

# The Transformative Image. The Power of a Photograph for Social Change: The Death of Aylan

La imagen transformadora. El poder de cambio social de una fotografía: la muerte de Aylan

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the role of the image as an agent for social transformation. The methodology adopted is a case study: the impact of the photograph of Aylan Kurdi, the three-year-old child drowned off Bodrum in an attempt to escape on a raft full of Syrian migrants. This is one of the most widely seen social photojournalism documents in recent times, and it had a huge impact on social media. The study applies an iconographic, iconological and ethical analysis to reveal the constituent parts of an image with the power for social change. In its main conclusions, this paper describes the potential for easy resignification of the digital graphic image as it symbolically transforms reality, and the power it has to generate processes of pronouncement and activism among citizens in digital environments. The results of the case study show that the value of an image for social change is achieved not only by the magnitude of the tragedy itself and the information that it registers, or by its formal aspects (iconographic), but mainly by being able to express a change of logic (iconological aspects) and to promote processes of reappropriation and denunciation. The ethical debate on dissemination shifts the problem from journalistic ethics to citizen responsibility.

## RESUMEN

Este trabajo plantea el papel de la imagen como agente de transformación social. La metodología que se emplea es un estudio de caso sobre el impacto de la fotografía de Aylan Kurdi, el niño de tres años ahogado en el intento de huida en una balsa de migrantes sirios en Bodrum. Se trata de uno de los documentos recientes de fotoperiodismo social más difundidos transnacionalmente y con gran impacto en redes sociales. El estudio aborda diferentes niveles de análisis (iconográfico, iconológico y ético) para deparar los aspectos constitutivos de una imagen con poder de cambio social. Como principales conclusiones, esta investigación comprueba el poder de la imagen gráfica digital por su carácter de fácil reedición y re-significación en el paso de transformar simbólicamente la realidad y generar procesos de pronunciamiento y activismo en la ciudadanía a partir de entornos digitales. Los resultados del análisis del caso que se delimita muestran cómo el valor de una imagen en el cambio social no viene dado solo por la magnitud de la tragedia o el hecho que registra, ni por sus aspectos formales (iconográficos), sino por ser capaz de expresar un cambio de lógica (aspecto iconológico) y propiciar procesos de reapropiación y denuncia ciudadana. Por último, el debate ético sobre su difusión traslada el problema de la deontología periodística a la responsabilidad ciudadana.

## KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Photojournalism, social change, digital image, iconographic analysis, social impact, communication, refugees. Fotoperiodismo, cambio social, imagen digital, análisis iconográfico, impacto social, comunicación, refugiados.



### 1. The image and social transformation

There are images that can totally condense and define a tragedy and remain fixed in the memory of a generation, shaking up people worldwide and arousing the inactive masses into action; images that put a place on the map, direct our attention towards a problem, provoke strong emotions of sadness, anger, indignation or rage. Photojournalism has played a particularly significant role in recording political conflicts, wars, tragedies and confrontations. The war photos by Robert Kappa, the image captured by Eddie Adams of the execution of a Vietcong guerrilla in Saigon in 1968, the photo of fleeing Vietnamese children taken by Huynh Cong Út in 1972, and so many others, mean that a particular tragedy is never forgotten. In the words of Valle, these photos act as tattoo-images: «some images can make an impact on the viewer's sensibility as if leaving an imprint on their memory, like an emotional tattoo that fades in and out (...) they make an impression on us and can remain with us for the rest of our lives» (1978: 47).

Photography is said to have a transformational quality in that it has a «technological power to transform the world into a representation» (Roberts & Webber, 1999: 2). It has been shown that certain actions undertaken by citizens in a specific situation were related to the images they had in mind of that particular event (Fueyo, 2002: 9). Valle (1978: 49) speaks of nucleus-images that can generate more information in a concentric way, and which «are able in themselves to influence states of opinion in a decisive way». Earlier studies concluded that social photography «offers subjects the chance to construct new alternative ways of understanding and making sense of events, reflecting on them and developing the means to confront them by building new meanings and discourses» (Echeverry & Herrera, 2005: 141). In terms of communication, this amounts to a network of emotions and beliefs, a moral response, which activates behaviours of social commitment (Pinazo & Nos-Aldás, 2013). Arroyo and Gómez (2015) have shown that the moral response is more coherent when the audiovisual content shows real people dealing with moral conflicts. The specific influence of social photojournalism on the imagination has been previously emphasized (Novaes, 2015: 3) along with the ethical and educational implications of the representation of suffering via the image (Boltanski, 2000; Sontag, 2003; 2008; Linde, 2005).

