GLOBAL RELATIONS FORUM YOUNG ACADEMICS PROGRAM
ANALYSIS PAPER SERIES No.10

Making the Connection: The Role of Empathy in Communicating Policy

CLAIRE YORKE

Henry A. Kissinger Postdoctoral Fellow, Yale University
Ph.D. in International Relations, King's College London

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August 2020

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ISBN: 978-605-06588-2-8

Publisher Certificate No: 22780

Printed in Turkey
Gren Agency, Istanbul. *www.grenajans.com*
Design and Layout
Wodern Web Developing & Design Services *www.wodern.com*

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This publication can be downloaded at gif.org.tr

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GRF is grateful to all members who participated in the evaluation commission for their invaluable insights and informed guidance, as well as for the time and effort they dedicated to the program.

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Claire Yorke is a Henry A. Kissinger Postdoctoral Fellow at International Security Studies and the Jackson Institute for Global Affairs at Yale University. Her writing and research explore the role and limitations of empathy and emotions in international affairs, diplomacy, leadership and policy-making. Alongside her research, she lectures and teaches at university and has recently designed a professional online course for mid-level managers on 'Empathy and Emotions in Policy-Making' with the International School for Government at King's College London. She received her Ph.D. in International Relations from the Department of War Studies, King's College London, and has a Masters from the University of Exeter, and a BA from Lancaster University. Prior to her Ph.D., Claire worked as Programme Manager of the International Security Research Department at Chatham House (2009-2013) and as a Parliamentary Researcher to a frontbench politician in the Houses of Parliament (2006-2009). In 2014, she was a member of the NATO and Atlantic Council Young Leaders Working Group, reporting to NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen on the future of the transatlantic alliance. She was a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Brent Scowcroft Center for International Security at the Atlantic Council in Washington DC, and is currently on the Advisory Committee for Women in International Security UK, the Board of Advisors for Promote Leadership and the Research Advisory Council of the Resolve Network.

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Abstract

Defined as an attempt to understand the experiences, feelings, and perspectives of another, and emphasizing the benefits of genuine human connection, the importance of empathy has been extolled by political leaders including former President Barack Obama, and current Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern. Yet it is no panacea, and its benefits may be subjective, dependent on diverse perspectives of who it benefits, and at what cost. More work needs to be done to understand its complexity and how it interacts with the imperatives and challenges of politics and public discourse.

Beginning with the assumption that empathy's value comes through its expression: whether through communication, actions, or behaviors on behalf of the person seeking to empathize, this paper examines the roles empathy plays in how leaders communicate and connect with the public. It aims to define and conceptualize what empathy looks like in official communications with domestic and foreign populations. Then uses three case studies to explore the implications of empathetic expressions and communications, or lack thereof, for effective policy engagement and the realization of policy objectives. In so doing, it explores the utility of empathy in this space while recognizing and giving voice to its variable and complex dynamics.

1. Introduction

Empathy is a popular currency in current public discourses. Prominent politicians have recently extolled its value, speaking of its contribution to kinder and more cohesive societies. Early in his political career, for example, former President Barack Obama spoke of the problem of an 'empathy deficit' within society. There was a need, he argued, to understand the lived experiences of others and how our lives intersect with one another.[1] Several years later, while addressing the United Nations on the importance of peace between the Israelis and Palestinians, he again invoked empathy as a vital component to transform the conflict.[2]

More recently, on a panel at Davos in 2019, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, argued that 'what the world needs now is the quality of empathy.'[3] To accompany this message, new initiatives in domestic politics in New Zealand have sought to situate ideas of kindness, inclusivity and tolerance at the heart of society. The country's budget was launched in May 2019, challenging traditional tenets of economic growth as central to a country's prosperity. Instead, emphasizing 'well-being', it places mental health, indigenous aspirations, and productivity at its heart.[4] Such moves are designed to create more citizen-centric governments and foster a greater sense of community.

Despite recognition of empathy's value, however, there is limited understanding of what it looks like in practice and what form it takes when it is a feature of policy-making processes. Indeed, empathy can have diverse roles across the policy-making spectrum. It can be evident in interpersonal relations in diplomatic interactions.[5] It can inform knowledge gathering and efforts to understand audiences and design more effective and citizen-centric policies. It can be a means by which to aid organizational cultures within government departments, and foster inclusivity and diversity between teams in the public sector. Or it could inform the art and conduct of strategy and politics. Taking a more focused approach, this paper examines how empathy features in how leaders communicate and connect with the public, and how its significance can be felt in its absence. It focuses on empathy as a communicative, performative, and iterative process, evident in words, deeds, and actions, and through constant symbiotic interaction between people.

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[1] Barack Obama, "Obama to Graduates: Cultivate Empathy", Speech to Northwestern Students at Graduation, 19 June 2006, https://www.northwestern.edu/newscenter/stories/2006/06/barack.html

[2] Barack Obama, 'Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly', 21 September 2011, https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/09/21/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly

[3] Jacinda Ardern spoke at Davos in January 2019, reported here by Ceri Parker, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/01/new-zealand-s-new-well-being-budget-will-fix-broken-politics-says-jacinda-ardern/

[4] New Zealand Treasury, The Wellbeing Budget, 30 May 2019, https://treasury.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2019-05/b19-wellbeing-budget.pdf

[5] Nicholas Wheeler, "Investigating diplomatic transformations." *International Affairs* 89, no. 2 (2013): 477-496.

In so doing, it explores empathy's different sides. Empathy can bring people together, and contribute to a sense of community and shared experience. It can help overcome differences and seek to mediate prejudices or in-group thinking. Yet, conversely, it can also foster a strong in-group identity that then excludes those seen to be a part of another group. In the public environment of competing pressures and obligations, empathy is not always welcome nor necessarily aligned with political objectives. Moreover, an absence of empathy can help entrench and deepen divisions. A failure to speak to diverse points of view, to seek to understand differences of opinion or communicate in ways that can build consensus and bridge divides, can make the process of unifying a population around a course of action even harder. These different dimensions are explored through the case studies here.

This paper argues that by seeking to understand the experiences, perspectives, interests and feelings of others, and by showing willingness to communicate and articulate that attempt at understanding, empathy can provide valuable insights into how diverse sections of the population, or foreign populations, perceive and respond to policy-decisions. In turn, it can therefore lead to more nuanced and credible communications that take account of such understanding and can help leaders, politicians and diplomats improve how they convey their decision-making choices, and connect more effectively with their audiences.

