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"The Image Speaks for Itself" – or does it?: Instant News Icons, Impromptu Publics, and the 2015 European "Refugee Crisis"
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"refugee crisis"

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Abstract

Easy internet access and ubiquitous smart phones have augmented the number of images produced and accelerated the speed by which they are circulated (and likely also forgotten). By contrast to the great quantity of pictures disseminated in today's connective media, a few photographs gain momentum and are declared to be "icons". They stand out from the image abundance, grasp the attention of a broad, transnational public, and stir emotional reactions and heated debates. Usually, these iconic images are related to major news events and represent an ongoing conflict or crisis in society in a simple, univocal manner. They quickly turn into standard frames of reference in news and popular culture, seem to require no particular explanation, and are often proclaimed to "speak for themselves". This article proposes the term "instant news icon" to define and gain a fuller understanding of the role performed by iconic images in today's connective media, distinguished by convergence between platforms and blurred boundaries between media production and media consumption. First, the article builds a framework based on the concept instant news icon and then applies quantitative and qualitative analyses to study the processes of distribution and meaning-making involved in the emergence of one instant news icon, news photographs from 2015 of a young refugee girl playing with a police officer on a Danish motorway.

Keywords

Impromptu publics, instant news icon, journalism, refugee crisis, social media, visual media

Introduction

Easy internet access and ubiquitous smart phones have augmented the number of images produced and accelerated the speed at which they are circulated (and likely also forgotten). An estimated 1.8billion unique images were shared online every day as of 2014 (Eveleth, 2015). In contrast to the great quantity of pictures disseminated in today's connective media (Van Dijck, 2013), a few photographs gain momentum and are declared to be "icons". They stand out from the image abundance, grasp the attention of a broad, transnational public, and stir emotional reactions and heated debates. Usually, these iconic images are related to major news events and represent an ongoing conflict or crisis in society in a simple, univocal manner. They quickly turn into standard frames of reference in news and popular culture, seem to require no particular explanation, and are often proclaimed to "speak for themselves".

Examples of images popularly referred to as "icons" in recent years include: Eyewitness footage of the seemingly random killing of Neda Agha Soltan during a demonstration in Iran spread virally and became a major international news story in 2009 (Mortensen, 2011, 2015). The image of the so-called "Standing Man", Erdem Gündüz, received intense, short-lived attention and was heralded as an icon of peaceful opposition in 2011, when he protested by standing silently on Taksim Square, Istanbul. In September 2015, appalling pictures of the three- year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi, who was found drowned off the coast of Turkey, were reported to have shocked and moved the world. Even if these images were declared to be "icons", they do not, strictly speaking, live up to definitions of icons formulated in the mass media era (see e.g. Bennett & Lawrence, 1995; Brink, 2000; Hariman & Lucaites, 2007; Mortensen, 2013). First of all, icons were formerly recognized as such only after passing the test of history. Selected images of current news events are now announced to be iconic immediately upon their release due to the

immense attention generated by their wide and rapid circulation. Second, traditional icons arose in the interplay between political actors, news media, and popular culture. Online construction of icons is less controllable and predictable because it involves more actors, more media platforms, and a greater geographical spread.

This article proposes the term "instant news icon" to define and gain a fuller understanding of the role performed by iconic images in today's connective media, distinguished by convergence between platforms and blurred boundaries between media production and media consumption. Needless to say, a new concept is only relevant if it labels phenomena or tendencies that are inadequately addressed by the existing research. "Instant news icon" refers to both *continuity* and *change*. Whereas these images retain some of the traits traditionally attributed to icons such as broad appeal, simple iconography, and symbolic richness, they also differ from the conventional definition of icons by emerging faster, spreading farther, and including social media and 'ordinary' media users in distribution and mobilization processes.

This article aims to build a theoretical framework based on the concept instant news icon and to study the processes of distribution and meaning-making involved in the emergence of one instant news icon. First, the article engages critically with "icon" as a contested concept. Next, the inspiration for "instant news icons", found in Bennett and Lawrence's (1995) term "news icon", is accounted for, before moving on to a discussion of how instant news icons are more transient than traditional icons and are mobilized by impromptu publics, which have affect (Papacharissi, 2015) as their driving force. The following section presents the instant news icon studied in this article and the methods deployed to do so: Quantitative and qualitative analyses are applied to news photographs from 2015 of a young refugee girl playing with a police officer on a Danish motorway. These photographs are chosen because they meet the definition of instant news icons by referring to a deep, topical conflict in society, spreading virally across social media and mainstream media, and traversing national as well as linguistic boundaries. The analysis is divided into three sections. The first provides a quantitative overview of the global distribution of the

images, created using the Google Image Reverse Search tool. The second section of analysis focuses on qualitative analysis of the Danish news coverage, which indicates a strong presence of meta-coverage and claims that the image "speaks for itself". The third section of the analysis focuses on a qualitative study of user comments on the social network sites reddit and Imgur, which implies that the image did not "speak for itself" but instead prompted diverse and heated reactions. Finally, the article's conclusion reflects upon the applicability of the proposed "instant news icon" concept.

