

BETWEEN BULLSHIT AND FAKETUALITY

THE VIRAL ANOMALY OF THE IMAGE OF LAITH AL SALEH

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ABSTRACT

THIS PAPER EXPLORES THE ANOMALOUS ROLE THAT TODAY'S SOCIAL MEDIA ENVIRONMENTS PLAY IN THE DYNAMICS OF AFFECTIVE AMPLIFICATION THROUGH VIRAL VISUAL CONTENT. AFFECTED BY THE POST 9/11 LOGIC OF MEDIA SECURITIZATION, THE CIRCULATION OF MANIPULATED IMAGES AND INTERNET MEMES HAS CREATED AN ATMOSPHERE OF CONTROVERSIAL SENTIMENTS AND IRRATIONAL FACTS. THE PREVALENT EXPERIENCE OF DISORIENTATION THAT PERPETUATES ITSELF IN THESE RELATIONS FEEDS ON THE EVERYDAY MICRO-ANTICIPATIONS OF CLAIM AND COUNTERCLAIM, MAKING THE DOUBLE BINARY OF FACT AND FICTION, SOURCE AND ADAPTATION IMPOSSIBLE TO SUSTAIN. AGAINST THIS BACKGROUND, THE DISCUSSION WILL FOCUS ON HOW THE VIRAL SPREAD OF ONE PARTICULAR IMAGE DURING THE REFUGEE CRISIS HAS CONTRIBUTED TO THE EMERGENCE OF THE ISSUE OF 'TERRORIST REFUGEES'. EXPLORING THE INFRASTRUCTURES OF MEDIA ALERT BEHIND THIS ISSUE, I ADDRESS THE RE- AND PREMEDIATING FORCES AT PLAY IN THE CIRCULATION OF THE IMAGE AS FAKETUAL. RATHER THAN RELYING ON THE AVAILABILITY OF VALID SOURCES, NETWORKED FORMATIONS OF FAKETUALITY FEEL TRUE EVEN THEY ARE KNOWN TO BE FABRICATED. I DEVELOP THIS ARGUMENT BY ADAPTING DIGITAL METHODS TO REFLECT ON THE SHIFTS IN CONTROVERSIAL RELATIONS OF RELEVANCE/VISIBILITY AS THEY UNFOLD THROUGH OUR EVERYDAY ENCOUNTERS WITH SEARCH ENGINES, ONLINE NEWS MEDIA, AND SOCIAL PLATFORMS.

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The image of Laith Al Saleh

On September 3, 2015, one day after the image of Alan (Aylan) Kurdi went viral and two months before a series of coordinated terrorist attacks occurred in Paris, a side-by-side image allegedly showing an IS fighter as a Syrian refugee was posted on Facebook by Peter Lee Goodchild.¹ In the first photograph on the left side of the image, a bearded man wearing military gear is depicted holding an assault rifle in his hand. Photoshopped into the lower right corner, a red colored text box reads "July 2014". In the second photograph on the right side, a similar-looking, perfectly shaved man is shown wearing sunglasses, a backpack, and a green T-shirt with the print, "Thank you". Below, again, a text box in red suggests further context as follows: "Asylum seeker Macedonian border August 2015". Goodchild's image caption, which received more than 70,000 shares, 7,000 likes and 2,500 comments within a short period of time, completes the post in a sarcastic manner: "Remember this guy? Posing in ISIS photos last year – now he's a "refugee" Are we suckers or what!" (Wendling 2015).²

(P)remediation: The viral anomaly of visual social content

In digital networks, such copy-and-paste micro-events mobilize viral images and memes in accordance with a double-fold logic of re- and premediation. While the logic of remediation provides visual content circulating between platforms with a sense of perceptual immediacy, its multiple contextual variations convene spreadable socio-technical formations within the anticipatory temporality of premediation. Developed by Richard Grusin (2010; 2015), both terms are central for my understanding of how, particularly in the context of online crisis communication, images that are appropriated for purposes of public commentary take on a dynamic of their own. Emphasizing how media circulate and remediate shock and controversy, in this article, I move from the linear concepts of viral transmission towards a critical analysis of the capacities of algorithmically driven technologies to facilitate (counter-)imitative flows of networked engagement. Typical of the post 9/11 desire for media securitization and carried by the formal news as much as the informal participatory media, the primary function of premediation in this context is to prevent future events from having been unanticipated. Contingent in its intensity, premediation is related to how digital networks "produce, intendify, and modulate the affectivity of shock, both individually and collectively" (Grusin, 2015, p. 30). Remediation, at the same time, is what allows content to shift forms and switch between contexts (see Bolter & Grusin, 1999).

Within this transitive mode of distribution, screengrabs of Goodchild's 'original' post started to circulate with even more intensity after the post was revealed as content misuse and removed from Facebook. On September 7, BBC Trending prominently reported on the incident and Goodchild, after being temporarily locked out of his Facebook account, apologized "for getting the facts wrong" (Wendling, 2015). The photograph on the right side of the image in his post from September 3 was taken on August 13, 2015, by Alexander Zemlianichenko (AP Photo) and published by Associated Press news agency on August 17 in a profile from a refugee center on the Greek island of Kos. Proliferating since then, the story of the man in the picture rapidly evolved into a subject of populist pro-and-anti-refugee sentiments: In an interview with the AP, Laith Al Saleh, 30, a former Free Syrian Army commander, claimed to have fought both IS and Syrian government forces, directly addressing the dangers of persecution for him and his family (see Paphitis & Bennett, 2015).