In the specific framework of reinterpretation and recreation that the digital image enables, it is important to consider the difference pointed out by Aparici & al.

(2009) between «represented reality» and «constructed reality» in cyberspace as a «non-place». Works by Murray (2008) and Chouliaraki (2015) contribute to the debate on new media and citizenry, ethics and the impact of digital images in the processes of remediation, intermediation and transmediation. This study aims to insert the role of images in the setting of communication for social change (as defined by Barranquero, 2012; Chaparro, 2013; Tufte, 2015). Based on a descriptive study of a specific case, the aim of this paper is to arrive at an understanding and definition of the «transformative image» (following the «transformative pedagogy» by Subirana, 2015), one with the power to provoke social change. The value of the image is studied in terms of impact and social mobilization. The study applies an iconographic-iconological method to the image, and it draws out the ethical questions and subjects them to expert interpretation in order to generate a multifaceted reflection on the subject. The image analyzed here consists of a paradigmatic example of the relations between digital communication and the social transformation processes. It is the features of digital communication –cooperation, instantaneity, feedback, horizontality, decentralization, flexibility, dynamism and interconnection (Sampedro & Sánchez-Duarte, 2011: 238)– which define the process followed by a «transformative» image like the one we shall describe.

### 2. A case study: the impact of the photograph of Aylan Kurdi

The methodology of case studies is typical of exploratory research and descriptive and explanatory studies (Martínez, 2006: 168). Initially, as Platt explains (1992), the case study was conceived as a sociological method for social work studies although it was later applied more broadly, in such areas as the analysis of media images and the relation between belief systems and decision taking. Studies have shown that decisions can be taken based on the «image» of the situation rather than on its «objective» (Holsti, 1962). Along these lines, this study analyses the case of the photograph of Aylan in order to reflect on the role of the image in provoking reactions of solidarity worldwide. We used Google Analytics to gather data on the impact of the image in digital media. The image was filtered and analysed on several levels: iconography (descriptive), iconology (interpretative) and ethics (implicative). This provided us with a framework for discussion on the power for social transformation of images that provoke a strong «e-motion», in the etymological sense of an «impulse that induces action».

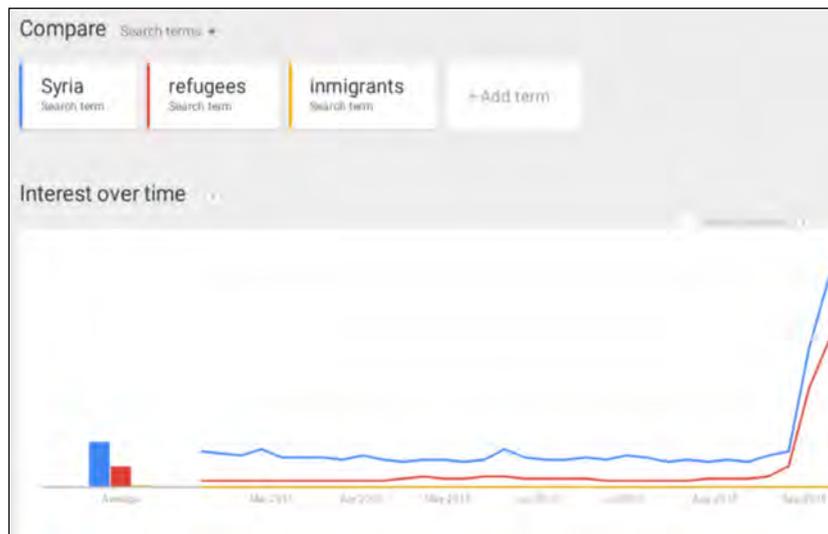
### 2.1. Analysis of the impact of the photograph

