The Omran Daqneesh Imagery from the Streets of Aleppo to International Frontpages

Political Contestation, Documentary Value and Emotional Appeal

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Article

The Omran Daqneesh imagery from the streets of Aleppo to international front pages: Testimony, politics and emotions

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Abstract

This article studies the virality and assigned iconicity of visual icons by examining the roles and interplays between photographers and other media actors contributing to early phases of making and sharing the Omran Daqneesh images from Aleppo, 2016. We draw on theoretical frameworks concerning the mobilization of iconic imagery in today's digitalized and globalized media landscape as well the interpretive continuum of documentary evidence and emotional appeal typically applied to iconic imagery of children. Empirically, we take our point of departure in interviews with photographers, NGO workers, editors and journalists involved in facilitating, producing and initially disseminating the Omran Daqneesh imagery, to explore how – in contrast to the seemingly straightforward communication offered by visual icons – they are in effect the result of an intricate interplay between these actors, which in different ways and for different reasons contribute to spreading the images and determining their significance and meaning.

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'Why do some war images, like the one of Syrian boy Omran Daqneesh, resonate more than others?' (Al Jazeera, 2016). This is how the television news channel Al Jazeera opened a debate on what it referred to as 'the limits of war photography' in relation to the instant iconization of the imagery of Omran Daqneesh, a 3-year-old Syrian boy who was pictured sitting in an ambulance in Aleppo with a bloodied face in August 2016.[1] Similar stories were run by numerous other news outlets. This debate addressed what appeared to be a stark contrast between, on the one hand, the unprecedented number and diversity of visuals from the war in Syria and, on the other hand, particular images gaining wide traction as emblematic of this war.

This contrast has become all the more staggering after the emergence of social and mobile media. Actors on the ground with little or no formal photojournalistic training are breaking the news media's traditional monopoly on conflict reporting by producing, disseminating and mobilizing images. The heterogeneous mass of images from war zones recorded by different actors and showing different perspectives may ideally create the potential for more nuanced and multifaceted insights. One example of this would be non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and activists working purposefully to collect and verify images to gather evidence of war crimes and other human rights abuses (Gregory, 2015; Mollerup and Gaber, 2015; Ristovska, 2016). The mass production and dissemination of visuals from wars, however, also leads to intensified spin battles to determine which images are real and which are manipulated and fake. Moreover, as mentioned above, the bulk of images and the diverse visual documentation of any one event often appears to be discarded in favour of certain images that attract intense attention across media platforms. This paper is concerned with these images – often declared to be icons – that play a crucial role in how wars are framed and perceived.

Iconic imagery pushes to the foreground questions about the visibility of wars in a changing media landscape: Why do some visuals draw immense attention and come to symbolize a given conflict across media? How are they enabled, produced, distributed and mobilized? And what dissenting claims are made concerning the power and legitimacy or the failings and delegitimacy of these visual icons? Based on interviews with photographers, NGO workers, editors and journalists involved in the facilitation, production and initial dissemination, we study the virality and assigned iconicity of the images of Omran Daqneesh. We thus take our point of departure in the following research question: How do certain images, as, for example, the ones of Omran Daqneesh, go viral in the digitalized and globalized media circuit and what meanings are attached to these proclaimed iconic images by the actors involved in their production and initial phases of mobilization?

In addressing this question, we argue that mobilization was driven by an intricate interplay between photographers, news organizations, political elites, NGOs and media users. Research has repeatedly emphasized that iconic imagery is characterized by an interpretive span between the authentic and the symbolic, between documentary value and emotional appeal (e.g. Brink, 2000; Hariman and Lucaites, 2007). Our interviews confirm this understanding, but also add more nuances. The actors involved in the production and initial mobilization did not see the images as both documentary and emotional, but rather ascribed the images either documentary or emotional value based on their roles: While the photographers primarily found the Omran Daqneesh images significant due to their testimony to a specific – albeit not unusual – episode of violence

against civilians in Aleppo, journalist and editors primarily focused on the emotional impact of the images.