To begin, this research outlines what empathy means in the context of policy-making with an emphasis on how it is used by political leaders in the public communication of policy decisions. It then turns to explore what this means through three case studies: firstly, the case of the European refugee crisis and the response of Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel; secondly, the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union (EU) and how Prime Minister Theresa May communicated the implications of Brexit; and finally, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's response to the terrorist attacks in New Zealand. This is a very brief excursion into empathy, yet these three cases offer a unique perspective not only on the role of empathy, but also its limitations and the implications of its absence. As part of this, it is unintentional that these three cases are all women. Empathy often has gendered connotations and is connected with attributes such as compassion and emotions, which are often seen as female traits. Yet such stereotypes do a disservice to all genders. Other cases could have included Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, or Nelson Mandela who are often associated with empathy, but are less contemporary. Yet the association of empathy with female leadership raises an interesting point for further consideration.[6] As it is necessary simultaneously to challenge the gendered expectation that women are more likely to express empathy, but also understand the socially constructed and societal roles and expectations that shape the value accorded

[6] A recent article in Forbes magazine pointed out the correlation of female leadership with certain qualities in connection to different countries' coronavirus responses, Avivah Wittenberg-Cox, "What Do Countries With the Best Coronavirus Responses Have in Common? Women Leaders", *Forbes Magazine*, 13 April 2020 (accessed 20 June 2020), https://www.forbes.com/sites/avivahwittenbergcox/2020/04/13/what-do-countries-with-the-best-coronavirus-reponses-have-in-common-women-leaders/#470d8e353dec

to the concept and its utility. For if empathy is dismissed as 'soft' or a sign of weakness associated with flawed gender stereotypes, then its value and critical role in policy risks being overlooked. Reflecting on all these themes, this paper concludes by synthesizing the research findings from these cases, and looking at areas for further research.

2. Empathy in Communicating Policy

In recent years, countries around the world have grappled with significant foreign policy challenges that have shaped internal politics. Terrorism, the movement of refugees and migrant workers, climate change, and Brexit have been prominent features of public discussion, and have sometimes provided powerful sources of activism and calls for change at both a domestic and international level.

For governments and political leaders, empathy can be a valuable tool in seeking to connect with domestic and foreign populations and communicate understanding of insecurities, uncertainty, or frustrations that accompany these shifts. However, far from being a simple antidote to complex challenges, empathy is a variable asset with a range of implications and differing levels of success. This section sets out a framework to understand the concept, and the factors and features that define it, before subsequent sections explore its application and variation through three distinct cases.

Empathy is defined as an attempt to understand the experiences, feelings, and perspectives of another. It is defined as an attempt rather than an ability as it is impossible to gain accurate understanding of another, or how they view the world. Yet the attempt itself is valuable. Although it is related, it is distinct from sympathy and compassion. Sympathy and compassion are typically associated with emotional responses, often pity or sadness that recognize and seek to alleviate the suffering of others. In contrast, empathy is a constant and iterative process of trying to step into someone else's shoes and understand their perspectives and experiences in a far broader sense. It means understanding their context, history and emotional state in a more comprehensive way. Yet it does not necessarily need to lead to efforts to alleviate pain or suffering, or to change someone's situation.[7] It is a practice of seeking to understand how different people experience the world and of acknowledging there are multiple diverse perspectives of the world. Importantly, it is also a reflective process of considering how oneself is experienced by the world and recognizing the impact one's words and deeds have on others. There is an inherent assumption that empathetic understanding generally leads to positive changes in how we respond to, and connect with, others, and while this is often the case it is not always so.[8] Empathy can have manifold applications and its value can be subjective depending on its direction and use.

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[7] Martha C Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.302.

[8] See, for example: Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (Penguin, 2009).

Understood this way, empathy plays a range of roles in the design, implementation and communication of policy. It can aid the determination of policy priorities, provide valuable sources of knowledge about how people experience government policy and where it falls short.[9] Within government departments, it can help foster more inclusive and cohesive teams, contribute to workplace cultures, and bring new styles of leadership and engagement.[10] To narrow the focus of such a broad topic, the emphasis in this instance is on its role within the communication of policy-decisions. This points to empathy's communicative and performative dimensions and its utility in helping political leaders to connect, or not, with their audiences.

Indeed, empathy's value comes from its expression, communication and performance: for example, through the words, actions, or behaviors of the person seeking to empathize. It is a human dynamic that involves a process of projected identification – imagining yourself in someone else's place. As Keren Yarhi-Milo and Marcus Holmes argue, empathy "has a relational quality"[11] that can help build connection with others, and its expression in interactions can signal that people have tried to understand the interests, needs, and positions of others. In this regard, the concept and value of recognition is integral to how empathy is understood.[12] Empathy acknowledges differences in experiences, perspectives and backgrounds, and its value lies in showing people that they are seen and heard, and that their needs are recognized.

The willingness and ability to use empathy is dependent, however, on a curiosity and interest within governments, or by leaders, about how different people feel about, and experience, policy in their everyday lives. Such efforts might be revealing. As Thomas Colley has examined in the context of the UK's intervention in Libya, public narratives about government policies may not correspond with the narratives the government thinks it is telling.[13] These are usually situated within longer historical discourses surrounding perceptions and opinions of government and society. If a compelling narrative emerges within society that resonates with people, for example that a government is inefficient, or against democracy, it can challenge official efforts to convey a different message. Opinion polling and surveys go some way to reveal the views of the public, and capture public moods, but a focus on empathy means going beyond the data to understand the stories and experiences behind these perceptions, to yield new insights.

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[9] See, for example: Peter Bazalgette, *The Empathy Instinct: How to Create a More Civil Society* (Hachette UK, 2017).

[10] See, for example: Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.* (Random House, 2018); Martyn Newman, *Emotional Capitalists: The New Leaders* (John Wiley & Sons, 2009).

[11] Marcus Holmes and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "The psychological logic of peace summits: How empathy shapes outcomes of diplomatic negotiations." *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2016): 107-122, p.108.

[12] Empathy as defined here is connected to the work on recognition in sociology, such as Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (MIT Press, 1996). See also: Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," *New Contexts of Canadian Criticism* 98 (1997).

[13] Thomas Colley , "What's in it for Us", *The RUSI Journal*, 160, no. 4 (2015): 60-69, DOI: 10.1080/03071847.2015.1079054.

Expressions of understanding, connection and recognition are much harder to convey to a crowd, however, than an individual in a face-to-face interaction. And, although a lot of work on empathy considers it in interpersonal relations, in the context of the public communication of policy, the relationship is between an individual, or group of individuals working on behalf of a government, and a significant and sizeable collective audience. In this context, the direction of empathy is primarily from policy-makers and politicians speaking as representatives of governments towards the public, though it does involve an iterative process of learning from, and seeking to understand the public. This wide audience includes their domestic population, citizens overseas, foreign allies, and adversaries. That there is not one target audience or point of focus, presents a challenge. Especially as it is impossible for a public figure to empathize with everyone.

For this reason, effective empathetic communication and expression is connected to the use of emotions and emotional narratives. Emotional connection is a powerful force in engaging large groups of people. Andrew Ross details how emotions can move crowds through 'circulations of affect',[14] and Emma Hutchison has written about the ways in which collectives can share in emotions, such as trauma.[15] Empathy in communications and public expressions by policy-makers is thus connected to a sense of the public mood and how they are able to harness it. Moods are felt and experienced, and are, as Martin Heidegger identifies, inescapable: they exist around us and as an intrinsic part of our interactions with the world.[16] However, they are under-conceptualized[17] and intangible, which makes it hard for policy-makers and politicians to measure or quantify. Yet good communicators are adept at sensing the public mood, and at reading a room, or a moment in time, and sensing not only the right tone and correct response, but how that response can change outcomes and attitudes to have an impact on the mood. In this instance, the measurement and identification of empathy therefore relies on qualitative and interpretive methods that analyze identities, discourses, emotions, symbols and imagery to capture how people create and attribute meaning and significance within societies.

