

# Shifting toward a humanized perspective? Visual framing analysis of the coverage of refugees on *CNN* and *Spiegel Online* before and after the iconic photo publication of Alan Kurdi

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## ABSTRACT

Iconic photographs have the potential to stay in public collective memories. One such photograph of a dead 3-year-old Syrian refugee named Alan Kurdi sparked global outrage in September 2015 and became symbolic of the challenges of the Syrian civil war and its consequences. This study examines how global awareness before and after the publication of the iconic photograph affected the visual framing of the arrival of refugees into Europe. The analysis focuses on the theme of refugee photographs on *CNN* and *Spiegel Online* news sites from 1 January 2015 to 6 October 2016. The two news outlets have different audience approaches: the US-based *CNN* reaches out to global news consumers while *Spiegel Online* in Germany mainly appeals to domestic audiences. Findings reveal that after the publication of Alan Kurdi's picture, *CNN* increased humanized visual framing while *Spiegel Online*'s visual coverage was leaning toward increased border control. The two different visual perspectives and their contribution to a polarized (domestic vs global) interpretation of migration are discussed.

## KEYWORDS

content analysis • global journalism • journalism studies • refugee crisis • visual communication

## INTRODUCTION

The conflict in Syria has been widely considered the worst humanitarian crisis in contemporary times (Collins, 2017). One devastating effect of this war has been the large death toll resulting from violent conflicts involving Syrian sectarian forces as well as influential foreign powers: nearly half a million people have been killed during the conflicts (Boghani, 2016). Meanwhile, the dire situation in Syria has forced 5.1 million Syrians to leave their country as refugees, pouring into both neighboring countries and further into Europe and North America (World Vision, 2017). The European Union (EU) has to cope with a notable rise of the number of refugees and migrants seeking asylum (Bozdag and Smets, 2017).

As one of the iconic symbols of the European refugee crisis, a news photograph, taken by Turkish journalist Nilufer Demir, depicted a drowned Syrian refugee toddler discovered on one of Turkey's beaches in the Bodrum Peninsula. The picture was not only massively circulated across media platforms, but it generated a considerable increase in social media discussion about migration and refugees (Bozdag and Smets, 2017). Such iconic photographs – symbolically powerful photographs of an historical event (Cohen et al., 2018) – have the potential to stay in public collective memories for decades. Alan's pictures were the first images depicting the refugees' identities in Western media (Zelizer, 2017) and thus introduced a new way of understanding the current crisis.

Research on the refugee crisis<sup>1</sup> has highlighted the ideological capacity of Alan Kurdi's photograph to mobilize the public and politics and influence decision making (Vis et al., 2015). Alan Kurdi's picture transcends national borders and it seems 'important to examine how iconic photographs are recognized within national and transnational frameworks' (Cohen et al., 2018: 456), which can transform the memories it helped to construct. For example, Cohen et al. (2018) mentioned the example of the 'Napalm Girl' image from the Vietnam War that has been diversely interpreted, ranging from global consumerism to even pedophilia (Boudana et al., 2017).

This study pays particular attention to the visual news coverage of Alan Kurdi's photo, examining the shifting mediated interpretation of the refugee crisis after the publication of the iconic photograph in Western media and comparing it to the visual news coverage before the photo publication. The focus was on comparing *CNN* to *Spiegel Online* because *CNN* operates at an international level and functions relatively independently of domestic regulations and state-institutionalized political elites (Wojcieszak, 2007) whereas *Spiegel Online* is a national news outlet. The choice of a German news outlet is relevant because, as of September 2015, Germany received the highest number of asylum applications within the European Union (DeSilver, 2015; Deutsche Welle, 2017). Greenwood and Jenkins (2015) argued that the visual representation of international news varies among different organizations and publications. These variations are important in understanding the impact of iconic photographs on the (cultural) interpretation of the refugees migrating to Europe from the Middle East and Africa. Because both publications cover

the refugee crisis to a similar extent, visually and textually, the comparison is feasible and important within this context.

Applying Lulu Rodriguez and Daniela Dimitrova's (2011) theoretical framework of visual framing, this study conceptualized visual frames of the European refugee thematic at the stylistic level, denotative level, connotative level (implied meanings of news images), and the level of ideological representation. Results show distinctive interpretations of the migration flow among the two online publications after the publication of Alan Kurdi's photo. *Spiegel Online's* visual coverage shifted toward increased border control interpretations (e.g. depicting more border control by the police) that reinforce nationalistic sentiments in Western Europe, whereas *CNN* used more humanized visual frames by depicting individual refugees' facial expressions. Using visual analysis, this research suggests that, after the publication of Alan's image, there might be an increase in humanitarian and more personalized reporting on refugees in the news media.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Visual framing

Journalists frequently turn to visuals to report on global crises (Zelizer, 2002). After analyzing war imagery in several post-war conflicts, Griffin (2010) argued that the media routinely exploit fear, voyeurism, and emotional fascination to boost circulations. The images of crises, dramatic events, violence, and suffering can fill the media organizations' need for 'attention-grabbing content' (p. 35). Because images seem utterly real (Lippmann, 1922), some depicting extreme conditions of human suffering have a powerful influence on the public and can create collective public memories for a generation. For instance, Perlmutter (1998) studied several iconic images taken during several major conflicts and crises: the Vietnam War, the Chinese pro-democracy movement in 1989, famine in South Sudan in the 1990s, and the US military involvement in Somalia in 1993. Perlmutter explored how those images were constructed, their interplay with public opinion, as well as political reactions to those images. By defining the term *icon of outrage*, the author concluded that tragedies, wars, and other disasters of human existence are often the sources of news icons that can engender viewer outrage and reaction.

The inclusion of iconic photographs in global crises nurtures public engagement with the news (Zelizer, 2017), and the pictures of human vulnerability invite engagement and moral action (Chouliaraki, 2015). This leads to the important question and empirical inquiry into how global and humanized perspectives in news visuals can be understood from a visual framing perspective. In the recent shift in media and communication studies toward ethics (Chouliaraki, 2015) and as studies on distant suffering have emerged, the inquiry to combine the visual framing literature with a cosmopolitan perspective seems more important than ever before.

