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# The shared story of #JeSuisAylan on Twitter

## Story participation and stancetaking in visual small stories

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Despite an increased interest in the discourse representations of refugees in the media, little attention has been paid so far to the circulation and uptake of such portrayals in social media. This article addresses this gap by examining networked users' reactions to the iconic image of Alan Kurdi, which quickly turned into a shared story. By analyzing story frames, i.e. orientations to the Storyrealm, the Taleworld, or the Outside world (De Fina 2016) in multimodal posts (dated September 3rd 2015), which feature the hashtag #JeSuisAylan, we show how hashtags, comments, and images combine into *visual small stories* (Georgakopoulou 2016) that prompt acts of affective and narrative stancetaking. Our analysis calls attention to stancetaking as embedded in storytelling activities and calls for extending the critical examination of discourse representations to the study of their uptake in practices of story participation online.

**Keywords:** refugee crisis, small stories, stancetaking, story frames, participation

### 1. Introduction

Visual communication is key in emerging practices and genres in social media – also known as *connective media* (van Dijck 2013). As shown in the Special Issue on *Social Media and the Visual* (Adami and Jewitt 2016), socially significant uses of static, moving, and animated images and memes – in various combinations with other resources, such as text, emoji, and hashtags – afford increased opportunities for identity construction and participation across private and public spheres. At the same time, such uses extend domains of control in online environments. This double-edged nature of visuality in social media calls for nuanced

understandings of its potential and limits relating to the production and sharing of social meaning.

Visualizations of suffering in social media, in particular, constitute critical sites for investigating how social meanings linked to political notions of humanity, pity, empathy, and solidarity are being (re)produced, disseminated, and taken up. As Chouliaraki et al. (2019, 308) argue: “Mediated visualities of suffering are always bound up in relations of power that have a direct impact on our conception of ‘humanity’, on who is/is not considered human and under what circumstances”. In other words, visualizations of suffering relate to questions of the aesthetics and ethics of mourning, witnessing, and public action.

A case in point is the wide circulation of an image depicting the lifeless body of a three-year old boy, Alan Kurdi, lying on a shore of Bodrum in Turkey. His family had fled their country of residence, Syria, seeking to cross from the Middle East to Europe and eventually reach Canada. Having settled for some time in Turkey, the family tried to reach Kos from Bodrum on an inflatable boat, designed for a maximum of eight people, which sailed at night, carrying sixteen passengers. The boat capsized in open sea resulting in the boy’s drowning, along with his mother, Rehanna, brother Ghalib and others on board, and adding to the toll of 3,770 people who lost their lives during migration to Europe in 2015 (IOM 2015). The image of the boy’s lifeless body, part of a series of photographs by Turkish journalist Nilüfer Demir for the Dogan New Agency, was shared on Twitter by Peter Bouckaert of Human Rights Watch (Walsh 2015) and very quickly turned into an iconic image. The boy became, thus, the face of human tragedy, initially as *Aylan*, after his name was misspelt in initial news reports.<sup>1</sup> The wide circulation of the image, along a series of related images from this event, which took place on the 2nd December 2015, has arguably contributed to a shift in the framing of the debate about *migrants* to a debate about *refugees* (Vis and Goriunova 2015, 10). It has also played a role in reframing the so-called *refugee crisis* as a *political crisis*, drawing attention to the inadequacy of institutions and systems to cope with the increased numbers of people entering the European Union (Blommaert 2015). The impact of these images on political agency has attracted not only media attention, but also scholarly interest. Goriunova (2015, 5), for example, foregrounded the intricate connections between existing regimes of visibility and social media publishing, while Ibrahim (2018) noted how reworkings of Alan’s photographs as memes produced a “sensorium” – a “necro-aesthetics” where death, disaster, and bodies become part of new aesthetic modes, transgressing political as well as ethical boundaries.

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1. In this article, we will refer to the boy as Alan, unless quoting directly from Twitter users’ posts.

This article contributes to research on mediated visualities of suffering based on the examination of the circulation of the image of Alan Kurdi as part of shared stories on Twitter. Shared stories, which are produced, consumed, and reproduced at large scales fostering particular ways of representing events, people, and places, have been recognized as a distinct online genre (Page 2018). The analysis of shared stories in this article draws on the practice approach to narrative (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012) also known as *small stories*, which foregrounds aspects of the stories' multi-semioticity, transportability, and contextually shifting meanings (Georgakopoulou 2015a).

The transportability of stories relies on multiple recontextualizations of selected aspects of the story by different people, who draw on platform-specific semiotic affordances for sharing. As Georgakopoulou (2015b) has shown in the analysis of the transposition of a critical incident event from Greek national TV, where it was broadcast, to online platforms, and especially YouTube, the story of the incident disseminated widely through different resemitizations by a variety of journalists, commentators, and ordinary people and created particular narrative stances to the events and characters. These stances were found to be closely linked to platform-specific affordances and the political affiliations of selected audiences, signalling selected aspects of context as relevant for the assessment of events and characters. Despite the potential of this wide circulation of the story to bring forth an array of interpretative meanings, its spectacular dissemination ended up, in fact, closing up possible meanings and interpretations.

Georgakopoulou's analysis foregrounds the importance of (i) aspects of a story's transportability and (ii) stancetaking as a central part of narrative activity. These insights inform the approach taken in the present study of story participation and stancetaking patterns in the shared story of Alan Kurdi's death on Twitter. Stancetaking is understood broadly as "a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field" (DuBois 2007, 163). As we argue in this case, stancetaking is intricately connected to the story frames that emerge in Twitter reactions to the shared story of the life and death of Alan Kurdi.