A contested concept

"Icon" is a contested concept, involving a range of potentials and challenges. Applied to everything from religious artifacts to Mona Lisa to Michael Jackson to Coca Cola to influential photojournalistic images, "icon" is, as Andreas Drechsel (2010) emphasizes, "an oscillating term and its popularity may well be due at least in part to its vagueness" (p. 5). Interpretations of what counts as an icon may be more or less exclusive: How many recipients should be familiar with the image for this label to be appropriate? For how long should an icon be recognized as such? Where should the line be drawn between "iconic" images vis-à-vis "influential", "important", and "famous" ones? Definitions of icons that seek to provide definite answers to these questions run the risk of being too rigid since there is not, as Martin Kemp (2012) argues, "some clear and definable boundary that the image crosses when it moves from being very famous to fully iconic" (p. 3). Another complication is that assigning the concept of "icon" to a particular image invariably evokes a performative aspect. Icons become icons, at least in part, because they are named as such. Research on the subject therefore takes part in constructing its own object of study. Considering the weight usually carried by icons, scholarly engagement with "icons" inevitably makes a claim concerning the prominence of the image in question. This is also coupled with methodological challenges. Definitions of icons emphasize their power and impact. But how are "power" and "impact" to be defined, theoretically underpinned, and empirically verified?

While taking these reservations into account, this article deploys the term "icon", in part for pragmatic reasons. By which other term should we refer to the intensely disseminated, renowned images commonly known as "icons"? Furthermore, the conceptual elusiveness may to a certain extent be explained by the broad and popular use of the term, not only across various scholarly fields but also in media and every-day communication. Research on icons at least ideally creates a platform for critical reflection upon how this notion is used in vernacular communication. An additional reason for sticking with this term is that it helps ground the current construction and mobilization of influential images in historical and cultural perspectives. Moreover, studying "icons" brings questions of power to the forefront. Whether historical or contemporary, icons are tied explicitly to issues of power in popular discourse and scholarship alike. "Icon" is applied to images that have an impact on agenda setting, public opinion, political decision-making processes, etc. Accordingly, the term makes space for investigating the relationship between particularly influential images, media, politics, and citizens and/or audiences in cross-cultural and cross-national contexts.

Another advantage of preserving the term is that the rich research conducted on icons in the mass media era provides an important stepping-stone for conceptualizing instant news icons. Coming from diverse disciplines such as history (Brink, 2000), rhetoric (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007), political science (Perlmutter, 1998), and communication/media studies (Bennett & Lawrence, 1995; Mortensen, 2013), scholarship on this subject has studied icons in terms of their aesthetics and communicative modes as well as their bearing on media, politics, and popular culture. The present article's theoretical and analytical approaches to instant news icons draw strongly upon the work by Bennett and Lawrence (1995), Brink (2000), and Hariman and Lucaites (2007) to identify how the digital media landscape reconditions and redefines iconic images.

Instant news icons: transient images, impromptu publics

This article offers the following definition of instant news icons: They are selected images, which through rapid and wide dissemination across media platforms become frames of reference for a large, sometimes even global, public. Usually they emerge in connection with situations or phenomena that already have status as news or media events. But they may also generate and drive these events themselves. Convergence between the news media and social network sites as well as the more active role assumed by media users are instrumental in the distribution and mobilization of instant news icons.

The "instant news icon" concept focuses on the context of news, and the area of inquiry is delimited from diverse religious and cultural contexts, in which different kinds of icons and conceptualizations of them occur. The news context also determines the genres and aesthetics of instant news icons, which predominantly fall within photojournalistic and documentary traditions. Regardless of whether they are taken by professional or non-professional photographers/photojournalists, instant news icons typically conform to the "realistic" and "authentic" style of photojournalism and documentary. Another important clarification is that "news" is understood in a broad sense, involving not only the news media and professional journalism but also alternative platforms for distributing news stories, such as social network sites, blogs, YouTube, and other sites for sharing videos and images as well as actors other than professional media workers taking part in the production and dissemination of news stories/images, such as citizens, activists, celebrities, and political actors.

"Instant news icon" is inspired by the term "news icon" introduced by W. Lance Bennett and Regina Lawrence in 1995. News icons, according to Bennett and Lawrence, include both visual images and what they call "word pictures". In contrast, the "instant news icon" concept points exclusively to visual images. Although the inclusion of linguistic icons would open up possibilities for analysis into the intricate interplay between images and words, this would, from the perspective of this article, create too diffuse a concept, bearing in mind the different grammars, distributive patterns, and reception modes of visual and verbal/written communication. "News icons" refer to the "emblematic decisive moments" captured

by the camera, as Bennett and Lawrence (1995, p. 26) write with reference to the catchphrase "the decisive moment", coined by French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson. They often "arise in their original contexts purely by accident" (Bennett & Lawrence, 1995, p. 24, see also Hariman & Lucaites, 2007; Mortensen, 2015) and retain a strong claim to representing reality because they usually show what seem to be spontaneous situations in a realistic, simple, and straightforward manner. At the same time, icons are deployed "by journalists to evoke larger cultural themes, symbolizing values, contradictions, or changes that have begun to surface in society" (Bennett & Lawrence, 1995, p. 23) or, as Alexander (2015) puts it, iconic images are "symbolic condensations" (p. 4). They transcend the (seemingly) spontaneous and specific situation represented on account of their affective appeal, intertextual references, and symbolic allusions to well-known tensions or conflicts in society (see also Hariman & Lucaites, 2007).

