Refugees and visual culture

Guest lecture Masaryk University Brno, November 2018

Prof. dr. Kevin Smets (Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium)

Refugees and visual culture

- Do iconic images make a difference?
  - Case: Alan Kurdi

- Representation and voice
  - Case: reacting to images

- Visual culture and daily life
  - Case: refugee camp

- (Discussion: refugee camp and technologies)

"Iconic images", children and conflict

THE ICONIC
IMAGE
ON SOCIAL
MEDIA:
A RAPID
RESEARCH
RESPONSE
TO THE
DEATH
OF AYLAN KURDI*

Visual Social Media Lab

SMaPP
DATA REPORTS
2016:02

Syrian Refugee Crisis Data Report

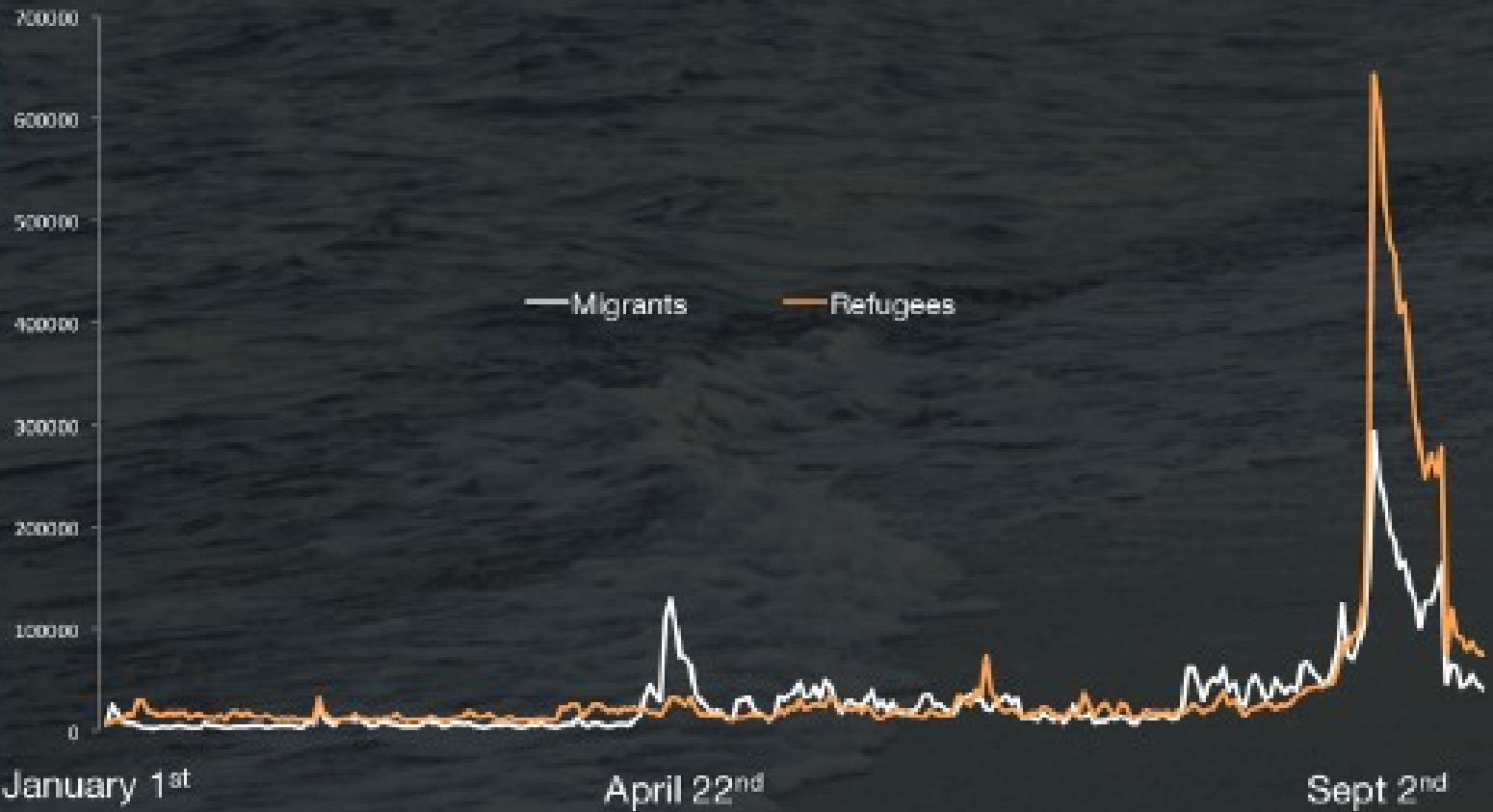Social Media and Political Participation Lab, New York University[1]