A narrative practice approach, like the one taken in this article, is well calibrated for clarifying salient elements of the shared story with a focus on the specific *story frames*, which shape – and are shaped by – participants' selections and reworkings of images and the evaluative comments that accompany these. The identification of story frames is based on the categories of *Taleworld* ("the world where characters move and live") and *Storyrealm* ("the storytelling event at the center of which the taleworld lies"). These categories are drawn from

Young's (1987) distinction of the two realms involved when people are telling stories and the recognition that these realms make for different story frame types. These either bracket a discourse activity as a story (*Taleworld*) or reveal attitudes towards the story or the storytelling event (*Storyrealm*) (De Fina 2016, 479). This narrative lens on discourses of refugees in (inter)action with a focus on the production and reproduction of story frames helps to pinpoint the specific kinds of acts of stancetaking and positioning created by and for sharers. More broadly, it helps to clarify the dynamics of interaction and participation online.

The article is organized as follows: the first section selectively overviews research on media representations of refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants (henceforth RASIMs; see Khosravini 2009) and provides the background to the article's analytic use of frames. The second section presents the data and methods for the study, alongside the research questions and coding scheme used. The third section offers the findings of the analysis: we present the story frames, both verbal and visual, which we have identified in our data, and show how these connect to acts of stancetaking online. In the final section, we assess our findings with respect to the (re)production and uptake of discourse representations of RASIMs in online contexts.

### 1.1 Previous research on media representations of refugee

Previous research on representations of RASIMs has largely focused on the study of discourse representations in the news, particularly print news, given that these are more easily amenable to the compilation of corpora and analysis. The significant body of work produced in this area is based on the recognition that media play a key role in establishing specific frames for the interpretation and assessment of current realities relating to refugees and, consequently, in affecting public opinion and sentiment towards people in suffering. A recurrent finding in these critical approaches to the study of media representations of RASIMs is the reproduction of negative perceptions, which results in the 'othering' of these social groups and their dehumanization in public discourse (Gabrielatos and Baker 2008).

Dehumanizing discourse further sediments existing negative representations of RASIMs and creates feelings of contempt for them and their lives (Esses et al. 2013). Some of these pervasive negative representations include their discourse construction as a "threat" or an "invader" to "national borders", neglecting the realities that motivate migration in the first place. Ruth Wodak (2015), more specifically, points to representations of refugees as a threat to "the national body" in both right-wing and mainstream discourse about refugees in Europe. Male refugees, in particular, have been the target of bias and negative categorizations as

“rapists” or “terrorists”. These are often fronted as justifications for populist movements that get disseminated via slogans, such as #RefugeesNOTwelcome (Walker et al. 2016).

From 2015 onwards, however, the increased negativity surrounding the discourse about refugees and the dehumanizing images in circulation has been countered to a significant extent by more positive and sympathetic portrayals. For example, shifts from the representation of migrants as “fortune seekers” or “adventurers” to “innocent victims” or “vulnerable”, “tragic asylum seekers” in need of support and assistance have been noted by a host of researchers (Blommaert 2015; Parker 2015; Gualda and Rebollo 2016; Smith Dahmen et al. 2018). This shift to more positive representations is largely achieved through the use of human stories (Steimel 2010; Hickerson and Dunsmore 2015; Cooper et al. 2016). For example, Smith Dahmen et al. (2018) report high emotional and sympathetic reactions to images of refugee children, including Alan Kurdi. Other scholars have pointed to the expression of strong political emotional reactions, directing blame to national targets, governments and humanity (Mortensen 2017; Olesen 2017).

At the same time, however, emotions of fear, hostility and the belief that borders ought to be closed continue to occupy a prevalent place in public discourse (Chouliaraki and Stolić 2017). These different portrayals underline the continuous shifts in the framing of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in media narratives. As Georgiou and Zaborowski (2017) note in their study of print media across eight European countries, the emphasis on tolerance, solidarity, and humanitarianism in September 2015 quickly gave way to discourses of securitization and fear in November 2015.

The large bulk of media studies and critical discourse analyses of representations of RASIMs has tended to foreground aspects of these representations as discourse products. In other words, the focus of these studies is placed on the recurrent lexical, grammatical and discourse choices – mostly verbal – which create specific ways of talking about refugees and of interpreting events and realities relating to them, i.e. producing different types of frames.

More recent work in critical discourse studies has considered aspects of multimodality (Machin and Mayr 2012; van Leeuwen 2008) in relation to photo-journalism (Chouliaraki and Stolić 2019; Caple 2013), highlighting how news photos also carry meaning and how they engage and position readers attitudinally (Economou 2014; Bouko this issue). There is still ample scope for investigations of how such multimodal aspects combine with narrative practices in online contexts, especially given the fact that in media and critical discourse studies, the concept of narrative is often used metaphorically, broadly referring to ideologies (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012).

In this article, we are interested in how representations of RASIMs are reworked into visual representations producing and reproducing specific kinds of frames, which guide the further circulation of stories and sedimentation of particular stances to them in connective media. The next section discusses in more detail the concept of frames.

## 1.2 Approaches to frames

The notion of *frames* is used in different ways across disciplines, with no consensus over its definition or the methods for its study, except perhaps for its recognition as an important concept in the study of representation, meaning, and the organization of social experience (cf. Goffman 1974). Among these different approaches, specific types of frames, including *news*, *discourse (or cultural)*, and *interactional* frames have emerged as the object of study for media and cultural studies scholars, critical discourse analysts, and interactional sociolinguists, respectively.