The same day the AP story was released, the left side of the image appeared in a photomontage by *The Atlantic*. Published without any visible indication of source, it presents Laith al Saleh as a "Syrian former rebel commander with his assault rifle near his ravaged home city of Aleppo in January 2015" (Taylor, 2015). Unsurprisingly, the ways in which the resulting side-by-side image was later reused in Goodchild-like posts on Facebook and Twitter were driven by speculations about its alleged origins. This viral kind of speculative engagement, as suggested in the BBC's recent article on "lies, propaganda and fake news", is often attributed to the breakdown of trusted sources of information and subsequent communication "without a common starting point" (Gray, 2017). Yet, what serves as a pretext for 'getting the facts wrong' in our speculative encounters with social media images can only partly grasp the alerting spread of (mis)information that these encounters partake of. In the iterative flows of viral engagement, the unlimited ability to falsify and the lack of ability to know complicate the common representational idea of concealed deception and fakery as propaganda. As observed in previous studies of affect and network culture (see Terranova, 2004, p. 142-148; Sampson 2012; Bolter & Davis, 2018), strategies of affective manipulation such as fearmongering are no longer merely encoded into images and conveyed through meaningful data channels (positive versus negative images, fact

versus fiction). Building on the (counter-)imitative investments of users' attention, viral images tend to operate within an affectively charged temporality, in which what matters is not to cover up the truth or to spread false beliefs but to capture and hold together a certain type of intensity.

By mapping the entanglements of re- and premediation in the circulation of the image across different contexts, I explore its affective intensity as characteristic of the anticipatory media formations that facilitate themselves through acts of repeated contact with the unknown. Virality, in this sense, is considered more complex than a rapidly spreading outbreak of node-to-node infection. A force that is both singular and common in its affective qualities, it derives from networks of "potential interaction based on repeated past interactions" (Chun, 2016, p. 52). Feeding into the intensification of simultaneous experiences of (not) knowing, the alerting atmosphere within which current global refugee issues are being expressed and shared across media is no exception: Taken out of various contexts, photographic images of the crisis move and transform through variously enacted forms of mediated engagement, in which particular bits of information 'feel true' even if they are known to be misleading. Building spreadable spaces of controversy, they draw social communities together and tear them apart. In other words, they constitute repeated counter-imitative encounters, in which anomalies in the traditional sense (as informational or affective entities without series) become replaced by a relational mode of serialization. As proposed by Parikka and Sampson (2009; see also Parikka 2007), viral flows of digital network culture imply a challenge to the notion of causality and uncontrolled contamination. What they reproduce is a state of media alert as a rule rather than an exception.

The constitutive capacity of visual social media to shape our networked experiences through premediation of deviations rather than through directive reproduction of norms creates a habitual environment of more or less shocking, more or less anticipated events and practices. At the same time, to understand premediation as remediation of potentiality means that there are always multiple familiar, yet incomplete future trajectories that unfold in relation to one another (Grusin 2015). Confronting us with the events *which may or may not happen*, our everyday encounters with clickbaity media alerts are often accompanied by some kind of visual 'evidence'. Disruptive as they are, images circulating in the context of crisis still meet our expectations and move efficiently between contexts, perpetuating a mixed, volatile affect of anxious excitement about the possibility of the next startling media encounter. Within this environment, the atmosphere of viral anomaly no longer appears as simply irregular. Instead, it evolves into a continuous process within which repetition and deviation from the repetition are closely interwoven. The focus moves towards the ways in which "small events can be encouraged to become bigger contagious overspills" (Sampson, 2012, p. 58) of repetition beyond the binary of the normal versus the abnormal. Understood in this vein, the viral spread of the image of Laith Al Saleh will be addressed as a question of reenactment of its anomalous potentiality in a circulatory process that simultaneously attempts to intensify its own disruptive potential and prevent itself from having been unanticipated.

The issue of 'terrorist refugees': Why do we share?

In particular, the remediation of the image through multiple screenshot variations circulating across platforms, blogs, forums, official as well as unofficial news websites, and other digital spaces of articulation deserves a closer look. As different actors worked to deploy the image within their communities of interest, they contributed not only to the affective afterlife of the image itself but also to the intensification of a particular "issue space" revolving around it (for a discussion of the concept in relation to digital infrastructures of circulation see Marres, 2012; Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández 2016; Niederer 2018; Rogers 2019). Emerging in the context of the global war on terror, the counterimitative dynamics of this space positioned the issue of 'terrorist refugees' as a matter of fact, or rather counterfact to what on the media has been presented as a shift from the "Mediterranean migrant crisis" to a "European refugee crisis" (see Goriunova & Vis, 2015). The articulation of this issue space is derived from the entanglements of search engine recommendation and platform engagement and, because of its involvement in the viral movement of media content, requires both a theoretical and a methodological emphasis on what makes it 'shareable' (see Marwick 2018).

As expressed in the present confusion about the rapid spread of photo-based memes and fake news, the viral share- and spreadability of refugee images goes beyond the notion of political propaganda that, once fabricated, would transmit identical units of political, cultural, economic, social, etc. values. Rather than merely resulting in an encoded process of signification, the

networked conditions of virality mobilize a broader human-media assemblage of relations, in which the double binary of fact and fiction, source and adaptation fails to sustain itself. As studies of viral circulation drawing on the sociology of Gabriel Tarde have shown (see e.g. Sampson 2012; Venturini 2019), the shared value of social facts can hardly be attributed to the controlling influence of universal truth. Instead, Tarde's theory of social encounter stresses that facts are derived from a repetitive succession of shifts in desiring relations. According to Tarde, facts become relevant because our common desires invent and institutionalize facts in accordance with the habituated flows of repetition (Latour 2002). Their seemingly coherent appearance is "traceable to the different currents of imitation of which they are the point of intersection, a point which is itself destined to be more or less exactly copied" (Tarde, 1903, p. 12). Inscribed into what can be passed on both knowingly and spontaneously, facts are constituted by blending forms of judgment, in which *both hope and fear* that "the thing desired will come to pass" (p. 159) establish what *feels* true. Projected onto the viral entanglements of affect and meaning, this suggests that our world-making practices involve imitation as much as they proliferate disagreement and uncertainty about what exactly is imitated and why.