Proceeding along five main sections, we start by presenting theoretical frameworks concerning, in the first section, the mobilization of iconic imagery in today's digitalized and globalized media landscape, and, in the second, the interpretive continuum of documentary evidence and emotional appeal applied to the iconic imagery of children. In the third section, we then set forth the methodological basis for the case study of the Omran Daqneesh images, which relies primarily on in-depth qualitative interviews with the actors involved in their production and mobilization. The analytical fourth section focuses on different phases and dimensions of the initial iconization process: We first detail the circumstances behind the taking and initial sharing of the Omran Daqneesh images before focusing on the contestation of the images by the political elites, the documentary significance attributed to the images by the photographers and their emotional appeal emphasized by journalists and editors. Finally, in the conclusion, we reflect on the dynamics between local contexts and global media networks in processes of iconization.

Iconic conflict imagery in the digital media circuit: New patterns of production and mobilization

Icon is a contested concept as it may be understood to refer to the inherent essentialist or universal qualities of an image (e.g. Drechsel, 2010; Kemp, 2012; Mortensen, 2016). We deploy the term to conceptualize how, through wide media circulation, particular images become visual frames of reference and are taken to symbolize e.g. the conflict in question. Research in the field has repeatedly highlighted that iconic images from conflict zones are distinguished by aesthetic simplicity and emotional appeal (e.g. Brink, 2000; Hariman and Lucaites, 2007; Mortensen, 2015; Perlmutter, 1998). They show scenes from the reality of war while also symbolizing abstract, decontextualized notions such as victimhood, hopelessness and despair. For this reason, they are often proclaimed to stand for or sum up the entirety of a conflict.

In this article, we show how – in contrast to the seemingly straightforward communication offered by the images of Omran Daqneesh and other iconic visuals – they are the result of intricate interplays between photographers, news organizations, NGOs, political elites and media users, all of whom, in different ways and for different reasons, contribute to the spreading of the images and determining their significance and meaning. Although political agendas driving mobilization processes also tended to be opaque in the analogue era, we argue that digital media have enforced the behind-the-scenes complexity for two major reasons. First, various actors, including 'ordinary' media users, play active roles in circulating the imagery and contribute to the framing processes, which were formerly shaped in the interaction between news organizations and political elites. Second, some recent images deemed iconic have been taken by residents who happened to be on location as violent events unfolded or have been taken by non- or semi-professional photographers with little training who nonetheless work to document conflict in organized and systematic ways. We are going to address these developments in turn.

The first development pertains to the mobilization of iconic imagery in today's connective media environment. This plays out in accordance with a pattern that has manifested itself on several occasions over the past few years (Mortensen, 2011, 2016). Apart from the Omran Daqneesh case, examples include the footage of Neda Agha Soltan, an Iranian woman shot during a demonstration in Tehran in 2009 (e.g. Mortensen, 2011, 2015; Stage, 2011) and the images of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian boy found drowned on a beach in Turkey in 2015 (e.g. Mortensen, 2017; Prøitz, 2018). The images attracting attention typically address topical crises or conflicts which have already been covered in the news media. In general, they are first disseminated on social media platforms before news organizations pick up the images – and the story of the images. At the same time, visual icons in the making are politically debated and contested on several levels, from social media users to political figureheads. Often, more than one image is widely circulated even though they are referred to in the singular and used more or less interchangeably (Assmann and Assmann, 2010). When news media become alert to the images, they declare them to be 'iconic' and publish stories both about the documented event and about how the images have achieved iconic status. News stories thus both confirm and play an active role in constructing icons: they cover and meta-cover at one and the same time (Mortensen, 2015).

Media users taking part in mobilization processes have added an element of unpredictability to which images achieve iconic status. For example, the images of Alan Kurdi were primarily published by news organizations *after* they were widely shared and commented upon on social media platforms; most news editors had initially decided against publishing the images of the dead child. Gillian Rose similarly stresses the element of chance involved in bottom-up mobilization of what she designates 'viral icons':

> Viral icons are those online images that gain millions of hits and should perhaps be understood less as resonant symptoms of social and cultural discourses and more as ludic play and experimentation, often silly but, in the prominence they gain, no less iconic for that. (Rose, 2015: 4)

'Viral icons' gaining wide resonance may not necessarily offer profound reflections of social and cultural discourses, as Rose indicates. However, the mundane or the popular should not per se be conflated with the 'silly'. Several examples have emerged in recent years of social media users engaging critically with and influencing the meaning ascribed to iconic images, for instance by taking part in debates or spreading playful or polemical memes (Boudana et al., 2017; Mortensen, 2017; Mortensen and Trenz, 2016; Olesen, 2018).

