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## **Compassion 2.0: How Internet users share “virtual care”?**

### **Współczucie 2.0: Jak internauci dzielą się „wirtualną troską”?**

#### **ABSTRACT:**

Compassion 2.0 manifests itself when images of babies in war zones hit headlines and appear on news and social media sites, where Internet users turn them into vehicles of emotions. In September 2015 a body of Alan Kurdi, a toddler dressed in red T-shirt, was found on a Turkish beach, where Nilufer Demir took memorable photos of the drowned 3-year-old refugee. Alan's afterlife in cyberspace began when Internet users started cutting the image of his body out of the original photo-journalistic frame to paste it into different contexts, charged with meaning and rhetorical power. The article explores visual metaphors that media users employed to create their own stories about Alan, which went beyond the narratives prevalent in traditional media and shows how “virtual care” is shared in a global village, where Compassion Fatigue (Moeller 1999) gives way to Compassion 2.0 which starts with a click and becomes one of online activities.

#### **KEY WORDS:**

compassion, emotions, Internet users, humanitarian crisis, media coverage, social media, response

#### **STRESZCZENIE:**

Emocjonalną reakcją odbiorców mediów, określaną tu mianem współczucia 2.0 obserwować można w Internecie, gdzie fotografując dziecięcych ofiar wojen, o których opowiadają dziennikarze tradycyjnych mediów, w sieci stają się materiałem poddawany graficznemu przekształceniu. Znalezione na tureckiej plaży ciało Alana Kurdi, 3-letniego uchodźcy, który utonął we wrześniu 2015 roku, internauci „wycinali” ze zdjęcia zrobionego przez reporterkę i „wklejali” w inne obrazy uruchamiające konteksty niosące wiele znaczeń. W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki analizy wizualnych metafor wykorzystanych w obrazach będących alternatywną narracją o chłopcu, o którego (ciało) w wirtualnej przestrzeni troszczyli się mieszkańcy globalnej wioski. Za pomocą studium przypadku pokazano, że zmęczenie współczuciem (Moeller 1999) ustępuje współczuciu 2.0, które zaczyna się od kliknięcia i staje się jedną z internetowych aktywności.

#### **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:**

internauci, kryzys humanitarny, media społecznościowe, medialne relacje, emocje, odbiór, współczucie

In August 2016 Omran was pulled out of the rubble in Aleppo, Syria. His face was covered with dust and blood he was trying to wipe, sitting in the ambulance and patiently waiting for medics to treat him. The boy in the ambulance – that is how he was described by journalists and how the world remembers 5-year old Omran Daqneesh, whose images went viral in August 2016, hash-tagged #Aleppo. Omran’s photos were compared to the images that hit global headlines in September 2015.

In 2015 Alan was washed ashore, and found on the Golden Beach in Turkey. A little refugee from Syria. He was lying on the sand and he looked like sleeping. The boy in red T-shirt, or the boy on the beach – that is how the world remembers 3-year old Alan Kurdi, whose images caused outrage and grief and embarrassment of millions of people who shared Alan’s photos hash-tagged #Humanity washed ashore. Extremely strong emotional response to the pictures of a drowned toddler is the focus of my study, because it showed in unrepresented way the sentiments of Internet users who expressed their compassion online, although it was not the first photo which broke “Internet’s heart”. It also happened in December 2014.

In 2014 Adi, a little girl from Syria, thought that the photographer was holding a weapon, so she bit her lip and raised her hands to surrender. It was in a refugee camp. 4-year-old Adi Hudea knew, from her war experience, that long objects meant danger, especially when they were pointed at her, like a telephoto lens which Osman Sagirli, the photographer who took that picture, was using on that day, when he captured the horror in the girl’s eyes. The girl who surrendered – that is how the world remembers the girl, whose images went viral on social media<sup>1</sup>, where comments read “I’m weeping” and “Humanity failed”<sup>2</sup>.

Omran was 5, Alan was 3, Adi was 4, when their pictures embarrassed the viewers, reminding them of the horrors of those trapped in the war zone in Syria or those trying to escape. The boy in the ambulance (in 2016), the boy in red

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<sup>1</sup> Her image went viral after being posted to Twitter by Nadia Abu Shaban, a photo-journalist based in Gaza. The image was first published in the Türkiye newspaper in January 2014. “It was widely shared by Turkish speaking social media users at the time. But it took a few months before it went viral in the English-speaking world, finding an audience in the West over the last week”, BBC, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-32121732> (access 16.01.2018 r.).

<sup>2</sup> Anonymous, *The photographer who broke the internet’s heart*, BBC, 31.03. 2015 r., <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-32121732> (access 16.01.2018 r.).

T-shirt (in 2015), and the girl who surrendered (in 2014) became tragic human faces of the biggest humanitarian crisis since the end of the Second World War.

