How the media and state capitalise on the perceived suffering of children in Global South nations

By Fiona Sim

From gaining four thousand followers on her first day on Twitter to closing a book deal for her memoir eight months later, seven-year-old Bana al-Abed (more commonly known by her Twitter handle @AlabedBana) has become a worldwide media spectacle. She is known for her tweets in fluent English depicting life in war-torn Syria. While al-Abed has become a hit in the media with transnational support from the British mainstream, alternative media sources allege that the girl is being used as a front for rebel propaganda purposes against the so-called Assad regime. This essay will critically assess how mainstream media's reliance on social media as a credible source—in particular, Twitter user @AlabedBana—serves the purpose of reinforcing Western state narratives about the political situation in Syria. This essay will then study how ideas and information are no longer contained within national borders because of the Internet using Appadurai's theory of the five flows of globalization. The plight of a seven-year-old, spread through global flows of ideas and knowledge production, has symbolised a new form of Orientalism (Said, 2003) reconstructed in the face of modernity.

In the words of Colin Sparks (2007): "The state is an instrument of coercion, the media are instruments of persuasion. They influence each other as if they were the two arches of a bridge." This symbiotic relationship means that the state influences the way certain events are portrayed in mainstream media. The media, in turn, can use these events to boost audience reach. Take, for example, the *Daily Mail*. It is the tabloid with the highest monthly print and online readership in the UK (Stone, 2016). Within days of Twitter account @AlabedBana's inception, Daily Mail, and other prominent papers reported the then-unverified Twitter handle as a legitimate source from inside Syria (Molloy, 2016). A child's tweets thus became the voice of the Syrian people in mainstream media. But to discover how the tweets of one Syrian girl-child came to stand out amongst hundreds of thousands of other Syrian Twitter users needs historical context.

It is through no coincidence that, historically, the British imperialists used the imagery of children and childhood for media propaganda. As Erica Burman (1995) explores, a paternalistic colonial mindset was used to justify the need for a global empire to the British people. Burman argues that the colonial gaze commodified childhood to construct the idea of the people of the Global South as docile, innocent, and dependent beings. GlobalSouth colonised 'Others' were portrayed as *needing* the British coloniser's Self to act *in loco parentis*, hence terms like "children of the Empire." Examples of this can still be seen in the British—and also, more generally,

Western—media today whereby non-governmental organisations such as *Save The Children* use close-up images of suffering children in the Global South countries as a marketing strategy (Brocklehurst, 2016). This marketing strategy not only highlights the humanitarian crises but moves the public to take action and intervene to alleviate the suffering visualised. In Bana, we see the orientalist perception of the British Self as one of 'parent,' 'defender,' and 'protector' of the Syrian Other packaged into the reductionist image of a defenceless, helpless child calling for help (Burman, 1995). al-Abed's tweets not only represent the lived experience of Bana al-Abed the individual but the lived experience of the Syrian "children of the Empire." Arguably, this demonstrates how the media can be complicit in the reproduction of backward colonial thinking. The following case-study strengthens this argument.

Following its slathering across tabloid front pages in September 2015, the name Aylan Kurdi may not ring any bells, but the image of a Syrian boy-child's body washed ashore on a beach is ingrained in the minds of millions of Britons (Hunter, 2015; Gerard, 2016). "This was something the Western reader could understand: a massive disaster, dying children, Western aid needed" (Allen and Seaton, 1999), and so a petition amassed over 400,000 signatures in a matter of days calling for the government to take in more Syrian refugees. Amidst the media spectacle, BBC presenters offered tweets like, "The world must find a way to end the suffering of so many in [the] Syrian war." At the same time, "Britain needs to act" became the rallying cry of politicians (HuffPostUK, 2015). But was this a cry for humanitarian action or imperialist intervention?

Days after the picture first emerged in the tabloids, the then re-elected Prime Minister David Cameron announced plans that the UK was to accept 20,000 refugees by the year 2020 (Stone, 2016). Bearing in mind that the UK Home Office had reportedly only taken 2,800 Syrian refugees in total up to that point, this plan did not seem feasible, but it received a mixture of praise and criticism (ibid). Just months later, the UK parliament voted to conduct airstrikes in Syria "against Isis" with the aid of anti-government forces, and Kurdi was all but forgotten (UK Parliament, 2015). It seems ironic that the UK would pledge to take on thousands more refugees months before conducting military intervention that would displace thousands more (CommonSpace, 2017).

Children "symbolize or concretize at least the horror of a situation in the mind of the observer," and this makes children powerful propaganda tools to be exploited for "adult agendas" (Moeller, 2002; Brocklehurst, 2016). Aylan Kurdi's lone lifeless body represented the loss of innocent lives while Bana al-Abed's "live" tweets represent her ongoing suffering as a child living in a warzone: both objects for consumption by Western media that propagate political 'action.' This is what Bolktanski calls the "politics of pity" (1999), whereby children are used for underlining the horrors of a situation. Like the moral panic incited by a terrorist attack on citizens of the West but not elsewhere, the child media spectacles Kurdi and al-Abed represent a moral burden on the public conscience: the dilemmas of the Global South becoming too close to Western lives means action must be taken to alleviate the suffering or, at the very least, distance it from the public conscience (ibid).