The second development concerns the networked modes of producing iconic imagery, which has received little attention from existing research (but see Mollerup and Mortensen, 2020). In particular, we would like to highlight the role performed by local non- and semi-professional photographers who, unlike staffed photographers, mostly do not have a default outlet for their images through agencies or directly through legacy news media. For this reason, networks and social media dissemination become crucial for whether and how their images will be shared and featured in the news media. Such photographers also differ from the 'accidental eyewitnesses' of individuals who happen

to be on location and record unfolding events in that they work continuously to develop skills, establish networks and solve technological and logistical challenges.

Local photographers in conflict situations often refer to a moral obligation and responsibility towards their communities when explaining their reasons for documenting conflict (Mollerup and Mortensen, 2020; Rafael, 2018). However, once their images are disseminated, these not only serve as moral imperatives and documentary evidence, but also become commodities upon entering commercial social media and media corporations. Photographers operate in accordance with both a moral economy and a capitalist economy, as Vincente Rafael writes in regard to photographers documenting extrajudicial state-orchestrated killings in the Philippine drug war:

> The photographer's 'job' of sharing his or her pictures means making them available to a global market for images. This requires turning the photographs into images comparable to and substitutable for other images. Comparability and substitutability renders photographs into commodities exchangeable for money. [. . .] As self-conscious witnesses to the crimes they cover, photojournalists participate in at least two kinds of economies: on one hand, the moral economy of mourning that seeks to re-humanize the victims and their families against the de-humanizing force of the State; and on the other hand, the capitalist economy that produces images for the global consumption of anonymous viewers. (Rafael, 2018; see also Rafael 2020)

This tension between moral and financial economies raises pressing questions regarding the security of photographers as well as the sustainability of their business models. As we have discussed elsewhere (Mollerup and Mortensen, 2020), local photographers in Aleppo are an apt example of this. They had access to documenting the conflict since they were already part of it as residents of the war-torn city – in fact, they had no choice to opt out. And yet their embeddedness in the conflict as local non- or semi-professional photographers also excluded them from obtaining the recognition, financial rewards and security measures granted to war photographers employed by media institutions.

Documentary value and emotional appeal in iconic imagery of children as ideal victims

While the use of mobile and social media put the traditional top-down mobilization of iconic imagery to the test, this does not automatically engender a change in the favoured motifs of iconic images. First of all, even if social media push the boundaries of what is deemed 'tolerably shocking' (Grant, 2015), news organizations, NGOs and others communicating humanitarian disasters have to strike a balance between documenting the gravity of the situation and not overstepping viewers' boundaries. Moreover, the most circulated images in the last few years have returned to the theme of children victimized by conflicts (e.g. Al-Ghazzi, 2019; Binder and Nadya Jaworsky, 2018; Mortensen et al., 2017; Prøitz, 2018), which is well-established in the history of photojournalism, especially through the World War II icon 'Boy in the Ghetto' (1943) (e.g. Magilow and Silverman, 2014; Raskin, 2004) and the Vietnam War icon of the young girl running away screaming after a napalm attack (e.g. Boudana et al., 2017; Hariman and Lucaites, 2007). This continues the tradition within humanitarian communication for using photographs of

children as a trope. As Wells (2008) contends, they 'have been at the heart of social reform campaigns since the nineteenth century' (p. 236).

The revisiting of this classical motif is foreseeable in light of the intertextuality characterizing iconic visuals (Hariman and Lucaites, 2007) or indeed their 'inter-iconicity' in referring to previous icons (Hansen, 2015: 277). They perpetually evoke familiar aesthetic and narrative frames and thereby also play upon well-known emotional responses and patterns of mobilization. As Cohen et al. (2018) contend, icons are 'important vehicles for collective memory' (p. 454). They look like images already familiar to the wider public through the news media as well as through popular culture and history. Children personify what has been referred to as 'ideal victims' (Seu, 2015; see also Al-Ghazzi, 2019). Depicted as innocent, passive, vulnerable and exposed to adult aggression, war icons of children signify civilian sacrifice and victimhood in between the factual and the symbolic, the historical and the general. They show children in a dramatic, simple and symbolically loaded manner, through which they become decontextualized and depoliticized from the specific circumstances and appeal to more general emotional responses of outrage, pity and compassion. At the same time, these images are anchored in actual events, which they serve to document and for which they also potentially provide legal evidence. The tension between documentary value and emotional appeal is central to the role and impact of visual icons of children. As the analysis of the Omran Daqneesh images shows, this tension may manifest itself in the distinct positions held by different actors with high stakes in the case.