The photograph of Aylan Kurdi, the Syrian boy who was washed up drowned on a beach in Turkey, was taken by the Turkish photographer Nilüfer Demir, for the Dogan agency, and published by Reuters Ankara/DHA on 2 September 2015. The case of Aylan was one of thousands involving Syrians fleeing civil war in their native land. Aylan and his family came from Kobane. He was three years old when he died, in an attempt to reach the Greek island of Kos. According to Reuters, 23 people drowned as they sailed in two rickety boats that capsized after being hit by a strong wave. Five children and one woman died. The bodies were found on the Turkish beach of Bodrum, in the province of Mugla. But it was the photograph of Aylan that caused a media storm. Yet he was not even the youngest of the casualties: they were the Jafer twins aged 18 months. Two thousand people had already crossed the same seas in dinghies in the previous four months but the world would never forget the name of Aylan Kurdi<sup>1</sup>.

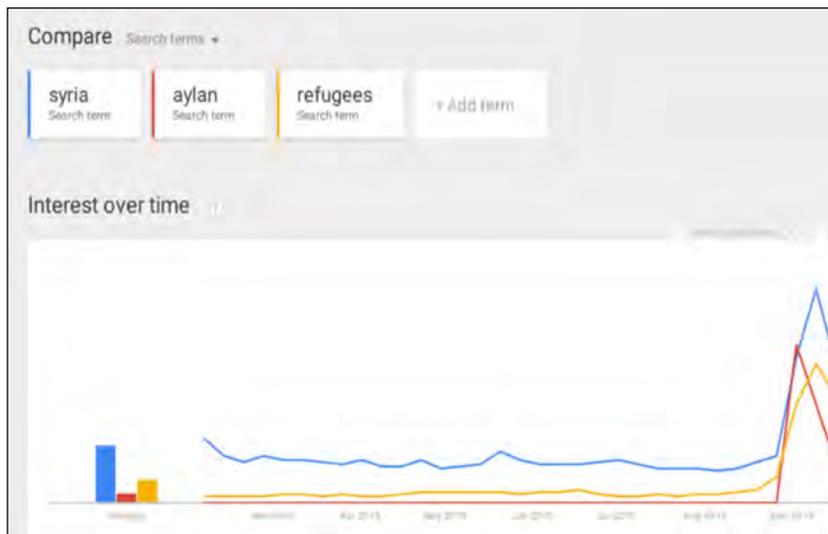
The photograph of the young boy acted as a triggering image. It appeared in the majority of international media outlets in a torrent of front pages and leading news stories (Graph 1), and Syria fast began trending on Google searches (Graph 2). These graphs reveal the power of reaction that an image can arouse by causing a mass search for information on the subject. Before reaching the press, this news story had previously appeared and multiplied on social media. This was communication by image. Reuters reported on the sheer viral power of the photo in a headline

«Troubling image of drowned boy captivates, horrifies» (Reuters, 2015). The image and its impact was a chronicle in itself for its potential to leave a strong impression on the viewer (to horrify).

Graph 1 shows the power that a single document can wield in order to situate a place on the map, or turn a humanitarian problem into a concern that affects people worldwide. Graph 2 demonstrates how an image quickly came to define Syria and the refugee drama. In fact, the name of Aylan that describes the image places him beyond the concept of refugee. The media treatment of the image raised this person above the category to which he was assigned. The human



Graph 1. Evolution of the number of headlines (Google Trends) with terms such as «Syria», «refugees» and «immigrants» in 2015 (09-12-2015) (<http://goo.gl/HLPUE4>).



Graph 2. Evolution of the number of headlines (Google Trends) with images labelled «Syria», «Aylan» and «Refugees» in 2015 (09-21-2015) (<http://goo.gl/kzz921>).

focus of that image with a name dragged the Syrian exodus out of anonymity.