From the beginning of the war in Syria more than 10 000 children have been killed<sup>3</sup>, an average of seven a day, 'and nobody has taken much notice', wrote Liz Sly, a Beirut-based Washington Post correspondent and one of the first who tweeted the photo of Alan Kurdi. She said: 'If it takes photographs of dead children to make people realize children are dying, so be it'<sup>4</sup>. 7 kids died yesterday, 7 will be killed tomorrow, and today will be the last day for 7 children. Journalists report their deaths, but the viewers seem too tired to care. It's called compassion fatigue, 'easy to catch', but 'hard to overcome'<sup>5</sup>.

## 1. COMPASSION FATIGUE

It sets in when people are exposed to media coverage of wars, disasters, and dramatic events which they can do nothing about. Susan D. Moeller, who investigated this media-induced compassion fatigue, noted: 'In a world that moves steadily from massacres to genocide, from images of chaos, destruction, death and madness (...) the public resorts to compassion fatigue as a defence mechanism against the knowledge of horror'<sup>6</sup>. Audience responses illustrate how this mechanism works: 'One of the things I try never to do is watch the news at 11, because that really makes you an insomniac'<sup>7</sup>, complained one of the viewers, the other admitted: 'Rwanda. I don't listen, (...) What can you do? You listen and there's nothing you can do'<sup>8</sup>.

It is disputable whether such sentiments are compassion fatigue or compassion avoidance<sup>9</sup>, however the truth is that many reports from war zones are 'beyond such a mild emotion as compassion'<sup>10</sup>. Writing about media consumers who

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<sup>3</sup> Liz Sly, *Why I tweeted the photo of the dead Syrian toddler*, „Washington Post”, 3.09.2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/09/03/if-it-takes-pictures-of-dead-children-to-make-people-realize-children-are-dying-so-be-it/> (access 16.01.2018 r.).

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> S. D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*, New York 1999, p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> S. D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue...*, op. cit., p. 226.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in S. D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue...*, op. cit., p. 235.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in S. D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue...*, op. cit., p. 235.

<sup>9</sup> S. D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue...*, op. cit., p. 235.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 236.

often become spectators of calamities reported in the news, Susan Sontag pointed out: ‘If one feels that there is nothing ,we’ can do (...) then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic’<sup>11</sup>. That’s a perfect recipe for compassion fatigue.

Janine DiGiovanni who covered the carnage in the Balkans in the 1990s, said that the most difficult thing about war coverage was the fact that the reporters were ‘covering a story that the public had grown tired of’<sup>12</sup>. News organisations believe that the audience don’t want to hear the stories about babies being blown up<sup>13</sup>, and reporters are painfully aware of that. There are pictures which touch the public’s conscience, but at the same time there are those which never get through because no one is looking<sup>14</sup>. As DiGiovanni bitterly put it, ‘hellholes are a bore, and there are a limited number of ways you can describe death and destruction’<sup>15</sup>.

It’s true that the horror of the news goes ‘beyond the threshold of what the public could stomach’<sup>16</sup>, and the audience is often left with the ‘images that are difficult to shake’<sup>17</sup>, which activates Compassion Fatigue – the defense mechanism that forces us to turn the page or switch the channel. ‘It may be that we are overwhelmed by so many variations of emotional stimuli that we constrict reality to what we can absorb’<sup>18</sup>. The world ‘watches the flames and carnage on the evening news, and very often shrugs its shoulders’<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Penguin Group 2004, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> J. Di Giovanni, *Tired Moving of the Pictures*, „Sunday Times”, 14.08.1994. Quoted in S. D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue...*, op. cit., p. 238.

<sup>13</sup> As Dan Rather put it, quoted in S. D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue...*, op. cit., p. 260.

<sup>14</sup> For more, see M. Hodalska, *Passengers in Charon’s Boat’: Reporters Covering Real-life Horror, Fear and Terror*, in: J. Campos II and K. Boczowska (eds.) *Framing Fear, Horror and Terror through the Visible and the Invisible*, Oxford 2016, p. 21–38.

<sup>15</sup> J. Di Giovanni, *Tired Moving of the Pictures*, „Sunday Times”, 14.08.1994. Quoted in S. D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue...*, op. cit., p. 304.

<sup>16</sup> A. Feinstein, *Journalists Under Fire : The Psychological Hazards of Covering War*, Baltimore 2006, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> S. D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue...*, op. cit., p. 234.

<sup>18</sup> P. Hosking SJ, *Compassion: What Is in a Word?*, in: Marion Kostanski (ed.), *The Power of Compassion An Exploration of the Psychology of Compassion in the 21st Century*, Cambridge 2007, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> M. Hodalska, *Stories of Fear, Horror and Terror: The Price that the Storytellers Pay*, in: M. Callaghan and K. Davis (eds.), *Cultural Experiences of Fear, Horror and Terror*, Oxford 2016, p. 150.

There are, however, images and stories that can ‘cut through the compassion fatigue night to have their moment in the bright lights’<sup>20</sup> and demand our attention. ‘When the victims are children, compassion fatigue is kept at bay longer than it might be if adults were the only casualties represented’<sup>21</sup>.