Method

The empirical case study of the Omran Daqneesh imagery provides an example of the production and dissemination of images within a changing media circuit and illustrates what is at play for the different actors participating in these processes. Our study is based on qualitative interviews supplemented with digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2015). We approached photographers and others involved in the production and initial dissemination of the images by using email addresses and phone numbers obtained through our professional network as well as through Facebook, Twitter and various websites. One international journalist and one NGO worker did not respond to our request. We interviewed a total of 13 people. With one exception, all of our interviewees were male. Three of our interviewees were the photographers who had captured the videos and photographs of Omran Daqneesh. In addition, we interviewed two other local photographers from Aleppo; two of the few international journalists covering Aleppo from inside the city in the time leading up to 2016; two news agency photo editors; one news agency correspondent; and three NGO workers who collaborated with Syrian photographers. Three of the local photographers we interviewed were part of the citizen-driven media collective, Aleppo Media Center, which provided international news outlets with significant visual documentation of Aleppo when rebels controlled large parts of this city in the period from 2013 to 2016.

In our analysis, we focus primarily on the perspective of the photographers and the international journalists, while the other interviews provide background information. The interviews with the photographers centred on their work and working conditions in Aleppo

as well as their specific engagement with the images of Omran Daqneesh. Interviews with agency workers revolved around their work to obtain images from Aleppo when it was deemed too dangerous for their own staff to work in the city as well as their specific engagement with the Omran Daqneesh images. The interviews with international journalists focused on their work and collaborations inside Aleppo, while the interviews with the NGO workers paid attention to their work to support local media initiatives in Aleppo.

The interviews with the Aleppian photographers were carried out in the winter of 2017–2018. At this time, the photographers were living in exile inside and outside Syria, and the interviews were conducted under somewhat difficult circumstances. Interviews were held over Skype, often with unstable internet connections and supplemented by follow-up discussions via email and Messenger. One interview was carried out on Messenger. The interview situation was also complicated by linguistic difficulties as the local photographers we interviewed spoke Syrian Arabic, and one of the authors of this article conducted the interviews in non-native Egyptian Arabic. The interviews were recorded and then translated and transcribed into English by a professional translator. Quotes were later double-checked by another professional translator. The remaining interviews with editors, journalists and NGO workers were carried out face-to-face and over phone, again followed up by further correspondence. We subsequently coded all transcribed interviews to systematically identify the main themes.

The interviews were supported by digital ethnography through which we traced the early sharing of the images and the networks of people involved in the process. In our digital ethnography, we have been limited by our linguistic capabilities and have thus mainly accessed sites in English, Arabic and, to a lesser extent, Danish. In addition, we watched photographs and videos from Aleppo, particularly those made by the photographers we interviewed or in which they appeared. Some images were sent to us directly by interviewees to elaborate upon their answers. We have actively used these images in our interviews and follow-up conversations. This case study has also provided the basis for a previous article (Mollerup and Mortensen, 2020) on the roles assumed by the photographers, while the present article deals specifically with the iconic mobilization of the Omran Daqneesh imagery.

In this article, we name some of the local photographers we have interviewed even though they are in heightened danger because of their work. We do so with their acceptance. Moreover, they have already been named publicly and this also serves to recognize their contribution to documenting the war in Syria. Some names, however, are aliases used by the photographers for protection.

The production and mobilization of the Omran Daqneesh imagery

This analytical section is divided into four subsections in order to focus on the driving forces and interests behind the different phases in the initial mobilization of the Omran Daqneesh imagery. We first detail the production and dissemination, before focusing on the contestation of the images by political elites, the documentary significance attributed to the images by the photographers and their emotional appeal emphasized by journalists and editors.