Cornelia Brink (2000) similarly observes that icons possess both "authenticity" and "symbolization". By the same token, instant news icons represent and are coupled with a particular occurrence in time and space yet also exceed the specificity of the event and symbolize larger, ongoing crises in society. However, there is one central difference between news icons and instant news icons in this regard. Bennett and Lawrence (1995) note that news icons either prompt consent or contestation in their representation of salient societal challenges: "[M]any icons celebrate accepted cultural values and orientation. [...] but some icons raise cultural tensions and contradictions" (p. 23). The publics surrounding iconic images in the digital era are neither as unified nor as homogenous as in the era of mainstream media dominance. Instant news icons do not spark consent *or* contestation but usually both consent *and* contestation; we shall return to one clear example of this in the analysis.

While indebted to Bennett and Lawrence's (1995) term "news icon" as far as the context of news and the duplicity of authenticity and symbolization are concerned, it is necessary to look into digital processes of distribution and mobilization in order to gain a more complete understanding of instant news icons. In the following, change introduced by instant news icons is structured along two dimensions: *time* (how

fast they are spread, how long they endure) and *space* (how they generate and are themselves generated by online publics).

Transient images

Traditional definitions of icons emphasize that they can only be recognized as such after proving their lasting significance. This limited their numbers considerably, as Hariman and Lucaites (2007) observe:

> They are a small set – fifteen, twenty, maybe thirty at the most across a span of generations. They in no way comprise the long list of influential photos, but they are the photos that stand out from all the others over time (p. 6).

Instant news icons are more contemporary and transient. This is clearly indicated by how they are immediately proclaimed to be iconic and spoken of as if they were standard references within a matter of hours of their release. While these images act as agenda setters and game changers, they do not necessarily endure as long in the public imagination as do traditional icons. After they have been passionately debated and disseminated for some days, they may more or less fade from public consciousness. The instant news icon concept implies a more inclusive understanding of the icon, which is bound to be attributable to more images than is the more exclu sive definition offered by Hariman and Lucaites (2007, see also Hariman & Lucaites, 2015)

But icons are not only historical themselves, they are also instrumental in constructing history, as Hariman and Lucaites (2007) argue, regarding icons as a means to "construct a community's sense of the past" (p. 2). However, if icons were only consolidated over decades, any notion of contemporary icons, such as that suggested by "instant news icons", would be ruled out. This standpoint seems unsatisfactory in light of the vested interests in constructing and mobilizing iconic images of topical conflicts and tensions in the current media environment. Besides, from a contemporary perspective, it is valuable to consider not

only which images are ascribed iconic status but also which are not. When some images and their depictions of certain actors and situations are placed at the forefront of the mediated public sphere, others slide to the background. Reflections upon contemporary news icons thus address negotiations of collective and individual identities. Icons present "a more or less idealized sense of who we are and what we ought to be," and they allow "anyone to have a sense of personal affiliation with large-scale events" (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, p. 2). At the heart of discussions concerning current icons are politics of representation and models for individual and collective identities.

Excluding contemporary icons from scholarly discussions also, as I have argued elsewhere, limits the analysis of historical icons (Mortensen, 2013). For example, considering Joe Rosenthal's photograph *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* from February 1945 as an icon only after history had passed judgment, would overlook the political and cultural importance of this image's instant canonization to mobilize support and funds on the home front.

By introducing "instant news icons", this article seeks to formulate an up-to-date conceptualization of icons, which includes contemporary icons with no guarantee that they will endure and become lasting cultural references. What instant news icons (potentially) lack in duration, they make up for in density and reach. Less monumental and epic, instant news icons counterbalance the historical weight traditionally ascribed to icons. This leads us to the issue of which kind of publics instant news icons engender - this is the second overall difference relative to traditional icons.

Impromptu publics

Icons have traditionally gained momentum on account of their ascribed ability to express the public's anxieties and aspirations at particular points in history. Even if this remains the case, the crucial question is *which* publics: How are we to understand what might be termed the "impromptu publics", i.e. the spontaneous and quickly forming publics, which instant news icons at once generate and are themselves

generated by? We can begin addressing this question by drawing a brief comparison to the publics surrounding mass media icons. These mainly emerged in the wake of top-down processes driven by the interplay between political elites and mainstream media. Whereas the mobilization processes fostering today's instant news icons still contain a strong top-down dimension, a bottom-up dimension is becoming ever-more pronounced. Instant news icons travel virally across broadcast, online, and print news, social media, blogs, etc. and are commented upon shared, framed, and made into stories in different ways depending on the actors and platforms involved. In contrast to traditional icons, actors from professional media and established politics are not alone in mobilizing icons; they are joined by citizens, activists, celebrities, and various other stakeholders and opinion-leaders. On social media, instant news icons are mobilized at the intersection between personal political participation and individualized media use, which has also been addressed by scholars working on connective action. Bennett and Segerberg (2013), for instance, underscore how citizens seek "a personal path to engagement – a politics by other, more self-expressive and self-satisfying means" (p. 23). Even if online media use tends to be more fragmented and personalized than in pre-digital times, mobilization is still intensified and accelerated by what Zizi Papacharissi (2015) calls "affective publics":