This was the case of Omran, Adi and Alan, on whom I will focus, because the image of his lifeless body ‘broke into our lives’<sup>22</sup> and ‘spoke to people in a way that thousands of words hadn’t or couldn’t’<sup>23</sup>.

## 2. IMAGES MAKE US CARE

In her excellent book *Regarding the Pain of Others* Susan Sontag wrote about ‘consumers of violence as spectacle, adepts of proximity without risk’<sup>24</sup>: ‘Parked in front of the little screens – television, computer, palmtop – we can surf to images and brief reports of disasters throughout the world’<sup>25</sup>. ‘If it bleeds, it leads runs the venerable guideline of tabloids and twenty-four-hour headline news shows – to which the response is compassion, or indignation, or titillation, or approval, as each misery heaves into view’, noted Sontag<sup>26</sup>.

The picture of a drowned toddler reached global audience with an impact that knew no precedence. It led although it didn’t bleed. It showed a dead child, who looked like sleeping and the calmness of the frame destroyed the peace of those who saw it. As Sontag would have put it, spectators surfing through images suddenly felt uncomfortable in front of their little screens. Some of those who felt uncomfortable sitting in front of computers, did move to do something, even if that ‘something’ was just a simple key stroke: to tweet, to like, to send or forward the images and their remakes loaded with emotions.

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<sup>20</sup> S. D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue...*, op. cit., p. 111.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 110.

<sup>22</sup> B. McKoy, *Aylan Kurdi: The Power of One Child*, “Compassion” (blog), <http://blog.compassion.com/aylan-kurdi-the-power-of-one-child/> (access 16.08.2016 r.).

<sup>23</sup> Maya Mailer, ‘Syria: what does it take to spark compassion?’, *Oxfam*, 7.10. 2015, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/blog/2015/10/syria-what-does-it-take-to-spark-compassion> (access 16.08.2016 r.).

<sup>24</sup> S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, op. cit., p. 99.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 103–104.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 16.

‘Images make us care about the news’<sup>27</sup>, said Barbie Zelizer. By replicating the disturbing images of Alan Kurdi many Internet users showed that they cared and wanted to share their ‘virtual care’ with others in their social networks. The aim of my paper is to investigate how Compassion 2.0 is manifested in the global village, where Internet users visualise their care and sympathy resorting to visual metaphors, as persuasive means to create expressive and impressive messages, well comprehended regardless of the language of those who communicate. Visual communication goes beyond borders and crosses the boundaries allowing its participants to articulate ideas and opinions without words.

History of photojournalism has recorded examples of press photographs that have been translated into posters, jigsaw puzzles, cartoons, paintings, or films<sup>28</sup>. Alan’s case, however, is unprecedented. His body was literally cut out of the original setting and moved to different contexts, charged with meaning and rhetorical power. And this is how Alan’s metaphoric afterlife began, turning his body, cut out of a photojournalistic frame, into a vehicle of emotions – sentiments not only expressed, but manifested by thousands<sup>29</sup>.

Barbie Zelizer studied the way news images move the public<sup>30</sup>. She pointed out that the photos which ‘make us care’ also give us a chance to engage emotionally and by doing so they stay with us long after the details of the story have faded<sup>31</sup>. The story of Alan Kurdi started on the shore, where his life was cut short.

He had a white teddy bear and a red T-Shirt; and no life jacket, when a rubber boat carrying him and his family, together with several other refugees, capsized. 3-year old Alan Kurdi did not reach the Greek Isle of Kos. His body was found at dawn, on September 2, 2015, on the ‘Golden Beach’ in Bodrum, Turkey, where Nilufer Demir took memorable pictures which hit global headlines and went viral on social media. It was only then, that the world learnt his name was Alan and he’d spent his 3-year-old life in a war zone in Syria.

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<sup>27</sup> B. Zelizer, *The Heartbreaking Image of the Syrian Boy Will Not Necessarily Lead to Action*, “Huffington Post” (blog), 8.09.2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/barbie-zelizer/impact-of-news-images-not\\_b\\_8094156.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/barbie-zelizer/impact-of-news-images-not_b_8094156.html). (access 16.01.2018 r.).

<sup>28</sup> See B. Zelizer, *About to Die: How News images Move the Public*, Oxford 2010; J. Lucaites and R. Hariman, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*, Chicago 2007.

<sup>29</sup> For more, see M. Hodalska, *#Humanity Washed Ashore: Visual Metaphors and Emotions in Social Media*, „Zeszyty Prasoznawcze” 2018, in press.

<sup>30</sup> B. Zelizer, *About to Die: How News images Move the Public*, Oxford 2010.

<sup>31</sup> B. Zelizer, *The Heartbreaking Image...*, op. cit.

In 24 hours following Alan's death 20 million people saw the photos and images of the drowned toddler were being tweeted 15 times a second<sup>32</sup>. Internet users expressed their feelings through images they shared, tagged and modified. Tribute pages, opened on websites such as the Bored Panda<sup>33</sup> or BuzzFeed<sup>34</sup>, were viewed by thousands who responded to the dramatic image of a toddler washed up on a Turkish beach. They submitted their own compositions: drawings, paintings, graphic manipulations, cartoons, photos of sand-sculptures, and performances<sup>35</sup>, commented and shared them across social media platforms.