On 3 September, a deluge of manifestos was posted on Twitter via the hashtag #KiyiyaVuranInsanlik (the humanity that drowns)<sup>2</sup>. Writers such as Nobel Prize winner Mario Vargas Llosa and ordinary citizens posted opinions on social media. The event was interpreted and its meaning recast in various forms of creative expression. Citizen actions manifested themselves in representations of the occurrence in the form of protest. Charlie Hebdo dedicated a front-page to satirizing the events surrounding the image that caused a great deal of controversy on Twitter, especially in the Arab world.

The photograph was a determining factor in the taking of immediate decisions. On 3 September, Facebook Spain saw the appearance of «Refugees Welcome» to promote policies of shelter and hospitality (Martínez-Guzmán, 2003) for displaced Syrians, and in less than a month it had acquired almost 10,000 followers. It was just one of many spontaneous initiatives that emerged on or around that date to call for and organize humanitarian aid and recruit volunteers to welcome refugees. On 4 September, the Avaaz platform used Aylan's image in a campaign to gather signatures in support of a plan to take in refugees. The Egyptian magnate Naguib Sawiris stated that he would buy an island to shelter between 100,000 and 200,000 Syrian refugees and name it Aylan Kurdi: «it was the photo of Aylan that really opened my eyes» (CNN in Spanish, 2015). There were also institutional responses. Angela Merkel announced a programme to take in more than 800,000 refugees. In Canada the event caused a political crisis. Canada's «The National Post» reported that Aylan Kurdi's family's request for asylum had been rejected by the Canadian government in June. The request had been presented by an aunt of Aylan who lives in British Columbia, and the Social Democrat deputy Fin Donnelly had personally handed in the request to the Minister of Immigration at the time, the Conservative Chris Alexander. This occurred in the midst of an election campaign, and the government was heavily criticized for its immigration policy because on 2 September, Alexander had defended government policy on refugees from Syria on state television and attacked the media for largely ignoring the humanitarian crisis (EFE, 2015). A website, [www.refugeeswelcome.ca](http://www.refugeeswelcome.ca), was created to promote an increase in the number of Syrian refugees that Canada would accept. The Nobody is Illegal organization mobilized its supporters. The image of Aylan exposed the incumbent Prime Minister of

Canada during the elections, which his party subsequently lost.

## 2.2. An iconographic analysis

Here we analyse the most important elements of this image of Aylan to show why it has had such repercussions, and why it has become an icon that has mobilized our consciences. Television news reports provided the complete sequence, with general shots of the victim from a distance, and allowed us to see additional elements of the context within which the body was found, such as images of the police officer who gathered up the corpse on seashore, and other witnesses. However, these images did not reproduce the full emotional impact of the still photograph.

In the foreground, we see the image of the boy's body, dead and alone, which is what causes the initial impact on us. It is the cadaver of a white boy whose clothes are soaked: his red T-shirt, his short blue trousers and the soles of his shoes still in good condition; he is lying face down in the wet sand on the shore, the sea is calm and the waves barely lap against his face. Although he is face down, we can just about see one side of his face. The boy's clothes are intact, the warm red of the T-shirt, the new shoes do not conform to the stereotype of a «poor» non-Caucasian boy whose clothes are ripped and torn, with sunken cheeks, the typical image of refugees in newspapers or on TV news. The casual observer might think it is just a little boy sleeping too close to the waves who you could pick up and remove from danger of drowning. The paradox of the image of life despite being one of death. The mind could whitewash reality and perceive it as a doll due to his paleness, like wax, reflected by the fragment of the face shown to the observer.

The photo is a low angle shot that softens the dichotomy from top to bottom and is thus hierarchical. The low angle provides emphasis and subjectivity, but the proximity is not just focal but also angled. The depth of the shot is sufficiently squeezed to allow us to be very close to the victim, an expressive device that heightens our sense of impotence, but the shot is sufficiently broad to incorporate the view of the sea. The photograph confers its look upon us so that the viewer is situated within the image, from above, and drawing us into it. Who are we? Someone on land, residing in that yearned-for destination of Europe. It is a Eurocentric vision that differs from that which a group of refugees would have on reaching European shores. This also creates an inside/outside situation. Such divisions emerge as dichotomy markers, meaning otherness, from a sense of heightened and upright subjecti-

vity of reception. The image was framed using the rhetorical device of suppression, exposing in full detail the shot of the boy but cutting out the police agents at work around him. This focuses and personalizes the tragedy of the Syrian refugees.