> Online activity may energize disorganized crowds and/ or facilitate the formation of networked publics around communities, actual and imagined (e.g., Howard & Hussain, 2013). These publics are activated and sustained by feelings of belonging and solidarity, however fleeting or permanent those feelings may be. The connective affordances of social media help activate the in-between bond of publics, and they also enable expression and information sharing that liberate the individual and collective imaginations (p. 9).

The "affective publics" concept goes a long way toward describing affect as the undercurrent for the mobilization of instant news icons, which prompts strong, diversified, and often fleeting emotional reactions. They condense into one image discourses and discussions related to ongoing media events,

news events, issue publics, or downright "shit storms", which stir the public in relation to a particular subject or situation. With regard to affect as a central term for the publics surrounding icons, research into traditional icons has emphasized their emotional appeal. Hariman and Lucaites (2007, see also Hansen, 2015; Mortensen, 2015), for example, list "emotional scenarios" as one of the five characteristics of iconic images. When it comes to instant news icons, audience response to the emotional scenarios is, in part, rendered visible when the images are shared, debated, etc. on publicly accessible social media sites and other online fora. As mentioned above, images travel more freely across linguistic barriers than does other online content, thereby driving mobilization processes.

The interplay between social media and mainstream news media is central to the impromptu publics spurred by instant news icons, which are more inclusive than the conceptualization of publics by, for instance, Bennett and Segerberg (2013) and Papacharissi (2015), who focus primarily on social media. When they spread virally, the news media both *cover* the story illustrated by the image and *meta-cover* the story of the instant news icon itself, typically by focusing on the fastness and vastness of its cross-media dissemination and the various interests and emotions invested in this process. The news media are feeding, covering, and themselves part of the affective publics evolving around instant news icons. Social media users nevertheless also to a large extent reflect critically upon this framing by the news media as well as upon the debates and patterns of meaning making by fellow users. Thus, the impromptu publics surrounding instant news icons are characterized by the inclusion of multiple platforms and different patterns of convergence and cross-referencing *and* by the fostering of critical self-reflexive engagement within the public itself.

Because instant news icons travel farther and faster via digital routes of communication, specific details about their original cultural and national contexts tend to be "lost in translation". Icons were also prone to recontextualization in the era of analogue media. In the words of Hariman and Lucaites (2007, p. 34), they were susceptible to "semiotic transcriptions", i.e. open to diverse investments and projections.

Instant news icons are subject to more far-reaching recontextualization due to their viral spread and active contributions from users.

In summary, connective media transform icons both in terms of how fast they emerge and how long they endure and in terms of how far and wide they are spread. The next step is to analyze an empirical example of how these accelerated and expanded processes of distribution and reception play out.

An instant news icon from the 2015 European "refugee crisis": the case, the methods

"'The refugee' is a figure which is always imagined in the context of borders." This observation by Anna Szörényi (2006, p. 24) resonates with the photographs of the six-year old Iranian refugee girl, Noor Al-Saedi, and a police officer playing "where is the ring" on the motorway just north of the Danish border with Germany. Claus Fisker for the Scanpix agency and freelance photographer Michael Drost- Hansen both captured several photographs of this scene, which were first published by the Danish newspapers *BT* and *Jyllands-Posten* on September 9, 2015. Two million Danes (out of the 5.7million population) were said to have seen the photographs on the day of their release (e.g. Zahle, 2015). Moreover, the images were circulated and left a strong impression outside of the national borders. For example, the *Washington Post* claimed they were among the "most powerful images of Europe's migrant emergency" (Kirkpatrick, 2015). The images refer to a highly unusual situation. In September 2015, refugees crossed the border from Germany in mass numbers and wandered along the motorway, which needed to be closed to cars. Many of the refugees intended to walk the 300-or-so kilometers (186 miles) from the border to Copenhagen, after which they could pass to Sweden, but they were eventually picked up by buses and other means of mass transport. This created an urgent national situation, which reflected the international state of emergency in relation to what was termed the "refugee crisis". Press attention was immense.

This case has not been chosen because it represents a situation particular to the Danish media or political system. On the contrary, the case has been selected because it refers to the larger transnational crisis

situation of refugees from Syria, Iran, and other countries crossing the Mediterranean and entering Europe, which had already been a major story in the international news media for months by the time the images were published. Moreover, the case is of particular interest in the context of icons because the child as victim of war and other crisis situations constitutes a familiar motif for this branch of images. Nick Ut's 1972 "napalm girl" photograph from the Vietnam War and the aforementioned images of the drowned refugee boy, Alan Kurdi, also from 2015, constitute famous historical and contemporary examples of this. Furthermore, coverage of refugees and other humanitarian crises relies strongly on visual representations. "[C]ompassion depends on visuals," Höijer (2004, p. 520) claims, while Bleiker, Campbell, Hutchison, and Nicholson (2011) argue that images of refugees "shape perceptions of and responsibilities towards asylum seekers" and "frame political discussions on the topic" (p. 399).