September 16, 2016

Alexandra Siegel & Joshua Tucker (SMaPP Lab, NYU)

Farida Vis, Simon Faulkner, Francesco D'Orazio & Lin Prøtiz
(Visual Social Media Lab)

How a single image changed the debate on immigration

Tweets by day mentioning Migrants (+8M) vs Refugees (+11M)

Migrants   Refugees

700000
600000
500000
400000
300000
200000
100000
0

January 1st   April 22nd   Sept 2nd

Source: Pulsar / Visual Social Media Lab 2015

نعمه الاهلNeamah @EfgddGdrgf · 17 Sep 2015

#غرق_طفل_سوري
#غرق_200_مسلم_سوري_في_البحر
#سوريا_لإدما
#رد_بصورة تعبيرية تمكي #حقيقة العالم المتوحش

Central questions

- How are refugees (as individuals/group) portrayed, visually and discursively?
- How is the refugee issue (as a demographic/political phenomenon) framed, understood, explained or solved?

  - Do the Alan images and "momentum" alter the discourses on refugees of Twitter users?

  - Do different actors in the debate about refugees, such as NGO's or politicians make use of the image? And in what ways does it connect to their discourses on refugees?

  - How do these findings play out in specific national or local contexts?

Research focus

A qualitative analysis of tweets about refugees posted by key actors (NGOs, politicians, citizens) between June 2015 and July 2016 in **Turkey** and **Flanders (Belgium)**

Refugee camp in South-Eastern Turkey

Maximiliaanpark, Brussels
(September 2015)

Methodology: procedure

Defining key actors: NGOs, politicians, citizens (exploratory observations, literature)

Selecting users in each actor category (Twitter advanced search options, multiple keywords)

Selecting tweets per user: purposive sampling

(Twitter advanced search options, scraping, TextWrangler, Excel)

Coding: inductive and deductive

Advantages of qualitative analysis: tone, context, relations, multi-modality, conversations (meso-level)

Methodology: data

BELGIUM			TOTAL
Actor group	Citizens: 23	Politicians: 11	NGOs: 8	42
Tweets	202	115	117	434

TURKEY			TOTAL
Actor group	Citizens: 15	Politicians: 6	NGOs: 9	30
Tweets	285	15	227	527

Methodology: analysis

Category	Description
Descriptive information	Date, user name, follower numbers, etc.
Used links and visuals	Content of the link and pictures
Description of Refugees	Threat, Victim, Opportunity, Agents
Perspective of Representation	Individual vs. Collective perspective
Reasons of the 'Refugee Crisis'	How is refugee 'crisis' explained: reasons, explanations, people to blame
Solutions to the 'Refugee Crisis'	Solutions offered to the current situation
References to Aylan Kurdi	References to Aylan in September 2015 and afterwards

Citizens: representations of refugees

- Refugees as **victims**
  - Turkey: Anti-government tweeters blame the government, pro-government tweeters blame the opposition, Asad, the west, or the humanity
  - Belgium: Refugees mostly seen as the victims of a lack of political action, or as the victims of instrumentalization (by politicians, media and NGOs)