Those powerful and often disturbing images, presented now in a form of picture galleries on the above mentioned websites, which (due to the diversity of pictures gathered on Bored Panda and BuzzFeed from all around the world) became the main source of research materials for this case study, which involves the analysis of visual metaphors, considered as visual representations of metaphorical thoughts or concepts<sup>36</sup> (drawing from the conceptual metaphor theory<sup>37</sup>) within the framework of narrative paradigm. The most widely shared pictures

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<sup>32</sup> A. Withnall, *Aylan Kurdi images were seen by '20 million people in 12 hours*, „Independent”, 15.12.2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugee-crisis-aylan-kurdi-images-were-seen-by-20-million-people-in-12-hours-new-study-suggests-a6774181.html> (access 16.01.2018 r.).

<sup>33</sup> *Artists Around The World Respond To Tragic Death Of 3-Year-Old Syrian Refugee*, „Bored Panda” tribute page, <http://www.boredpanda.com/syrian-boy-drowned-mediterranean-tragedy-artists-respond-aylan-kurdi/> (access 16.01.2018 r.).

<sup>34</sup> *17 Heartbreaking Cartoons From Artists All Over The World Mourning The Drowned Syrian Boy*, BuzzFeed website, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanhatsthish/humanity-washed-ashore?utm\\_term=.lm9WJPM40j#.uayBK5Oojg](https://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanhatsthish/humanity-washed-ashore?utm_term=.lm9WJPM40j#.uayBK5Oojg). (access 16.01.2018 r.).

<sup>35</sup> S. Faulkner, *Aylan Kurdi and the Movability of Images*, in: F. Vis, O. Goriunova (eds.), *The Iconic Image on Social Media: A Rapid Research Response to the Death of Aylan Kurdi*, p. 53–55. Visual Social Media Lab, December 2015 <http://visualsecialmedialab.org/projects/the-iconic-image-on-social-media>; (access 16.01.2018 r.). F. Vis, *Examining the Hundred Most Shared Images of Aylan Kurdi on Twitter*, in: F. Vis, O. Goriunova (eds.), *The Iconic Image on Social Media: A Rapid Research Response to the Death of Aylan Kurdi*, p. 27–30, Visual Social Media Lab, December 2015 <http://visualsecialmedialab.org/projects/the-iconic-image-on-social-media>; (access 16.01.2018 r.).

<sup>36</sup> For the discussion of the mode of communication through which metaphors are expressed, see E. El Refaie who pointed out that metaphors must always be studied within their socio-political context. *Understanding visual metaphor: the example of newspaper cartoons*, „Visual Communication” 2003, vol. 2.1, p. 75.

<sup>37</sup> *Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) introduced by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, whose pioneering work in the field, Metaphors We Live By (1980), inspired a number of cognitive linguists, for example Raymond Gibbs and Zoltán Kövecses. See Z. Kövecses, Metaphor:*

provide examples of visual metaphors, including cultural archetypes<sup>38</sup>, symbols and allegories<sup>39</sup> which were employed by social media users to express compassion 2.0 and to create their own narratives alternative to those prevalent in traditional media.

Extremely strong emotional response of Internet users who shared and disseminated the images of Alan, hash-tagged #Humanity Washed Ashore, is the focus of my paper which demonstrates: how compassion fatigue was overcome by Compassion 2.0; what forms it takes and what visual metaphors are employed to convey the message of compassion and sympathy.

### **3. COMPASSION. SUFFERING WITH THOSE WHO SUFFER**

“The origins of the word compassion come from the root word *pati/passio* (Latin) *patheia* (Greek) meaning to “bear/suffer”, or “passion/affection”, and the prefix *cum* (Latin) or *sym* (Greek) meaning “with” or *em* (Greek) meaning “into/in”. The English words “compassion” (from Latin) or “empathy” and “sympathy” (from Greek) denote fellow feeling, affinity for, and sorrow for the sufferings of another”<sup>40</sup>. Both terms, compassion and sympathy, mean suffering WITH those who suffer.

Peter Hosking notes that the word compassion is defined in various but similar ways as: “(a) a feeling of sorrow or pity for the pain or misfortunes of another that inclines one to help; (b) feeling deep sympathy for another’s suffering or misfortune accompanied by a desire to alleviate the pain and remove its cause; (c) the feeling of emotion when one is moved by the suffering of another and by the need to relieve it, and (d) sympathetic consciousness of another’s distress with a desire to alleviate it”<sup>41</sup>.

Emotional response to the death of Alan Kurdi shows that online compassion was offered to a boy who was already dead, but who stood for those who were

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*A practical introduction*, New York 2002. R. Gibbs, *Evaluating conceptual metaphor theory*, „Discourse Processes” 2001, nr 48.8, p. 529–562.