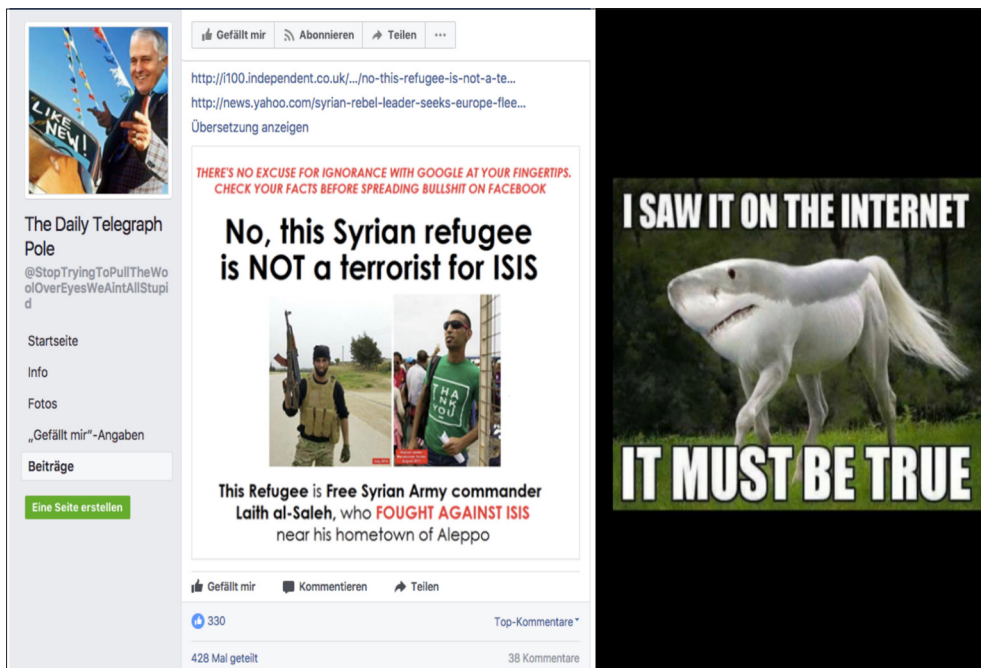


Figure 1: "There is no excuse for ignorance with Google at your fingertips, check your facts before spreading bullshit on Facebook": A remediation of Goodchild's Facebook post in a Facebook post by publicly available Australian community page The Daily Telegraph Pole (on the left) from September 13, 2015, with 330 likes, 428 shares and 38 comments by 29 users with one memetic response (on the right); screengrabbed, August 2017.

The idea of reconstruction of such shared spaces of controversy in digital environments requires reflection on how user practices and platform infrastructures shape the relevance of the issue in question. As manipulated content circulates through cooccurring sociotechnical practices, multiple variations of the same image generate affectively charged environments of engagement (for a recent discussion in the context of the refugee crisis see Goriunova & Vis, 2015; Pedwell, 2017; Papaillias, 2018). Within these environments, the algorithmic logic of 'if-then' and the anticipatory temporality of 'what-if' intermix, amplifying the controversy of the issue in question with each new act of searching, liking and sharing. Characteristic of what we see online, 'if-then' corresponds with the data-intensive logic of content distribution based on what platforms curate, recommend and target for purposes of valuation (Bucher 2018; see also Gerlitz and Helmond 2013). 'What-if', on the other hand, is the main affective intensity of such encounters. By proliferating specific possibilities or future scenarios which may or may not actually occur, it feeds the attentional economy of Grusin's (2015) "mediashock" by relying on the speculative assemblages of anticipation. In other words: We know that most images circulating on the internet are bogus, but what if some of them are not?

In particular, the use of the Google search engine has an impact on what is seen and shown, shaping the mediated performance of societal concerns in multiple ways (Rogers, 2009; Marres, 2012; Hillis, Petit & Jarret, 2013; Bounegru et al., 2017). Driven by self-reinforcing cascades of suggestions linked to highly ranked sites, our informational practices make specific search results and sites of their proliferation appear more relevant (or truthful) than the others (Barton, 2009, pp. 493-496). In addition, the algorithmic procedures of Google valuation is accompanied by the increased reliance on social recommendation

as the preferred way of accessing information and dealing with news sources. Given sufficient relevance (or controversy) of a particular topic, committed media users may be sharing and seeking information at the same time, while content may be regarded as worthy of attention if it appears in the 'right' context of their media network. While social media paths of news discovery might now be overtaking search engines as the major driver of traffic to news sites, the ways in which newsworthy content is "produced" still relies on the search-based models of linking and relevance (Bruns, 2018, pp. 130-133). The everyday acts of retrieving and sharing information on refugee-related issues can therefore be understood as practices that are constitutive of the issue content as well as of informal influences these issues develop upon one another through Google's enactment of particular forms of knowledge and visibility. Under these conditions, if there is "no excuse for ignorance with Google at your fingertips" (Figure 1), then that is only because what we choose to engage with in our everyday practices of searching reinforces itself in a compounding manner. As proposed by Boler and Davis (2018, p. 76), the affective forces of feedback loops are central to the generation of attention in such environments, as they are the mechanism by which the need to 'know more' (out of interest, obligation or sheer curiosity) feeds into the algorithm-driven outcome of recommended content. As a consequence, we are presented with more or less adequate projections of what we desire to (never) find. Drawing on these considerations, I identify the main sites of controversy of the image of Laith Al Saleh by using Google to explore the anomalous extent to which the imitative infrastructures of search and recommendation partake in shaping the capacity of such images to provoke polarized engagement.

To approach the image of Laith Al Saleh in its circulation, I used a combination of two DMI Tools, Google Reverse Image Scraper and Google Scraper or the Lippmannian device. While the first tool allows one to retrieve the results of images.google.com for a set of image URLs (DMI, 2017a), the second detects the resonance of specific terms on selected image domains and visualizes the results using the format of the tag cloud (Marres, 2012, p. 151; DMI, 2017b). An exemplary list of relevant web sources – news sites, blogs, forums – was created to give an overview of the image locations returned by Google, which then were queried for "Laith Al Saleh" to explore the fabricated qualities of the image before and after it was revealed as taken out of context.³

Based on these explorations, the spatial-contextual unfolding of the image's share- and spreadability will be discussed with regard to its affective role in the fabrication of the issue of 'terrorist refugees'. By taking into consideration that data collected on online content/actions feeds forward into promoting the same content and actions, my approach to controversially mediated issue spaces emphasizes two things: First, due to its assembled nature, an issue space draws together visual, social and material investments of engagement, which operate through technological mediation to the same extent as they depend upon flows of meaning, sentiment and human agency. Second, what happens within this space shapes the issue in question as highly contingent upon the temporal qualities of the actor-networks involved. Drawing together contradictions that are not necessarily binary, an issue space amplifies its relevance/visibility through multi-sited human-media encounters with the same issue that may be oriented in different ways (Marres, 2012). In their networked spread through polarized investments of public attention, these encounters evolve into a series of visual social modifications which can be more or less anticipated. Their contagious potential derives from the situatedness of the issue in the circuits of repetition and variation, whereby everything a viral image stands for can be easily taken out of context (Pilipets 2019).