- Refugees as a **threat**
  - Turkey: mostly during particular events and discussions (e.g. citizenship discussion); Aylan as a threat because of Kurdish ethnicity
  - Belgium: most present during particular events (e.g. attacks in Brussels); connected to pre-existing tropes of migrant as exploiter and cultural Other

Citizens: framing the refugee 'crisis'

- The **reasons** for the refugee 'crisis'
  - Users who are against migration: economic pull factors, particular politicians
  - Users who are positive about migration: vague reasons (e.g. 'humanity')

- The **solutions** for it
  - Those employing a victim representation: call for action and solidarity
  - Those employing a threat representation: closing borders, restricting migration, cutting benefits (mostly in Belgian case)

Discussion (all actors)

- **Change over time** and the **'Aylan moment'**
  - Consistency and coherence at user-level
  - Aylan image incorporated into pre-existing discourses
  - Exception: 1-time tweeters with strong affective responses

- **Comparing** Turkey and Belgium
  - More intra-actor discussions in Belgium
  - Different roles of Islam
  - More political polarization in Turkey: AKP, Gülen, Kurdish issue
  - Both see the Gulf countries as the bad 'Others' who do not take any refugees
  - Islamic State rather absent

Discussion

- Users who oppose to immigration employ the clearest vocabulary and framework

- Significance of the comparison
  - 'Global' icon and awareness ←→ Local and national contexts and discussions

- The limited power of the iconic image (on social media)
  - Continuity of discourses rather than disruptions
  - Similarities and convergence with 'traditional' media

Ai Weiwei's Aylan Kurdi image is crude, thoughtless and egotistical

Niru Ratnam

Ai Weiwei as Alan Kurdi

Articles

The changing political impact of compassion-evoking pictures: the case of the drowned toddler Alan Kurdi

Jacob Sohlberg ✉, Peter Esaiasson & Johan Martinsson
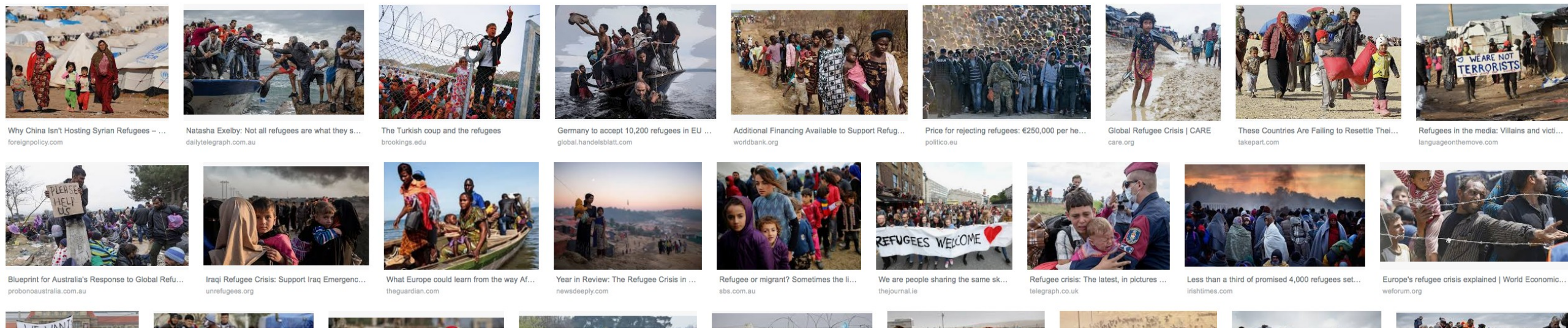
Representation and voice

(Visual) representations of forced migration

- Migrants do not have "voice"
- Emphasis of "Otherness"
- Social, economic or security threats
- Victimization, "Regime of pity"

(Chouliaraki, 2006; Chouliaraki & Stolic, 2017; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017; Ongenaert & Joye, in press; Wright, 2002)

- Misrepresentations can be harmful to groups
- Include the perspectives of those being represented
- Co-analyzing media texts