<sup>38</sup> E. P. Hatcher, *Visual Metaphors: A Methodological Study in Visual Communication*, University of New Mexico Press 1989, p. 239. K. L. Smith, S. Moriarty, K. Kenney, G. Barbatsis, *Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media*, Routledge 2004.

<sup>39</sup> See, L. D. Ritchie, *Metaphorical Stories in Discourse*, Cambridge 2017, p. 249.

<sup>40</sup> P. Hosking SJ, *Compassion: What is in a Word?...*, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*.

alive – for the survivors of the exodus, for the strangers crisscrossing European borders. When Alan’s photos went viral, the majority of Internet users switched from using ‘migrant’ to ‘refugee’<sup>42</sup> and this effect persisted for two months, before the things went back to the ‘old normal’<sup>43</sup> and media reports showed unnamed ‘migrants’ waiting behind fences, as Barbie Zelizer pointed it out<sup>44</sup>.

Language can make a difference especially making ‘a human person into the other’. Peter Hosking draws out attention to the problem of manipulative language that can include or exclude: ‘Consider how people who flee their country of origin and seek protection in another country can be called desperate people (...) refugees, asylum seekers, right through to (...) illegal immigrants, and queue jumpers, people traffickers, and even terrorists. (...) Our compassion antennae can be jammed by manipulative language like this. It interferes with the magnetic point of the moral compass. Compassion invites us to value everyone’s story—to listen to the other because we are all others. If the story is struggle, then it is the lived experience for all. It is an essential story, about a person of intrinsic worth, with ultimate human dignity’<sup>45</sup>.

The stories told in traditional news media reflect the public discourse, where the refugee is a fundamentally ambivalent figure, i.e. someone who is, simultaneously, a sufferer of a geo-political conflict and a threat to the Westphalian order, as Lili Chouliaraki observed<sup>46</sup>. Contradictory emotions, like compassion and outrage or hostility, go hand in hand in West, because the news coverage of Europe’s refugee crisis is dominated by two main narratives: the narrative of Suffering and the narrative of Threat and Fear, which overlap in traditional media<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> See also, H. Lewis, *How Newsrooms Handle Graphic Images of Violence*, „Nieman Reports”, 5.01.2016, <http://niemanreports.org/articles/how-newsrooms-handle-graphic-images-of-violence/> (access 19.01.2018 r.).

<sup>43</sup> B. Zelizer, *Haunting Image Spurs Action on Migrants*, 8.09.2015, <http://www.philly.com/philly/blogs/thinktank/Haunting-image-spurs-action-on-migrants.html> (access 19.01.2017 r.).

<sup>44</sup> B. Zelizer, *Haunting Image Spurs Action on Migrants*, op. cit.

<sup>45</sup> P. Hosking SJ, *Compassion: What is in a Word?...*, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>46</sup> L. Chouliaraki, *Between Pity and Irony: Paradigms of Refugee Representation in Humanitarian Discourse*, in: K. Moore, B. Gross, T. Threadgold (eds.), *Migrations and the Media*, New York 2012, p. 14.

<sup>47</sup> For more on the narratives in traditional news media, see: M. Hodalska, C. Ghita, *Visual Metaphors of Dismay: Representations of Migrants in Recent Culture and the Mass Media*, in press.

The new media, however, especially the social networking sites, offer its users tools to react, to comment upon, to add their own content, to create narratives that challenge those officially existing in public discourse and traditional media. In fact, the stories written by the Participants of Culture 2.0. go far beyond the narratives prevalent in traditional news media, where people are turned into numbers that change. Traditional media narratives are dehumanizing. Graphics offer visualization of the migrants’ moves but tell very little about their hunger, cold and despair. Migrants are depicted as a series of lines crisscrossing states and numbers<sup>48</sup>. In 2015 the image of one body washed upon a shore ‘turned such lines on a map into living and dying people’<sup>49</sup>. Emotional response to that image tells us a lot about Compassion 2.0 in the global village.

#### 4. COMPASSION 2.0

Today almost half of the global population is online and an estimated 3.2 billion people stay connected<sup>50</sup>. But are they really ‘connected’ in emotional sense? In his article ‘Empathy 2.0: Virtual Intimacy’ Timothy L. Hulsey quoted G. Anthony Gorry who wrote about ‘Empathy in the Virtual World’: ‘In our life on the screen, we might know more and more about others and care less and less about them’<sup>51</sup>.

We are virtually close, but emotionally distant. Writing about compassion, Peter Hosking pointed out that the degree of compassion may be related to the distance from the person affected (‘Compare the sympathy for newborns with HIV in Africa, with attitudes to intravenous drug users with blood born viruses in Melbourne’<sup>52</sup>, wrote an Australian Jesuit).

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<sup>48</sup> D. Machin, *Visual Communication* Berlin/ Boston 2014, p. 126.

