. When I am actually there with them in the camps or the detention centers, is more important than showing my work in an exhibition" (Kurtis, 2016, p. 50). These photographers want their own photos to be an act of protest at the very least, but have no illusions about their direct impact considering the enormous magnitude of the crisis. Many of the conditions to do with crossing borders or escaping warfare point to a man-*made* crisis. But this materiality promises that it can also be unmade. The political economy of the European Union is what creates the difference between safe crossings via ferries, which run daily for 20 euros, and paying 3,000 euros per person to smugglers for dangerous clandestine crossings. It is a matter of policy, and not an unfortunate inevitability.

Our caution to endow viral or affective dissemination with disproportionate power was confirmed by comparing the images of Omran Daqneesh and Alan Kurdi, which were equally large and emotional, and travelled through similar digital highways. When stories behind epic visuals are not embedded in grassroots activism, they become thin solidarities, forms of pity, and are easily blown away. Negative propaganda and the permeability of antirefugee sentiments disrupt the transition from the temporary commitments of social media into offline and more permanent ties. Ultimately, there are no shortcuts such as those afforded by digital media; other kinds of (grassroots) agency and (personal) intervention are needed. The one criticism that might be leveled at academia is that we pay insufficient attention to practice-based critique. Besides the bare minimum of critical and historicized analyses, we can disrupt this regressive sense of normalcy with action-based programs to cultivate justice through our faculties and trade unions.

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