Abandon or embrace: Functionalism perspective of photojournalists on Syrian refugees

Tsuroyya, D Tandyonomanu, and A Dharmawan

1Communication Sciences Department, Faculty of Social Sciences and Law
Universitas Negeri Surabaya Kampus Unesa Ketintang Jln. Ketintang Surabaya
60231 Indonesia

Abstract. This research examines photojournalist’ perspectives of Syrian refugees in Europe, encoding, and dissemination processes. It employs a qualitative approach and functionalism perspective of mass media by sending questionnaires to voluntary respondents. The findings show sharing similar background and/or having experiences in the Middle Eastern countries highly influence the perspective of photojournalists on Syrian refugees. The encoding process covers through research of priority issues, target audience, trustworthiness of photos, and audience interpretation. The distribution method includes taking advantages of personal social media to promote the links of photos. As part of mass media industry, photojournalists play a crucial role to contribute to social integration, particularly, in creating a shared understanding between European community and Syrian refugees. The current research serves as a basis to future investigations on the perspective of European community towards Syrian refugees, whether or not their perspective is influenced by such photos.

1. Introduction
The never-ending conflict of Syria has attracted global attention in terms of whether or not neighbour countries should welcome Syrian refugees and provide facilities to daily need fulfilment [1–4]. Most of neighbour countries feel reluctant to open up their doors for Syrian refugees due to several biased arguments [3,4]. Among them, the most popular arguments entail Islamophobia and afraid of terrorism framed by media [5]. Syrian people are falsely identified as terrorists for they cooperate with Iraqi people to found Islamic Syria and Iraq State (ISIS) resulting to casualties, destructions, discrimination, and huge migration [6–9]. Despite ISIS ties to Syrian people, several terrorist acts that have occurred in neighbour countries [8,10–14], particularly Western European contribute to the factor of reluctance and refusal of Syrian asylum seekers [15].

To better understand complex political issues of refugee in Estonia, two different viewpoints were employed in previous research, namely political discourse and cultural representations from both policy makers and artistic performances [16]. Similar to the crisis of refugee in Estonia, Syrian crises were viewed from bias political perspective; i.e. on one hand Syrian refugees have yielded labeling such as Islamists terrorists, and heightened xenophobia as well as casual racism. On the other hand, the Eurozone concerned on its economic and employment crises suppose if it welcomed the refugees [17]. Reluctance also occurred in U.K. where Syrian refugees were seen as thieves who stole British citizen’s jobs as well as a threat to social and cultural integration [3]. A similar case took place in Jordan whose government was unable to bear the humanitarian crisis in Syria by itself; in fact with the support of European Union to Jordan, its government claimed the support was inadequate [2].
Conversely, given different demographic and historical circumstances, Germany emphasized more on refugees’ contribution to its population as a whole in terms of emotional and material wellbeing [3]. Nevertheless, previous scholars have discussed various resolutions to resolve Syrian humanitarian crisis [14,15,18,19]. One of them issued a policy recommendation to EU members open widely their doors for refugees and impose sanctions for those who fail to abide this policy [15]. Earlier research also discussed the existing programs to resolve the refugee crisis including provisions of food, medicine, and shelter [18]. Crucial advocacy by leaders and practitioners was deemed to be necessary to support Arab students who were affected by refugee’s stereotypes in Western community [14]. In the context of media, research presupposed functions of news in a process of assimilation of refugees in the host country particularly in Spain and Netherlands including the relationship between news consumption and assimilation of culture, politics, and language; transnational news as strategies of integration; and the use news media in the assimilation process [19].

Despite numerous studies on resolutions of Syrian refugees in policy making, key programs, advocacy, media’s role in acculturation process, there is a lack of research addressing how media practitioners, in this case photojournalists, contribute to resolve Syrian crisis. Therefore, to disclose their contribution, this research investigates their perspective of the crisis, whether or not it concerns them. In addition, the role of photojournalists rest on a process of encoding at which they instil certain messages about Syrian refugees to audiences. Lastly, how photojournalists disseminate plays a crucial role in reaching massive audiences and sending the message. In so doing, voluntary respondents consisted of photojournalists, and were recruited through an online survey. The data sets were analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis. Results indicated participants pertain to Syrian refugees in term of providing relief and aid despite cultural differences and labelling them as hard workers, easy going as well as the most extrovert people. The encoding process revealed more emphasis should rest on creating a space where refugees would not stop hoping and living their dreams. Ultimately, the respondents used personal social media and international media outlets to disseminate their message and reach more widespread audience.