### 2.3. An iconological analysis

A verifiable hypothesis is that social inequality is linked to inequality in iconographic representation and the production and consumption of images. Likewise, a process of transformation and social change requires change in the social discourse. This process involves a semiotization of the ideology (hypothesis posed by Cros, 2009) or the cultural production of socio-ideological signs. Today's universe of images is a dialectical field where «ideologemas» and «ideosemas» are debated, in the sense attributed to them by Cros (2009), as textual and extra-textual phenomena. The image of Aylan is an ideologema in terms of a concept referring to a representation of an experience as well as a social sentiment. And the idea of sentiment is key in the social image that aims to create solidarity. The ideologema is one of the main regulators of content in the social conscience, and enables this content to circulate and become transformational communication. The ideosem is the factor that induces evaluation or criticism (Malcuzyński, 1991: 24).

The image of Aylan is endowed with considerable polysemy in terms of meaning. The icon harbours the concept of immigration, the refugee, immigration policies, tragedy, vulnerability and infancy, and contains those three treatments that an image can provide: document, art and sentiment (Aparici et. al, 2009: 214). It presents a view that is different within the universe of the tragedy of the children of immigrants and refugees crossing the Aegean or Mediterranean. We could say that it is a feminine view, not only because the photo was taken by a woman (the masculine and feminine circulate through the two genders) but by someone who has been brought up to care for others



Image 1. Photograph of Aylan Kurdi. Photographer: Nilüfer Demir/ Dogan Agency (Reuters, 2015).

rather than explore the world.

We observe how the image shifted the focus of the discourse on the problem. It is the word refugee and not the word immigrant that users type when searching on Google (Graph 1). As the fundeu.es website indicates, it is not appropriate to call refugees migrants or immigrants. Aylan was fleeing with his family but had not yet become «refugeed» (using the past participle of the verb). Yet his image defined the entire tragedy of the Syrian refugees. Immigrant was not the word that people associated to his case, and they did not use it when searching for information online (Bernardo, 2015). The same tragedy occurs incessantly with other migrants but they do not have an image as powerful as Aylan's, nor a term of salvation like refugee. This distance between the concept of immigrant and refugee not only differentiates meaning but also assumes a political shift in the treatment and understanding of the problem of displaced people because the idea of refugee implies an active institutional approach to sheltering such people. We observe a socio-political and informational shift in favour of the word shelter (which defines an attitude and/or a programme of assistance) as opposed to the word asylum (which defines a right) in the treatment of the subject in the news. The image of Aylan was a turning point for a semantic approach that is vital for a process of social change. Social change involves a transformation in the form of representing, understanding, analysing, thinking about and reacting to problems. This shift towards positive concepts from negative images defi-

nes one of the new designs in communication that aims to generate a feeling of solidarity. We could say that it is a way of seeing something negative yet thinking positively about the same issue: seeing the tragedy and at the same time contemplating the solutions.

#### 2.4. An ethical analysis

The ethical debate surrounding an image like the one of Aylan draws on the motives for its publication, and ownership of the image; the instrumentalization of the document for profit (sale of newspapers, attracting more readers, etc.) or the possible morbid curiosity of consuming such a dramatic image as well as the treatment of the image of children (Espinosa & al., 2007). It could also examine the dilemma of widespread dissemination and copyright, but what is the real focal point of the ethical dilemma? Here are the opinions of four experts on the debate on the image of Aylan:

The unanimous opinion of these professionals in the field, with years of experience and a clear ethical commitment, such as the 2009 National Photography Prize winner Gervasio Sánchez, was that this image had to be published, and that its impact achieved the required mobilizing effect<sup>3</sup>. The photograph has become one of the icons of the refugee drama of the second decade of the XXI century; it is a transformative image.