*Visual framing* can be defined as ‘the selection and emphasis of some aspects of the perceived reality by visual stimuli’ (Brantner et al., 2011: 251). People process photographs more quickly than words because visuals elicit a spontaneous emotional response (Schwalbe and Dougherty, 2015). Visual images’ special qualities of ‘iconicity and syntactic implicitness’ (Messaris and Abraham, 2001: 220) make them very effective framing tools (Fahmy, 2010a, 2010b).

Empirical studies have focused on visual frames in international news coverage. For example, Fahmy’s (2010a) comparative study on 9/11 and the Afghanistan War pointed out that the media often simplify complex international events. The study found that visuals in English-language newspapers emphasized the human suffering of 9/11 and downplayed the civilian casualties caused by US military forces. In contrast, the images in Arabic-language newspapers focused on local victims of the Afghan War. These results reinforced the local/foreign dichotomy rather than a global journalism perspective.

Parry (2011) examined photographs in UK newspapers in the 2003 Iraq War that supported the dominant ‘humanitarian intervention’ discourse and the coalition forces’ mainstream liberation narratives – again reinforcing the dichotomy between foreign and national frames of the Iraqi War. Fahmy (2007) further noted that the visual coverage of the toppling of the Saddam Hussein statue in US newspapers more frequently used the ‘victory/liberation’ frame than newspapers from non-coalition countries.

In another study, Fahmy (2010b) analyzed visual news frames circulated in English- and Arabic-language transnational press of the 9/11 attack and the Afghan War. This research examines two sets of framing visual frames: the human-interest frame versus the technical frame and the anti-war frame versus the pro-war frame. Meanwhile, two sets of framing devices were also explored: graphic portrayal and emphasis. The result from a framing analysis of 1,387 news pictures indicated that in the *International Herald Tribune*, an English-language newspaper, a pro-war frame put an emphasis on the human suffering of 9/11, military operations, and patriotic events. In contrast, news photos published in the Arabic-language newspaper, *Al-Hayat*, focused more on the material destruction of 9/11 and the victims of the Afghan War. In addition, the Arabic-language newspaper demonstrated visual portrayals of the humanitarian crisis in the Muslim country of Afghanistan. The use of different framing devices by media conveyed distinct messages that reflected cultural and ideological differences.

In the context of Syria, Pantti’s (2013) cross-national project examined the visual representation of the Syrian crisis in broadsheet newspapers of seven European countries. Through a comparison of visual coverage of the Syrian civil conflict in *The Guardian* (UK), *Helsingin Sanomat* (Finland), *La Repubblica* (Italy), *Romania Libera* (Romania), *El Pais* (Spain), *Kommersant* (Russia), and *Hurriyet* (Turkey), Pantti concluded that war violence and

protests were most commonly presented in visual frames across all national newspapers. Although these newspapers incorporated a significant portion of video footage and images taken by citizen journalists, those eyewitness footages did not have a strong impact on newspapers' coverage in terms of depicting death and injury of war victims. The selected newspapers in general exercised great restraint in the visual representation of human cost. Rather than directly showing readers human death, all the newspapers focused on belligerent actions, protests, and only in extreme cases showed injured people. The findings suggested that national newspapers, which still play an important role in public political discourse in the new media environment, were less concerned with the moral aspect of a visual coverage on the lost human lives in Syria.

Based on war/peace journalism, Greenwood and Jenkins (2015) examined the visual coverage of the Syrian civil war published in news and public affairs magazines from March 2011 to late 2013. The analysis indicated that, in news magazines, the dominant visual frame of an international conflict was presented through the images of fighting and war victims. Public affairs magazines, on the other hand, adopted a peace frame in their published news photographs such as non-violent demonstrations and daily life for civilians. This study supported the findings from previous research that international news is often portrayed in terms of episodic and violent events.

Another study by Seo and Ebrahim (2016) examined how visual frames were used in social media during an international conflict. They analyzed themes, frames, and structural features of news images from the Syrian civil war that were posted on official Facebook pages of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces in 2013 and 2014. The study found that the human-interest frame was largely presented in visual images of the two sides to promote different political agendas. Specifically, on the Facebook homepage of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, stories of Syrian casualties were featured under the human-interest frame. In comparison, human-interest frame images on the Syrian Coalition Facebook page reflected the repressive Assad regime and the suffering of Syrian civilians. Since those images received a large number of comments and shares on Facebook, Seo and Ebrahim concluded that images using the human-interest frame 'were more effective in generating audience reactions' (p. 245). Without a doubt, those human-interest frame images published on social media successfully helped propagandists on both sides by forming an active two-way communication with the public and enhancing the audiences' understanding of their messages.

In regard to the Syrian refugee crisis, Zhang and Hellmueller (2017) examined 287 news photographs published on *CNN* and *Spiegel Online* online news sites regarding the Syrian refugee crisis. Based on the notions of global journalism and framing, the researchers investigated whether images of human suffering published in two mainstream Western media reflected the practice of

global journalism, which emphasizes cosmopolitanism in reporting global issues. The content analysis indicated that, compared to *Spiegel Online English* online, CNN's news images presented more 'human interest' and 'lose/gain' frames, which depicted the suffering of Syrian migrants and refugees. On the other hand, German online media demonstrated 'law and control' as well as 'xenophobia' frames. The findings reflected that the visibility of suffering on *CNN International* resonated with cosmopolitan viewpoints on a prominent global issue.

Concerning immigration issues, Fernandez and Lirola (2012) found that immigrants were often negatively portrayed in news pictures and that the negative framing of immigrants consciously or unconsciously provoked the public's discriminatory attitudes toward them. Cisneros (2008: 572) disclosed that the visual representation of immigrants in US media often echoed the public dominant discourse of immigration – 'immigrants as the pollutant and invaders'. By analyzing the news images of immigrants published in the front pages of Australian newspapers, Bleiker et al. (2013) revealed that immigrants are usually presented in large groups with a focus on boats. The lack of close-up portrayals of immigrants demonstrated the lack of a humanistic perspective toward the immigration issue.

All in all, from a framing perspective, the studies described above indicated that news images taken in war zones or extreme humanitarian crises not only reflected the events and the experience of photographers but were also cultural products influenced by governmental management, media business, and political persuasion (Griffin, 2010).