<sup>49</sup> E. Ruppert, F. Ustek, *Body Counts: Counting Aylan Kurdi*, in: F. Vis, O. Goriunova (eds.), *The Iconic Image on Social Media: A Rapid Research Response to the Death of Aylan Kurdi*, Visual Social Media Lab, December 2015, <http://visualsocialmedialab.org/projects/the-iconic-image-on-social-media/> (access 19.01.2018 r.), p. 69.

<sup>50</sup> See M. Hodalska, C. Ghita, J. Bapat. *Perils of the Web: Online Threats and Offline Fears*. Introduction to *Perils of the Web: Cyber Security and Internet Safety Nowadays*, edited by M. Hodalska, C. Ghita and J. Bapat, Oxford 2016, p. vii-xviii.

<sup>51</sup> G. Anthony Gorry, *Empathy in the Virtual World*, „The Chronicle of Higher Education” 2009, Quoted in: T. L. Hulsey, *Empathy 2.0: Virtual Intimacy*, Spring 2011, <http://www.teachingsofdrjim.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Hulsey-Empathy-2.0.pdf> / (access 19.01.2018 r.).

<sup>52</sup> P. Hosking SJ, *Compassion: What is in a Word?...*, op. cit., p. 9.

In other words: people are more willing to show compassion to those whom they would never meet in person. This is also one of the relevant traits of compassion 2.0, considered as a social and cultural phenomenon of our age. Many of those who willingly shared the images of Alan Kurdi have never seen a refugee in person, only on their 'little screens', watching the media coverage of migrant crisis.

## 5. ALAN'S DEATH AND AFTERLIFE IN CYBERSPACE

Alan Kurdi has become a symbol of suffering of three thousand 'boat people' who drowned only last year trying to reach European shores. The boy clad in tiny T-shirt looked like any other boy in Europe and his photo made the faraway conflict close and personal for the audience familiar with the images of boys dressed in T-shirts and shorts, but unfamiliar with the images of blood, debris and shattered glass<sup>53</sup>.

The toddler has become a human face of the crisis, a symbol, an icon, an emblem, and emotional vehicle allowing thousands of Internet users to express their grief and outrage and manifest their compassion through sharing the dramatic images of the drowned toddler and creating their own stories about the boy's afterlife.

Compassion 2.0. was manifested through images of Alan's body, which was cut out of the original photo and pasted into different contexts, replicating the so called 'user generated content', where Alan's body is no longer the boy's body, but has become the signifier, only without the signified? Or, maybe it has been filled with too much meaning?<sup>54</sup>

## 6. HOW INTERNET USERS SHARED 'VIRTUAL CARE'?

One of the most significant and touching is the way in which Internet users denied Alan's death and offered alternative ending of his tragic story. Hundreds shared the image<sup>55</sup> which domesticated the scene of horror: The surf approaching

<sup>53</sup> See M. Hodalska, *#Humanity Washed Ashore*, op. cit., in press.

<sup>54</sup> All the images discussed here I investigate in details in M. Hodalska, *#Humanity Washed Ashore*, op. cit., in press, where I explore the emotions evoked by these images, whereas here I focus on compassion and the way it is manifested online.

<sup>55</sup> Cartoon hash-tagged #How His Story Should Have Ended..., submitted by Steve Dennis and ranked 2 in popularity on *Bored Panda* gallery. Huffington Post attributed the image to Omer Tosun. See: R. Drainville, *On the Iconology of Aylan Kurdi, Alone*, in: F. Vis, O. Goriunova

Alan’s face in the original photo has been turned into a pillow<sup>56</sup>. The boy’s body washed ashore, was virtually taken care of and put to sleep. Social media users were tucking Alan under the blanket, or putting his head on the pillow of stars<sup>57</sup>, as if they had wanted to offer the boy the comfort which the world failed to offer him when he was alive.

Those who shared the cartoon showing Alan between Heaven, symbolized by the stars, and the Sea – which in reality claimed his life, and here, in the drawing, is turned into a puffy coverlet – wanted to offer Alan the comfort, peace and protection, putting his body to rest in a cosy bedroom decorated with stars and surf-like patterns of bedlinen. Such pictures suggest ‘the notions of failed protection and withdrawn care’<sup>58</sup>. To make it up for the lack of care when Alan was alive, those who shared the images offered ‘virtual care’ to... the representation of his lifeless body.

The day after Alan’s body was found on a Turkish beach, president Erdogan<sup>59</sup> repeated Pope Francis’<sup>60</sup> metaphor of ‘Sea turned into a migrant cemetery’. Heart-rending is the image hash-tagged #Just Sleeping<sup>61</sup> which is a form of artistic tribute to those kids who perished without their names being displayed on front pages: children with rosy cheeks; serene and smiling; clutching teddy bears or dolls, dressed in pyjamas. The toddlers rest in different poses on their backs or bellies, like Alan, covered by the sea waves which take the form of a polar blanket with handcrafted edges. It’s another striking metaphor of afterlife, digitally crafted by imagination of Internet users.