We are not used to seeing images of dead children, drowned children, in our newspapers or on television news. As Sánchez says, what stands out is that «the body is whole» when normally war and natural catastrophe bring us images of mutilated, amputated or shattered bodies. The bodies of the drowned that are normally washed up are severely

deteriorated but not in this image. It is a boy who can be clearly identified by anybody in the West as «one of us» (which questions the hypocrisy of a society that needs «mobilizing» images of this nature to provoke a reaction). The reflection by cartoonist El Roto (2015) that «an image is worth more than a thousand drowned people» underlines how we set about confronting the multiple causes of war, and pushes us to look for meaning and to make sense of this situation beyond the image itself. The conclusion is that a fixed image can have a far more mobilizing effect than moving images on TV or hundreds of articles on the subject; but it should make us reflect on the underlying causes of a tragedy that centres on one single «exemplifying» case of the cruel destiny of hundreds of thousands of refugees.

The dilemma highlighted divisions in Europe. Many dailies preferred to ignore the unfolding drama. No national newspaper in Germany or France published the photo (except «Le Monde»). However, the main dailies in the UK («The Guardian», «The Independent», «Daily Mail», «The Sun») all published the image on their front pages. The Italian media was divided («La Repubblica» did not publish it). In Portugal, an editorial in «Público» felt obliged to explain why it had published the photo, and in Spain, «El Mundo» provided a link to a video of a debate among its editors about its publication. In contrast to this

What reflection would you make on the ethical dilemma caused by the publication of this image, its meaning and its symbolic and evocative power to bring far-reaching problems that European governments have ignored to the foreground of the social debate?			
José-Carlos Díaz (16-9-15, 00:12.)	Gervasio Sánchez (14-9-15, 10:00.)	Manuel Chaparro (13-9-15, 21:26.)	Pedro Soler (13-9-15, 23:58.)
«We are at our most sensitive when tragedies affect defenceless children. We feel responsible because the child died trying to get to a member state of the European Union, and we (and our representatives) have been unable to help him, to provide resources so that he didn't have to risk his life on this journey».	«I don't know of any mother or father who would object to the publication of such a photo». «There is a vicious circle of cynicism and hypocrisy. Debates on whether to show or not to show the faces of living or dead children. We have seen the hypocrisy of newspapers that publish front-page articles that are biased and manipulated yet they pose moral disquisitions for their readers on a theme like this. Then the debate on whether to publish the photo or not from a certain angle. Publish the photos and be damned! When it concerns an image of this nature it must be disseminated, and many more such photos should have been published too».	«The same as when Javier Bauluz published a photo of a dead immigrant washed up on Tarifa beach while bathers continued bathing as if nothing had happened. This is the world we live in, one with an economic model based on individualism not solidarity. Even so, citizens are more capable of action than the governments we have. The photos have served to force the governing class to react when citizens had already started to do so».	«The impression is that the viewer needs to simplify things and identify, and there is no greater sense of identification than that of the loss of a son or daughter of that age and in these circumstances. The problem in this case is not the media, it is how human beings react to these exceptional wake-up calls and remain passive in the face of a tidal wave of news that is so heart-rending. It's amazing. We have become immune to people dying in their thousands in dinghies, but a tragedy still needs its symbol».

Table 1. Opinions gathered from telephone interviews with four experts.

«revealing media blurring», the image was disseminated widely and quickly across the social networks, and the deontological debate was rendered irrelevant by the deluge of online diffusion.

The publication of the photograph coincided with the world's most important photojournalism festival, «Visa Pour l'Image», held in Perpignan (France), where debate initially centered on its authenticity. The image of Aylan routed all scepticism as it was clearly genuine but the manipulation came later when individual citizens began posting it online. This is where an ethical analysis of citizen responsibility concerning these images and their processes of resignification, appropriation and strategic management is most necessary. It should be asked whether it is ethical to manipulate an image or alter its meaning. The image began to undergo digital alteration, and artists were the first to denounce the refugee drama and promote the creative restitution of reality. Their works robbed the image of its iconic power and undermined the dramatic influence of its lyrical tone. They were published under the hashtags mentioned previously. One such illustrated image, by Steve Dennis (Álvarez, 2015), became very popular. It showed the boy in a cot, and this counter-image is interpreted as the art of satisfaction, recreating a world that coincides with our desires. The image was transformed into sand sculptures, graffiti and other protest art manifestations, as a way of symbolically overcoming the trauma caused by such a news event, and which also brought pressure to bear on the political treatment of the issue and helped mobilize citizens.