The literature review shows there is a need to understand how cosmopolitan perspectives can be identified in everyday news media – that is how media content or visuals demonstrate connections between local/domestic events and global processes (Van Leuven and Berglez, 2016). More precisely, Rodriguez and Dimitrova's (2011) model of identifying visual frames contributes to the literature on visual framing by conceptualizing visual frames at the denotative, stylistic, connotative and ideological levels. Therefore, this study attempts to empirically assess visual frames that entail the stylistic, denotative, connotative and ideological levels in regard to the coverage of the refugee crisis.

The first level, the denotative systems, examines who or what is being depicted. The second level, the stylistic-semiotic systems, examines the stylistic conventions and technical transformations in the photograph (Rodriguez and Dimitrova, 2011). On the third level, the connotative systems, where most of the framing analysis takes place, the visuals are examined more in terms of the type of signs and symbols attached to persons and objects.

On the fourth level, ideological representations are examined as the level draws together the symbols and stylistic features of an image into coherent interpretations of the rationale behind the photograph (e.g. what is the symbolic feature?). Table 1 depicts the definition of each level, its analysis procedure, and the research questions that it attempts to answer. This study pays

particular attention to the death of Alan Kurdi as a reference point. The main idea is to understand whether international attention to a crisis moment, such as the publication of an iconic photograph, may shift visual frames toward more humanized perspectives. Four research questions were posed:

RQ1: At the denotative level, how were refugees portrayed on *CNN* and *Spiegel Online* before and after the publication of Alan's photo?

RQ2: At the stylistic level, what camera-shot positions were used in the visual coverage on *CNN* and *Spiegel Online* before and after the publication of Alan's photo?

RQ3: At the connotative level, what visual frames and attributes can be identified on *CNN* and *Spiegel Online* before and after the publication of Alan's photo?

RQ4: At the ideological level, what interpretations can be identified on *CNN* and *Spiegel Online* before and after the publication of Alan's photo?

## METHOD

### Rationale for sampling

*CNN* and *Spiegel Online* were chosen for this study because the research objective is to examine how an international iconic photograph affects the frames of an international and domestic media organization in the visual representation of refugees. Greenwood and Jenkins (2015) argued that the visual representation of international news varies among different organizations and publications. These variations are important in understanding the impact of iconic photographs on the (cultural) interpretation of the crisis. *CNN* is an internationally known transnational broadcast media that aims to reach audiences all over the world using English and various regional languages (CNN, 2015). Meanwhile, Germany has the highest request for asylum applications and thus the media might produce more domestic interpretations of the crisis. *Spiegel Online* is one of the most widely read German-language websites and an offshoot of one of Germany's leading weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel*, with a circulation of more than one million weekly (Flippo, 2011).

Based on their mission statements, both these media outlets seem to appeal to different audiences: *CNN* serves a global community, whereas *Spiegel Online* leans toward a parochial viewership. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the visual coverage of the refugee crisis on *CNN* and *Spiegel Online* might reflect different representations and viewpoints.

The search engine of the two online news sites was used to collect news images. This study examines news images of the refugee crisis published from 1 January 2015 to 6 October 2016 – almost two years of visual coverage on both digital platforms. The rationale of this time frame is based on several stages of the Syrian Civil War. In 2015, because of the ISIS threat and the escalated conflict between the Syrian government and a reb-



Table 1. Levels of visual framing.

Visual framing level	Definition of the concept	Operationalization	Type of analysis	Research question answered
Denotative systems	‘Who or what is being depicted here?’	Origin of refugees, the size of the group, facial expressions, actors (NGOs, refugees, politicians, military, etc.) Camera shots	Content analysis: Chi-square test, comparison between before and after publication of the iconic photograph	RQ1: At the denotative level, how were refugees portrayed on <i>CNN</i> and <i>Spiegel Online</i> before and after the publication of Alan’s photo?
Stylistic-semiotic systems	‘The stylistic conventions and technical transformations involved in representation’	Camera shots	Content analysis: Chi-square test, comparison between before and after publication of the iconic photograph	RQ2: At the stylistic level, what camera-shot positions were used in the visual coverage on <i>CNN</i> and <i>Spiegel Online</i> before and after the publication of Alan’s photo?
Connotative systems	‘Ideas or concepts attached to visuals.’ Visuals are examined more in terms of the type of sign and symbols.	Dominant frames	Content analysis: Logistic regression	RQ3: At the connotative level, what visual frames and attributes can be identified on <i>CNN</i> and <i>Spiegel Online</i> before and after the publication of Alan’s photo?
Ideological representations	‘It draws together the symbols and stylistic features of an image into a coherent interpretation which provides the “why” behind the representations being analyzed.’	Symbolic features of an image and their coherent interpretations	Content analysis: Factor analysis, factorial ANOVA	RQ4: At the ideological level, what interpretations can be identified on <i>CNN</i> and <i>Spiegel Online</i> before and after the publication of Alan’s photo?

Source: Adapted from Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011).



els group, many Syrians fled their homes and the refugee crisis reached its peak. Since Russia started its airstrike in Syria in fall 2015, the Syrian conflict became proxy war and therefore the media coverage across the world shifted its attention back from the refugee crisis to the political situation in Syria.

The picture of the dead Syrian toddler was published on 2 September 2015, and thus the triggering of media and global outrage was used as a turning point to measure the differences and similarities of the two media outlets on the visual coverage of the refugee crisis. By typing in the keywords 'refugee', 'crisis', and 'migrant', a search on *CNN* yielded 200 news photographs and a search on *Spiegel Online* yielded 238 news images. In total, 438 samples of news images were analyzed and coded.

### **Coding scheme**

First we coded the image publication date as before or after the publication of Alan's photo. Then we divided the coding into the four levels of visual framing. For the denotative system, the following variables were coded: origin of refugee, the size of the group, facial expression, and general actors (such as NGOs, police enforcement, politicians, etc.). The variable 'refugees' facial expression' included four categories: not recognizable, positive (happy, grateful), negative (fearful, angry, or desperate), and mixed (both positive and negative facial expressions of refugees). For the stylistic-semantic systems, camera shots were coded. Camera-shot position included the following categories: close-up, medium shots, long shots, dialogue shots, and shots of refugees either moving in boats or over land and were operationalized according to Zhang and Hellmüller (2017). These codes were applied at the stylistic level: Close-ups featured the face of subjects, medium shots featured the portrayed subjects from the waist up, long shots featured the subject from a distance, dialogue shots portrayed subjects engaged in a conversational type of interaction, and portrayed subjects as moving.