Production and dissemination

The images of Omran Daqneesh exemplify how iconic visuals are usually mobilized when public attention is already aimed at the given situation through sustained media attention. In the summer of 2016, after 5 years of war in Syria, regime forces besieged parts of Eastern Aleppo, which were controlled by armed groups opposed to the government, including the Free Syrian Army. Syrian and Russian forces carried out intense aerial bombardments. International news media were consistently covering the situation. However, due to the dangers of the war, they refrained from sending staffed journalists or photographers into the city or into the country in general. They relied instead on local non- or semi-professional photographers and media workers for their ongoing coverage.

On the evening of 17 August 2016, airstrikes were continually hitting the rebel-held part of Aleppo. One strike hit the Qatarji area, reducing the main part of a residential building to rubble. Photographers, civil defence workers from the White Helmets and paramedics rushed to the site as bombs were still falling. They were guided by instructions from White Helmets 'spotters' over walkie-talkie sets. As they reached the site, war planes were still roaring above them, making people on the ground fear secondary strikes. A family was trapped in the ruins. After a long and difficult rescue mission, the first person to emerge from the rubble was the young boy Omran Daqneesh.

At least four people filmed Daqneesh. With some compositional variations, the images we have been able to access are similar in quality and content. The boy is sitting in an ambulance in an orange chair. To his left and right both, there is ambulance equipment, which is coloured in slightly different shades of orange. His feet are bare, and his hands rest in his lap. One side of his face is covered in blood, while the other side is covered in dust. His hair and body are also covered in dust. Daqneesh's face bears an expression that could be regarded as either emotionless or grave. In some versions of the images, Daqneesh's sister and brother are sitting with him in the ambulance. While the different versions of the image are fairly similar, they were not spread in equal measure. The most widely shared images were the video and stills from the video filmed by Mostafa Sarout from the Aleppo Media Center (Figure 1) as well as photographs taken by Mahmoud Raslan. A video recorded by Ammar Jaber, a staff correspondent at Orient News, was published in a report the day after the attack but barely spread beyond his own news outlet. This report is no longer available online, and Jaber does not possess the video himself. Raslan and Sarout immediately spread their images on WhatsApp groups and on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms. Moreover, they shared them with other individuals on the ground, including doctors treating Daqneesh at the makeshift hospital, who further shared the images on WhatsApp groups. In the following hours, the images were spread widely on social media platforms. From then on, dissemination and mobilization conformed to the pattern known from other recent iconic visuals.

Even though the earliest postings of the images reached and were shared by international journalists through social media, news organizations refrained from immediate publication. They only published the video and stills of Omran Daqneesh after these had gone viral. On the day after the attack, 18 August (Aleppo time), journalists began calling agencies to ask for the images they had seen on social media. The images were shown by a vast array of television stations across the globe, including CNN (USA), Al

Figure 1. Photo credit: Mustafa Alsaroot.

Jazeera (Qatar), TRT World (Turkey), DR (Denmark) and Caracol (Columbia). On the following day, 19 August, the images were published by newspapers across the globe, including *The Guardian* (UK), *Algomhuriyya* (Egypt), *El País* (Spain), *The New York Times* (US) and *O Globo* (Brazil). The Omran Daqneesh imagery was thus spread extensively across media platforms.[2]

Political contestation

The images quickly became the target of intense and conflicting political interests (see also Al-Ghazzi, 2019). Western news organizations and politicians used the images to highlight the tragic situation in Aleppo, with some calling for action. Meanwhile, pro-regime Syrian and Russian news media and state representatives contested the validity of the images in different ways. When confronted with Omran Daqneesh's image in an interview with German broadcaster SRF, Syrian president Bashar Al Assad quickly dismissed it as forged and claimed that two images had been merged (SRF News, 2016). In contrast, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov conceded in an interview with CNN's Christiane Amanpour that 'it's really a tragedy' and asserted that civilians 'must insist that the moderates who want to protect them separate themselves from [The] Nusra [Front]', thereby turning the blame and responsibility onto civilians (CNN, 2016a). Pro-Assad journalist Beeley (2018 [2017]), writing for Russian RT, described the image as staged, arguing that another boy had been in the chair but had been replaced in favour of 'the smaller and cuter Omran'. Meanwhile, on another international political front of the war, attention to the image increased when then US president Barack Obama mentioned Omran Daqneesh in a speech held at the UN Leaders' Summit on Refugees after a 6-year old American boy wrote him a letter asking permission for his family to adopt Omran (e.g. Corkery, 2016).