2. Methods
This research employed a qualitative approach [20] and an online survey as data collection method [20]. The survey then was sent to photojournalists who have covered Syrian refugees. Respondents were recruited voluntarily using the network of journalist and photojournalist associations. The questions consisted of open and close-ended ones. The former asked respondents their perspective of Syrian refugees and processes of encoding and dissemination, and were analyzed using thematic analysis. On the other hand, the latter requested participants fill out demographic data which then were presented in the forms of percentages.

3. Results and discussion
Results of demographic data indicated respondents were dominated by male photojournalists and their nationality did not affect their perspective of Syrian refugees. Similar to respondents’ nationality, their religion implied less contribution to their concern of the refugees; i.e. to urge international stakeholders to extend a crisis relief. These results somewhat serve as an implementation of international policy on refugees stating the obligation of providing access to meals, health, and housing [18]. Years of covering issues on (Syrian) refugees ranged from 4 - 5 years. In other words, professional experiences contribute to shaping respondent’s framework of thinking on Syrian crisis. This results resembles previous research on determinant factors as to why Germany welcome Syrian asylum seekers; i.e. its demographic population consist of migrants and Germany origin, and the country has taken lesson from the Holocaust [3]. In relation to functionalism perspective of mass media, the results illustrate photojournalists perform their function as information supplier of the crisis [21,22].

The open-ended question required participants describe their viewpoints of the crisis and possibilities of their background affecting their perspectives. Respondents agreed with the fact that there should be immediate resolutions to the crisis. Other respondent viewed Syrians as hard working as well as easy going people. In fact, they welcome everyone in their circles regardless of his race,
ethnicity, and religious affiliation. On the other hand, participants’ background has given a great deal of leverage with supporting Syrian asylum seekers. A Colombian respondent described similarities between displacement in Colombia and Syria. However, the former was caused by an internal conflict and suffered from violence, whereas the latter involved conflicts from different arm groups and resulted in bombing, massacres, and starvation. Therefore, he argued immediate relief from international stakeholders to the crisis was obligatory, which provides rationales to previous research suggesting support for the refugees [14]. The aforementioned perspective and background of respondents show journalists’ function of correlation, i.e. supporting the asylum seekers [21,22].

In the process of encoding, the questionnaire inquired participants elaborate responses covering priority of issues, content and type of the message, type of target audience, methods of message representation, trustworthiness of photos, and intended interpretation of audience. The first topic received various responses namely treating the refugees as common human beings; exposing their success stories; urgency of immediate crisis relief. A respondent argued that treating this marginalized group as common human beings entails acknowledging each individual who has a right to dream, hope, and get his needs fulfilled. Responses of priority issues correspond to the second topic, which discussed the content and type of message as well as target audience. Respondents believed that through emphasizing the refugees as human beings, their photos would let audiences know information of the crisis, thus resulting in the provision of humanitarian aid. Others preferred to relate the success stories to keeping hopes – having positive thinking – and goals that the refugees would return to their homeland soon. The rest of respondents opted to spread the importance of assisting this marginalized group as the message of their photos. In terms of target audiences, the participants responded there were categorized into two groups; people and media industry. The former consisted of young educated public figure and middle aged individuals, whereas the latter covered international media outlets with global outreach. Inferring from responses of both the first and second topic, photojournalists hope their photos will entail positive actions from international community particularly to sustain the lives of refugees, rather than govern them [23].