The study of discourse representations in the media often draws – directly or indirectly – on *news frames*, defined in terms of specific configurations of verbal and visual information that propose particular angles on what the issue is about, how it can be addressed, and who is responsible for creating and for doing something about it (Tewksbury 2015). The concept of *discourse frames*, which has also been applied to the study of media representations emphasizes cognitive aspects of frames as “knowledge representations about the world” (van Dijk 1977, 19). These approaches to frames tend to restrict analysis to the investigation of topics and language choices and to pay little attention to the way these discourse representations are negotiated in everyday interaction. As Fisher (1997, n.p.) notes, “scholars cannot identify frames by counting the appearance of key words and phrases, or by specific argumentative structures. Instead, one must look for storylines about what is to be comprehended.” In addition to storylines, it is also important to look at interaction and story participation patterns.

From an interactional perspective, frames are conceived of as situated orientations of participants to a discursive context, which makes meaningful interaction possible or explains communication breakdowns; recognizing, for example, whether something is said as a joke or as a serious comment is key for successful communication. In other words, frames are understood as “part of the interpretive means by which participants understand or disambiguate utterances and other forms of communicative behaviour”, including aspects of metacommunication (Jaworski and Coupland 2006, 28–29). Frames also refer to participants’ *stancetaking*, i.e. the way participants in conversation shift their stance in response to new or changing situations and to “the alignment participants take up to them-

selves and others in the situation” (Tannen and Wallat 2006, 363). As Coupland and Ylänné (2006) suggest, frames can be also investigated as a process through which societies reproduce meaning (cf. Goffman 1974). This understanding of frames points to their importance as acts of stancetaking, which shape – and are shaped by – participants’ political, social, or cultural positioning in specific discourse domains.

Acts of stancetaking in interaction are not solely speaker-centred language phenomena associated with an individual user’s linguistic choices. Rather, they are: (1) *sequential* in that the act of taking a stance often becomes a target for the next speaker’s stance, (2) *dialogical*, as stances emerge in and through interactional co-participation and (3) *discursive*, in that acts of stancetaking are embedded in other communicative acts, such as conversing, arguing, or narrating (see Du Bois 2007, 140).

In order to apply this more interactional concept of frames and stancetaking to the study of story participation patterns in social media communication, we start from the widely established distinction in narrative analysis between the *taleworld*, that is the world where characters move and live, and the *storyrealm*, that is the storytelling event at the centre of which the taleworld lies, which is, in turn, embedded in a conversation (or in other kinds of communicative practices). According to Young (1987) the storyrealm and taleworld echo Goffman’s (1974, 21) notion of frames in that they work as “schemata of interpretation” used by people “to locate, perceive, identify, and label events and occurrences to understand participants’ perspectives on stories” (De Fina 2016, 479). Story frames are, in essence, the sites where participants’ stancetaking and positioning are articulated, and thus constitute key sites for the study of stancetaking as embedded in narrative practice.

In the present study of Twitter reactions to the shared story of the life and death of Alan Kurdi, we are interested in identifying the salient elements of the story and storytelling event that draw participants’ attention and evaluative comments and create specific kinds of stancetaking and positioning for sharers. We argue that the narrative practice lens is necessary for moving beyond the identification of ‘static’ discourse representations, be they negative or positive, and consider instead the ongoing (re)constitution of discourse representations in (inter)action as an integral part of meaning-making and positioning practices. The next section presents the data for this study and the methods we have used to collect and handle them.



## 2. Data and methods

In our previous work we combined small stories (Georgakopoulou 2015; 2016) with visual semiotics (van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2000) to examine how two iconic images – the image of Alan Kurdi and Omran Daqneesh – portraying children’s death and injury, respectively, were rescripted for sharing. This mode of rescripting was shown to be instrumental in the creation of a visual story in-the-making, which involved the selection, representation, visual arrangement and emplotment of key characters in time and place in the (narrative) space of an image. We pointed out how the ecstatic sharing of these images prompted public emotional responses in the here-and-now calling for ‘our’ benevolent taking of action within an emerging political spectacle and extending the mediatization of the refugee crisis online (Giaxoglou and Spilioti 2018). In this article we extend our analysis of the refugee crisis story as a shared story-in-the-making by focusing on the hashtag story #JeSuisAylan on Twitter. Our aim is to probe further into the circulation and uptake of discourse representations of refugees in story participation practices online.

The data we have analysed have been extracted from Twitter. There are two main ways of extracting data from Twitter, each of which comes with its own merits and challenges. The first one involves the use of APIs (Application Programme Interfaces) and the second one the use of third-party applications, which are “built on the Twitter platform by external developers, and are not owned or operated by Twitter” (Twitter [no date]a). The advantages of using Twitter APIs is that they are free and they follow Twitter’s terms of service; they are however, time-consuming, while they only yield a limited amount of posts (only 1%). Third-party Applications, also known as archives, allow the full collection of posts (100%). Data extracted by Twitter’s APIs is subjected to the UK Data Protection Act (UK Legislation 1998). For reasons of data compliance and also convenience, we preferred to use Twitter APIs. Using the Twitter’s API we searched for the hashtag #JeSuisAylan. We chose the hashtag #JeSuisAylan as a key hashtag around which other related hashtags are used including hashtags that invoke other (social) media events, such as the attacks at the Charlie Hebdo offices in 2015. The choice of the hashtag in the data collection process has also been motivated by its recognition as a metadiscursive and metanarrative resource (Giaxoglou 2018) and a resource for claiming affect (Pizzaro Pedraza and de Cock this issue). The use of hashtags is of interest as hashtags create and make widely available frames for the interpretation of events as well as positions towards them. The choice of the tweets yielded a multi-lingual corpus of posts in French, English, Spanish, and other languages, which highlights the globalizing dimension of sharing this hashtag.

