

Sensationalism Sells...and that's not always a bad thing

By Riham Alkousaa

Numbers mean little to the average person. For example: Stating that the Syrian war has left 400,000 dead over the past six years, while true, is unlikely to provoke outrage, let alone go viral. Compare that to the power of a single, sensational image: The now famous picture showing the body of two-year old Ilan Kurdy, lying dead, face down on a beach on the Turkish coast after his boat was wrecked. Or the tragic, shell-shocked face of five-year old Omran Dankish, perched on the orange seat of an ambulance in eastern Aleppo, powdered with shrapnel, and bleeding from a head wound.

While sensationalistic, these photographs did what numbers could not: They generated public outcry, prompting apathetic populations to act, and demand that their governments open doors to refugees, pressure Assad to stop bombing Aleppo and allow the city's besieged civilians to flee.

Sensationalism for the sake of sensationalism is morally reprehensible. At the same time journalism is inherently sensational for a reason. Journalists want to draw readers in. Real stories are what makes people care about otherwise abstract issues like government policies or a distant war somewhere in the world.

For example, I worked on an investigative story about the sexual harassment in refugee camps in Germany. As sensational as this topic could be, I wanted to shed light on this issue because the federal government was debating whether it should impose minimum protection standards in refugee camps. Did refugees need a safer environment while they were waiting for their papers to be processed?

We spoke with Dalia Hasan, a 17 years-old Palestinian-Syrian who was sexually harassed in her room because there was no lock on the door. Shorouk Kerd, a pregnant woman told us how she couldn't breathe in the room which she shared with 9 other refugees. Through telling those details, we were able to illustrate how unprotected refugees are and what they needed the government to do for them. Without the emotional stories of the people, no one would care about this issue.

A few months later, most German states changed their laws regarding protection in refugee centers. When Manuela Schwesig, the family minister was asked in a press conference how Seehofer, CSU party leader, and Tomas de Maizière, home secretary, changed their minds, she said "some journalism stories can help," referring to our piece.

In the time of media fighting for space and users' time, and in the age of digital journalism and a shorter attention span, journalists are trying harder than ever to keep readers engaged until the end of the story. Although we moved past Yellow Journalism and tabloid news stories of crime and sex, readers still expect human characters to embody the issues they want to learn about.

Stories about policies deficiencies, unemployment or corruption need to be humanized

in order to make people read them and then demand that governments change. We need more than facts to make other people's realities relevant to us, and our responsibility as journalists is to tell stories not just facts, to tell people why it matters, and why they need to care.