The images of the young refugee girl and the police officer live up to the definition of instant news icons offered above: They show a scene seemingly grabbed spontaneously out of reality, which at the same time carries symbolic meanings and intertextual references repeatedly brought up in their receptions across media platforms. The images are related to the topical, much-debated situation of the refugee exodus and sparked significant, albeit quickly fading, attention in the news media and social network sites nationally and internationally. Soon proclaimed to be iconic, these images were intensely shared and commented upon in the days after their release. On the day following their publication, newspapers addressed the pictures as though everybody would or should know of them.

As indicated above, studying icons involves methodological challenges, which researchers have sought to overcome by applying various approaches such as opinion surveys (Perlmutter, 1998), audience recognition (Spratt, Peterson, & Lagos, 2005), content analysis (Mortensen, 2015), and rhetorical analysis (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007). The spread of the images across multiple platforms and some 48 countries highlighted the urgency of these methodological challenges. It quickly became evident that it would not be feasible to acquire a complete overview yet that studying one particular context could be criticized as

being random or too narrow. Instead of choosing either breadth or depth, I opted for a middle course, which combines quantitative and qualitative methods to study material from three distinct sources: First, a student assistant deployed the Google Reverse Image Search tool to create a quantitative overview of the images' distribution across vastly different regional contexts and media platforms in the period from the day of the images' release on September 9, 2015 to two months later, November 9. Second, 30 articles published on the subject in major Danish newspapers were identified using the Infomedia database (again in the period September 9-November 9, 2015) and were subjected to qualitative analysis. Third, comments on the social media platforms Imgur and reddit were qualitatively analyzed. Unlike social media such as Facebook and Instagram, Imgur and reddit do not primarily take their point of departure from the private sphere but instead from clips in the news and popular media, which users discuss and comment upon.

By combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies as well as three analytical contexts, the article aims to provide empirical insight into the impromptu formation of publics surrounding instant news icons as well as into how emotions drive different patterns of response, which may either build upon consent (newspapers) or dissent (social media).

Around the world in a few days

The first part of the analysis provides an overview of how much and how far the images spread. Giving precise numbers is difficult as the results vary depending upon the technological tools and methods employed. For example, using the search terms "refugee", "girl", "Danish", and "police officer" generates 512,000 hits on Google; 78,000 on Google News; and 36,100 on Bing, not all of these hits are relevant to the case. However, obtaining exact numbers was less important than forming a general idea of how the images were shared, i.e. proportions in the division between different national/regional contexts. To this end, Google Reverse Image Search was deployed. This generates significantly lower hits

than other search engines because this tool measures how many times the images were actually *shared* and not just referred to or commented upon.

The results facilitated by Google Reverse Image Search provide an overview of the geographical spread of the images. A source of error in the Google Reverse Image Search is that a series of photographs of the same incident were circulated (even if the coverage mostly refers to them as just one image). Three of the most-shared images were applied to this tool. Obviously, the numbers would have been higher had the search included all of the images. It was not possible to generate numbers concerning the shares between media platforms because the diversity of languages and national variations in content and graphic layout made it difficult to distinguish between, for instance, news sites and social media sites. Moreover, it has not been possible to gather information concerning the extent to which the numbers generated by Google Image Reverse Search are inclusive, i.e. reflect the actual number of times the images have been shared. However, as noted above, the numbers may still highlight a general pattern in the diffusion of the images.

According to Google Reverse Image Search, the three images were shared a total of 1193 times in approximately 48 countries in the period September 9-November 9, 2015. China was the country in which they were shared the most, 21% (shared 254 times), followed by Turkey 15% (175 times), the United States 12% (148 times), Iran 11% (127 times), Spain 7% (84 times), and Denmark 6% (66 times). The remaining countries amount to less than 5% each. These proportions indicate that the sharing follows the model of the big head and long tail, in so far as the national contexts in which they were shared the most amount to 72% (i.e. "the big head") while the remaining 28% are divided between 42 countries, each with a share of less than five percent (i.e. "the long tail"). Another interesting point to be deduced from these numbers is that the country of origin, Denmark, is only in sixth place, which should of course be taken with the reservation that Denmark is a small country, especially compared to China and the USA. The geographical spread is also remarkable in so far as the four countries in which the

images were shared the most (China, Turkey, USA, and Iran) cover different continents, along with entirely different media systems and forms of government. These numbers obviously only give an indication of *how* the images circulated around the world and not *why*, by *whom*, and on *which* types of platforms. Nonetheless, they sketch out a general pattern of how this instant news icon spread virally and rather unpredictably across national contexts.