The individuals who had been behind or before the lens – the photographers and the people depicted in the photographs – were also pulled into this political contestation. One of the photographers was reproached for alleged dubious connections with armed or terrorist groups. Moreover, Omran Daqneesh's family was drawn into the political dispute when asked by international media organizations, Syrian opposition groups and regime media to tell its side of the story, which it mainly refused to do. In the summer of 2017, the family was eventually interviewed by regime-friendly and state news media. While its story did not dispute the validity of the image, the family suggested that it was unclear whether Russia or Syria was responsible for the attack. However, the family's statements should be read with the reservation that, as Sam Gregory (2015) has argued, there can be detrimental consequences to critical testimonies in Syria. The contestation of the Omran Daqneesh imagery by political figureheads and the media attests to the ascribed symbolic importance of iconic images in that they are able to frame a given war in the news media and impact international political opinion.

One of thousands of pictures: Documenting everyday atrocity

To the photographers, the images did not stand out from others that they took on a daily basis or from the thousands of other images documenting civilian suffering and death in Aleppo. They mainly attached documentary value to them as testimony to the atrocities of war. The images only became distinguished to them once they went viral and were assigned broad importance and shareability.

The production and initial spread of the Omran Daqneesh imagery was an outcome of sustained efforts by the non- or semi-professional photographers to document war crimes in order to make the outside world aware of the grave situation in Aleppo. These efforts explain why the images could be taken in the first place on the streets of what was at the time perhaps the most dangerous city in the world and why they reached the front pages of the international news media. As mentioned above, the video of Omran Daqneesh was filmed by Sarout from Aleppo Media Center, which grew out of the initial uprising and turned into an important source for international news organizations because it reported from inside Aleppo. Sarout's profile and working conditions are characteristic of the photographers included in this case study. He had no formal photojournalistic training when the war broke out, however, he received some from the Aleppo Media Center. While the centre obtained support from international NGOs, its budget remained very limited. In order to attract the widest possible audience, the Aleppo Media Center had reached agreements that international photo agencies could use their work without financial compensation. Accordingly, news agencies were able to use the Omran Daqneesh video and stills as handouts from the Aleppo Media Center's YouTube, Facebook and Twitter accounts. At this point, the Aleppo Media Center had already built up trust and a followership based on its consistent coverage of events in Aleppo (for more details, see Mollerup and Mortensen, 2020). The position of two of the photographers, Raslan and Sarout, as non- or semi-professional photographers is also crucial in this regard. Since they were not contracted by a news organization seeking to commercialize images, the photographers retained copyright of the photos and this left to them the decision of whether to share their images with their social media friends and followers rather than an editor.

While most of our interviewees expressed their surprise at the iconization of this precise image, the photographers themselves most strongly vocalized this point. As Raslan stressed, this was, quite literally, 'only one of thousands of pictures':

> I didn't know that this picture, which was only one out of thousands [of] pictures that had been taken in the Syrian revolution, was going to cause an uproar and influence people and inform them that there are people who are being exterminated, dying, being bombarded and starving. . . .every day as a minimum – when I go out and cover areas where artillery attacks are happening and injuries taking place – I see around 30–40 injured children like Omran.

Raslan's recollections indicate that the photographers found neither the events depicted nor the images themselves to be unusual or remarkable. An injured child and their work to document and share photographs and videos had become an everyday endeavour in the years' long war. Sarout accounted for his astonishment at the wide spread of the image along similar lines:

> Well, I published it on social media in the beginning. And like I told you, I didn't know that the picture was going to be so widely distributed, or that it would become this famous. Every day I was documenting, I was filming tens of children or tens of families who were being hit by strikes daily in Aleppo.

The photographers thus relayed what they experienced as a somewhat arbitrary relationship between the steady, daily mass circulation of images and individual images suddenly going viral.