To analyze the connotative system, we coded for 'dominant frame', which had five categories: human interest (focused on refugees and their lives and suffering), xenophobia/intolerance (focused on European locals' xenophobic sentiments), lose/gain (focused on the lost lives and the saved lives), law and control (focused on border control and law enforcement), and politics (focused on politicians and celebrities). For the ideological representation, we decided to run a factor analysis based on the previously discussed three levels because this level represents the coherent interpretation incorporating the previous three levels of visual framing (Rodriguez and Dimitrova, 2011). The framing categories were based on previous framing studies concerning migrant issues. For instance, Dimitrova et al. (2018) identified five frames in their content analysis study of the Syrian refugee crisis presented in the Bulgarian and Turkish press. The researchers found five major frames that had

been used by two national papers: threat frame, victim frame, administrative frame, humanitarian frame, and diversity frame.

Of the total 438 news pictures, two trained coders coded 43 news photographs that were randomly selected to check inter-coder reliability for all variables included in the analysis. The reading of the photo captions made the coding more precise. First, tests for inter-coder reliability resulted in Krippendorff's alpha ranging from .75 for camera shots to .87 for visual frames. The final results of inter-coder reliability were acceptable and the two coders proceeded with the coding of the 438 news images.

## RESULTS

### The denotative-level of visual framing

Regarding *RQ1*, there was an association between publication date and refugees' visual patterns on *CNN*,  $\chi^2(4) = 16.93$ ,  $p = .002$ . In 59 of *CNN*'s news images published before 2 September 2015, 20.3 per cent (12) of photographs did not depict refugees and 13.6 per cent (8) of the photographs featured individual refugees. In addition, 11.9 per cent (7) of news images featured a small group of 2 to 3. Meanwhile, 25.4 per cent (15) of news images presented a medium group of refugees of 4 to 15 and 28.8 per cent (17) of news photographs portrayed a large group of refugees. By contrast, in 141 of *CNN*'s news images published on or after 2 September 2015, 10.6 per cent (15) of photographs did not depict refugees and 28.4 per cent (40) of the photographs featured individual refugees. In addition, 22.7 per cent (32) news images featured a small group of 2 to 3 refugees. There was a significant increase of the depiction of individuals and small groups after the publication of Alan's photograph. Meanwhile, 27 per cent (38) of news images presented a medium group of refugees of 4 to 15 and 11.3 per cent (16) of news photographs portrayed a large group of refugees.

For *Spiegel Online*, there was an association between the publication date and refugees' visual patterns,  $\chi^2(4) = 18.29$ ,  $p = .001$ . Among 94 of *Spiegel Online*'s news images published before 2 September 2015, 18.1 per cent (17) showed no refugees in the pictures, 23.4 per cent (22) featured individuals, and 10.6 per cent (10) of news images depicted a small group of 2 or 3. Besides, 36.2 per cent (34) of news images presented the medium group of 4 to 15 and 11.7 per cent (11) of images demonstrated a large group of more than 16 refugees. Among 144 of *Spiegel Online*'s news images published on or after 2 September 2015, 38.9 per cent (56) of news images showed no refugees, 10.4 per cent (15) featured individuals, and 10.4 per cent (15) showed a small group of 2 to 3. Besides, 23.6 per cent (34) of news images presented a medium group of 4 to 15 and 16.7 per cent (24) of images demonstrated a large refugee group (more than 16). Overall, there was a significant increase on *Spiegel Online* depicting no refugees and a significant decrease on pictures depicting individual refugees.

**Refugees' facial expression.** For *CNN*, there was no association between the publication date and refugees' emotion,  $\chi^2(3) = 1.3, p = .73$ . Among 59 images published before 2 September 2015, 37.3 per cent (22) of images did not clearly show refugees' facial expression, whereas 6.8 per cent (4) of images demonstrated refugees' positive emotion. On the other hand, 49.2 per cent (29) of images exhibited refugees' negative emotions and 6.8 per cent (4) of images showed refugees' positive as well as negative emotions. Meanwhile, among 141 images published on or after 2 September 2015, 36.2 per cent (51) of images did not clearly show refugees' facial expression, whereas 3.5 per cent (5) of images demonstrated refugees' positive emotion. On the other hand, 51.1 per cent (72) of images exhibited refugees' negative emotions and 9.2 per cent (13) of images showed refugees' positive as well as negative emotions.

In *Spiegel Online*, there was an association between the publication date and the refugees' emotion,  $\chi^2(3) = 10.78, p = .01$ . In 94 images published in *Spiegel Online* before 2 September 2015, 52.1 per cent (49) of images did not show refugees' facial expression, 20.2 per cent (19) of images displayed refugees' positive emotion, 22.3 per cent (21) of images showed the refugees' negative emotion, and only 5.3 per cent (5) of images showed refugees' mixed emotions. Meanwhile, in 144 of *Spiegel Online's* images published on or after 2 September 2015, 63.2 per cent (91) of images did not show refugees' facial expression, 6.3 per cent (9) of images displayed refugees' positive emotion, 25 per cent (36) of images showed the refugees' negative emotion, and only 5.6 per cent (8) of images showed refugees' mixed emotions.

**Presence of NGO workers and law-enforcement agents.** For *CNN*, there is an association between the publication date and the presence of those news actors,  $\chi^2(7) = 30.86, p < .001$ . Among 59 news images published before 2 September 2015, 30.5 per cent (18) presented law enforcement agents and border patrols. By contrast, in 141 photographs published on or after 2 September 2015, a total of 13.5 per cent (19) presented law-enforcement agents and border patrols. This was a decrease of the presence of law-enforcement agents in *CNN's* visual coverage before, on, or after 2 September 2015. Another decrease was found in presenting NGO humanitarian workers, which decreased from 15.3 per cent (9) of coverage before 2 September 2015, to 5.7 per cent (8) of the coverage on or after 2 September 2015.