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(eds.), *The Iconic Image on Social Media: A Rapid Research Response to the Death of Aylan Kurdi*, Visual Social Media Lab, December 2015, p. 47. <http://visualsecialmedialab.org/projects/the-iconic-image-on-social-media>; (access 16.08.2016 r.).

<sup>56</sup> R. Drainville, *Iconology of Aylan Kurdi*, op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>58</sup> H. Ryan, #KiyiyaVuranInsanlik: *Unpacking Artistic Responses to the Aylan Kurdi Images*, in in: F. Vis, O. Goriunova (eds.), *The Iconic Image on Social Media: A Rapid Research Response to the Death of Aylan Kurdi*, Visual Social Media Lab, December 2015, p. 46. <http://visualsecialmedialab.org/projects/the-iconic-image-on-social-media>; (access 16.08.2016 r.).

<sup>59</sup> B. Rossington, *Europe has turned the Mediterranean into a ‘refugee cemetery’, blasts Turkey’s president*, „Mirror”, 3.09.2015, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/europe-turned-mediterranean-refugee-cemetery-6377730>, (access 16.08.2016 r.).

<sup>60</sup> E. Biles, *Stop Mediterranean becoming vast migrant cemetery, Pope tells Europe*, Reuters, 24.11. 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-europe-idUSKCN0J911320141125>, (access 16.08.2016 r.).

<sup>61</sup> Submitted by Mahnaz Yazdani and ranked 6 on *Bored Panda* tribute page.

Noteworthy is that the Sea, blamed for taking the refugees' lives, is portrayed in a very friendly manner. Cartoons and drawings depict no storm, no high waves, no tides. The nature is gentle, unlike humans who force others to flee their land. Maybe that's why (according to the narratives discussed here) humans have no right to cry over Alan's death, or... they no longer have the right to cry. Cartoon submitted by Azzam Daaboul<sup>62</sup> is powerful in form and meaning. It shows Sea Creatures crying. Dolphin, whale, turtle, fish, sea star – all of them standing in line and bowing their heads to pay respect to Alan who is lying on the sand next to a very indifferent coast guard (the man is taking notes, he is not crying). Sea creatures are weeping, putting their fins in respectful gesture, resembling the one of a humble prayer.

The narrative of Lost Humanity also includes crying teddy-bears, such as those in submission ranked 56 on Bored Panda website, hash tagged #Faith in Humanity – Lost: Teddy bears are sitting on the moon, one teddy is wiping his/her eyes, comforted in loving embrace of another (a gesture that only a few of Internet users would offer to a refugee). Teddies are looking at Alan turned to an angel and resting on a cloud in heaven. Knowing the boy's plight, and looking down to earth from the sky, one soft toy says to the other: 'I see humans, but no humanity'. The powerful metaphor of teddy bears crying over humanity builds the Narrative of Lost Humanity, which is reinforced by the visual metaphor of Sea Creatures who are more humane than humans. A cartoon hash-tagged #Noblest of Them All<sup>63</sup> depicts a whale carrying Alan on its back. Thousands of social media users shared the images of compassionate Sea creatures, who witnessed not only Alan's death, but the deaths of thousands like him.

Sea Creatures grieve the death of a toddler who used to play with his brother, clutching a white teddy-bear – the photos of their happy life were widely displayed in the media after their tragic death. The same photo we see in a heartbreaking image of a teddy bear crying over a photo of him and his human friends<sup>64</sup>. Compassion and grieve of Internet users took the shape of crying sea creatures and soft toys.

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<sup>62</sup> Ranked 3 in popularity on *Bored Panda* website.

<sup>63</sup> Submission by Abdal Mufti, ranked 20 on *Bored Panda* website.

<sup>64</sup> Ranked 40 on *Bored Panda* website.

Weeping teddy bears recalls the happy moments he spent with Alan and his brother. Confronted with the boy’s death, Internet users shared images that portrayed Alan together with material attributes of happy childhood, such as: balloons, football<sup>65</sup>, seaside set, reminding the viewers what toddlers should do on a beach, or gain, trying to offer the boy (or his image?) the opportunities he lost.

Heart-wrenching is the cartoon<sup>66</sup>, which shows Alan playing next to a sand sculpture, whose shape resembles the toddler’s body. The living boy, clad in red T-shirt, is kneeling next to the ‘sand boy’ and preparing a house of sand. Is it a house for the ‘sand boy’ lying on the shore? Or a painful reminder of those who lost their homes and set on a journey, looking for a roof for their heads?

Another childhood object depicted in one of most circulated drawings<sup>67</sup> is the one of ‘a paper boat’ floating on the sea. Fragile paper ship recalls childhood games, but also chillingly reminds us of the boat that sank on September 2, 2015, with Alan and eleven others onboard.

Equally persuasive is the image of Alan’s body locked in a bottle<sup>68</sup> washed ashore. A glass bottle is an archetype of communication, where one cannot reach the addressee. In the picture disseminated on social media, Alan’s body has become a powerful message, which one Twitter user put in her comment: ‘it’s a message in a baby – (...) Do not let this happen anymore!!!’<sup>69</sup>. The sad truth is that ‘this is happening’, on everyday basis.