In addition to reading the mood, empathy's value is connected to the image and credibility of the communicator. In the context of empathy, the warmth and sense of connection people have to the messenger, and how they conform to anticipated forms of behavior, is crucial. To speak to people, it is important that

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[14] This idea captures how emotions are inseparable from one another, and move through society in circulations of varying intensities. It is connected to ideas of 'public moods' and collective feelings. Andrew AG Ross, *Mixed Emotions: Beyond Fear and Hatred in International Conflict* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[15] Emma Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics*. Vol. 140. (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[16] Andreas Elpidorou., and Lauren Freeman, "Affectivity in Heidegger I: Moods and Emotions in Being and Time", *Philosophy Compass* 10, no. 10 (2015): 661-671.

[17] See Erik Ringmar. "What are public moods?" *European Journal of Social Theory* 21, no. 4 (2018): 453-469; and Claire Yorke, "Reading the Mood: Atmospherics and Counter-Terrorism", *RUSI Journal*, (2020) Forthcoming

they also feel heard. This was visible in the case of the Grenfell Tower fire in the United Kingdom in June 2017. On the day after a tragic and horrific tower block fire in West London, the Prime Minister, Theresa May, arrived on the scene to meet residents and firefighters, and inspect the area. Yet her demeanor came across as officious and dispassionate. The media contrasted her perceived lack of compassion to the survivors and victims with the opposition leader, Jeremy Corbyn, who was seen getting involved in relief efforts, hugging residents and joining them in their grief.

Indeed, there are difficult and intangible dimensions to the role of a leader in being able to convey empathy credibly. It involves a confluence of their public image, perceptions of their integrity, their strength, their sincerity, and how their words align with their actions. It may be that they have enough power and a strong enough reputation that displays of understanding enhance their public image. Whereas, conversely, if they are seen as too weak, particularly on matters of security, that empathy can be seen to further undermine their public image. This requires far deeper analysis of the interaction of diverse reputational factors. There is a larger debate to be had about whether you can fake empathy, and whether it matters. Charisma, for example, plays a role in convincing people that a leader can connect with them, but its absence can be equally felt. What is important is that empathy is perceived as credible, and that people trust someone's sincerity when expressing or conveying empathy. Such appearances, however, are subjective and dependent on the audience and position of the viewer.

Furthermore, in the public space, efforts to express empathy or understanding can be a political act. Its reception can be dependent on the willingness of the public to engage in efforts to understand others, and in turn accept compromises or constraints on their own expectations and interests. In this sense, empathetic understanding cannot be understood as separate to fundamental tenets of politics, such as interests, needs, security, power, and identity. It underscores the inherent costs and trade-offs involved in empathizing.[18]

A further challenge can be seen in the need to communicate multiple messages simultaneously to different audiences, without the messages undermining one another. This is complicated by the fact that there is not a direct line of communication between governments and the public. For policy-makers and politicians, the vast majority of public expressions will be mediated through the media in various forms. This can involve a process of curation and management on the side of the media to create the soundbites they think best capture a story, which, depending on their leaning, their politics, or their angle on a story can create different feelings and attitudes within their audience. Similarly, knowing the media environment and the complex demands of a 24/7 news cycle and social media platforms, officials within government can attempt to control the appearance of a message to preempt media coverage, removing elements of sincerity or warmth to manage a politician's image.

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[18] Naomi Head, "Costly Encounters of the Empathic Kind: A Typology." *International Theory* 18, no. 1 (2016).

This is made harder by the existence of multiple narratives competing simultaneously in the public space. It can be difficult for governments to connect with different populations when encountering opposition narratives, or discourses that provide more compelling stories or provoke stronger emotional reactions.

Empathy should therefore be understood as an interactive and connective process that seeks to engage and understand the perspectives of others in order to gain insights and information to inform one's words, action and behavior. It is situated within a complex and non-linear communications environment where it is mediated and shaped by factors including personality, interests, politics, identities, and the tone and receptivity of public discourses. Understanding it means embracing complexity and nuance and the absence of neat or finite answers.

Observing and measuring empathy in discourses and actions, involves identifying how communicators aim to connect with their audiences: it is seen in attempts to connect one's own personal experiences to the audience, such as in expressions of 'I feel your pain', or 'I know what it is like'. It is visible in efforts to give voice to, and articulate the feelings and experiences of others, and is evident in awareness of how one's own words and actions might have an impact on them. It is revealed in how they express understanding for the wider context, situation, and history of events, and the implications they have had for communities. In actions, it is visible in efforts to connect with others, to show respect for their customs, to listen and demonstrate emotion in line with the feelings of the audience.

The absence of empathy, in contrast, can be seen in an apathy about others and their experiences, or in disrespectful language or willful disregard for other points of view. At the more extreme end, a willful use of dehumanizing language, in attempts to deny or demonize the existence, needs, interests, or experience of others.[19] It can also be seen in more passive forms through a lack of concern for others, an apathy about other experiences and perspectives, or a sense of disconnection from, or disinterest in, people.

Despite its positive potential, empathy can have a darker side. Psychologist Paul Bloom points to how empathy can distort policy priorities.[20] An evocative, emotional story about an individual can move people to prioritize the one over the many, for example, moving someone up a waiting list for specialist treatment irrespective of large numbers of other people waiting before them. Furthermore, in contrast to the potential for empathy to aid inclusion, he points to how it can also foster and deepen an in-group mentality. People feel more connected to those who are like them, and create out-groups to reinforce their own sense of

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[19] Claire Yorke, "The Significance and Limitations of Empathy in Strategic Communications." NATO *Defence Strategic Communications* 2 (Spring, 2017).

[20] Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (Random House, 2017).

identity and belonging. At its extreme end, Fritz Breithaupt connects empathy with sadism. It can involve pleasure at a sense of the perceived pain another will suffer, which can motivate acts of extreme violence.[21]

Alongside these more negative connotations, empathy can be instrumentalized for manipulative purposes. Insights gained about how other people experience the world, their perspectives and feelings can be used to take advantage of them or exploit their vulnerabilities. Such dimensions pose difficult questions for how we understand the concept, and the subjectivity of its application: Is it empathy if we do not like what it looks like? Moreover, if people of opposite political views to ourselves are using empathy to tap into people's fears and worldview to galvanize a community to oppose immigrants, or use violence against certain people, can it still count as empathy? In this instance, this is considered the darker side of empathy and is beyond the bounds of this research.