Meanwhile, for *Spiegel Online*, there is an association between the publication date and the presence of NGO workers and law-enforcement agents,  $\chi^2(8) = 23.35, p = .003$ . The presence of law-enforcement agents increased from 12.8 per cent (12) before 2 September 2015, to 18.8 percent (27) after 2 September 2015. On the other hand, the presence of NGO humanitarian workers decreased from 4.3 per cent (4) before 2 September 2015, to only 0.7 per cent (1) after 2 September 2015.

**Origin of refugees/migrants.** It was found that in 59 images published on *CNN* before 2 September 2015, 35.6 per cent (21) featured refugees from the

Middle East and 33.9 per cent (20) featured the migrants from Africa. By contrast, among 94 *Spiegel Online*'s images published before 2 September 2015, 37.2 per cent (35) depicted refugees from the Middle East and 25.5 per cent (24) portrayed the migrants from Africa.

After 2 September 2015, among 141 news images on *CNN*, 54.6 per cent (77) of them showed refugees from the Middle East and 5.7 per cent (8) showed migrants from Africa. In comparison, among 144 news images published on *Spiegel Online*, 26.4 per cent (38) of them showed refugees from the Middle East and 3.5 per cent (5) of them portrayed migrants from Africa.

## The stylistic level of visual framing

**Camera shot position.** Regarding RQ2, the test statistics indicated that for *CNN*, there is an association between the publication date and the camera shot position,  $\chi^2(4) = 23.37, p < .001$ . Among 59 news photographs published before 2 September 2015, 30.5 per cent (18) of them were close-up shots, 13.6 per cent (8) of them were medium shots, 28.8 per cent (17) images were long shots, 15.3 per cent (9) of them were dialogue shots, and 11.9 per cent (7) images were shots showing refugees moving in a certain direction. Among 141 news photographs published on or after 2 September 2015, 27 per cent (38) of them used close-up shots, 34 per cent (48) of them were medium shots, 16.3 per cent (23) images used long shots, 2.1 per cent (3) of them used dialogue shots, and 20.6 per cent (29) used shots of refugees moving in certain direction.

For *Spiegel Online*, the test statistics indicated no association between the publication date and the camera-shot position,  $\chi^2(4) = 3.38, p = .50$ . In 94 of *Spiegel Online* images published before 2 September 2015, 38.3 per cent (36) images used long shots, 27.7 per cent (26) were medium shots, 18.1 per cent (17) were close-ups, and 10.6 per cent (10) were shots of refugees moving. Besides, only 5.3 per cent (5) images were dialogue shots. By contrast, in 144 of *Spiegel Online* images published on or after 2 September 2015, 36.1 per cent (52) images used long shots, 25 per cent (36) were medium shots, 20.8 per cent (30) were close-ups, and 16 per cent (23) were shots of refugees moving. Only 2.1 per cent (3) images were dialogue shots.

## The connotative level of visual framing

**Dominant frames.** Regarding RQ3, the retrieved test statistic indicated that, for *CNN*, there was a significant difference in terms of adopting different visual frames before or after the publication of Alan's photograph,  $\chi^2(4) = 27.87, p < .001$ . For *Spiegel Online*, there was a significant difference before 2 September 2015, and after that date in terms of adopting different visual frames,  $\chi^2(4) = 23.09, p < .001$ .

Logistic regression was used to analyze the relationship between the publication date (before and after Alan's photo) and the news organization (*CNN* and *Spiegel Online*). Also, interaction effects were checked between the publication date and the news organization and its effect on the domi-

nant frames. As shown in Table 2, the model is significant for the human interest frame. For news organization, the likelihood of the human interest frame increases 2.29 times when the source is *Der Spiegel*, while the chance of the human interest frame increases by 4.28 after the publication of Alan's photograph.

However, the interaction effect shows a negative interaction that predicts more human interest frames after the publication of the photograph when the source is *CNN*. For the Lose and Gain frame, we found that before the publication and *CNN* were positive predictors. For the Law and Control frame, we found that the interaction between *Spiegel Online* and the publication date after Alan's picture were significant. The chances of the Law and Order frame increases by 3.60. It is interesting that the strongest increase of the positive interaction (i.e. *Spiegel Online* and after the publication of Alan's photograph) for the politics frame was 109.60, which refers to the increased likelihood of the presence of political figures on *Spiegel Online* after the publication of Alan's picture when compared to *CNN* and before the publication.

## **Ideological representations of visual framing**

**Ideological representation.** Regarding *RQ4*, the visuals were assessed as ideological representations. The fourth level of the visual framing approach (Rodriguez and Dimitrova, 2011) builds on the previous three levels. This level takes into account the latent meanings of the media frames. To gauge whether the publication of Alan's picture triggered more humanized ideological interpretation on *CNN* and *Spiegel Online*, factors were identified within the visual coverage of the refugee crisis to interpret the latent meanings behind the visual representations.<sup>2</sup>

To identify those dimensions or factors, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted and varimax rotation was used. Items that did not provide high loadings in the first test were excluded for further analysis to find the best factor solution that explains the data set. Varimax is an orthogonal rotation procedure, which maximizes the variance for each factor (Mertler and Vannatta, 2005). The final varimax salutation yielded three factors, accounting for 66.7 per cent of the overall variances.

Three extracted factors were identified and interpreted as follows (see Table 3). The first factor that emerged was labeled *Law and Control Perspective*, which is the idea to close borders and not let more refugees come into the country. The interpretation of law and control provides visuals of confrontations between police units and refugees and border patrol. The photographer is usually positioning himself or herself on the side of the border control agents or police, so the picture is taken from the law-enforcement side. The second factor focuses on the absence of positive emotions among refugees from the Middle East by showing visuals of refugees from the Middle East without any positive emotions such as happiness or relief. This frame is interpreted as portraying the *Refugees from the Middle East* as victims of their own destiny in