Elaborations that correspond to the third topic comprised embedding universal values and privacy commitments particularly in capturing female refugees in photographs. To better illustrate, universal values convey exposing human relationships, which are free from norms and religious interpretation. The participants chose children and family ties to pass their message to the audience. As in the case of photos with female refugees, the photojournalists made necessary arrangements in order to abide rules of appropriateness. This is relevant to studies focusing on the impact of refugee’s stereotypes toward female asylum seekers [5]. In this stage the photojournalists perform their function of information, correlation, and sustainability [21]. First, the information function solely entails supplying photos to inform the audience. Second, correlation comprises explanatory of why female refugee photos have to be captured in a very specific frame; support the refugees to get necessary aid, and socializing the crisis with wider audiences.

The last phase of encoding process requires sustaining trustworthiness and projecting intended meanings of the photos. The participants shared the same understanding that they needed thorough investigations prior to producing story-telling photos. The investigation then included interviews and confirmation with refugees, officials, locals as well as understanding the big scenario of the story to be shared. Other respondents believed that they need to show respect towards the refugees, rather than showing sympathy for them. In fact, the refugees felt delighted to be captured as who they were. The rest of participants viewed that capturing the moment was a method to sustain the trustworthiness of their photos. These would best explain the situation at the moment, thus enable to represent their message. These methods of sustaining trustworthiness lead the respondents to project intended meanings of their audience. Most participants decided to leave the interpretation of their photos in the hands of the audience as they have taken part in telling the stories from the photos. Other respondents argued their photos contained parts that the audience wanted, thus the intended meanings would be dominant. In other words, the audience shared the same meaning with the photojournalists. The last response dealt with attracting audience’s empathy; i.e. the audience would forget his social, race, economic as well as education background and imagine himself as the refugee. Through putting the audience in the situation of the asylum seekers, the photojournalist expected that aid would be widely
available and within the reach of the refugees. Once the audience thinks of social and cultural differences of the refugees, the intended meaning cannot be achieved. As suggested in previous research, international solidarity heavily rested on debates of moral and disposition thus leading to understanding of Western attitudes toward the refugees, which sadly comprise support to injustice and inequalities [3].

Again media whose function to maintain social stability play a crucial role to the contribution of creating dialogue between the refugees and Western community. “Great impacts resulted from the use of participatory media involve re-establishment of the relationships, creating a shared understanding on the issue, and building views of interconnected future among opposing groups in Kenya” [24]. This Communication for Development (C4D) media intervention may serve as a means to address the Syrian crisis. In this case, the respondents had involved refugees in producing their photos, particularly in the aspect of trustworthiness. However, governments which welcome the refugees are required implement a humanitarian government, i.e. saving the refugees as well as caring its citizens [3]. In addition, education is highly potential to be included as the key pillar of the crisis relief as success stories of child refugee in his academic life will trigger positive reaction from the audience [18,25].

The last topic of discussion extends to the process of dissemination from the respondents. Most respondents shared the same method of dissemination; i.e. using personal social media, writing a 100-word photo caption, and sending a link at which the photos are going to be published to international affiliations. These methods are relevant to the previous research arguing news media consumption is related to deliberate strategies of assimilation of the refugees in the host country [19]. Finally, the policy recommendations for EU members to strengthen religious protection, to voluntarily welcome the refugees despite the existing sanctions for the members who refuse to do so, and to eliminate weaknesses of Directive 2000/43/EC stating “equal treatment for person of irrespective racial or ethnic origins” [15] shall be implemented to support the functional role of photojournalists in creating a shared understanding between the refugees and the audience, particularly Western community [21].

4. Conclusion
This research discusses three valuable topics of promoting social integration of Syrian refugees within European community through photojournalism, namely photojournalist’s perspectives of Syrian refugees, processes of encoding and dissemination. First, photojournalists whose background similar to that of Syrian refugees incline to show sympathy for the refugees, and believe that they need immediate aids from European countries regardless of their religion, race, and ethnicity. Second, the process of encoding requires three components be accompanied in compelling news reports, namely sincere characters of the object, thorough investigations, and attachment of universal values. Lastly, the dissemination process covers promoting via social media and writing captions of the photos as well as sharing with international affiliations. Within the context of functionalism perspective, Syrian refugee photos serves as a means to create understanding among European community leading to social integration. Eventually, photojournalists play a crucial role in promoting advocacy for Syrian refugees, particularly improving access of the refugees. In the future, research on responses of European community toward Syrian refugees is worth investigating leading to designing strategic C4D intervention based to create a dialogue between European community and Syrian refugees.