## **7. ADI, ALAN, OMAR AND TEN THOUSAND OTHERS IN THE MEDIA**

10 000 children have perished since the beginning of the war in Syria. A little town. The world heard about Adi, Alan, Omar when their photos went viral on social media. Neda Kadri’s cartoon shows Syrian children welcoming Alan Kurdi in heaven: ‘You are so lucky Aylan! We are the victims of the same war but nobody

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<sup>65</sup> In submission hash-tagged *#I[t] should end this way*, ranked 94 on *Bored Panda* website, El Vigia de Ponce offered alternative ending, showing Alan dribbling a football toward the viewers. The boy, literally ‘put together’ from pieces of photos in a photoshop program and thus given ‘new life’, is surrounded by characters from Peanuts, popular children’s comic.

<sup>66</sup> Submitted by Gunduz Aghayev and ranked 4 on *Bored Panda* website.

<sup>67</sup> Submitted by Murat Sayin and ranked 10 on *Bored Panda* website.

<sup>68</sup> Ranked 49 on *Bored Panda* website.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*. Comment by Kelly Noble, found on *Bored Panda* website.

cared about our death'<sup>70</sup>. Compassion fatigue is hard to overcome. Compassion fatigue sets in when people feel there is 'nothing they can do'<sup>71</sup>.

Social media give the Participants of Culture 2.0 the feeling that they can do something, and that their actions, i.e. online activities, are meaningful. Susan Sontag warned us: 'Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers'<sup>72</sup>. In 2015 Internet users did take action, tailored according to their limited means, but still their voice was powerful enough, to be heard by those who so wished. Social networking sites offered them platforms and gave them means to express their feelings and ideas, thus providing the tools to ACT, even if acting means only forwarding a message, pressing the 'send' button, sharing, liking, commenting – all this is still better than nothing, for those who perish in the Sea, and for the rest of us, participants, comfortably seated in front of our little or big screens<sup>73</sup>.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS: FROM COMPASSION FATIGUE TO COMPASSION 2.0

Compassion Fatigue was caused by the coverage of death in traditional news media. Today it gives way to Compassion 2.0, cultural phenomenon born online and witnessed within social networks, manifested by the use of graphics and visuals easy to share and loaded with meaning, often in response to dramatic and heart-breaking news reports that bring images difficult to digest, especially when injured babies become tragic heroes of human stories that hit headlines. Those stories are continued on websites around the world and social networking sites where Internet users participate in creation and dissemination of powerful images that express what words cannot express. As was in the case of Alan Kurdi.

Metaphorically speaking, Compassion 2.0. is dressed in white blankets of stars, and manifested in the attempts to offer the dead toddler protection and comfort the world failed to offer him when he was alive. Compassion 2.0 means

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<sup>70</sup> Mailer, *What does it take to spark compassion?*, op. cit.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in S. D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* London 1999, p. 235.

<sup>72</sup> S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Penguin Group 2004, p. 90.

<sup>73</sup> Whether or not such actions may be labelled slacktivism, discussed and criticised in E. Morozov's book *Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (2011), that concept, however intriguing, goes beyond the realms of this study.

offering ‘virtual care’ to the on-screen representations of his lifeless body. Compassion 2.0. is reflected in the tears of crying starfish and teddy bears grieving the loss of their human friends, who are covered with the sea waves turned into a puffy coverlet, and hash-tagged #Just sleeping. Sympathy is expressed by the visual metaphor of compassionate creatures, who are more humane than humans.

Various means of visual communication, especially visual metaphors, including symbols, allegories, archetypes, allow Internet users to express their feelings and create narratives alternative to those presented in traditional media.

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New media users show and sometimes manifest Compassion 2.0 by visualising their care for those who suffer in pictorial metaphors in images they either create or simply disseminate to show others in their network that they care, to ‘share’ their ‘virtual care’.

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When new technologies turned spectators into Participants of Culture 2.0, the Participants’ compassion became one of their online activities.

In a powerful drawing<sup>74</sup> that recalls and juxtaposes two famous photos: Kevin Carter’s picture of a girl and a vulture, taken in Sudan 1993<sup>75</sup>, and Nilufer Demir’s photo taken on a Turkish beach in 2015. In heaven, the starving girl, who remained anonymous forever, meets the drowned boy, and asks: ‘Still the same?’, Alan Kurdi replies: ‘Still the same’. No, Alan. Something has changed. Compassion is no longer fatigue. It has become one of Internet activities.

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<sup>74</sup> Submitted by Hrishikesk Sarma, and ranked 13 on *Bored Panda* website.

<sup>75</sup> Awarded Pulitzer Prize and followed by Carter’s suicide. See: M. Hodalska, ‘Passengers in Charon’s Boat’: Reporters Covering Real-life Horror, Fear and Terror, in: J. Campos II, K. Boczkowska (eds.), *Framing Fear, Horror and Terror through the Visible and the Invisible*, Oxford 2016, p. 22–23.

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## **Biogram**

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