**Table 2.** Logistic regressions results for predictors of dominant frames.

	$\beta$ (beta)	SE	Wald	p(sig)	Odds ratio exp (beta)
<b>Human interest</b>	.276	.096	8.17	.00***	1.32
News org ( <i>Der Spiegel</i> )	.82	.329	5.99	.01**	2.29
Publication date (after)	1.45	.33	19.54	.00***	4.28
News org * pub date	-2.37	.43	30.79	.00***	.09
Nagelkerke R square	.13				
<b>Lose/gain</b>	-1.98	.15	183.18	.00***	.14
News org ( <i>Der Spiegel</i> )	-1.10	.42	6.88	.00***	.33
Publication date (after)	-1.31	.39	11.02	.00***	.27
News org * pub date	.39	.62	.41	.52	1.48
Nagelkerke R square	.09				
<b>Law and control</b>	-1.42	.12	138.88	.00***	.24
News org ( <i>Der Spiegel</i> )	-.11	.43	.7	.80	.90
Publication date (after)	-.58	.43	1.86	.17	.56
News org * pub date	1.28	.54	5.62	.01**	3.60
Nagelkerke R square	.05				
<b>Politics</b>	-3.09	.24	173.93	.00***	.05
News org ( <i>Der Spiegel</i> )	-2.15	1.11	3.77	.05*	.12
Publication date (after)	-2.56	1.11	5.36	.02*	.08
News org * pub date	4.70	1.53	9.48	.00***	109.60
Nagelkerke R square	.12				

Note. \* $p < .0$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

that they have to apply for asylum and find a way to Europe. Third, a final ideological interpretation is that African migrants risking everything in search of better lives are labeled *Desperation of African Migrants*. This interpretation of the crisis also refers to the work of international organizations such as the UN and UNESCO in trying to improve the migrants' situation. In most cases, the visuals portray migrants as an arriving group rather than a departing one. Hence, the perspective of the country they seek asylum in is given more visual coverage than the departing country or continent.

The next step was to examine if there is a difference in manifestations of ideological interpretations before and after the publication of Alan's photo. Factor scores were computed and index scores were created for each factor for further analysis (standardized range: 0–1). This procedure compared the manifestation of the ideological frames in the visual coverage. Overall, the most frequent manifestation of the interpretation of the crisis was the victim frame of Middle Eastern refugees ( $M = .42$ ,  $SD = .40$ ), followed by the law and order interpretation ( $M = .27$ ,  $SD = .35$ ), and the least frequent manifestation as the interpretation of desperate African migrants ( $M = .10$ ,  $SD = .21$ ).

**Table 3.** Results of factor analysis of interpretations of the refugee crisis (varimax-rotated principal factor).

Items	Law and control perspective	Middle Eastern refugees as victims	Desperation of African migrants and Europe as a safe haven
Human interest frame	-.803	.165	-.322
Law and control frame	.853	.027	-.227
Law enforcement	.829	.054	.023
Middle Eastern refugees	-.035	.676	-.367
Negative emotions	.046	.880	.065
Not recognizable emotions	-.058	.904	.159
Lose/gain frame	.138	.035	.810
African migrants	.105	.010	.741
NGO workers	-.194	-.039	.513
Total variance explained	25.33%	22.44%	18.93%

Note: Boldface numbers indicate factor loadings on the indicated factor group.

Generally speaking, *Spiegel Online* portrayed the crisis more through the interpretation of the law and control perspective (*Spiegel Online*:  $M = .30$ ,  $SD = .36$ ; *CNN*:  $M = .27$ ,  $SD = .35$ ). Meanwhile, *CNN* portrayed the crisis more through the victim interpretation of Middle Eastern refugees (*CNN*:  $M = .54$ ,  $SD = .42$ ; *Spiegel Online*:  $M = .32$ ,  $SD = .37$ ). Finally, *CNN* portrayed the crisis more through the interpretation of the desperation of African migrants (*CNN*:  $M = .13$ ,  $SD = .25$ ; *Spiegel Online*:  $M = .08$ ,  $SD = .18$ ).

Second, a factorial ANOVA was conducted to compare the main effects of the publication date and news outlets, and the interaction of the publication date and news outlet on the three ideological representations (the law and order interpretation as the dependent variable first, then the Middle Eastern refugees as victims interpretation as the dependent variable, and last the African migrants lose and gain interpretation as the dependent variable). The publication date included two levels (before and after the publication of Alan's picture), and the news organization consisted of two levels (*Spiegel Online* and *CNN*).

For the first example (i.e. law and order interpretation being the dependent variable), the interaction effect was significant at the .05 level. The main effect for the news organization yielded  $F(1,434) = .81$ ,  $p > .05$ . The main effect for the publication date yielded  $F(1,434) = .67$ ,  $p > .05$ . The interaction effect was significant,  $F(1, 434) = 21.88$ ,  $p < .05$ , observed power: .99). After the photograph was published, *Spiegel Online* significantly included more law and order ideological representation than *CNN* (after the publication: *CNN*:  $M = .16$ ,  $SD = .32$ ; *Spiegel Online*:  $M = .39$ ,  $SD = .37$ ; compared to before: *CNN*:  $M = .36$ ,  $SD = .34$ ; *Spiegel Online*:  $M = .22$ ,  $SD = .34$ ).