The photographers' surprise at the massive interest spurred by the images of Omran Daqneesh was matched by their astonishment that many of their other images of death and suffering did not stir people to action or even gain notice. All of the photographers and media workers we interviewed emphasized that they had documented and seen documentation of atrocities far worse than the Omran Daqneesh imagery. As Aleppo Media Center producer and photographer Kareem Abeed made clear: 'We, the Aleppo Media Center, have documented greater crimes, documented more dreadful events and also documented moments that were harsher than these moments'. Raslan explained that even if the imagery of Omran Daqneesh evoked emotions, it did not account for or represent the nature and scale of the war crimes committed in Aleppo:

> However, the picture of the child Omran was the only one that evoked feelings in people. People didn't see the thousands of other children who died in Syria. They didn't see the women who were dying with their children still in their womb, not even 7 months old inside his mother's womb. . . .So, I didn't at any time expect that people would look at the picture of Omran and be affected by it because there are thousands of children who suffer in the same way on a daily basis as Omran did.

Another source of surprise for the photographers was the emotional investment in the images, which, in their perception, primarily served as testimony of the specific incident and not as a symbolic representation of the suffering of civilians. When the Aleppo Media Center posted the video on its YouTube account at 22:12 Aleppo time on the night

of the bombing, it was accompanied by a factual text, 'The first sights of an attack by warplanes believed to be Russian on the neighbourhood, Qatarji' (Aleppo Media Center, 2016). The Aleppo Media Center thus accentuated the documentary value, which Raslan also highlighted:

> So the regime could not absolve itself of the bombing, because the site was filmed and it was evident from the pictures that it was Russian planes since the bombing site was huge. I filmed it and documented it and everyone saw it.

This tension between documentary content and emotional appeal is crucial to understanding why the imagery went viral to the surprise of the photographers who took part in its production and the early phases of its dissemination.

Emotional appeal and tolerably shocking atrocities

As the photographers were mainly concerned with the war victims, they were puzzled that the images of Omran Daqneesh attracted more attention than images of graver incidents. Meanwhile, the journalists and editors we interviewed focused on the images holding an emotional impact on viewers and being within the confines of the 'tolerably shocking' (Grant, 2015). As an agency photo editor explained, this combination was the driver behind the virality: 'It was shared because it touches people, it is human and it is not bloody'.[3] Beirut bureau chief for *The New York Times* Anne Barnard, who took part in the initial spreading of the Omran Daqneesh images on social media, similarly emphasized in our interview with her: 'I picked out Omran and put him on Facebook because that picture touched me. And I guess other people did so too'. In her Facebook entry, Barnard reflects on the emotional impact of this particular imagery on remote viewers:

> Omran, 5, pulled from rubble and treated for a head injury in an airstrike on Qaterji neighborhood in rebel held east Aleppo, according to doctors there. We can get numb seeing dead and injured children remotely day after day, but some pix particularly get to the mom in me and this is one. The orange chair. The expression. I want to give him a hug. Many kids come in without any family member by their side. I hope his are alive and can come soon.[4]

Barnard alludes to the way in which certain images breach the 'compassion fatigue' (Moeller, 1999) of distant and mainly Western spectators watching mediated suffering every day because they create viewer identification, in this instance by appealing to 'the mom in me'. The position of 'emotional observers' (Mortensen and Trenz, 2016), mirroring their own lives in an empathetic reaction to images, constitutes a recurrent response to mediated suffering.

Like the photographers taking the images, Barnard emphasized that they were far from the most violent ones to come out of the war in Syria. However, in contrast to the photographers, she maintains that this is precisely the reason why reporters personally affected by their behind-the-scenes access to photographs from the war in Syria would post these images:

> Journalists who cover Syria, we have been psychologically affected. I don't know anyone who has not been traumatized by talking to people and just by seeing the constant stream of these

images. Even when I am on my couch in my safe and comfortable life in Beirut, I have a variety of images flowing through of children's bodies disconnected in different ways that you cannot imagine they could be. . . .We are not going to share these images. But Alan [Kurdi] looked like he's sleeping, Omran looks like he could be your own kid who's just been in a minor car accident. So you are not being forced to see something unseeable. It is something people can bear to look at. The reason the image [of Omran Daqneesh] went viral certainly has to do with the fact that you are not looking at a dead Omran; he does not have his leg hanging from him.