Results were extracted to an excel spreadsheet including the images attached as well as replies and comments. By inserting codes for each post, we conducted the analysis using Excel filters which reveal selected coded categories. We have retrieved 613 tweets covering the period between September 2 and May 31, 2016. We focussed, more specifically, on the analysis of the tweets retrieved from the 3rd September (i.e. the day following the boy's death), as one third of the tweets were posted on that date alone (182 tweets), when Alan's photo also featured on the majority of Western media. Given that the retrieved tweets were recovered using Twitter's API from one of the researchers' personal Twitter accounts, the collection of posts cannot be seen as fully representative of other users. And yet, this filtered sample of tweets, arguably, provides useful insights into general trends in the circulation of visual stories of the refugee crisis and the key modes of story participation by networked users.

## 2.1 Coding scheme and research questions

In this article we look at acts of stancetaking embedded in story frames in the context of online participation to the shared hashtag story #JeSuisAylan. Our research questions are the following:

1. how do networked users participate to the hashtag story #JeSuisAylan?
2. how do these participation patterns relate to existing media representations of refugees?

To address these questions, we look for the different story frames produced and reproduced through acts of stancetaking taken in the process of participating to the shared story. To identify these frames, we draw on Anna De Fina's analysis of YouTube users' comments (De Fina 2016). In her study De Fina examined participation roles in digital storytelling as they relate to the range of frames available in an interaction.

The comments analyzed by De Fina are somewhat different to the material examined here given that they revolve around a monologic, 'big' story that had been shared in video format by *Charlamagne Tha God*, a radio host and TV personality in the US, and then reposted on Gawker titled "This is an amazing story about Rihanna partying". We focus, instead, on a 'small' story, in the sense of a transportable, seemingly fragmented, distributed and condensed story of an iconic death shared via images and their accompanying comments. Despite this difference in the story format of our data, the patterns of participation in which these comments are produced and shared are similar in that they are intricately linked to platform-specific affordances of commenting in polylogal (Page 2018) or poly-storying (Georgakopoulou and Giaxoglou 2018) contexts, where comments

may be physically adjacent but not necessarily referentially and explicitly connected to each other. For the analysis of tweets, we use Young’s (1987) types of story frames with a focus on “the *taleworld*, the *storyrealm*, or the *external world outside the interaction*” (De Fina 2016, 479); this analytical framework has been selected for pinpointing how comments are discursively connected through the production and reproduction of particular types of frames.

For the coding of our data, we marked individual posts for three different categories noting (1) details about each post (date and time stamp, username, content, interactivity metrics), (2) social media activity type and (3) story frame type. With respect to the details we noted about each post (coding 1), in order to ensure the anonymization of posts usernames recorded in the initial coding were deleted at a later stage.

The content of the post refers to the tweet’s content including message and hashtags, and any hyperlinks that may have been part of the post. In the case of hyperlinked content, we sought to retrieve the image, cross-linked tweet or news article, where possible (i.e. unless hyperlinks were broken links when we accessed them).

Acknowledging that we communicate through “culturally recognized activities” with identifiable goals among community members (Levinson 1979, 69), the coding for social media activity type was aimed at providing an insight into the different types of sharing users select from when participating in an unfolding Twitter ‘conversation’ and it is summarized in Table 1. *Commenting* refers to posts that feature user-created content in its own right or added to reshared content. Posts that feature one or more hashtags or hyperlinks to an image, a news article, or other social media profiles without any added comment to them are coded separately as *Resharing*. *Replying* includes any public replies to a previous message or contributions added to a thread. In the first round of coding, we had also included the category of cross-posting, i.e. posting automatically from another platform but given that there were very few instances of this type of activity the category was left out of the scheme. As Adami (2014, 226) notes automatic cross-posting is usually discouraged and users instead prefer to personalize a post each time it is re-posted in a different social media profile involving minimal intervention to reshape it to suit the site- specific audience.

Table 1. Coding for activity type

Activity type	Examples from the corpus
Commenting	“Charlie Hebdo keeps pushing the limits and loses support of even the people who empathized with them. Disgraceful. #JeSuisAylan”
Resharing	“#jesuisaylan #AylanKurdi” [hyperlink to picture]
Replying	[UserX] added: “I agree, the worst cartoon. #jenesuispascharlie. #Iamnotcharlie. #yonosoycharlie #jesuisaylan” [hyperlink to picture]

Following De Fina's categorization, our coding for story frames initially included four different foci: the *storyrealm*, the *taleworld*, the *outside world*, and a *second story*, but ended up focusing on the first three, given that we did not identify any second stories in our corpus. The categories used either bracket a discourse activity as a story (Taleworld) or reveal attitudes towards the story or the storytelling event (Storyrealm) (De Fina 2016, 479). In our data we followed a similar path to De Fina, which involved looking first for the main topic of the message and then recognizing the following foci and sub-foci. This process resulted in the coding categories summarized in Table 2:

**Table 2.** Coding scheme for story frames

Category	Content type and examples from the corpus
<i>Storyrealm</i> "the storytelling event at the center of which the taleworld lies" (Young 1987)	<p><b>Participants:</b> direct address to networked publics, often calling to (some form of) action, e.g. "#JeSuisAylan; We went to the streets for Charlie. But for #Aylan?"</p> <p><b>Tellability:</b> reference to why the story is worth telling, e.g. "#jesuisaylan Cette photo qui fait la une de tous les journaux remue toutes les consciences."</p> <p><b>Shareability:</b> exclusive use of the hashtag or a series of hashtags, e.g. #JeSuisAylan</p> <p><b>Metacomment:</b> explicit reference to the hashtag #JeSuisAylan, e.g. "On est à deux doigts du #JeSuisAylan ou #JeSuisUnMigrant"</p>
<i>Taleworld</i> "the world where characters move and live" (Young 1987)	<p><b>Character:</b> comment on the character of the story, e.g. "#JeSuisAylan cet enfant est le mien...; Il s'appelait Aylan Kurdi, et il avait 3 ans. #jesuisaylan [hyperlink to image]."</p> <p><b>Plot elements:</b> comment on other aspect of the story, e.g. "Aylan et Ghalib fuyaient la guerre pour un avenir meilleur [hyperlink to news article] #JeSuisAylan #JeSuisGhalib."</p>
<i>Outside World</i>	<p><b>News story:</b> explicit comment on coverage of the story in the media e.g. "Le choc des photos. L'arrogance européenne résumée en une et en page 5 du Monde. #AylanKurdi #JeSuisAylan #réfugiés."</p> <p><b>Europe or the refugee crisis:</b> explicit orientation to more general issues relating to Europe or the refugee crisis e.g. "The European Value is Humanity. The European Valuta is Euro Don't mix Values and Valuta. #jesuisAylan #refugeecrisis")</p>

Recognizing the multimodal nature of the posts in our corpus, we also coded all the images that were shared alongside the posts, applying similar categories to the ones described for the verbal story frames (see Table 3).

In the next section we present and discuss the findings from our analysis.

Table 3. Coding for visual story frames

Category	Content type
Visual Storyrealm	<b>Meta-comment:</b> creative reworkings of the image, which involve the rescripting of time, place, or main character.
Visual Taleworld	<b>Character:</b> focus on the character of the story in the image showing the boy’s dead body in focus.
Outside World	<b>Mobilization:</b> images of rallies relating to the story and visual records of mobilization in connection with refugees.

3. Findings

3.1 Social media activity types

As Table 4 shows, in terms of social media activity types, the analysis of our corpus yielded an almost equal number of posts categorised as ‘commenting’ (87 instances) and ‘resharing’ (85 instances). In terms of resharing, more specifically, users seemed to opt for resharing just the keyword hashtag #JeSuisAylan (54 instances) and to a lesser extent a series of connected hashtags (25 instances). There were also few instances of resharing news articles about the event (8 instances).

Table 4. Activity types (Total=182)

Activity type	Frequency of occurrence	Details
Commenting	90	
Resharing	85	54 instances of resharing the keyword hashtag only 25 instances of resharing the keyword hashtag with other hashtags 8 instances of resharing news articles
Replying	7	

These findings suggest the importance of Twitter in this case as a space for users’ comment- and hashtag-based reactions to the shared story of Alan Kurdi with little need to refer to the details of the events – as evident in the low number in the corpus of resharing news articles or other more extended accounts of the related events.

There were few ‘conversations’ prompted by different types of posting activity, as evident in the small number of replies to tweets. This suggests that reactions to the story are not shared as part of an extensive engagement with user comments, but instead, they take the form of one- off individual contributions to an

unfolding ‘conversation’ online made up of accumulating posts and aggregating hashtags in indirect interaction with one another. This finding prompts us to propose the term *inter-reactions* to capture this indirect relationship created between sequentially-ordered and spatially contiguous posting formats on social media comment spaces, which foster modes of interaction as participation to a shared story. This mode of participation will be further clarified in the analysis of verbal and visual story frames and acts of stancetaking.

### 3.2 Story frames

The analysis of story participation shows that users’ emphasis is largely placed on the contribution of meta-comments to the shared story of the death of Alan Kurdi (114), as shown in Table 5. Fewer posts related to the Outside World (48) or focussed on aspects of the Taleworld (20).

**Table 5.** Findings of story frame types (Total = 182)

<i>Storyrealm</i>	114
Participants	18
Tellability	12
Shareability	79
Metacomment	5
<i>Taleworld</i>	20
<i>Outside World</i>	48

The majority of the posts categorized as relating to the Storyrealm involved the resharing of the hashtag #JeSuisAylan or a series of related hashtags (79 instances). The use of the hashtags highlights a concern with the shareability of the story and the further promotion of its circulation and hence its visibility online. Fewer posts were oriented to networked publics calling for action (18 instances; see Example 1) or explicitly commented on the tellability of the story (12 instances; see Example 2).

- (1) Time for action #JeSuisAylan; Hug your children
- (2) #jesuisaylan Cette photo qui fait la une de tous les journaux remue toutes les consciences  
(Trans. #jesuisaylan This photo which has hit the headlines moves all consciences)

Lastly, a limited number of posts called attention to the use of the hashtag, either negotiating the meta-message expressed by the hashtag (Example 3) or ironically

nodding to the quick succession of hashtags in reactions to very different kinds of events, turning ‘JeSuis...’ statements into a cliché, i.e. an empty expression (Example 4).