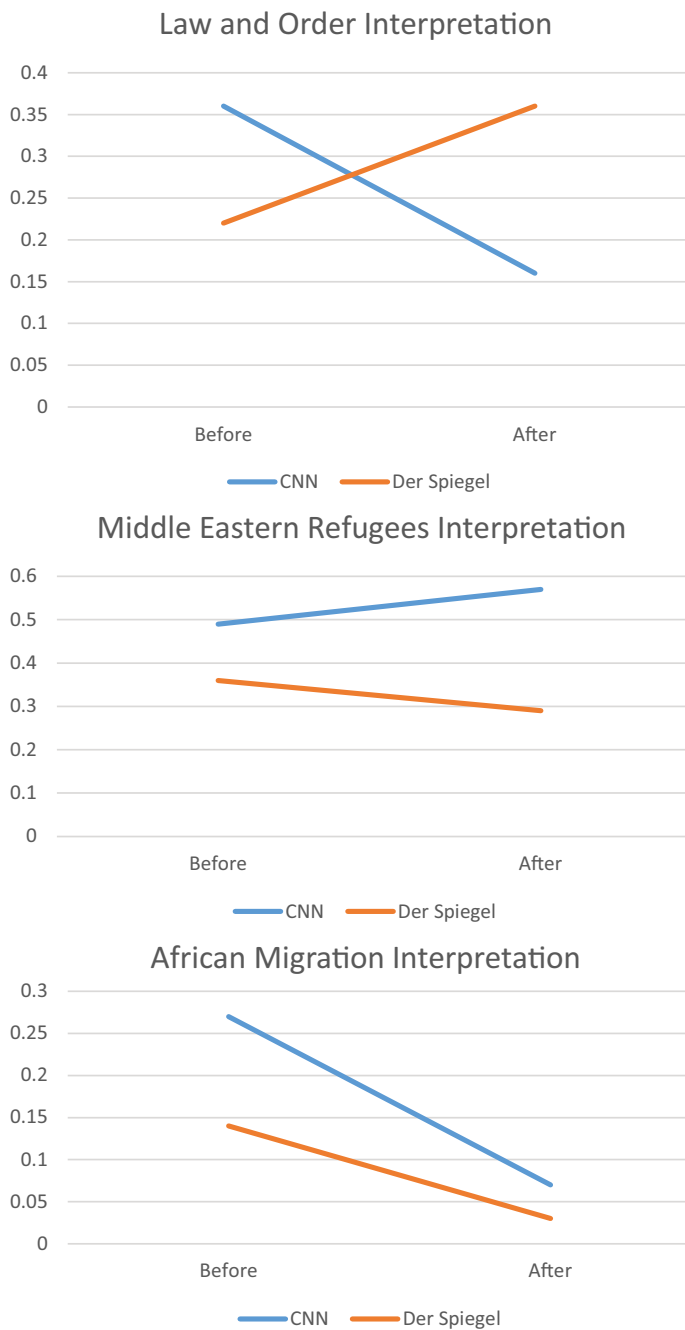
For the second example (i.e. Middle Eastern Refugees as Victims as the dependent variable), the interaction effect was approaching significance, while the main effect for news organization was significant at the .05 level, indicating a difference between *CNN* and *Spiegel Online* (*CNN*:  $M = .54$ ,  $SD = .42$ ; *Spiegel Online*:  $M = .32$ ,  $SD = .37$ ). The main effect for news organization yielded  $F(1,434) = 26.10$ ,  $p < .05$ . The main effect for publication date yielded  $F(1,434) = .91$ ,  $p > .05$ . The interaction effect was not significant,  $F(1, 434) = 3.01$ ,  $p > .05$ . Overall, *CNN* included more depictions of the Middle Eastern refugees as victims representation overall, independent of the publication date.

For the third example (i.e. lose and gain frame of African migrants as the dependent variable), main effects and interaction effects were found to be significant. The main effect for the news organization yielded  $F(1,434) = 16.15$ ,  $p < .05$  (observed power: .98), indicating a difference between *CNN* and *Spiegel Online* (*CNN*:  $M = .13$ ,  $SD = .25$ ; *Spiegel Online*:  $M = .08$ ,  $SD = .18$ ). The main effect for the publication date yielded  $F(1,434) = 54.28$ ,  $p < .05$  (observed power: 1.00), indicating an overall difference between the time before and after the publication of the photograph (before:  $M = .19$ ,  $SD = .27$ ; after:  $M = .05$ ,  $SD = .16$ ). The interaction effect was significant,  $F(1, 434) = 4.09$ ,  $p < .05$  (observed power: .53). See Figure 1 for after the publication (*CNN*:  $M = .07$ ,  $SD = .18$ ; *Spiegel Online*:  $M = .03$ ,  $SD = .12$ ) compared to before the publication (*CNN*:  $M = .27$ ,  $SD = .32$ ; *Spiegel Online*:  $M = .14$ ,  $SD = .18$ ). The strongest effect was the publication date: the frequency of the ideological representation of African migrants declined on both websites after the publication of the iconic photograph, while *CNN* still covered it significantly to a higher extent than *Spiegel Online*.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Considering the importance of media coverage in times of crisis (Chouliaraki, 2010) and the role of visuals in understanding far-away conflict (Zelizer, 2017), this study contributed to the understanding of the visual framing (Rodriguez and Dimitrova, 2011) of the refugee crisis on *CNN* and *Spiegel Online*. Recent literature has pointed out the rather negative tone in the news coverage of the refugee crisis, such as some British newspapers suggesting the use of the army to prevent refugees from crossing the English Channel (Khiabany, 2016). This study attempts to provide a nuanced analysis to understanding how iconic visuals have the potential to alter the visual representation of migration in Europe.

First, at the connotative level, the analysis revealed that, after the publication of Alan Kurdi's image, *CNN* significantly increased its news coverage on the refugees from the Middle East. By contrast, *Spiegel Online* decreased the Middle Eastern refugees' presence in its visual coverage after the publication of Alan's image. Second, the stylistic level of visual framing was probed



**Figure 1. Ideological interpretations of the refugee crisis (profile plots).**

*Note.* The y-axis shows the frequencies of the ideological representation in visuals, whereas the x-axis represents the time before and after the publication of Alan Kurdi's photograph.

$F(1, 434) = 21.88, p < .05$  (law and order interpretation);  $F(1, 434) = 3.01, p > .05$  (Middle Eastern refugee interpretation);  $F(1, 434) = 4.09, p < .05$  (African migration interpretation).

on the diversity of sources and camera angles. The study revealed that after the publication of Alan Kurdi's image, *CNN* used more medium-shot camera positions to capture a small group of Syrian refugees. *CNN* humanized the coverage by focusing on individual refugee families in the pictures and demonstrating their negative emotions. In this way, *CNN* humanized its visual coverage by focusing on the suffering experienced by the refugees and migrants. The detailed portrayal of the refugees could shorten the emotional distance between news audiences and refugees and urge people to act to help those sufferers. On the other hand, *Spiegel Online's* coverage presented more law-enforcement agents after the publication of the photograph.

In *Spiegel Online's* coverage, there were a greater number of shots featuring the refugees' migration process, signaling a flow of refugees moving into Europe. By using this camera-shot position, individual refugees' emotions and facial expression were not emphasized.

This could be explained by the fact that a large number of refugees and migrants applied for asylum in Germany (41% total within Europe). *Spiegel Online* was more concerned about border control and local residents' anti-immigration movements. This reflects the sentiment in German society in early 2016 in which a poll showed the citizens' lack of faith in the German Chancellor's ability to solve the refugee crisis and a revival in popularity for an anti-immigrant party (Sharkov, 2016). Interestingly, the strongest increase in regard to dominant frames was found for *Spiegel Online* after the publication of Alan's photograph: the politics frame was 109.60 times more likely to appear than before the publication of Alan's photograph and when compared to *CNN*.