This paper assumes empathy is primarily a positive, pro-social process that can yield greater understanding of others to gain better insights and inform how politicians engage with the public, should they choose to apply it. In the following sections, three cases examine some of these dynamics and the manifestations and implications of empathy in the public space.

3. Case Study One: Germany, Refugees and the Migration Crisis

Across Europe, 2014 and 2015 saw a marked increase in the number of people traveling across the Mediterranean to escape from conflicts including in Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Although many people had sought refuge before, during these two years the numbers reached their highest levels.[22] Countries such as Greece, Italy, and Turkey, struggled with the numbers of people looking for safety and security. Other countries in the south of Europe struggled to register and process new arrivals, leaving many stranded or waved through to neighboring countries who were equally unwilling to deal with the sudden influx. Some countries were openly hostile. Hungary, for example, built a wall to separate them from Serbia and Croatia and prevent people from crossing.

In an attempt to address the crisis, German Chancellor Angela Merkel opened Germany's doors to welcome refugees. Although the Chancellor had a strong position in Europe, her decision, whilst both morally and pragmatically motivated, was painted by some as a sign of emotional weakness, with mixed results. Der Spiegel, for example, suggested that despite Merkel's reputation for rationality and firmness, this more emotional side and her empathy showed she

[21] Fritz Breithaupt, *The dark sides of empathy* (Cornell University Press, 2019).

[22] UNHCR, Operations Portal: Refugee Situations, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean#_ga=2.226839005.1524056250.1574633901-1724700435.1574633901

was prone to error.[23] This first case study of empathy explores the motivation for, and communication of, this change in policy, and the implications these shifts in refugee policy had on Germany and Europe more widely. It illustrates the political implications and societal factors that can mediate efforts at empathy. Given the forces at play in national and European policy, Chancellor Merkel had to navigate simultaneously diverse and strong opinions when she was engaging with her domestic and European audience.

The refugee crisis was, and still is, a humanitarian challenge. In the period before Merkel's decision, hundreds of people were drowning when the boats they were traveling on, overflowing with people, capsized in the Mediterranean. In mid-August, over 70 refugees were found dead in a truck in Austria, having been illegally smuggled and trafficked across borders by criminals exploiting the desire of people to seek security.[24] They were just one example of a wider tragedy. The scale of the crisis was brought to prominence, when, on 2 September 2015, the tragic image of Alan Kurdi, lying face down on a beach in Bodrum, Turkey, went viral. He was a refugee who had drowned along with at least twelve other Syrians when two boats capsized during a journey to safety in Greece. Their story, encapsulated in the powerful photo, gave a human face to a crisis that had already taken thousands of lives.[25] In response, an outpouring of public compassion in Europe led to government promises to address the crisis. Such promises were, however, variable across the region.

Domestic politics and public outcry about the crisis were powerful but often contradictory forces. Whilst many people wanted to alleviate the suffering of refugees, many were also reluctant to see refugees and migrants come to their towns, despite the availability of jobs. In Germany, in particular, there was some hostility to refugees and migrants during this period. Far-right supporters were gaining prominence and in some areas people were nervous about the implications of a mass influx of people to the country. It was a fine line for politicians to tread.

Chancellor Merkel had already signaled her support to help those seeking safety. In her New Year's message in 2014, for example, she had spoken of welcoming refugees and rejecting the racism and anti-Muslim protests.[26] Yet as the crisis in Europe escalated, there was a need to do more. By the summer of 2015, despite a relatively tense domestic environment and concerns across Europe, Germany

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[23] "Merkel's Refugee Policy Divides Europe", *Spiegel Online*, 21 September 2015, https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/refugee-policy-of-chancellor-merkel-divides-europe-a-1053603.html

[24] Bethany Bell & Nick Thorpe, "Austria's migrant disaster: Why did 71 die?", *BBC News*, 25 August 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37163217

[25] Niamh McIntyre, Mark Rice-Oxley, Niko Kommenda & Pablo Gutiérrez, "It's 34,361 and rising: how the List tallies Europe's migrant bodycount", The Guardian, 20 June 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/20/the-list-europe-migrant-bodycount.

[26] "Welcome refugees and reject racism, Merkel says after rallies", *Reuters*, 31 December 2014, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-merkel/welcome-refugees-and-reject-racism-merkel-says-after-rallies-idUSKBN0K90GL20141231

made a decisive effort to alleviate the problem. On 25 August 2015, Chancellor Merkel made her first visit to a shelter for asylum seekers in Heidenau following a wave of attacks on refugees and shelters by far-right extremists.[27] The visit signaled her care and support for those seeking shelter. In Berlin, a decision was taken by the government to enable Syrian refugees across the European Union to register in Germany, overriding the Dublin Regulation that refugees be registered in the first country they entered.[28] The following week, Merkel permitted refugees in Hungary to access Germany by relaxing border controls with Austria. She prepared the country to welcome over one million refugees. In 2015, the number of asylum seekers more than doubled, going from 202,645 in 2014, to 476,510 in 2015, and then to 745,155 in 2016.[29]

In her summer press conference on 31 August 2015, she spoke of the importance of dignity, of humanity and helping those in need.[30] These virtues were held up as central to the need to act: "If Europe fails on the question of refugees, if this close link with universal civil rights is broken, then it won't be the Europe we wished for,"[31] she stated. She invoked empathy during the conference, speaking of how few people knew the exhaustion and anxiety that comes with making the long journey for one's life and that of one's family.[32] It was an expression that recognized the unimaginable and unique experiences and challenges facing refugees. It spoke, too, to the morality that underpinned her decision in the face of an extraordinary situation. She repeated her criticism for those who made refugees unwelcome, protesting and threatening their presence in the country. And asserted that it was something Germany could manage given all it had experienced, exclaiming 'we can do it' in an effort to assuage fears, although it was a phrase that would prove problematic.[33]

Initially, many Germans welcomed the refugees. The term 'Wilkommenskultur' (welcome culture) was used in the media and society in response, and reached a peak in November 2015. Yet there were some shifts over time, and a year later one study found there was a slightly less favorable attitude among certain sections of society.[34] It would be interesting to assess further whether over time,

[27] Kate Connolly, "Angela Merkel to visit asylum shelter after wave of far-right attacks", *The Guardian*, 25 August 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/25/angela-merkel-visit-asylum-shelter-attacks

[28] UNHCR, The Dublin Regulation: Overview, https://www.unhcr.org/4a9d13d59.pdf (accessed 20 Feb 2020)

[29] Eurostat, Asylum and first time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex - Annual aggregated data (rounded) http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyappctza&lang=en (accessed 20 Feb 2020)

[30] The Federal Government of Germany, 'Flexibility is called for now', 31 August 2015 https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/-flexibility-is-called-for-now--435220

[31] "Merkel warns that refugee crisis tests Europe's core ideals", *DW*, 31 August 2015, https://p.dw.com/p/1GOaJ

[32] Chancellor Angela Merkel, 'Sommerpressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel', 31 August 2015, https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/pressekonferenzen/sommerpressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-848300

[33] Janosch Delcker, "The phrase that haunts Angela Merkel", *Politico*, 19 August 2016, https://www.politico.eu/article/the-phrase-that-haunts-angela-merkel/

[34] Ulf Liebe et al., "From welcome culture to welcome limits? Uncovering preference changes over time for sheltering refugees in Germany". *PLoS ONE* 13 no.8 (2018), DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0199923

proximity to refugees will help to generate greater understanding among the public, and examine the impact on national and local attitudes towards refugees and migrants. However, from within her party, critics viewed the open-door policy as a costly mistake and expressed concern that the welcome would encourage new refugees, and not just those at the borders already, to come to the country.