- (3) *On est à deux doigts du #JeSuisAylan ou #JeSuisUnMigrant*  
(Trans.: We are within a hair’s breadth from #IAmAylan to #IAmaMigrant)
- (4) *#jesuischarlie #jesuisaylan et dans 15 jours #jesuiséquipedefrancederugby.*  
(Trans.: #iamcharlie #iamaylan and in 15 days #iamteamfrancerugby)

Posts categorised as invoking the Taleworld included posts, which explicitly referred to Alan as the main character of the story (Example 5) or which invoked some of the details of the life of the boy and his brother, Ghalib, who also died when the boat they were on capsized.

- (5) *#JeSuisAylan cet enfant est le mien*  
(Trans.: #IamAylan this child is mine)
- (6) *Aylan et Ghalib fuyaient la guerre pour un avenir meilleur*  
(Trans.: Aylan and Ghalib escaped the war for a better future)

Finally, comments categorized as ‘Outside World’ mainly involved comments on the broader issues the story raised about Europe, the world and humanity, attributing blame and responsibility to different social and institutional actors (38 instances; Example 7).

- (7) *Jusqu’à quand? L’Europe doit prendre ses responsabilités et les Européens montrer leur solidarité #UE #Réfugiés #Syrie #JeSuisAylan*  
(Trans.: Until when? Europe has to assume its responsibilities and the Europeans show their solidarity #UE #Refugees #Syria #IAmAylan)

Comments in this category also included a number of posts (7), which highlighted the ambivalent coverage of the story as encapsulated in two images featured in the French newspaper *Le Monde*: the image of the dead child in the first page and the image of a model advertising Chanel in a similar pose on a shore (Example 8).

- (8) *Le choc des photos. L’arrogance européenne résumée en une et en page 5 du Monde. #AylanKurdi #JeSuisAylan #réfugiés*  
(Trans.: The shock of the photos. The European arrogance summarized in the first page and in page 5 of LeMonde #AylanKurdi #IamAylan #refugees)

The above findings suggest that Twitter affords a space for *inter-reaction* – rather than interaction – taking the form of individual contributions of meta-comments, assessments, and evaluations to a story-in-circulation, i.e. a story that is shared among networked audiences who contribute brief assessments and evaluations of

it. This is evident in the predominance of comments pertaining to the Storyrealm and highlighting a concern with further increasing the visibility of the story by sharing it, and comments relating to the Outside World, which underline its wider importance and relevance. The identification of considerably fewer comments pertaining to the Taleworld in the corpus suggests that users' affective engagement with the main characters of the story is limited. Instead, affective engagement with the story appears to be driven by associations of the boy's story to other stories and reactions to them, e.g. the Charlie Hebdo attacks or the refugee crisis and its implications. Users' participation to the story is found to be centred around the shareability of the story in the recognizable and portable format of the hash-tag story #JeSuisAylan, which extends the mediatization of the story online. The next section looks more closely at the story frames created by the images that are shared as an integral part of the tweets.

### 3.3 Visual story frames

The majority of the images in the corpus focused on the Storyrealm, i.e. images involved some form of visual rescripting (in 33 instances). To a lesser extent did images concern the Taleworld, in other words fewer images involved the visual representation of the boy's death as portrayed in Demir's widely shared images (in 15 instances) and even less so, did they invoke aspects of the Outside World (i.e. images of users in solidarity rallies; in 6 instances). More specifically, images relating to the Storyrealm were found to involve predominantly rescriptings of the image of the boy's dead body on the shore, which projected positive after-life scenarios (in 20 instances). Through these rescriptings, often elaborated and made more explicit in the verbal component of the message, users projected stances of solidarity and positions of alignment with Alan and refugees, more generally, as shown in Figure 1.

The example above shows a reworked image of the dead boy's body as it was found on the shore. The lifeless body of the boy is rescripted as a body with wings, i.e. as an angel, while the earthly place of the shore is rescripted as an imagined space where the boy is flying, instead of just lying on it, lifeless. The image also features the slogan 'Je suis Aylan', which is repeated in the space of the message and hashtagged alongside additional hashtags that link this story to the crisis in Syria and refugees. This visual rescripting accompanied by the verbal component of the tweet offers a meta-comment on the shared story and elevates the image of the dead boy's body and his story into an icon of affective solidarity with refugees.

This example shows how the visual and verbal components of the message create a coupling of the visual tellability and shareability of the story to project forms of affective solidarity typical of online participation modes (e.g. 'JeSuisX').





**Figure 1.** Visual rescripting of the viral image  
[Post No 532] 7:13am – 3 Sep 2015  
“Je suis Aylan. #JeSuisAylan #Syria #SyriaCrisis #Refugees”

As De Cock and Pizzaro Pedraza (2018,214) have shown in their corpus-based study of the broadening of meaning in the case of the hashtag #JeSuisCharlie, such uses attest to the gradual evolution of the phrase ‘JeSuis’ into an independent element which becomes emblematic of Twitter users participating to public displays of mourning and solidarity via the use of hashtags.