Feels true: From hate to bullshit and back again

The cloud of international web locations of the image in Figure 2 indicates the counterimitative rhythm of claim and counter-claim within which the actor "Laith Al Saleh" was aligned with the issue of 'terrorist refugees' in the period between August 2015 and August 2016. In many ways, the results of querying "Laith Al Saleh" in this source cloud most strongly express two resonant positioning tendencies (see Rogers, 2017, p. 81-84): the right-wing-left-wing variations of the story in which the image was used either with or without mentioning Laith Al Saleh to mutually intensify the efforts of either attesting (program) or denying (anti-program) the speculations about the terrorists posing as refugees in different areas of Europe.

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The two most visible examples of the alerting intensity with which the image was employed to warn of the impending catastrophe of the terrorist invasion were the Greek right-wing nationalist blog "sibilla" and the Dutch platform "terrorismemonitor". The latter also exists as a Twitter account for "monitoring jihad and terrorism threats" and continues to be used by the Dutch right-wing activists to steer audiences against refugees (see Ponsioen & Van Beek, 2016). With a link to the side-by-side image from *The Atlantic* (Taylor, 2015) on the front page, both sources introduced Laith al Saleh as a "Jihadist commander of the Islamic State terror movement on his way to the Netherlands".⁵ Reproducing what Lisa Nakamura (2008) has coined as the "racio-visual logic of the internet", such obviously manipulated expressions of media alert operate through a mixture of culturally situated and digitally networked socio-technological practices. Made to encourage recirculation and reduplication across different national contexts, images reproduce and shift the infrastructures of stereotypical attributions depending on the local particularities of the situation at hand. This is how, on August 31, 2015, the national belongings of the image were changed in the story "Europe welcomes illegal immigrants while abandoning real refugees". According to the international page of the "Jobbik movement for a better Hungary", Laith Al Saleh, "wearing the green color of Islam and a "Thank you" on his T-shirt", got "to the island of Kos, then through Macedonia and Serbia to Hungary" together with "his friends [...] from Syria, Iraq (and who knows where else)".⁶

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to other phenomena such as patriotism, war, torture, and security. Predicting the proximity of the unknown other, specific word pairs such as “jihadist Syria” and “ISIS terrorists” helped to reproduce an environment of anxious anticipation along with the dominant narrative of protecting Europe from “numerous crimes and violations” yet to come (Figure 3).

The more elaborated positioning efforts of this kind were made in the first month following the publication of the BBC report on Goodchild’s deliberately misleading use of the image. A range of international blogs and news sources raised concerns about the incident, as the Moscow based television network RT suggested that “at least two terrorists who were uncovered by Hungarian Special Forces via photographs on social media” would have “crossed into Europe”. In a video report titled “ISIS fears” from September 9, 2015, RT rebroadcasts Hungary’s national public channel M1 story from September 8, in which several before-and-after images of Laith Al Saleh and other men appear in the context of “speculations” about “IS militants”. Though, while addressing these speculations, the report repeatedly mentions that, with the exception of Laith al Saleh, the identities of other men in the images would remain unknown, it concludes with one of the invited expert’s statement that, “either way”, these men “almost certainly are individuals who have belonged to terrorist groups in the past”.⁷

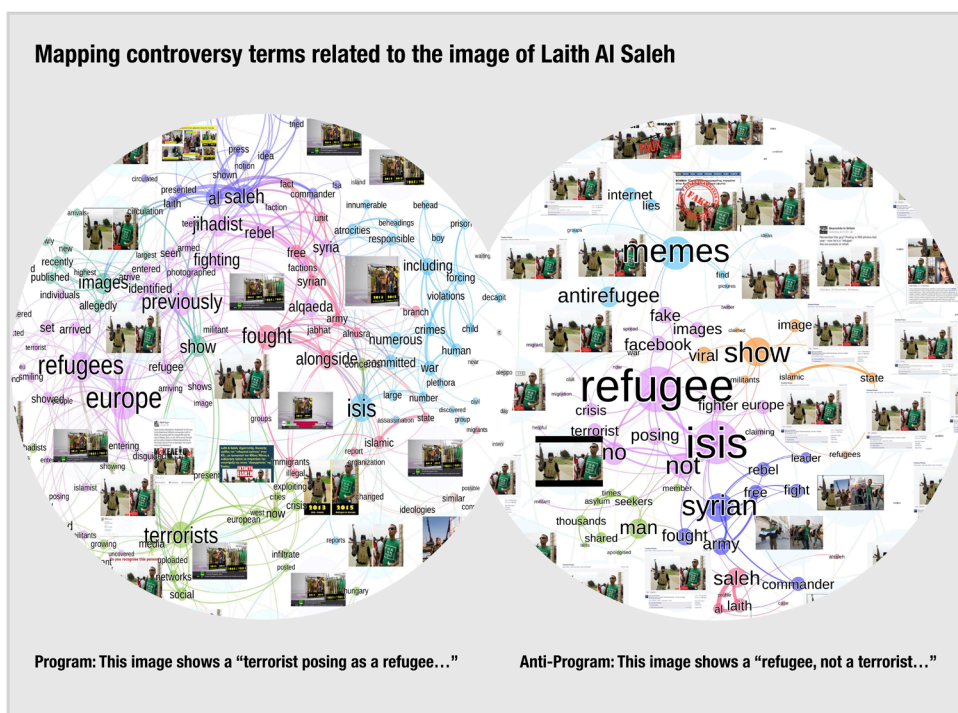


Figure 3: Different positioning efforts related to the appropriation of the image of Laith Al Saleh from the list of selected image locations according to Google Reverse Image Search as they were used in the articles/headlines on the issue of “terrorists posing as refugees”, August 2015–August 2016; author’s visualization, generated with Wordij, Table2Net, Gephi.