Across Europe too, there was criticism from Germany's allies about the country's new refugee policy.[35] The wider European context is important in understanding this response to her decision, and how her display of empathy was received. Notably, a series of coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris killed 130 people, and injured around 494 in the events of 13-14 November 2015. Claimed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the attacks contributed to concerns over the rise of Islamist extremism in Europe. A month later, in cities including Cologne, Hamburg, and Stuttgart, more than 1,200 women were sexually assaulted on New Year's Eve 2015. Reports suggested over 2,000 men were involved, and of the 120 men identified, around half of them were foreign nationals who had recently come to Germany.[36] This added to a narrative, perpetuated by those opposed to immigration, that the influx of refugees was, in part, connected to these assaults.

Across Europe political leaders faced movements within their societies who were opposed to immigration and played on insecurities and fears over the influx of people to their countries. The arrival of people seeking refuge coincided with a rise in the far-right in Germany and elsewhere.[37] In the UK, just over six months after Merkel's decision to open the borders, fears about people coming through Europe to the UK were encapsulated in a political campaign poster used by Nigel Farage of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) during the UK referendum to leave the EU. A large billboard featuring a queue of people seeking refuge at a border, stated the country was at 'Breaking Point', and failed by the EU.[38] Similar sentiments were echoed by other movements across Europe, meaning Chancellor Merkel had to balance the moral obligations towards refugees with policies that limited total numbers and ensured border controls were effective.

What is striking, is that it was a decision taken by the leader because they felt it was the right thing to do. Angela Merkel was a sufficiently strong politician,

[35] Stefan Wagstyl, "Angela Merkel defends Germany's open-door refugee policy", *The Financial Times*, 25 November 2015, https://www.ft.com/content/a60f289a-9362-11e5-bd82-c1fb87bef7af

[36] Rick Noack, "Leaked document says 2,000 men allegedly assaulted 1,200 German women on New Year's Eve", *The Washington Post*, 11 July 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/07/10/leaked-document-says-2000-men-allegedly-assaulted-1200-german-women-on-new-years-eve/; and Georg Mascolo and Britta von der Heide, "1200 Frauen wurden Opfer von Silvester-Gewalt", *Sueeddeutsche Zeitung*, 10 July 2016, https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/uebergriffe-in-koeln-1200-frauen-wurden-opfer-von-silvester-gewalt-1.3072064

[37] Ben Knight, "Germany: Far-right violence and Islamist threat on the rise", *DW*, 4 July 2017, https://www.dw.com/en/germany-far-right-violence-and-islamist-threat-on-the-rise/a-39534868-0

[38] Heather Stewart and Rowena Mason, "Nigel Farage's anti-migrant poster reported to police", *The Guardian*, 16 June 2016 https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/16/nigel-farage-defends-ukip-breaking-point-poster-queue-of-migrants

both domestically and within Europe, to take such a unilateral decision. Opening the doors to refugees was, for Merkel, an act of conscience, as she could not sit by and watch the tragedy unfold without acting to alleviate it. Merkel's reasoning was connected to a humanitarian duty and a sense of an imperative - that it was something Germany should do, and that they could do. There is an overlap here between compassion and empathy. The performance and articulation of these two concepts in this case pose interesting questions for how we understand empathy. A willingness to welcome others, and understand their experiences and their plight, was dependent, in part, on domestic and European perceptions of security, identity, employment stability and culture. Despite the criticism, however, in the long-term, history may judge the political and ethical wisdom of the decision differently.[39]

4. Case Study Two: Brexit and the UK's Decision to Leave the European Union

On 23 June 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. The final vote saw 51.9% voting Leave versus 48.1%[40] voting to Remain. It was a surprise outcome to a referendum campaign that had revealed deep divisions within the country, not only about the UK's position in Europe, but also about the type of country that people wanted the UK to be. The result reflected differences between cities and rural areas, with cities like London and Liverpool strongly favoring remain, while regions such as Cornwall and Devon were more supportive of leaving.

The whole referendum process offers a rich source of information on how empathy and emotions shape debates, and motivate people to action. An observation of the approach of both sides of the debate suggests the Leave campaign, in particular, harnessed emotions of frustration and discontent effectively, and promised a new pride in Britain as a global actor once it left the EU. Remain, in contrast, used more rational arguments, speaking of economic benefits and the interests served through the union. It failed to offer a vision for staying in Europe that resonated at an emotional level. This case looks at what happened next, at the period after the referendum. As a useful counterpoint to the other two cases, it reveals a notable lack of empathy in how political leaders communicated the implications of the result and sought to take the country forward.

The morning of the results, having campaigned to remain in the EU, Prime Minister David Cameron acknowledged the election result and vowed to respect the outcome. In so doing, he called for fresh leadership to take charge

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[39] "The indispensable European", Leaders, *The Economist*, 7 November 2015, https://www.economist.com/leaders/2015/11/07/the-indispensable-european?fsrc=scn/tw/te/bl/ed/theindispensableeuropean

[40] EU Referendum Results, 24 June 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/politics/eu_referendum/results

of the UK's departure, and announced his resignation.[41] Replacing him, Theresa May took office and, determined to honor the result of the referendum, she pledged in her first statement to acknowledge a country for everyone and not just the few, and to give power and opportunity to the people.[42] It sounded like a promising start, and yet it contrasted with her declaration during the leadership campaign that 'Brexit means Brexit'[43] - a statement that indicated there would be no middle ground, no consensus building, and no definition of what Brexit meant both to the government and the British people. The statement also implied that the desires, interests, and feelings of those 48% who had voted to remain in Europe would be disregarded. Indeed, as time went on, Brexit became less about a national decision that would make the country stronger for all, and more a party-political project as the pro-Brexit elements of the Conservative party wielded greater influence over the party.

At the Conservative Party conference in October 2016, Prime Minister Theresa May expressed understanding for those who had voted Leave, and had felt that "the world works well for a privileged few, but not for them".[44] She acknowledged that the vote was a vote to change how the UK worked and to make life better for those who felt isolated by the status quo.[45] However, at the same time, she created a divide between the Leavers and Remainers. Referring to those that viewed themselves as part of an international community, and repeating a refrain that it was the people versus the elite, she stated that 'if you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere'.[46] It was a striking phrase that implied that identity was to be tied to a nation state, rather than a collective entity. In so doing, it undermined the European identities of those who had voted to remain in the EU, and isolated them further within the political discourse.