News media (meta)coverage of the self-explanatory, instant news icon

By deploying qualitative approaches in the two next sections, the analysis becomes more narrow and focused. We first turn to the 30 articles included in the coverage in Danish newspapers, which devotes scant attention to the facts and background behind the story of the girl and her family. Noor Al-Saedi is widely reported to be Syrian, when in fact she is Iranian, and details as to how and why her family fled their home country are recounted in just a few articles, all of which use an article printed in the Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet* as their source of information (see e.g. Vissing, 2015). Moreover, thorough engagement with the complex of problems and differences of opinion related to the so-called "refugee crisis" are virtually non-existent. Instead, the newspapers resort to "meta-coverage", that is, coverage not dealing explicitly with the content and implications of the case but instead indulging in self-referential and self-reflexive accounts of how the case was framed by newspapers and other news media as well as by users on social network sites (see e.g. Esser, 2009; Mortensen, 2015). In this case, meta-coverage foregrounds the communicative circuit involved in promoting the instant news icon by dwelling on how famous the images have become, in how short a time, and how much and widely they have been dispersed via social media. To quote a typical statement, "the picture has been used by international and national media, and has especially been vividly retweeted, shared and commented upon in social media" (Attardo & Paulsen, 2015) Meta-coverage is accompanied by repeated claims about the image "speaking for itself", with the underlying assumption, it seems, that this instant news icon is self-explanatory. In particular, the police, when asked to comment on the great notice sparked by this image, are quoted for several

statements to this effect, such as the following: "We're very happy about it – how we're being praised. And the picture clearly speaks for itself." The police officer himself (who remains unnamed in the coverage) has no further comment, apart from reiterating that the "image speaks for itself" (Bakalus, 2015b). The recurring assertions that the image "speaks for itself" are all the more striking in light of how the articles frequently use the word "world", for example, in phrases such as "hits wildly worldwide" (Bakalus, 2015b) and "travels around the world" (recurrent expression, e.g. Vissing, 2015). This indicates that the proclaimed unity of reception is worldwide.

Along with general statements about the self- explanatory icon spreading worldwide, the meta- coverage follows two distinct storylines. While they both emerge from emotional responses to the images, their levels of engagement and commitment are distinctly different: The first concerns a message of humanitarianism and the second focuses on the police officer attracting female attention.

First, many newspaper articles highlight the humanitarianism symbolically communicated by the images:

> The Danish police officer has become a symbol of humanity in the midst of the humanitarian catastrophe, which has reached Europe in the form of refugees about which nobody really knows what to do (Hartung, 2015).

This interpretation of the police officer as a "symbol of humanity" on account of his interaction with the young girl is in line with representations of refugees constituting a major theme in the humanitarian tradition within photojournalism and documentary photography, e.g. the canonical work by Dorothea Lang and Sebastião Salgado. Refugee children occupy a special place within this tradition because they are seen to be "ideal victims": vulnerable, innocent, in need of protection, and evoking "a strong emotional impact" (Seu, 2015, p. 663). Depictions of children tend to depoliticize and decontextualize refugees and their situation in so far as children are perceived to be lacking political agency, and they shift attention from the specificity of the circumstances to general emotional responses, for instance of pity

and compassion (see also Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006, 2012; Wright, 2002). As Marisa O. Ensor (2010) remarks:

> Children's pre- and postmigration circumstances, as well as their complex cultural, socioeconomic, and educational needs, tend to be ignored. Victimhood is thus seen as universally constitutive of the child migrant (p. 21).

Along these lines, the coverage is preoccupied with how this touching scene has moved spectators worldwide. These emotions seem attributable in particular to how the refugee child is interacting with an official authority, the police officer, offering her temporary protection and comfort in this interim stop on her flight.

The humanitarian interpretation is underscored by the newspapers paying great attention to the images' intertextual references to other influential depictions of refugees in the fall of 2015. Drawing comparison to preceding icons is a typical feature in the reception of icons, which Lene Hansen (2015, p. 296) terms their "inter-iconity", with reference to Kristeva's concept of intertextuality. For example, social media expert Benjamin Rud Elberth is quoted as saying:

> This is a fantastic photo. There are so many feelings in it, and it hits an incredibly dry spot. The Danes are hungering for something besides a man spitting from bridge, a dead boy on the shore, refugees kept off a motorway, and other of the horror scenarios we are experiencing at the moment (Zahle, 2015).

The first picture mentioned by Elberth stems from the Danish context and attracted huge attention as well. Released two days earlier, it depicts the same stretch of motorway. However, this photograph shows a diametrically opposed Danish welcome to refugees: A man, quickly dubbed "the spitting man" (*spyttemanden*), stands on a motorway bridge and spits at the refugees passing beneath. This image was

greeted with national and international contempt and condemnation because it was seen as a symbolic manifestation of some Danes' latent xenophobia and the Danish government's restrictive attitude towards refugees. In both the international and the national news coverage, the disparity between the two images was interpreted as a symptom of a country split between hospitality and hostility towards refugees. The second imagery to which Elberth refers is the aforementioned photographs of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian boy who died during his family's flight across the Mediterranean. In one of the images of Kurdi, the body of the infant boy is carried by a police officer, which allows for the same juxtaposition between the refugee child and a representative from the authorities. However, there is a stark contrast between the grim and appalling images of Kurdi and the hope of humanitarianism and solidarity conceived by the Danish ones (at least according to the newspaper coverage).