5. References
[1] Fargues P 2014 Europe Must take on its Share of the SYrian Refugee Burden, but How? Policy Br. 1–5
[2] Achilli L 2015 Syrian Refugees in Jordan: a Reality Check Migr. Policy Cent. EUI 2 1–12
[3] Mavelli L 2017 Stopping boats, saving lives, securing subjects: Humanitarian borders in Europe and Australia Eur. J. Int. Relations 23 533–56
[4] Anon 2015 A crisis , not a drama 5387
[5] Rettberg J W and Gajjala R 2016 Terrorists or cowards: negative portrayals of male Syrian refugees in social media Fem. Media Stud. 16 178–81
[6] Aistrope T 2016 Social media and counterterrorism strategy Aust. J. Int. Aff. 70 121–38
[7] Awan I and Zempi I 2016 The affinity between online and offline anti-Muslim hate crime: Dynamics and impacts Aggress. Violent Behav. 27 1–8

[8] Andre V and Pratt D 2015 Religious Citizenship and Islamophobia Islam Christ. Relations 26 131–2

[9] Lathion S 2015 Fight Islamophobia in Europe? Less Islam and Muslims and More Citizenship! Islam Christ. Relations 26 133–44

[10] Alam Y and Husband C 2013 Islamophobia, community cohesion and counter-terrorism policies in Britain Patterns Prejudice 47 235–52

[11] Soyer F 2013 Faith, culture and fear: comparing Islamophobia in early modern Spain and twenty-first-century Europe Ethn. Racial Stud. 36 399–416

[12] Choma B L, Hodson G and Costello K 2012 Intergroup disgust sensitivity as a predictor of islamophobia: The modulating effect of fear vol 48

[13] Ogan C, Willnat L, Pennington R and Bashir M 2014 The rise of anti-Muslim prejudice: Media and Islamophobia in Europe and the United States Int. Commun. Gaz. 76 27–46

[14] Jones V and Jones V 2017 Race Ethnicity and Education The racialization of Arab panethnic identity: exploring students’ ingroup and outgroup social positionings The racialization of Arab panethnic identity: exploring students’ ingroup and outgroup social positionings Race Ethn. Educ. 3324 1–18

[15] Ayer A and Forbes J M 2017 Discrimination based upon race, religion and ethnicity when filing for asylum in the European Union

[16] Makarychev A and Yatsyk A 2017 Estonia and the refugees: political discourses and artistic representations Glob. Aff. 0 1–13

[17] McConnell F, Kuus M, Jeffrey A, Crawley H, Vaughan-Williams N and Smith A 2017 Interventions on Europe’s political futures Polit. Geogr. 1–11

[18] Warner J 2017 No lost generations: Refugee children and their human right to education, from the Holocaust to the Syrian Civil War (University of Washington)

[19] Alencar A and Deuze M 2017 News for assimilation or integration? Examining the functions of news in shaping acculturation experiences of immigrants in the Netherlands and Spain Eur. J. Commun. 32 151–66

[20] Jensen K B and Jankowski N W 1991 A Handbook of Qualitative Methodologies for Mass Communication Research (London: Routledge)

[21] McQuail D 2012 McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory (London: Sage)

[22] Williams K 2003 Understanding Media Theory (London: Hodder Education, Part of Hachette Livre UK)

[23] Feldman I 2014 What is a camp? Legitimate refugee lives in spaces of long-term displacement Geoforum 66 244–52

[24] Bau V 2015 Building peace through social change communication: Participatory video in conflict-affected communities Community Dev. J. 50 121–37

[25] McBrien J, Dooley K and Birman D 2017 Cultural and academic adjustment of refugee youth: Introduction to the special issue Int. J. Intercult. Relations 0–1

Acknowledgments
We would like to thank Mauricio Morales and Mohamed Emad Helal for giving useful insights and providing access to photojournalist network.