Other images pertaining to the Storyrealm include slogan memes, which are reworkings of the popular ‘Je Suis Charlie’ meme, as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** The meme slogan ‘Je Suis Aylan’  
[Post No 469] 1:49pm – 3 Sep 2015  
“#JeSuisAylan”

In this case, the image becomes the vehicle of visual meta-comment on the story and projects alignment with the story character, Alan. The slogan’s presen-

tation re- uses the format of the slogan ‘Je Suis Charlie’ and invokes statements of solidarity that had become the centre of media and social attention across large parts of the world earlier that year. The rescripting of the slogan super-imposes the story of a refugee child to the story of the attack at the offices of Charlie Hebdo as a way of claiming attention to it and calling for affective engagement with this story in an equally large scale of sharing.

In the corpus, there were also a number of instances of shared images of the boy’s dead body, as it had appeared in the print news, creating frames focused on the Taleworld (21 instances), i.e. as comments on the main character and the event of death. These were often accompanied by posts featuring the hashtag #JeSuisAylan or posts including more extensive comments that picked up on aspects of the taleworld rendered in an affective tone (see Example 9) or that commented on the wider importance of the story for European institutions and values (Example 10).<sup>2</sup>

- (9) *Sono partito dalla Siria, Volevo andare in Canada Rimarrò in Turchia.*  
 #JeSuisAylan (Trans.: I left Syria, I wanted to go to Canada, I will remain in  
 Turkey #IamAylan). [Post No: 571] 3:50am – 3 Sep 2015

- (10) *Honte à nous! La peine de mort est rétablie en Europe! #JeSuisAylan #Aylan*  
*#migrants #JeSuisRefugié #Refugiés*  
 (Trans.: Shame on us! The death penalty is restored in Europe)  
 [Post No: 568] 4:17am – 3 Sep 2015

In Examples 9 and 10, the visual component of the message *shows* the story, zooming in on the boy’s lifeless body, while its verbal component adds an evaluative assessment of why it’s worth telling. These messages combine textual, visual, and hashtag components into multimodal ensembles, which are amenable to further sharing as *visual small stories*. The circulation of such stories contributes to the creation of what Ruth Page (2018) calls a *shared story*, which emerges from the engagement of multiple tellers in the production, consumption, and reproduction of particular representations of events and characters and assessments about these. These visual small stories select specific stances on the death of Alan Kurdi and the wider issues this death relates to, such as migration, attitudes to RASIMs, and the grievability of lives. The next section discusses in more detail the identified story frames in relation to the acts of stancetaking that they encode and make available for sharing.

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2. In the examples we have refrained from reproducing the image of the dead boy for ethical reasons. In these cases, we only reproduce the text that accompanies the image.

### 3.4 Acts of stancetaking

Story frames which focus on the Taleworld are based on the selection of salient visual and verbal aspects of the story as worthy of being shared. More specifically, visual taleworld frames involve the selection of the image of the boy's body in focus. These frames invoke the event of the boy's drowning as a shared story worthy of public attention and political action. By showing, rather than just telling the story, the image registers an affective stance about the death of Alan elevated to a symbolic level of interpretation. These visual frames are, thus, instrumental in emblemizing the image.

Sharing the emblematic image prompts the production of more explicitly articulated stances to the event as part of the Storyrealm, i.e. as meta-comments to this shared story. These meta-comments highlight the tellability of the story and the wider importance and relevance of the events for networked users. The use of verbal taleworld frames, on the other hand, points to the selection and foregrounding of basic story elements, for instance the tragic journey of the boy expressed in the first person (see Example 9 above) or the report of story orientation elements, such as the boy's name and age expressed in the third-person (see Example 11).

- (11) *Il s'appelait Aylan Kurdi, et il avait 3 ans. #jesuisaylan.*

(Trans.: His name was Aylan Kurdi, and he was 3 years old. #iamaylan)

[Post No 608] 12:20pm – 2 Sep 2015

Such individual reactions to the story shared on Twitter prompt specific modes of story participation and stancetaking online. In this type of stories, the image serves as the target of the evaluation of the story and the post as the space for expressing assessments on the event and characters, as discussed in the previous section.

The hashtag #JeSuisAylan is the most common act of stancetaking in the visual small stories in our corpus. This stance is expressed in the first-person point of view, anchoring the evaluative angle on the story to the individual user and creating a position for oneself in inter-reactions to this shared story. In some cases, the first-person singular focus is extended to the first-person plural signalling an inclusive 'we' as taking up this stance (see Example 14).

- (12) *Nous le sommes tous. #jesuisaylan.*

(Trans.: We are all this. #Iamaylan')

The expression #jesuisaylan can be taken to illustrate Du Bois' definition of stancetaking as follows: "*I evaluate something, and thereby position myself, and thereby align with you*" (Du Bois 2007, 163). At the same time, this act of stance-taking is

communicated as a dialogic act through the use of hashtag, which points to an intended connection to networked audiences. Importantly, this act of stancetaking is iterable and transportable in that it is produced for further circulation.

The (inter)textual and visual combinations that make up the visual small stories invoke sociocultural value by expressing evaluations at different levels. These evaluations involve picking up the image of the dead Alan as the most salient element of the storytelling event, freezing it as a storytelling moment and showing it for further sharing. This mode of showing rather than telling mobilizes the expression of affective stances relating to sympathy and solidarity with the plight of children like Alan. In some cases, these stances extend to expressions of alignment to migrants (e.g. We are all migrants. #JeSuisAylan) and refugees more broadly (#Réfugiés pour moi l'accueil c'est OUI! #AylanKurdi #JesuisAylan #Jesuisréfugié #refugeeswelcome #PS; Trans.: #Refugees for me the welcoming is YES! #AylanKurdi #JesuisAylan #Iamarefugee #refugeeswelcome #PS).