In June 2017, boosted by polls suggesting a healthy majority, May held a new General Election to aid the process of delivering Brexit. Yet, as the campaign progressed, May lost her comfortable majority, leading to a loose coalition with the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland (DUP), and a harder position on Brexit.

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[41] PM David Cameron, 'Speech: EU referendum outcome: PM statement', 24 June 2016 https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/eu-referendum-outcome-pm-statement-24-june-2016

[42] PM Theresa May, 'Statement from the new Prime Minister Theresa May', Prime Minister's Office, 13 July 2016 https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/statement-from-the-new-prime-minister-theresa-may

[43] Theresa May MP, Video: "No second EU referendum if Theresa May becomes PM", *BBC News*, 11 July 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-politics-36764525/no-second-eu-referendum-if-theresa-may-becomes-pm

[44] "Theresa May's conference speech in full", *The Telegraph*, 5 October 2016, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/05/theresa-mays-conference-speech-in-full/

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

The government's approach was accompanied by a growing polarization in political discourses that would continue throughout and beyond May's tenure. The public mood nationally has been tense, further stoked by political leaders and the media who exacerbated the divisions. And, as language has become more extreme, it has become harder to overcome the divisions between the different sides. In seeking an election and several votes in Parliament on a Brexit deal, Theresa May and the Tory government depicted opposition parties as 'game playing', and against the 'will of the people'. The discourses pitched Parliament against the people.

Similarly, as in other cases, Theresa May's approach was largely dependent on the media to mediate and communicate her message. Domestically, the media exacerbated the dichotomy of 'us' versus 'them' and 'Leave' versus 'Remain'. When three High Court Judges determined some of the government's actions were unconstitutional, the Daily Mail led with the heading 'Enemies of the People'[47] and, in public discourses, people were referring to those opposed to leaving as 'traitors'.

Over this period, those who wanted to remain in Europe continued to campaign against the government's approach and held a series of marches and campaigns to share their voices and their grievances with the process. Calls to stop Brexit also became stronger as the government's position became more entrenched. The government, and the pro-leave media, did little to explain the compromises involved in the negotiations. In the UK public discourses, at least, few attempts were visible of the British government trying to understand and communicate the negotiating position of the European Union or the manifold factors that simultaneously motivated and constrained their hand. In contrast, the UK made some efforts in Europe to communicate the UK's continued interest in relations with the region. In an article in the French newspaper Le Figaro in February 2017, for example, Theresa May spoke of the UK's shared interests and values with their neighbors and their desire to continue these relations.[48]

Nevertheless, through their actions in relations with their European counterparts, the British government displayed arrogance regarding the strength of the UK's position within the union. Theresa May triggered Article 50, beginning the two-year process of withdrawal, in March 2017, before a negotiating strategy had been decided. It left the UK weaker, and failed to fully understand the situation or the interests, needs and perspectives of their counterparts. It was one country, negotiating with a collection of 27 other member states, who offered a unified stance. In this regard, the case further illustrates a disconnect between the British and their European counterparts. There was capital to be

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[47] James Slack, "Enemies of the people: Fury over 'out of touch' judges who have 'declared war on democracy' by defying 17.4m Brexit voters and who could trigger constitutional crisis", *Daily Mail*, 3 November 2016, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3903436/Enemies-people-Fury-touch-judges-defied-17-4m-Brexit-voters-trigger-constitutional-crisis.html

[48] PM Theresa May, 'We have voted to leave the EU, but not Europe: article by Theresa' May, 17 February 2017, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/we-have-voted-to-leave-the-eu-but-not-europe-article-by-theresa-may

gained by media outlets looking to create an 'other' of Europe. Indeed, certain prominent sections of the British media regularly portrayed Europe as difficult, punishing Britain for wanting to leave.

Strikingly, given the scale of the issue, Prime Minister Theresa May did little to win over members of opposition parties. It was not until January 2019, upon winning a confidence vote that had been moved against her, that she indicated she would consult with the leaders of other parties on the best way forward. This is not only about empathy, and a willingness to understand the perspectives and interests of other political points of view. It is also about a failure to compromise and to agree to concessions for the widest possible good.

A perceived absence of empathy is both a matter of personal style, and a choice not to engage in the process of understanding the perspectives of other. This case further reveals the problem of performative empathy and the sincerity of that performance. The rhetoric at the start of her tenure of a country for all, that understood the challenges people faced, and where people could live to their potential, yet that was matched by a discourse that shut out alternative visions of Britain and that denied the experiences of those who saw Britain's future with Europe. If used merely as a rhetorical device to convey care and understanding without the alignment of actions, empathy becomes performative and hollow.

This case is a fascinating example of the implications of a lack of empathy. The post-referendum discourses could have been very different. The Prime Minister could have sought a more conciliatory middle ground that united both sides of the divide and used empathetic understanding to find ways to unify them to seek a more cooperative solution. Instead, despite the narrow margin of the vote, the public discourses did little to speak to those who had voted to remain within the European Union, and those who were undecided on the right course of action. With Brexit now in progress under the leadership of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the division remains and continues, becoming harder to overcome as each side remains firmly fixed in their position.

5. Case Study Three: New Zealand's Response to Terrorism

On 15 March 2019, in Christchurch, New Zealand, a man walked into two mosques during Friday prayers and opened fire, killing 51 and injuring over 40 worshippers. It was the country's deadliest mass shooting. Although acting alone, the attacker had been inspired by far-right ideas and was active on online forums where he detailed his plans. Before driving to the mosques, he had posted a document online with his intentions, and then livestreamed his attack via social media, resulting in it going viral and raising critical questions regarding the responsibilities of online platforms.[49] The response of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and her public engagement and communication

[49] Graham Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age", *CTC Sentinel*, Vol 12, Issue 6, July 2019, https://ctc.usma.edu/christchurch-attacks-livestream-terror-viral-video-age/

with the survivors, people of New Zealand, and the international community, provides an interesting and valuable final case study. It offers a comparative example of how empathy can be harnessed as a strength by leaders.

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, Jacinda Ardern appeared publicly to share her grief and set out the country's response to terrorism. Dressed in black, visibly upset, and with her hair covered in respect for the Muslim community, she visited Christchurch and consoled the families of the victims. In the days that followed, she attended events with the survivors, attended the local Cashmere High school that had lost two students in the attacks, and met with the emergency services. She spoke of the importance of community, praised the bravery of those who had sought to help the injured, and emphasized the shared values that united them. She promised to pay the funeral costs of the victims, and pledged to act on gun ownership. Her actions and priorities signaled that she was supporting the people who had survived, and those who were a part of the community most affected by the events. In so doing, she gave a human face to leadership. This approach and leadership were praised internationally, with an emphasis on the empathy she demonstrated.[50]

In Parliament on March 19th, four days after the tragedy, politicians of all parties came together to express their grief and support for the victims and show solidarity with the Muslim community. Initiating the proceedings on this day, the Speaker expressed that "as part of our expression of sorrow and of our hope" prayers will be recited in Arabic and in Te Reo (the language of the Maori peoples) with English translations.[51] The Prime Minister's tone of unity had set an example for the country.