Once again, Barnard suggested that the images might invite audience identification because Omran Daqneesh 'could be your own kid', and that they went viral because they offer what Grant refers to as 'safe emotional distance' (Grant, 2015: 64). This accords with children represented in iconic images as 'ideal victims' foregrounding abstract notions of civilian suffering and despair as opposed to factual information about specific events. While the photographers focused on the images of Omran Daqneesh as documentation of a specific incident, the international journalists focused on the symbolic impact of the images.

Even if Barnard and other journalists posted the images on Facebook, it should be kept in mind that their social media presence constitutes an integral part of their professional vocation and identity – not least due to their thousands of followers. Journalists taking to social media underscore the blurring of personal and professional boundaries to enhance 'visibility and affects' (Pantti, 2019: 124). On social media platforms, journalists adhere to what van Dijck and Poell (2013) have termed 'social media logics' and this, as Mervi Pantti rightly contends, 'encourages subjective voices and personal expression in order to generate emotional engagement' (Pantti, 2019: 126). She argues that social media practices have further developed the well-established personalized approach in conflict reporting when journalists cross the line between objectivity and advocacy to 'take a moral stance, raise awareness about the consequences of war and create sympathy for victims' (Pantti, 2019: 127). In this case, Barnard and other journalists deployed different strategies. They engaged with the emotional impact of the Omran Daqneesh imagery on social media. Meanwhile, in the news media, they meta-reflected on the emotional response and ensuing virality that they themselves had played an active part in creating and promoting. As Barnard recounted:

> I think I was one of the first people to share it on social media, so maybe I was part of making it go viral, but I didn't actually write about it till later. So 24 hours later when we saw how it was going viral I said, ok, I have to write about it.

A typical pattern in the news coverage was to deploy the double approach of running the story and the meta-story simultaneously and thus follow the typical pattern of concurrently reproducing and producing the visual icon narratively. When the image was published in *The New York Times*, Barnard's (2016) accompanying story, 'How Omran Daqneesh, 5, Became a Symbol of Aleppo's Suffering', was less about the event depicted than a meta-story about the spread and impact of the image. Another example of meta-coverage surfaced when CNN turned it into a story and an anchor broke into tears on screen when she presented the story of Omran Daqneesh (CNN, 2016b). In this manner, the initial documentary value attributed to the imagery by the photographers was overlaid by the

emotional appeal manifest in its spread by social media users, including journalists. News stories, in contrast, were driven by the collectively ascribed importance of the image.

Conclusion

By studying the production and early mobilization of a visual icon through interviews with central actors involved in taking and sharing the images of Omran Daqneesh, we have shown that the mobilization process was characterized by different actors attaching shifting meanings to these images. The local photographers mainly attributed the images with documentary value and did not reckon that they stood out in this regard. To the photographers facing death and destruction on a daily basis, the sensitivities of distant viewers did not constitute significant measures of their work. However, the images striking an emotional chord turned out to be the driver behind their virality. The subsequently attributed journalistic value of the images was therefore less about their documentation of a specific incident than about the sentiments that the images evoked. They were journalistically framed as part of a continuing story about watching the war in Syria from afar rather than about the war itself.

Through these shifting meanings and foregrounded values, the images' iconization emerged as part coincidental effect and part deliberate effort by photographers, media organizations, journalists and editors in continuation of their working routines and networks established over the years of covering the war in Syria. By focusing on the early stages of production and dissemination, we have analysed the added complexities of mobilization processes brought about by new actors such as non- and semi-professional photographers as well as through digital media networks. In so doing, we have also drawn attention to the dynamics between local contexts and global media circulation. Visual icons are deeply embedded in local contexts in terms of the specific events being recorded and the photographers working on location in their own neighbourhood to document war crimes and other atrocities. On the other hand, they are circulated via existing and emerging global networks, which shape their virality by the emotional investment in the images.

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Notes

1. Omran Daqneesh was described as 5 years old at the time his image went viral in August 2016. However, in interviews from June 2017, almost a year after, Daqneesh presented himself as being 4 years old. He was thus either three or four at the time of the attack.
2. A Google image reverse search conducted in June 2019 threw up more than 25 billion hits.
3. This quote is from an informal interview and we do not have permission to quote the interviewee by name.
4. https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10153799605626439&set=a.101503512712614 39.345143.600051438&type=3&theater (last accessed 18 February 2020).

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