

Abstract:

Face and the ethics of the selfie

A case study of refugee self-representation

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In August 2015, a BBC news story broke out. It was about an awareness-raising campaign based on selfies by an actor-‘refugee’ documenting his dangerous journey to Europe. These were selfies of Survival. They documented the lethal risks of the Mediterranean sea-crossings and celebrated the triumph of enduring them. The BBC story featured illustrations of these fake selfies, pointing to signs of fakeness in the campaign and reflecting on the blurring of boundaries between authentic and non-authentic pictures. A compelling instance of embodied testimony under conditions of life and death, these selfies had originally gained a large Instagram following as sovereign acts of ‘refugee’ self-representation before ending up as a forensic exercise of ‘fake news’ in our media.

What is significant about this story is that it ended up being the only news story where the face of a refugee appears in full frontal view, in the news. The key question here is: why is that?

In order to address this question, I propose a new understanding of the selfie as a moral practice. Extending current approaches to the digital genre of the selfie as an aesthetic of techno-social practice, this new understanding stems from two places. First, it stems from the function of the selfie to confront the viewer with the face of the other (as a locative ‘here I am’ and an existential ‘here I am’) and, in so doing, to make a demand for a moral response. Second, it stems from the capacity of the selfie to flow both horizontally across social media (intermediation) and vertically onto mainstream news platforms (remediation). As both face and flow, the ethics of the selfie becomes particularly relevant in research questions around excluded or marginalized groups whose ‘face’ struggles for visibility in Western media spaces – for instance, refugees.

Taking, therefore, the 2015 refugee crisis and its extensive coverage in Western news as a starting point, I ask the following question: What does it mean for refugee selfies to circulate on Western media platforms? In which ways are they inserted in ‘our’ visual economies? How is their news value justified? And what role do these justifications play for Western media, not only as news platforms but also as moral and political spaces? In addressing these questions, I propose to re-theorize the selfie as a moral act of public address, which inserts the face into established structures of visibility that regulate who we see, how and why.

Systematic analysis of the two dimensions of the selfie as face and flow enables the construction of a typology of refugee selfies that consists of three categories: journalists’ photographs of refugees taking selfies, selfies of refugees with Western

public figures (such as Angela merkel or the Pope) and selfies of celebrities-as-refugees. Across these three categories, the public claims of the refugee self to place ('here I am') and to humanity ('here I am') appear to be consistently displaced in favour of public testimonies of people like 'us'. Ultimately, I conclude that the selfie as face is subjected to the institutional flows of Western news, which consolidate the geopolitical bordering of refugees stuck in the outskirts of Europe with practices of 'symbolic bordering' that appropriate, marginalize or displace the face of the other in the screens of our digital media.