While the humanitarian interpretation accords with the empirical context and circumstances of these images, the second storyline in the news coverage goes more "off topic" and conforms to a soft-news logic when focusing on how the police officer reportedly "charms the entire world" (Attardo, 2015).

The following quote from the tabloid *BT*, with the telling caption "Danish police officer flooded with marriage offers from the world's women: I would also cross the border for him", is telling of this strand of newspaper coverage:

> The sweet photo has touched the hearts of many Danes. But the nice police officer is also a hit outside of the country's border, after the picture has been shared at lightning speed on social media. Foreign users, however, are more preoccupied with the police officer, whose looks many find utterly attractive (Bakalus, 2015a).

This approach turns the police officer into an object of admiration and desire. Bearing in mind the way in which icons negotiate individual and collective identities in relation to societal crises or tensions, it is of course interesting that this figure is perceived as an official authority – "the police officer". However,

he is not treated as a representative of a particular system or national context but rather as someone performing a general role in an amicable way.

To summarize, the newspapers turn coverage into Meta-coverage and refrain from getting into specific explanations or discussions about the case or the urgent political challenges facing Denmark and the rest of Europe due to the refugee exodus. Instead, they dwell on the emotions stirred – of humanitarianism and attraction – within the impromptu publics mobilized by these images. By centering on these emotions, the newspapers emphasize the patterns for identification with the girl, the police officer, or the interaction between the two. The newspapers primarily cite social media as sources of information for this (meta)coverage, which makes it all the more interesting to turn to the third and final part of this analysis, focusing on the reception of the series of images on two selected social network sites.

Social media response: divided opinions and meta-reflexivity

This section concerns responses to the images of the police officer and the young refugee girl on Imgur and reddit, which were chosen because the quantitative analysis performed using Google Image Reverse Search pointed to these social network sites as among the most popular outlets for disseminating and debating the images. To ensure consistency, the analysis is based on the same three images as the ones applied to the Google Reverse Image Search. The following analysis deduces some overriding patterns from the comment threads. They are particularly interesting for presenting a perspective on the Danish news coverage, which drew extensively on this social media content as source material but only focused on the affirmative aspects, either in terms of the humanitarian framing or the personal appeal of the police officer.

Of the three images, two show the scenes to which the news coverage was referring – of the police officer and the young girl playing together on the motorway. The third image, however, presents their interaction from a different perspective. They are both standing up and smiling, but the police officer is pointing his

index finger at the girl as if mildly reprimanding her. It is worthy of note that this photo generated by far the most comments on both Imgur (849 comments and 1,598,086 and reddit (1233 comments, views not stated), with the other two photos receiving fewer than 100 comments each on the two sites (all numbers as of August 22, 2016). This is symptomatic of how social media users foreground the negative, conflictual aspects of the series of photographs. As another indication of this tendency, the image is published on reddit under the, it seems, satirical and critical caption "Danish Police Officer Has Had Enough of Syrian Girl who Crossed the Border Illegally".

To an extent, the comments on reddit and Imgur confirm the Danish newspapers' accounts of how social media flooded with comments concerning the police officer's appearances, which are mostly delivered in a mundane, joking, and jovial manner, for instance "oh my god... This guy is insanely handsome.... Can I have one?!" (reddit, Indian_ angrycock) but also in more overtly sexual reactions, e.g. "Fuck the police, if you know what I mean" (Imgur, moolissaa). However, the sites also include a range of other responses, which brings to the fore the conflictual implications of this image and the refugee exodus. Debates quickly shift focus from the situation in Denmark to the ones in Hungary, the United States, and other countries and do not come across as coherent or stringent but instead as eclectic, impulsive, and motivated by spur-of-the-moment reactions and emotions.

Comments such as this one, bringing up the perceived threat of refugees as terrorists, are not uncommon, which feed into the negotiations of identity spurred by instant news icons: "According to /r/ worldnews that girl is an entitled criminal on par with rapists and murderers, and is probably affiliated with ISIS" (reddit, 'QuarterOztoFreedom'). Moreover, users reflect upon the different statuses of refugees and migrants and whether people fleeing Syria and neighboring countries are genuine refugees fleeing war and other imminent threats or have assumed this role out of convenience and under false pretenses:

Syrian 'refugees' who were going on hunger strike- type thing because they wanted to leave
Hungary to get further to Germany, because Hungary is too poor or too dangerous or
something (reddit, 'mongo_lloyd').

Some see this series of images as a contrast to the Danish government's policy on refugees. In the
following quote, it is interesting to note that on par with the newspapers' coverage, the Danish police
officer is not regarded as a public authority and representative of a system but rather as a person acting
as a model of civic engagement:

Denmark govermet [sic!] is super racist and are trying to force/keep out as many fugatives
[sic!] they can. Good to see not all dk people are the same:) (Imgur,
'WeBuiltThisSchmidtyOnTootseRolls').