The finding of this study resonates with the results found by Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017). By focusing on the notion of *journalism performativity*, the authors examined the language of 1,200 news articles of refugee crisis published in newspapers across eight European countries. The analysis emphasized how selected news articles narrate the subjects (refugees), their status, and presentation of their perspectives in the news. The results from the content analysis indicated that, in constructing the reality of the refugee crisis, politicians' voices were dominant at the expense of citizens and refugees. In using strategies of marginalization, collectivization, and decontextualization of refugees' voices, all European newspapers in the selected study followed Euro-centric, nationalist principles of significance and priority whereas keeping firmly refugees outside the remit of 'our' own communities of belonging. In so doing, the authors argued that news created a journalism practice called 'journalism bordering' that reflects a Euro-centric hierarchy of voices and power structure. In this way, journalism practice is deprived of diverse voices but instead reflects sentimental pity or angry exclusion. This study adds some nuances to these findings in arguing that certain iconic pictures can trigger an alteration of visual perspectives and can accelerate a Euro-centric perspective.

Fourth, this study looked at latent ideological patterns. At this fourth level of visual framing, three latent factors clearly indicated different perspectives on the crisis (Figure 1). Those three perspectives were dependent on geographical regions (e.g. Germany, the Middle East, and Africa). The first frame was that the law-enforcement frame reflected the perspective of the country that receives refugees. The second frame was the victim interpretation of refugees from the Middle East. The third interpretation was that of the African migrants who risk everything in search of better lives. They are not portrayed as victims foremost but as risk takers because they want a better life, hence making a conscious decision to leave their country and lose everything to reach Europe, which they consider as a safe haven. The distinction between Middle Eastern *refugees* and African *migrants* and the different associations to the two geographical regions can be explained by the distinction made between refugees and migrants in terms of immigration procedures. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, refugees' status are defined and protected by international law, but migrants are subject to the immigration laws of individual countries. The distinction is that refugees are forced to leave their homes, whereas migrants decide to move (Berglund Prytz, 2016).

There was significant decline in the coverage of the desperate African migrants' perspectives following the publication of Alan's picture. This reveals that a global outrage has the potential of excluding some interpretations such as the African perspective from the media sphere while focusing on the Middle Eastern refugees, as they became the focus of coverage; this is the case for *CNN*. Global outrage may shift the focus of the news organizations toward more humanized frames, while leaving out the complexity of the overall crisis that involves both migrants and refugees. It is interesting that *Spiegel Online* and *CNN* responded quite differently to the publication of the photo, which can be explained to some extent by their organizational structures and whether they operate on a national or international level: *Spiegel Online* operates at a national level and within a particular political system, so it increased its law and control interpretation of the crisis. Meanwhile, *CNN*, operating at an international level, increased the victim interpretation of the Middle Eastern refugees – mirroring the global or mostly Western discourse at that time. While *CNN* decreased its law and control interpretation, *Spiegel Online* decreased its victim frame portrayal.

This study contributes to visual framing literature in two important ways. First, it provides a roadmap of how visual framing can be empirically examined through the lens of the theoretical framework proposed by Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011). It further highlights the measurements of frames on four levels as a fruitful way of providing a nuanced perspective on visual framing.

Although the third level provides important insights into visual frames, the fourth level depicts the ideological representation building on the three previous levels. The fourth level draws together the symbols and stylistic

features of an image into a coherent interpretation that provides the rationale behind the representations being analyzed (Rodriguez and Dimitrova, 2011). In other words, the three previous levels are essential building blocks for understanding the ideological representation as the fourth level of visual framing. In building on these levels, we can conclude that *Spiegel Online* published more law and order enforcement ideological representation (including law enforcement actors) than *CNN* did. More important, there is support that the overall ideological representation is still very much determined by a Euro-centric perspective of portraying refugees and migrants as either victims or threats (focusing on negative emotions).

This study also supports previous findings by Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017). They analyzed news images of the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis and explored if the visualization of the refugee crisis in European news had mobilized different forms of moral responsibility toward the misfortunes of refugees and migrants at Europe's border at three key moments of crisis. A conceptually driven semiotic analysis of refugee news in European newspapers across five countries (Greece, Italy, Hungary, UK, and Ireland) yielded five key visual configurations: biological life, empathy, threat, hospitality, and self-reflexivity. The authors argued that even though these five categories of visibility had introduced public dispositions to action towards the vulnerable, they failed to humanize refugees and migrants. Refugees and migrants presented in the news pictures were portrayed as either victims or terrorists. The victimhood and threat were two major themes. In other words, their stories were merely spoken through the viewers' version of stories.

The results highlighted differences between the publication dates of the picture but also spoke to the differences between *CNN* and *Spiegel Online's* approaches to humanized reporting as well as the manifestations of the law and control frame in the German case. Theoretically speaking, the law-enforcement interpretation clearly indicates the opposite trend of humanizing interpretation from an ideological perspective. The two quite different perspectives found in this study may lead to a more polarized interpretation of the crisis – perceptions of an initiated global public sphere on *CNN* compared to a reinforcement of a domestic sphere on *Spiegel Online*. Although the refugee and migrant crisis is far from being resolved, media visuals present important cues in how the crisis is being interpreted, understood, and perceived from an international or domestic perspective. This study was only able to make a very modest contribution in studying two Western news outlets. Future studies should also include countries like Lebanon or Jordan – countries affected to a greater extent than Germany by the arrival of refugees – to understand their responses to this global crisis. It is hoped that the empirical examination of visual framing based on the four levels will provide an informative road-map to study ideological visual representations of migration beyond Western media systems.

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## NOTES

1. In accordance with previous research (see Mortensen et al., 2017), we use the term ‘refugee crisis’ as a recurrent phrase in Western news media to refer to challenges faced by refugees and migrants.
2. Factor analysis procedures were chosen over cluster analysis because we were interested in reducing numbers of variables to understand underlying ideological representation rather than finding subgroups among a larger group.

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