In the subsequent process of remediation, a similar report titled “Images Show Jihadist Militants Entering Europe As ‘Refugees’” spread in a series of imitations across international far-right conspiracy pages from Alex Jones’ “internet news” website InfoWars. Focusing on “the fact that the Free Syrian Army fought alongside ISIS and has committed a plethora of [...] human rights violations”, these pages used the image of Laith Al Saleh and other “unidentified men” from the RT report for attacking the BBC’s attempts “to debunk the notion that Al Saleh was a jihadist” (Watson, 2015). Connected to this ‘fact’, the possibility of ‘terrorists’ who were also addressed as ‘militants’ or ‘males of fighting age’ coming into Europe as part of the refugee flow was articulated through generalized claims on whether national borders should be opened for those refugees who are welcome or defended from those who are not. This tendency, after its peak was reached in September 2015 and the controversial dynamics of the image started to flatten out, spilled over into the first half of 2016 (Figure 4). Reappearing in the US neoconservative forums in the context of Trump’s presidential campaign, it became part of the threads suggesting: “On the left, an ISIS ‘warrior’, on the left [sic] a refugee...can you spot the difference”.⁸ In the looping process of association and intensification through expressions of anxiety and hate, the now-and-then image of Laith Al Saleh transformed into a collective body-image of the unknown. As proposed by Sara Ahmed, the particularities of such transformations can be addressed through the notion of affective economy of differentiation between a bogus and a genuine asylum seeker (Ahmed, 2004, p. 47):

"Indeed, the possibility that we might not be able to tell the difference swiftly converts into the possibility that any of those incoming bodies may be bogus. [...] The figure of the bogus asylum seeker evokes the figure of the 'bogey man', as a figure that stalks the nation and haunts its capacity to secure its borders. The 'bogey man' could be anywhere and anyone; a ghost-like figure in the present, who gives us nightmares about the future, as an anticipation of a future injury. [...] The impossibility of reducing hate to a particular body, allows hate to circulate in an economic sense, working to differentiate some others from other others, a differentiation that is never 'over', as it awaits for others who have not yet arrived."

Mapping similar relations in *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), Jasbir Puar describes how the work of national imagination makes desired truths become "lived as truths, as if they were truth, thus producing material traces and evidences of these truths, despite what counterevidence might exist" (39). Such 'true feelings' require the intensification of anomalous experiences by means of triggering multiple deep-seated affective states simultaneously (fear, anxiety, hate, love, laughter, etc.), which are then re-mixed and reenacted by the media on a daily basis. Under these conditions, while aiming to reveal the right-wing workings of fearmongering as fake, the opposing intensity of media alert continued to intensify the circulation of the image within the same affective economy of amplification (for a similar discussion in the context of far-right provocation see Kølvrå 2015).

Among the top 20 web locations mentioning Laith Al Saleh to make appeals such as "Don't believe everything you read on social media" (Bartlett, 2015), "Rumour goes viral" (Charles, 2015) or "A man is being shamed on Facebook" (White, 2015), an even more general debunking effort was made by the U.S. "independent media channel" TheLipTV. In a YouTube video discussion "ISIS Fighter Turned Refugee Propaganda Debunked", Goodchild's post was employed as an "anti-program" (Rogers, 2017) of the "ISIS fears" narrative, allowing the users to connect to the confusing affective force of the image with an even stronger intensity. Apart from being situated within the problematics of detection of the 'terrorist anomaly', the image of Laith Al Saleh was re-activated within what Nigel Thrift and Tony Sampson call an "imitative momentum" of fake encounter (Thrift, 2009, Sampson, 2012, p. 160). In a similar manner as the RT report, the video by TheLipTV confronts the users with the image in a familiar setting of a newsroom. Yet, instead of simulating factuality or trustworthiness of the image by consulting an 'expert' opinion on its alleged sources, the video re-enacts the outrage about the fact of its repeated manipulation as a trigger for outbursts of further controversial associations, desires, and beliefs. In the absence of the arguments, the emerging fakety of this whole visual media assemblage justifies the appearance of the image on the 'news' through anticipation of the next hoax. As one of the LipTV moderators declared:

"I am calling bullshit and I'm right! [...] I know this is just one image, but [...]. This is the main reason you see a lot of the right-wing in Europe, particularly in the Eastern block of Europe kind of saying, this is why we don't let migrants in [...] because we gonna have the terrorists coming. [...] We see fake stuff on Facebook all the time. It's always bullshit. You can't trust anything you see on Facebook."⁹

These two different reenactments of the image's affective value as news value are both potentiated by the seemingly precautionary viral logic of networked media spaces. In *Virality*, Sampson (2012, 129) suggests that a possible way to think this logic in the context of fears of the "terror contagion" is to acknowledge that its publicly communicated expressions work to construct a "transmittable and infectious unknown enemy". On the one hand, by "calling bullshit" on the hateful generalizations about refugees, the oppositional intensity of media alert intends to disrupt the everyday work of reproducing the dominant experiences of fear, uncertainty, and crisis. On the other hand, to the same extent as bullshit itself, the very emergence of the need of calling bullshit on something, as Harry Frankfurt (2005) has shown, is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what they are talking about. Accordingly, it can be argued that the main issue at stake in the mediated construction of the bodies of male Syrian refugees as 'terrorist' is that the duration of uncertainty over these bodies can be infinitely prolonged (see also Rettberg & Gajjala, 2016). By framing each other's perspectives as fake, the cascading flows of pro- and anti-refugee sentiments continuously worked to sustain the viral intensity of the image of Laith Al Saleh as an (im-)possible trigger of the anomaly detection. In a series of self-reinforcing encounters, in which what is known and what is unknown constantly switched places, the affective economy of circulation produced a confusing mixture of fuzzy experiences "relating simultaneously to known, unknown, self, nonself, and "dangerous" others" (Sampson, 2012, p. 133).