Despite the mimetic character of acts of stancetaking in reaction to the tragic story of Alan, it is important to note that such reactions can be said to be motivated by viewers' need to restore order in the face of an event that causes high levels of discomfort and distress, namely a child's death, which is the most marked type of death. Participation to the shared story via visual and verbal meta-comments seems to attest to the phenomenon of what is known in psychology as *parasocial mourning* (De Groot et al. 2015), whereby distant viewers who are emotionally moved and affected by a death of someone they didn't know before. Media scholars have pointed how social media have afforded increased opportunities for constructing such parasocial relationships with celebrities or TV characters (e.g. Lawrence Kutner, a character on the series *House, M.D.*) through which fans claim entitlement to public displays of mourning (Klastrup 2015, 2018).

The case of this emblematic death, in particular, makes available positions of distant witnessing to the death of the 'Other'. These positions resonate with stances to the Other's suffering mediated by emblematic photographs in earlier historical moments. As Sontag (2004, 107) notes "certain photographs – emblems of suffering, such as the snapshot of the little boy in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943, his hands raised, being herded to the transport to a death camp – can be used like *memento mori*, as objects of contemplation to deepen one's sense of reality; as secular icons, if you will". The amenability of the media image of Alan's death to artistic rescriptings and visual small stories extends its meaning and upscales it to a symbol of (distant) death. Similarly to the 'about-to-die' images whose presentation draws attention to the generalizability of the event, rather than its specificity (Zelizer 2010, 25), Alan's image produces an emotional and contingent audience involvement which sidesteps the complex details of the life narrative of the boy, his family, his country or other refugees.

#### 4. Conclusion

The key story frames – verbal and visual – identified in this study point to popular tropes for approaching the Other’s death and suffering. They suggest a possible path for explaining how discourses about refugees circulate and become further sedimented on social media, attesting for example “the shift in media representations of refugees as vulnerable” (Gualda and Rebollo 2016; Smith Dahmen et al. 2018). As other scholars have noted, such shifts in representations are largely achieved via the use of human stories (Steimel 2010; Hickerson and Dansmore 2015; Cooper et al. 2016). As we have demonstrated, Alan’s death is foregrounded as the focus for public assessment via individual acts of stancetaking embedded in practices of sharing visual small stories within existing regimes of mediated visualities of suffering.

In these individual visual small stories, which combine images, hashtags, and/or comments the image becomes the main vehicle of the meta-comment to the shared story, while the text or hashtag in the post supplements it and renders the main message more explicit (e.g. #JeSuisAylan #NoOneIsInnocent). The sharing of this type of stories (re)produces iterable stances, which contribute to the co-creation of a shared story for projecting affective frames to the event. This circulation drive of this shared story does not rely so much on the detail about the story or the clarification or further exploration of related events, causes of the events, and second stories. Rather, the circulation drive of these stories lies in the opportunities they create for tellers to participate in the telling and evaluation of these events through taking up a stance on characters and events drawing on and aligning to familiar tropes and frames.

More specifically, these frames echo stances to refugees identified in previous research and include, for example, compassionate stances, tender-hearted, blame-filled, shame-filled, powerlessness-filled (Hoijer 2004) or generally emotional sympathetic reactions (Smith Dahmen et al. 2018), which are often combined with the expression of strong political emotional reactions, directing blame to national targets, governments and ‘humanity’ (Mortensen 2017; Olesen 2017). In our corpus, stances expressing emotions of fear, hostility and the belief that borders ought to be closed as the ones found by Chouliaraki and Stolić (2017) were extremely rare.

Even though media often rehumanizes refugees (Wallace 2018, 22) the sentimental portrayal of refugee stories as tragedies can be harmful in different ways. Instead of mobilizing public and political agency, media coverage of migration ends up creating spectacles of human suffering, turning reporting into acts of voyeurism and raising “vague awareness” of largely apathetic spectators (Rae et al. 2017; Chouliaraki and Stolić 2017). Based on the analysis of our corpus, we

suggested that the circulation of stances through sharing visual small stories creates alignment frames that guide the reception of this story in relation to other stories. This mode of sharing creates positions of ambient solidarity as a form of phatic and evaluative communion of networked publics around the so-called refugee crisis.

The circulation of visual small stories on Twitter in reaction to the iconic image of Alan Kurdi illustrates how media spectacles extend to social media spectacles of affect, which prompt mediated participation to the death and suffering of the Other. In cases of reporting instances of sensational and tragic death, like the boy's death, which are inherently reportable, the tellability of the story on social media is contingent upon its shareability. The resharing and reworking of the emblematic image shifting from Taleworld to Storyrealm frames partly explains how this shared story continues to accumulate affective value over the time of its circulation (see also Bouko, this issue) and ends up reproducing equally emblematic stances.

We would like to argue that the study of processes of circulation and uptake of discourse representations is a productive direction for critical discourse and narrative analysis, as it can provide important insights into how mediatization extends in online contexts fostering specific modes of participation as forms of online inter-(re)action. If, for Sontag (2004, 80), "[t]o remember is, more and more, not to recall a story but to be able to call up a picture", this study suggests that to remember is to be able to call up a shared and shareable story that places us in positions of mediated witness to distant death and suffering. In the wake of highly mediatized death events and tragedies, networked users are urged to affirm already circulating stances, instead of investigating widely shared stories in relation to the 'bigger' stories of war and power and the 'small' stories of suffering and death with which such events and those involved are bound up.

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