In delivering her statement and detailing the nature of the attack, Ardern reiterated and made clear her commitment that she would never mention the perpetrator by name, instead focusing on the strength of the community and its values. This refusal to name the terrorist and give him notoriety was seen as a 'policy of disregard'.[52] It is significant in contrast with how many other countries had dealt with attacks, particularly since 9/11, where enhanced security, fear and anger had typified the response, and contributed to further securitizing the debate. Masha Gessen in the New Yorker noted that by refusing to acknowledge who had committed acts of cowardice in Christchurch, Ardern avoided the dichotomy of 'us and them' that dehumanizes the 'other', a notion that many

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[50] See Ann Fifield, "New Zealand's prime minister receives worldwide praise for her response to the mosque shootings", *The Washington Post*, 18 March 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/03/18/new-zealands-prime-minister-wins-worldwide-praise-her-response-mosque-shootings/

[51] Hansard Debates, 'New Zealand Parliament, Ministerial Statements: Mosque Terror Attacks – Christchurch', 19 March 2019 - Volume 737, https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/hansard-debates/rhr/combined/HansD_20190319_20190319

[52] Masha Gessen, "Jacinda Ardern has rewritten the script for how a nation grieves after a terrorist attack", *The New Yorker*, 22 March 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/jacinda-ardern-has-rewritten-the-script-for-how-a-nation-grieves-after-a-terrorist-attack

other world leaders had previously evoked.[53] In so doing, the emphasis was on community, cohesion, and the potential for optimism, even in the darkest of days.

These themes were reiterated at the memorial for the victims, two weeks later, where she spoke of the strength of the community, and of the stories of those who had survived. Proclaiming "these stories… now form part of our collective memories. They will remain with us forever. They are us,"[54] she connected their traumatic experiences to the national identity, contributed to a shared ownership of the tragedy. Yet she also used the occasion to reflect on how to move beyond the tragedy to create a better society: "A place that is diverse, that is welcoming, that is kind and compassionate. Those values represent the very best of us."[55] She called for solidarity from the international community in transforming the "vicious cycle of extremism breeding extremism."[56]

This approach reflects a certain foresight. In the wake of attacks there is often a spike in violence against certain groups. Within online communities, such as 8chan, and social media sites such as Facebook, lone-wolf terrorist actors can inspire others to commit similar acts of violence. Indeed, the attacks in New Zealand may have inspired a mass shooting at a Synagogue in San Diego, California, on 27 April 2019.[57] Efforts by Jacinda Ardern to avoid the securitization of language, and avoid amplifying the threat, were therefore aimed at mediating and reducing further tensions.

Expressions of empathy, and similarly compassion, often need to be met with actions to be credible. As outlined in the previous case where performative empathy was used by Theresa May without accompanying effort to engage with and understand others. Ardern's words and deeds aligned, and her approach was not just about understanding, but about concerted action: about hearing and witnessing the harm, and seeking to alleviate and transform it. Such action reinforced the sincerity of her communications.

In the weeks and months after the attack, her compassion for the victims' families and the wider community was matched by a firmness in resolve to address some of the underlying problems of online radicalization, reduce access to firearms and make clear her government's commitment to support the community. Empathy and emotions were visible during her speech to the New

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[53] Ibid

[54] PM Jacinda Ardern, "Jacinda Ardern's speech at Christchurch memorial – full transcript", *The Guardian*, 28 March 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/29/jacinda-arderns-speech-at-christchurch-memorial-full-transcript

[55] Ibid

[56] Ibid

[57] Gianluca Mezzofiore and Paul P. Murphy, "The New Zealand mosques attack appeared to inspire California synagogue suspect", *CNN*, 29 April 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/29/us/california-synagogue-8chan-new-zealand-mosque/index.html

Zealand parliament to support new gun laws where she spoke of the people directly affected by the violence.[58] A week after the attacks, and measures were already underway to address gun ownership. Since then a gun buyback scheme introduced after the attacks, has led to over 32,000 weapons being handed in.[59] Recognition of the insecurity caused by terrorism has led to trials of armed police in three areas of the country over residual security concerns after the attacks.[60]

At an international level, and alongside French President Emmanuel Macron, Jacinda Ardern has been at the forefront of a new international initiative known as the Christchurch Call, to limit and regular online extremism, and call on social media companies to do more to counter the proliferation of hate and extremist content online.[61] This decisive action and commitment to rectify problems online that facilitate terrorism give meaning to her statements that she cared and wanted it to never be repeated.

The media played an important role in this case. It served to disseminate her message, and to galvanize action across New Zealand and beyond. Expressions of solidarity came in from around the world. However, simultaneously, parts of the media also worked to undermine the tone she had set. An analysis by members of the International Hate Observatory project at MIT Media Lab found that some media outlets not only published the name of the perpetrator, but also made his manifesto and viewpoints available in their reporting.[62]

Expressions of empathy are not universal tonics, nor should they be seen as such. However, this case shows that empathy can be harnessed to convey support, understanding, and compassion at a time of tragedy. It is connected to ideas of respect and dignity, acknowledging people and their pain, their experiences, and their fears. Moreover, this case reveals the power of politicians showing their humanity, helping to connect them with the communities and people they serve at a time of trauma. Coupled with sincere actions, and resolve, it moves beyond being merely a rhetorical device to try to connect with people through communications but serves as a sign of strength, avoiding the further securitization of society, and reducing tensions between communities.

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[58] "New Zealand PM Jacinda Ardern gives emotional gun law speech", *BBC News*, 10 Apr 2019 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-asia-47880283/new-zealand-pm-jacinda-ardern-gives-emotional-gun-law-speech

[59] Asher Stockler, "More than 32,000 Prohibited Guns Turned In, As New Zealand Approaches Buyback Deadline", *Newsweek*, 2 Nov 2019, https://www.newsweek.com/new-zealand-buyback-program-guns-1469405

[60] Praveen Menon, "New Zealand plans armed police patrols after Christchurch massacre", *Reuters,* 17 Oct 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-newzealand-shooting-security/new-zealand-plans-armed-police-patrols-after-christchurch-massacre-idUSKBN1WX00D

[61] The Christchurch Call, https://www.christchurchcall.com

[62] Jason Baumgartner, Fernando Bermejo, Emily Ndulue, Ethan Zuckerman and Joan Donovan, "What we learned from analyzing thousands of stories on the Christchurch shooting", *Columbia Journalism Review*, 26 March 2019 https://www.cjr.org/analysis/christchurch-shooting-media-coverage.php

6. Conclusion: Empathy as a Variable Asset

Empathy is a variable asset in public communications. Although it can be a source of connection and understanding to help bridge divides and attempt to overcome trauma, its utility is dependent on broader factors including the context, the personalities and the receptivity of the public to its expression.