Between bullshit and faketuality: In memes we trust

When observing these dynamics as a constitutive element of circulation of the image of Laith Al Saleh, it is important to recognize how the representational limits of its multiple media locations simultaneously expand its meaning in differently orientated terms. Rather than focusing on the failed attempts of the media to define the factual dimension of the image in accordance with the binary logic of source and adaptation, I argue in favor of conceptualizing the intensity that produced its fake news value as faketual. Using a Deleuzian approach to affect, I understand the medial workings of faketuality not as a “question of looking for an origin, but rather of evaluating displacements” (Deleuze, 1997, p. 63). By shifting the focus away from the assumed truth or falsity of its content, I address the faketual intensity of the image of Laith Al Saleh as articulated within the controversy over its belongings. Rather than relying on the availability of relevant sources, visual social relations of faketuality benefit from the unconscious modes of relating and unrelating in which the image transforms as it moves via a series of mutually reinforcing imitative and oppositional contextual encounters. In amplifying certain already existing practices of media use and preempting others, the context itself becomes both intense and porous, transparent and promiscuous. It links the visual, the material and the social, mobilizing mixed experiences of seriation and circulation. Accordingly, what spreads as faketual is continuously modulated through affective connections between previous media encounters and their potential contextual variations yet to come. As they repeat and feedback upon one another, they take the shape of contingently interconnected relations that feel true even if they are known to be fabricated. In this process, matters of shared concern translate into something we desire to know for a fact and vice versa (see Latour, 2004). Without necessarily being experienced as fake, the resulting vibrant, material-semiotic assemblage of faketuality facilitates affectively underpinned forms of knowledge, in which real and imaginary events become blurred. What makes these blurrings faketual is that they play on public hopes that most of the alerting images circulating on the media are bogus. At the same time, the lack of capacity to know where these images come from intensifies fears that some of them might be not what they seem, increasing the contagious potential of the issue at stake with each new act of sharing. The prevalent experience of disorientation that perpetuates itself in these dynamics feeds on the everyday micro-imitations of claim and counterclaim, creating a habitual environment of made-up arguments, irrational facts, controversial sentiments, and their visual social materializations.

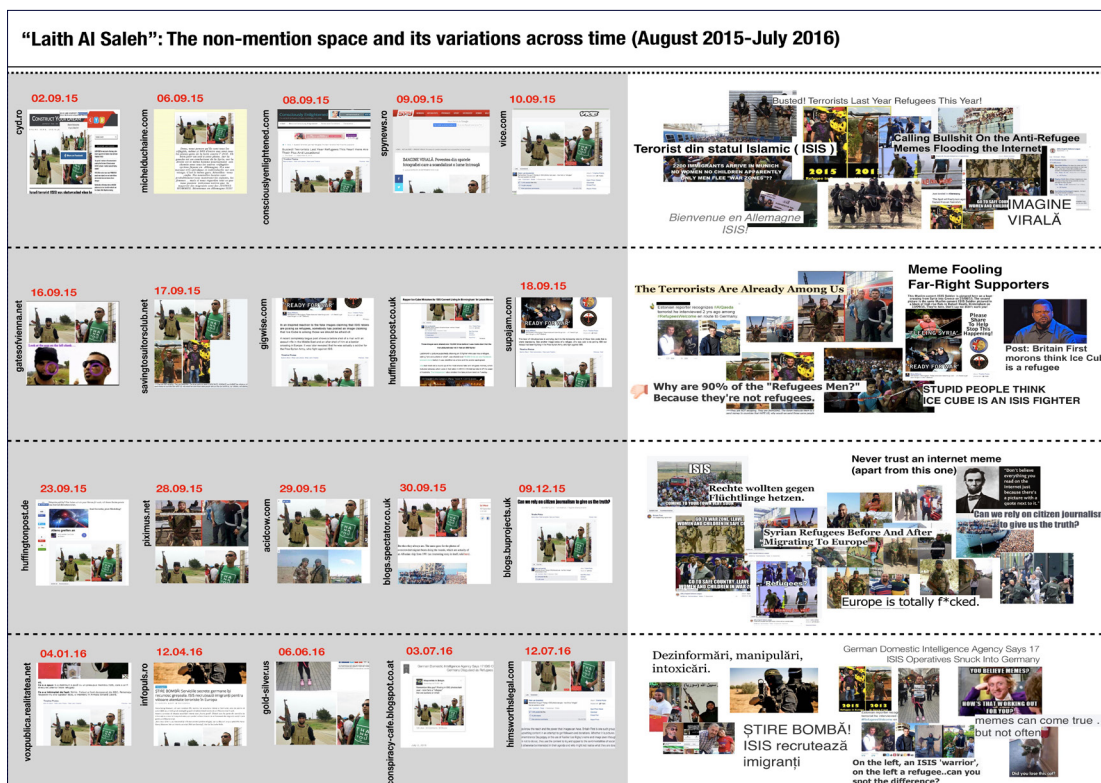


Figure 4:

The use of the image without mentioning Laith Al Saleh in the source cloud (on the left) in relation to its imitative variations and corresponding headlines (on the right) across time (August 2015–July 2016); author's visualization.

The affective workings of faketaility are especially evident in the positioning efforts of the sources in which the image of Laith Al Saleh was used *without mentioning Laith Al Saleh* (Figure 4). Spreading across different contexts, it was the double presenting of the past and the present typical for photo-based meme genres (see Shifman, 2014) that became the main focus of attention. Proliferating predictions of the impending arrival of the 'unknown enemy', some adaptations of the image were used in a series of online photo-collections showing "Terrorists last year, refugees this year", "Syrian refugees before and after migrating to Europe", or simply "Terrorists" who are "already among us".¹⁰ In this context, the viral circulation of media alert took on a new memetic, or "prospective" dynamic (Shifman, 2014, p. 355). Through temporal, contextual and generic proximity to other images of young, foreign looking, allegedly unidentified men, the deindividuation and fragmentation of the image started to produce its own alternative variations for purposes of parody and critique. Characteristic of the genre of crisis memes more generally, such anticipatory entanglements of "timeliness, timelessness and seriality" (Rintel, 2015, p. 266) make communities of differently minded users connect and disconnect. In their efforts to anticipate hateful cascades of social media postings directed against refugees, memes that were circulated "to basically mock people who consistently share anti-refugee propaganda" (Hopkins 2015) were doing just that. Featuring well-known, typically heroic or typically comedian male movie stars, they worked by reactivating and intensifying the *faketail* value of the logic of "terrorists posing as refugees" in easily recognizable *fictional* settings (Figure 5). These variations were remediated alongside the image of Laith Al Saleh by popular news and opinion websites such as Vice, Gigwise, and HuffPost, where the right-wing tendency of fearmongering collapsed into the emergence of the figure of "anti-refugee memes".