(Horsti, forthcoming; Georgiou, 2018; Nikunen, forthcoming; Perez Portilla, 2018; Rajaram, 2002)
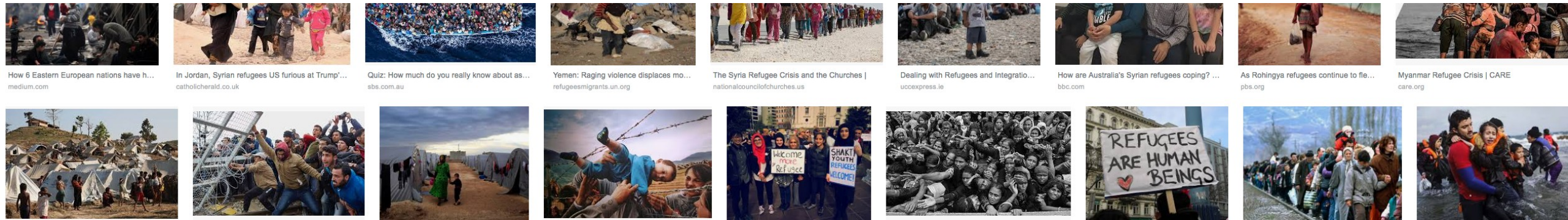
Methods

- Interdisciplinary team
- Interviews, focus groups and visual workshops with 44 asylum seekers and refugees from Syria (24), Afghanistan (11) and Iraq (9)
- 31 men, 13 women, between ages 17 and 60 ; many had post-secundary education
- Inspired by photo voice and photo elicitation methods

- Core of discussions about representation: a database of 29 photos (Reuters, AP, Magnum, …) that represent key themes in coverage on refugees

'Weird'

Do you see how much people ~~suffe~~ sufer to get to Belgium? Losing too many thing for just life anormal live the no need more ngative disicons.

THeo Franken

Are what we've doing is enough? Are we need more help?

The triple violence

- Experiences of the country fled, the risk-taking journey, and the unstable new lives (Kobelinsky, 2012)
- Ensuing trauma

The climate of suspicion

- "Deserving" versus "undeserving" migrants (Lacroix, 2016)
- "Crimmigration" (Stumpf, 2006)
- The individual responsibility and "the right to have rights" (Mazzocchetti, 2017)

A paradigmatic shift
(counter-representations)

- From pity to empathy
- Showing suffering in all its shapes – including deception in Belgium
- Criticizing victimhood as a pan-identity

Visual culture and dialy life

What are refugees doing when they are not suffering?

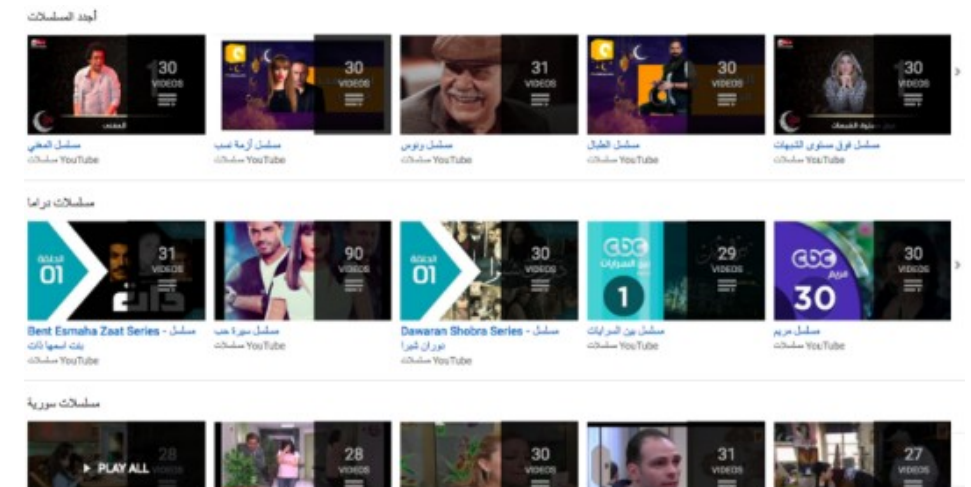How do refugees react to these portrayals?