These three case studies reveal different dimensions of empathy, or hint at the implications of its absence. In Chancellor Angela Merkel's approach to the refugee crisis, empathy came from a sense of moral imperative to help those in need. Yet the case also reveals how such expressions can encounter resistance from political, social, and security factors, and underlines how empathy can be shaped and mediated by other elements. In contrast, the Brexit negotiations reveal the implications of empathy's absence in exacerbating social divisions and domestic tensions. Prime Minister Theresa May's failure to reach out to and engage with those who saw the result as detrimental to the country contributed to the entrenchment of views at a time when the country needed to be brought together and a common, shared solution sought. Such divisions remain difficult to overcome as the polarization of debate, and increasingly extreme tone of language make it harder for either side to listen, or seek consensus. On the most positive side, the case of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern offers an example of empathy as a strength and an asset in reuniting a country after trauma and tragedy. It gave voice to shared feelings and communal grief, while acknowledging the values and strengths of the community. It also points to the importance in communicative terms, of demonstrating respect, and giving dignity to the victims and individuals affected by the attacks.

These cases reveal that empathy is a critical component in a government's ability to connect with, speak to, and understand their audiences. But empathy alone is no panacea. As these examples demonstrate, empathy is an iterative process. It involves reflecting on how the actions of government - future, past and present - might have an impact on people, and how the public might perceive them. Governments should therefore be ready and willing to engage in self-reflection and understand shortcomings or failures that can be addressed.

What is significant in the expressions of political leaders, is they often set the tone for wider society. Through communicating empathy, they are able to foster inclusion, expand the parameters of debates, and acknowledge diverse perspectives and experiences. The danger is, however, that the value of empathetic expressions and communications is turned into a formula. Although empathy can be instrumentalized, and used intentionally to foster connections and win support, its ability to do so effectively will be, in part, dependent on whether its use is matched by commensurate efforts. If empathy's potential to connect with, and conveying respect and recognition for others, is reduced to just empty words without the sentiment, sincerity, and the commensurate actions behind it, it risks being rendered performative and meaningless. This undermines its benefit and speaks to a lack of integrity at a political level.

At times, empathy and compassion overlap. Angela Merkel's response to refugees is not only about understanding their struggle and their plight, it is motivated by a sense that something should be done to alleviate it. Similarly, Jacinda Ardern's outreach to the Muslim community that suffered from the Christchurch attack is a visible demonstration of compassion. Delineating and understanding the subtle differences and the interaction of these concepts is key. Important in both of these cases is that empathy appears sincere and genuinely motivated and comes from leaders perceived as credible and trustworthy. The role of empathy changes with the crisis. In these three cases, each crisis or situation demanded diverse responses, both from leadership and from society, which point to how empathy is part of a broader toolbox of connecting policy with the public.

Although these three cases highlighting the leadership of three powerful women, empathy's gendered connotations are misleading. It is a universal trait, and reveals a different and valuable strength: the ability to hold space for others and see their shared humanity. Despite empathy being often maligned as a weakness if strength is defined as toughness, what is so interesting in the case of Jacinda Ardern, is that the traits of empathy and compassion were connected to perceptions of effective and strong leadership. Hers was not soft or fluffy empathy, it was matched by strength, resolve, action, and a sense of purpose. It is indicative of a recent shift in how empathy is seen as an asset within leadership.

This paper has been a brief exploration of three big cases through the lens of empathy. Yet they all deserve far greater attention. The question of empathy for refugees and the political, ethical and moral dimensions of the debate require more analysis, especially as the longer-term implications of Angela Merkel's policy become apparent. The empathy expressed by Jacinda Ardern after Christchurch points to a broader avenue of research on changing the narrative after terrorist attacks to focus on cohesion, community, and collective identity over security and threat-based narrative responses. While rhetoric has to be matched by action to enhance security, it speaks to the importance of cultivating a sense of resilience and community. In a case as big as the Brexit debate, there is far more that could be written and examined, including a longer-term view exploring the converse side of how Remain supporters did not fully understand the desires and interests of those who wished to Leave. And how politics and politicians before the European referendum had not fully understood the challenges and sense of marginalization that significant sections of the country experienced. It is a field with rich potential.

In spite of these manifold applications, empathy can help in the creation of more citizen-centric government. By seeking to understand the experiences, perspectives, interests and feelings of others, and by showing willingness to communicate and articulate the attempt at understanding, empathy can provide valuable insights into how diverse sections of the population, or foreign populations, perceive and respond to policy-decisions. In turn, more nuanced and credible communications that take account of such understanding

can help leaders, politicians and diplomats improve how they convey their decision-making choices, and connect more effectively with their audiences. It may take time to fully understand and inculcate its benefits and its utility into political life, especially in a climate that values displays of strength and toughness as traditionally conceived. However, as more people seek to be heard and understood within society, and more pluralistic voices reveal the diverse experiences of citizens, empathy offers a valuable, even if variable, asset for citizen-centric government.

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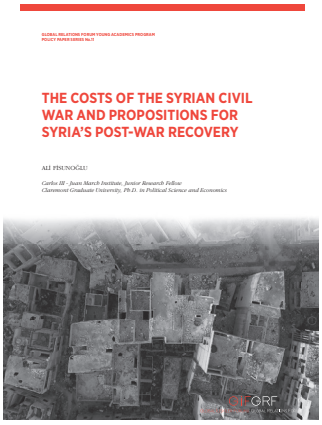

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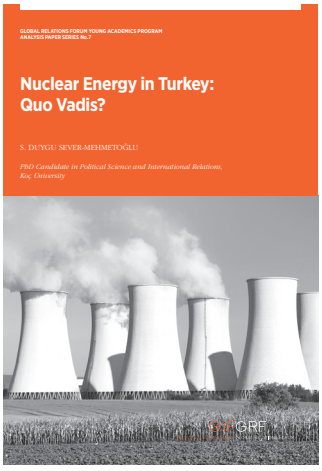

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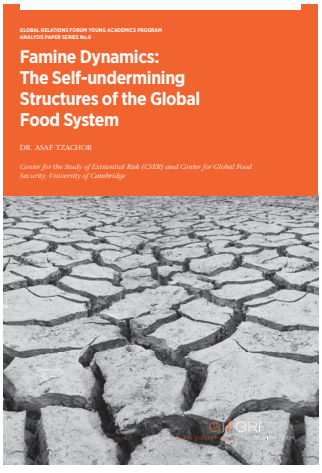

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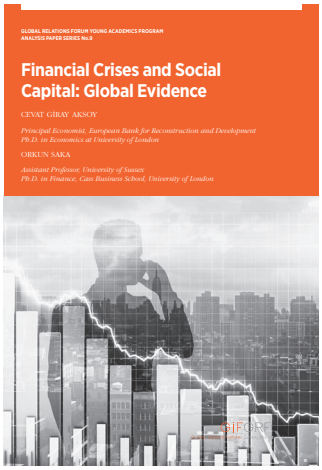

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