Figure 5: "Isis Cube"-meme in a Facebook post by Britain Furst (British satirical community page; on the left), posted on September 16, 2015 with 8.004 likes, 7.306 shares and 1.275 comments by 1.113 users, including 31 image responses (with the most popular (1131 likes) variation on the right); screen-grabbed in August 2017.

One of the most prominent examples that was celebrated under headlines such as "Stupid people think Ice Cube is an ISIS fighter posing as a refugee" (Moore 2015) or "Meme fooling far-right supporters" (Hopkins, 2015) was the now-and-then image presenting popular US rapper and actor Ice Cube as a "Muslim-convert ISIS soldier pictured [...] in Birmingham on 13/09/15". Equipped with the logos of British nationalist movements Britain First and EDL (English Defence League), it was shared in a Facebook-post by Micky Williams on September 15, 2015 from where it spread to a satirical community Facebook page Britain Furst, provoking further 7.306 shares and a 'discussion' with 8,005 likes and 1,275 comments made by 1,113 users (Hopkins 2015). There it inspired expressions of collective laughter over a shared joke ("Straight outta Isis"; "Isis Cube lolol") along with the confusion about previous acts of sharing ("So, did Britain First actually post this originally? Because if so... wow...), occasional outbursts of trolling ("I will cut you") and multiple individual expressions of anger directed against both the "lefteye champagne socialists" and the "right-wing scare mongering".¹¹ Based on imitation rather than interaction, the unfolding

of these micro-activities required attention to the current populist far-right developments in Britain (and the rest of the world) to the same extent as popular knowledge of Ice Cube's "Straight Outta Compton" debut hip-hop album with N.W.A. (see Figure 6). In remediating the intentional provocation of the "logic of lulz" or "lols", an abbreviation for "laughing out loud", which is typically associated with trolling on subcultural image boards such as 4chan and reddit (Phillips, 2015), further satirical appropriations of the image, including (among others) Sylvester Stallone "posing for ISIS", were used to confuse the negative affectivity of "anti-refugee memes" within the antagonistic framework of memetic remix and collective satire (Phillips & Milner, 2017). At the same time, through mobilization of dynamics of misappropriation and misunderstanding, these memes intensified antagonism even further (Pilipets & Winter, 2018). Shared along with the image of Laith Al Saleh, they became a celebrated subject of the left-wing news websites precisely because they were (allegedly) taken seriously by far-right supporters.

Word Cloud: 'Isis Cube' Refugee meme in a discussion thread by Britain Furst

believe (18) brilliant (17) **britain** (47) canoe (12) coming (12)
 comment (22) crazy (17) **cube** (197) 😂 (623) fishing (63)
 fleeing (27) **fucking** (58) funny (19) furst (15) guy (17) motherfucker (13)
 ha (17) **haha** (33) **hahaha** (28) **hahahaha** (18) hilarious (13) **lol** (68)
 joke (28) **ice** (164) idiots (12) 🏠 (7) islamic (10) jesus (10) **isis** (95) live (12)
 looks (14) muslim (12) oh (20) page (24) **outta** (47) people (32) photos (12)
 picture (15) 😏 (6) piss (13) **post** (28) rapper (16) real (15) really (20) refugee (16)
 share (19) shit (15) **straight** (64) stupid (15) 🤔 (19) **syria** (57)

Figure 6: Facebook reactions to "ISIS Cube" meme in the image discussion thread: Top 100 of 2688 words/1277 comments, 1113 users, 7306 shares, posted by Britain Furst community page, 16 September 2015; extracted with DMI Netvizz, visualized with TagCrowd/Textanalysis.

Philip Kleinfeld's Vice Magazine article from September 10, 2015 played a central role in this dynamic. Under the headline "Calling Bullshit on the Anti-Refugee Memes Flooding the Internet", it presents the image of Laith Al Saleh in a compilation of obviously manipulated photo-based memes from a number of far-right British Facebook pages such as EDL (English Defense League) and Britain First. Addressing those sharing them as "racist jerks cranking up the meme generators and knowingly filling the internet with lies" (Kleinfeld, 2015), the article uses the negative affective intensity of the image to transfer the "bullshit" characteristics of anti-refugee propaganda onto the everyday proliferation of habitual racism. Suggesting with the typical alerting intensity of the next anticipated mediashock ("Stay woke, people!") that the racist meme flood (presented as "the horror of far-right Facebook") can easily spread to the unprotected user, it amplifies the viral anomaly of the issue by reversing the entanglements of hate and fear mongering towards a different dangerous other.¹² Such counterimitative reversals in the virally spreading flows of images and information constitute the rhythmic patterns of (p)remediation as part of the affective logic within which "habits render past contingent repetitions into anticipatable connections" (Chun 2016, p. 54). Within this logic, as both Grusin (2015) and Chun (2016) argue, the distribution of crisis works at its best when networked environments of communication present future projections as though they really existed. Continuing the self-amplifying dynamic in which the image of Laith Al Saleh was reproduced in both refugee-friendly and refugee-unfriendly contexts, the remediation of the controversy over 'terrorists posing as refugees' extended itself to 2016.

Conclusion: The viral loop of confusion

This points us to the central role of *faketuality* in the anomalous spread of viral images (see Parikka & Sampson 2009): To the same extent as it continuously works to steer the shared awareness of those who follow its conflictual impulses on a daily basis, it strongly benefits from the networked practices which conveniently separate the common self from the unfamiliar dangerous other. The contingent and contagious dynamics of (p)remediation it derives from are driven by propensity rather than purpose (Thrift, 2009; Sampson, 2012; Grusin, 2015). Using the experience of the unknown to organize affective spaces of disorientation and confusion, the logic of faketuality engages people within an ongoing process of speculation about what might or might not be coming next. The (counter)imitative intensities of media alert it produces fluctuate between expressions of hate, anxiety, growing mistrust, absurdity and laughter, interlocking in the course of visual circulation. Amplifying contagious intensities of manipulated content in a network of cascading relations of polarization and imitation, the preemptive temporality of sharing creates a multi-sited affective environment – a looped space in which the desire to prevent the possibility of being shocked repeats itself with minor variations, feeding back and forward into the waves of its own intensification.