media and home-making in a refugee camp

Kilis, © Tobias Hutzler

1. Entertainment and popular culture play a central role in maintaining "ontological security"

2. Media devices are important "currency" in the camp's informal economy

© Tobias Hutzler

© Anita Fabos & Cathrine Brun

District Zero (2015, Jorge Fernandez, Pablo Iraburu, Pablo Tosco)
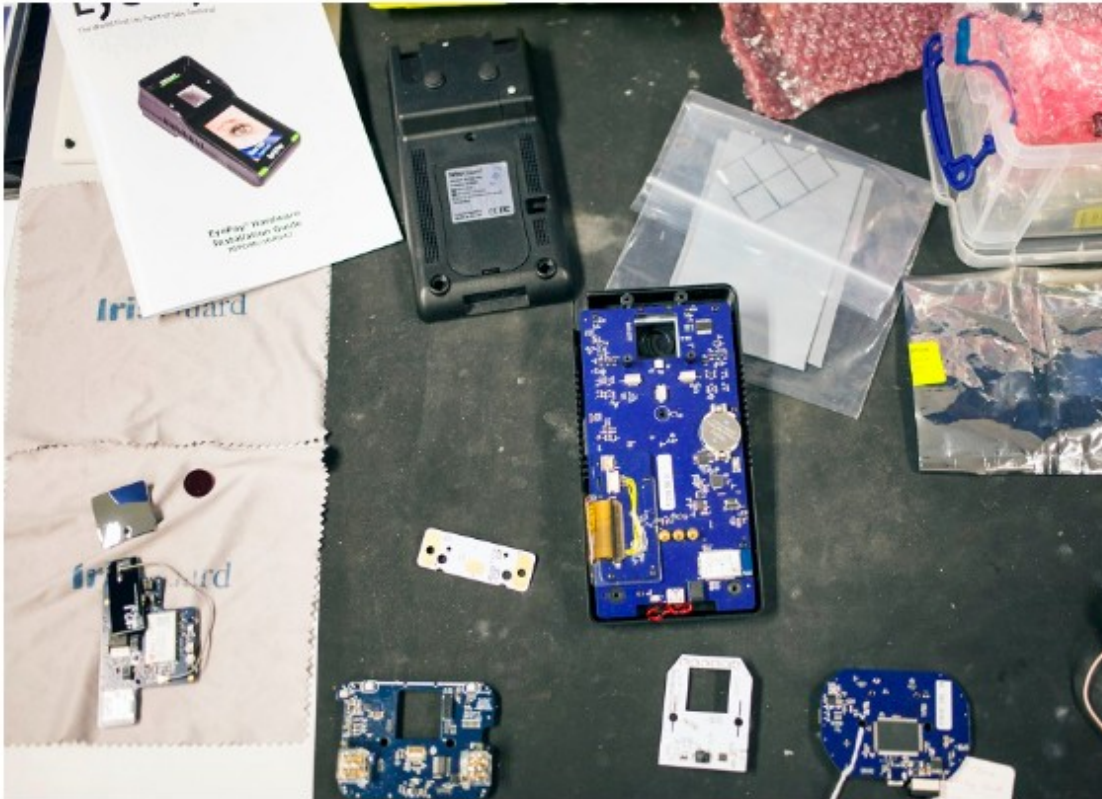
Discussion: technology in refugee camps?

Protoypes of EyePay. Credit: Ariana Dongus

Biometrics

Tested on millions Non-volunteers

In Jordan's camps, refugees are registered by iris scan and identified. They can not refuse. This is how the EyeHood technology is made ready for the market.

From Christina to Nedden and Ariana Dongus, London

Article

SECURITY DIALOGUE

Experimentation in humanitarian locations: UNHCR and biometric registration of Afghan refugees

Security Dialogue
2015, Vol. 46(2) 144–164
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DOI: 10.1177/0967010614552545
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