Thus, arguably, the controversy over whether or not Bana al-Abed is a real person is irrelevant because her very existence has real-world consequences. al-Abed is perhaps the world's

youngest politician, actively engaging with world leaders from Erdogan to Trump (BBC News, 2017; Palazzo, 2017; The New York Times, 2016). With al-Abed's cries for Assad and Putin to "stop the bombing" to tweets in favour of Trump's airstrikes on Syria, her actual suffering as a Syrian child is obscured and overshadowed by a political agenda. In both cases, I argue that the media and state capitalise on the perceived plight of children in Global South nations. Jin (2010) reasons, social media has introduced "new forms of engagement, politicization, and aestheticization of war, conflict, and human suffering." This raises the questions, is this a result of globalization, and if so, is globalisation a vehicle for neo-colonialism?

There is general agreement that globalisation means "greater interconnectedness and action at a distance" but little congruence, according to Colin Sparks (2007). Appadurai's theory of the five scapes of globalisation propose five intersecting factors that shape the global exchange of ideas and information. According to Appadurai, ideoscapes as ideologies of the government and political, socio-economic environment are "composed of elements of the Enlightenment worldview… including 'freedom,' 'rights,' 'sovereignty'… and 'democracy'" (1996:p.33), whereas mediascapes are "image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality" (Appadurai 1996:p.33). I will argue that *ideoscapes* and *mediascapes* enabled al-Abed to rise to fame as an orientalist imaginary of the Western Self.

Where "new authenticity points to the truth of ordinary voice as an emerging political force that promises to democratise traditional broadcasters" (Chouliaraki, 2014:p.3), it is unsurprising that the Twitter voice of "ordinary girl" al-Abed has caught media attention. However, using Appadurai's words, tweets in themselves only provide "strips of reality" that are de-contextualised and reduced to short, quick "snapshot" sentences that reveal nothing but what the "tweeter" *wants* the reader to see. Another issue is that one's online identity cannot be verified, hence the emergence of so-called "catfishing" wherein a person's online identity has been discovered to match their in-person personality (Slate Magazine, 2013). Naturally, it is to the worry of some journalists that Twitter accounts are used as independent sources on their own (J-source.ca, 2011).

Ironically, through Twitter as a mediascape, @AlabedBana can both become a worldwide phenomenon and be deconstructed under the scrutiny of a skeptical international audience. Independent media collectives and journalists across the globe have used the public access to the @AlabedBana account to analyse photos, video clips, and even tweet interactions. Through this, the legitimacy of the account has been, once again, questioned: the cleanliness of Bana contrasting the destruction around her; Bana's father as seen in his official social media accounts versus pictured with al-Nusra rebel groups; Bana's inability to speak English in in-person interviews other than to say "Please save Aleppo" versus her fluency in her tweets (ISMC, 2016; MintPress News, 2016). Using Social Rank, a free analytics platform, one can see that al-Abed's first follower was Al-Jazeera journalist Abdul Aziz Ahmed (@AbdelAhmedJ) known for his opposition to al-Assad's government. In addition to gaining four-thousand followers within twenty-four hours of its inception, al-Abed follows a myriad of anti-Assad journalists and politicians and often instantly engages with Twitter hashtags (21st Century Wire, 2016). This serves as further evidence that @AlabedBana may be at the heart of a deliberate, politically charged social media project to discredit and disgrace al-Assad's government. If @AlabedBana is but a political project, why insist that a young girl is writing the tweets and not her mother (who allegedly "helps" her

daughter to run the account)? Why Twitter as the platform and not Facebook? Why English as the chosen tweet language and not Arabic?

It can be argued that mediascapes have been co-opted to reinforce and appeal to Western-dominated ideoscapes. It would then make sense for the intended audience to be Western. Using Said's Orientalism, the West here is defined as the geo-cultural Self-construction through the Oriental (Syrian) Other. Using this lens, we can see the mimicry of the 2011 Arab Springs "Twitter revolution" (Beaumount, 2017) embodied in a single, innocent girl-child speaking the common language of approximately one billion to gain Western attention and empathy. Bana al-Abed is the innocent child suffering at the hands of the al-Assad dictatorship Other seeking help from the 'civilised' West to become more like them. By positing the Syrian conflict as one in which al-Assad and the Syrian government are infringing on the human rights and freedom of Syrian children, anti-Assadist groups can justify their call for the removal of the government and incite powerful, international intervention to facilitate it.

In conclusion, both approaches have exposed the multi-functionality of Bana "@AlabedBana" al-Abed to further political agendas. It serves the—often Orientalist—narrative of a few while the lived experiences of the many continue to go ignored and unreported, obscuring the reality of ordinary Syrians whose voices are elevated, ignored, or twisted to suit the Western observer's agenda (Globalresearch.ca, 2016; Newsweek, 2016). While it may be insubstantial to attribute Trump's recent strikes on Syria (BBC News, 2017) to the influence of @AlabedBana alone, it is clear that the account's interactive four-hundred-thousand followers contributed to political debates in regards to al-Assad, conflict within Syria, and the "refugee crisis." I thus end this essay with a tweet by @AlabedBana: "I welcome Donald Trump action against the killers of my people."

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