Others, meanwhile, turn to media meta-reflexivity. But they do so with more of a critical edge than does
the newspapers' Meta-coverage. The users are of the opinion that the photo "seems like a convenient
photo-op" (Imgur, 'Silverlight') or downright "Aww adorable propaganda" (Imgur, 'Cubiol'), implying
that the images serve the interests of the police/government by embellishing the Danish approach to
refugees.

This brief analysis of comments posted on Imgur and reddit points to how the journalists sourcing these
sites in their coverage of the instant news icon seem to have been highly selective in choosing comments
supporting the interpretation that the "world's" women were infatuated with the Danish police officer.
In contrast, the sites host a wide range of comments, which touch more explicitly than does the Danish
news coverage on the political issues raised by the refugee situation and give vent to anger, indignation,
fear, and other emotions far beyond the proclaimed unity of the positive reception recounted by the
newspapers. Most of the comments seem to arise from an affective response to the images, which
becomes a catalyst for expressing what appear to be preconceived opinions and emotional inclinations –

as well as more-or-less coarse jokes. They hardly confirm the prevalent interpretation by the news (meta)coverage that the images "speak for themselves".

Conclusion

The relationship between image abundance and iconic images in the current media landscape raises a number of questions: Which images attract notice and are remembered? How do relationships play out between news media and social media as well as between local and global media? Who are the individual actors and media institutions involved in mobilizing these images, why, and how? What publics form around iconic images? This article has suggested the concept of "instant news icons" to grasp the transformation that iconic images are undergoing in the digital age.

The various analytical approaches to the instant news icon of the refugee girl and the police officer point to some tendencies in this transformation: In today's convergent and connective media landscape, icons arise faster and fade faster via the impromptu publics forming on social media, news media, and the interplay between the two. A particular interesting point in regard to what is termed "impromptu publics" in this article is that the public generating in response to the imagery of the Iranian refugee girl playing with a police officer was tied together through extensive practices of cross references between the news media and social media. Moreover, it included a meta-reflexive layer in both of these spheres. In offering deliberations on the larger communicative circuit in which the images circulated, the news media not least referred to the reception on social media, while social media users reflected on the way in which this image was framed in the news media. The main story in Denmark was that the images, via social media, had spread far beyond the national context. This Meta-coverage emphasized that the images "spoke for themselves" in their universal message of humanitarianism and the police officer's romantic or erotic appeal to women. They cited social network sites to this effect, however, the actual comments on reddit

and Imgur contradicted this interpretation by foregrounding a number of conflictual aspects of the case, indicating that the images did not, in fact, speak for themselves.

What was observable it this case was instead a "referential slippage", to use a pertinent expression from Hariman and Lucaites (2007). When circulated across media and regions, a shift occurs from the photographs' referential meaning to their symbolic meaning, i.e. from the original intention and historical circumstances to projected values, emotions, and opinions. Even if this instant news icon fostered a sense of cultural and political unity according to the newspapers, it hardly conveyed a fixed message on social media. They rather added contestation to the consensual approach of the newspapers.

This article has argued for the continued use of "icon" despite obvious limitations. One is that this term appears to be worn on account of the broad and somewhat uncritical application in various contexts. Another is that definitions of icons tend to be slippery or imprecise. The choice to stick with this concept is, as mentioned above, motivated by how "icon" is used in popular discourses and scholarship as well as how it grants access to historical comparisons. Another advantage of using this concept is that it is tied up with questions of power and enables research into the dynamic relationship between influential images, media, and politics in how prevalent conflicts and challenges in society are represented, discussed – and in which public realms.

Notes

1. Campbell (2002, p. 1) uses the term "instant icon" with reference to a photograph from 1992 of a male prisoner in a camp in Bosnia. He does not, however, use it in the same sense as this article, which concerns iconic images in the digital media circuit.
2. Due to copyright restrictions, it has unfortunately not been possible to reproduce the images in this article. However, they are widely available from online sources, for example though a Google Image search using the terms "refugee", "girl", "Danish", and "police officer".

3. "Refugee crisis" in this context refers to the discursive construction in (primarily) Northern/Western European media of the challenges related to refugees arriving from Syria in 2015. Countries in the Middle East and Southern Europe had experienced humanitarian catastrophes as well as grave logistical and social challenges related to refugees from the war in Syria much earlier.

4. All quotes in Danish have been translated into English by the author of this article.

5. Twitter was the most popular, but it was not possible to recreate tweets on the subject.

6. Retrieved from http://imgur.com/gallery/p5tJIUc (all links last accessed on August 23 2016)

7. Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/pics/comments/ 3k9lbw/danish_police_officer_has_had_enough_of_ syrian/

8. Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/pics/ comments/3k9lbw/danish_police_officer_has_ had_enough_of_syrian/cuvz8e1

9. Unlike reddit, Imgur does not use so-called "perma- links". The debate prompted by the image may be found here: http://imgur.com/gallery/p5tJIUc. This is also applicable to the following quotes from Imgur.

10. Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/pics/ comments/3k9lbw/danish_police_officer_has_had_ enough_of_syrian/cuvsifs

11. Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/pics/ comments/3k9lbw/danish_police_officer_has_ had_enough_of_syrian/cuw0p6n

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