The exploration into complexly mediated conditions of crisis communication requires reflection on the diverging ways in which visual social media shape networks of (mis)information, affect and meaning, but also new forms of anticipation, valuation and control. Proliferating through our everyday media encounters, the viral entanglements of these networks need to be approached through the affordances of media technologies as well as from the perspectives of those affected.

Notes

1. Goodchild's twitter feed <https://twitter.com/peterpanohn0> contains over 1,500 photos and videos almost exclusively dedicated to the issues of far-right populism and white European nationalism. The screen-grabbed Facebook post as it appears in the BBC interview with Goodchild can be accessed under <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-34176631> (retrieved on August 17, 2017).
2. In "Repeat, Remediate, Resist? Digital Meme Activism in the Context of the Refugee Crisis" (co-authored with Rainer Winter, 2018), the circulation of the image of Laith Al Saleh on Twitter and Facebook is analyzed in its ambiguous capacity to intensify the dynamics of popular/populist/political engagement. This paper supplements our prior analysis and explores the circulation of the image from a different angle.
3. To extract a list of relevant sources behind the circulation of the image and its various appropriations I used four lists of web locations with 100 URLs each. Using the image URLs from The Atlantic, BBC Trending and RT reports as an input in the Google Reverse Image Scraper (2017), I created three lists with 100 web locations on which the images can be found according to images.google.com. I then triangulated the results with the list of top 100 URLs returned by Google for the query "Laith al Saleh" and extracted 60 URLs appearing on at least two of the lists within a date range between August 2015 and August 2016. These were then extended by 4x top 10 URLs from each list. In the next step, "Laith al Saleh" was queried in each of the unique web locations through Google Scraper. While the source clouds generated by the scraper were Google-ordered, for purposes of analysis I have rearranged the cloud of sources using the image of Laith Al Saleh by date. Each domain name in the cloud is resized according to the number of times it mentions the keyword "Laith Al Saleh". For a discussion of a "device-centered" approach to social issues and other examples of using the Google Scraper, see Rogers (2009) and Marres (2012). Terms related to the image of Laith Al Saleh as they were used in the articles from the list of selected image locations according to Google Reverse Image Search (Figure 3) with the number of mentions per term were generated with TagCrowd (retrieved from <https://tagcrowd.com> on August 17, 2017).
4. The only exception was the AP interview with Laith Al Saleh that was remediated by the local Greek (ekathimerini) and German (n-tv) reports in August 2015. It also re-appeared in a no longer available version by Yahoo news from August 17, 2015 that did not use any visual material but was often commented on by the right-wing bloggers accusing the report of spreading leftist propaganda.
5. The link to sibilla post is available under: <http://sibilla-gr-sibilla.blogspot.co.at/2015/08/laith-al-saleh.html>. The post by terrorismemmonitor was returned by Google reverse image scraper under a broken link: <https://terrorismemmonitor.nl/rebellen-commandant-mogelijk-onderweg-naar-nederland/> (retrieved on August 17, 2017).
6. Available under: http://www.jobbik.com/europe_welcomes_illegal_immigrants_while_abandoning_real_refugees (retrieved on August 17, 2017).
7. Further information on the RT report from September 9, 2015 is available under: <https://www.rt.com/news/314788-hungary-migrants-isis-terrorists/> (retrieved on August 17, 2017).
8. See e.g.: <http://gold-silver.us/forum/showthread.php?90107-On-the-left-an-ISIS-warrior-on-the-left-a-refugee-can-you-spot-the-difference> (retrieved on August 17, 2017).
9. By claiming to provide "an uncensored, unscripted conversation that picks up when the mainstream leaves off", the format of TheLipTV provides a good example of such affective faketuality. This source does not appear in the cloud (due to the Harvester settings "Exclude URLs from Google and Youtube" in the first phase of source extraction). The whole video discussion with 4.901 views, 47 likes, 92 dislikes and 73 comments by 47 users is available under: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibP40wp7QCw> (retrieved on August 17, 2017).

10. See e.g.: <http://piximus.net/others/syrian-refugees-before-and-after-migrating-to-europe> or <http://consciouslyenlightened.com/busted-terrorists-last-year-refugees-this-year-here-are-their-pics-and-locations/> or <http://gatesofvienna.net/2015/09/the-terrorists-are-already-among-us/> (retrieved on August 17, 2017).
11. The whole discussion was retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/BritainFurst/photos/a.722782891130445.1073741828.722772297798171/985594068182658/?type=3&theater> on August 17, 2017.
12. Unsurprisingly, Kleinfeld's article provoked not only enthusiasm on the side of the refugee supporters, but also further racist attacks directed against refugees and the author of the article himself. See, e.g., the offensive blog-entry by the *Daily Stormer*, an American far right, neo-Nazi, white supremacist commentary website, where Kleinfeld, shortly after his VICE article was published in September 2015, was personally accused of spreading propaganda. In affective terms, the entry continues the hateful loop of 'calling bullshit' as a product of assimilation/amplification, which Gabriel Tarde (1903, p. xvii) describes as characteristic of (counter-)imitation, meaning that like-minded people tend to attune to like-minded others. Commenting on Kleinfeld's analysis, the author of the entry states: "Basically, the entire thing is without meaning. In a very long "analysis", no actual points are made. The point is that it is long, and has a bunch of still, so if you skim it, you're like "oh I guess it's some kind of hoax, Europe isn't being overrun by violent monkeys who want to kill us all." [...] It's just meant to make a psychological impression on the feeble-minded bitches who read VICE." Retrieved from <https://dailystormer.name/vice-kike-philip-kleinfeld-calls-bullshit-on-pol-migrant-video/> on August 17, 2017.

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