The ethics of the image appropriated by citizens shifts the ethical debate from the news publisher to the news receiver as cyber-publisher, to people who are active in media usage, «mediactive», and who access their resources, «recursive» (Kely, 2008; Gillmor, 2010; Sampedro, 2015); this is a process that has to be analyzed in terms of political participation and the assumption of ideological power that the citizen desires and is willing to assume in terms of the issues of government that concern them.

### 3. Discussion and conclusions: «Is an image worth more than a thousand drowned people?»

This study enables us to define a «transformative image» as one that acquires a political dimension, passing from its initial news dimension to one in which it becomes the image on a flag at a demonstration that is both personal and collective. The reading of the image is always historical (Aparici & al., 2009: 210), depending on the previous knowledge of the reader. In this

case, the image came to us after years of civil war in Syria, a conflict that has been defined by the European Parliament as the greatest humanitarian tragedy since the Second World War. Here we see how an image with such transformative power becomes a symbol of a serious social problem.

We believe that an image is transformative because it contains a new discourse. An image that quickly arouses solidarity on an issue that is not new; it possesses this power because it can break a rigid stereotype. The case of the image of Aylan breaks the stereotype of war refugees packed into fields where the mass of the population obliterates the individual story of each human being. The new image gives them back their names, tells a story of a life cut short and generates projection and identification.

If an image can push decisions to be taken in the name of social justice, it is because it cancels out the sceptical view and destroys arguments that justify oppression of that social justice. We can say that an image for solidarity is an image that can be appropriated by citizens to enable them to express themselves, to denounce and to recreate. The online digital image is not sessile. It is not defined as static but dynamic due to its potential for alteration and manipulation in many different ways. The image of Aylan initiated a chain of symbolic value and resignification. It is a nodal image in a citizen reaction, like a mental thought that acts on the ethical and political debate, in dialogue with other studies such as those by Chouliaraki and Baagard (2013). They are not images that fit in with the journalistic objective of an ephemeral news chronicle but respond to a logic of processes (Kaplún, 1998) and are evaluated in the dynamic of communication to transform and transformation to communicate (Marí, 2011). Far from the paradigm of news transmission, transformative images bring to the fore a model of solidarity via communication for the persuasion of behaviours that involves strategic thinking. They belong to a model of communication that is «like a network that starts off as a weaving from closeness and proximity and extends to involving others in dynamic actions of solidarity» (Marí, 2014: 155).

It is not only the represented fact that makes an image transformative but its power to symbolize, its explanation of the process; the links and networks in which it is able to move, the critical distillation and formulation of the problem that can condense into easy but diverse decoding, and its capacity to be displaced in order to achieve mass dissemination.

This case study shows the current importance of the processes of image manipulation that can be analy-

as exercises in symbolic resolution and citizen participation that generate opinion flows which can exercise political pressure on an issue and as a call to solidarity. The new processes that enable digital media to recreate and republish images means that the power of the image today can be appropriated by citizens as an instrument for communication that transcends the ethical debate on image manipulation. In contrast, this brings up the question of the power for social change achieved by the capacity for dialogue and for achieving an open, reflective, creative, political and responsible intervention on the image.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Google search of «Aylan Kurdi» yielded 7,730,000 results (2015-09-27). A Wikipedia page was created almost immediately.
- <sup>2</sup> Google search of the hashtag found 92,100 results in many languages (2015-09-27).
- <sup>3</sup> Other professionals agree: DevReporter Network (2015). Reflections by photojournalists on the image of Aylan Kurdi. (<http://goo.gl/SYaD8T>) (2015-12-01).

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