

HYBRID MEDIA EVENTS

The *Charlie Hebdo* Attacks and the
Global Circulation of Terrorist Violence

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Contents

List of Figures	ix
List of Tables	xi
List of Photographs	xiii
About the Authors	xv
Preface	xvii
Chapter 1 What Are Hybrid Media Events of Terrorist Violence?	1
1.1. Why Do the <i>Charlie Hebdo</i> Attacks Matter?	1
1.2. Towards Interdisciplinary Analysis of Media and Terrorism	4
1.2.1. Hybrid	5
1.2.2. Media Event	9
1.3. On the Hybridization of Media Events	13
1.4. The Five Elements of Hybrid Media Events	16
1.4.1. Actors	17
1.4.2. Affordance	18
1.4.3. Attention	19
1.4.4. Affect	20
1.4.5. Acceleration	20
1.5. Analysing Hybrid Media Events on Twitter and Beyond	21
1.5.1. Three Empirical Phases	23
1.6. Structure of the Book	26
Chapter 2 Creating a Media Event	29
2.1. Many Beginnings	29
2.2. <i>Charlie Hebdo</i> — A ‘Bête et Méchant’ Newspaper	30
2.3. Remediation in Digital Media — Shootings Go Viral	35
2.4. Mythologization of the Victims	37
2.4.1. News Coverage and Global Mourning	37
2.4.2. The Manhunt Continues	40
2.4.3. Who Counts as a Victim?	41

2.5.	Condensation of Meaning(s)	43
2.5.1.	The World Political Elites Demonstrate Solidarity	43
2.5.2.	Counter-narratives Challenge the Main Storyline	45
2.5.3.	'Huge Show of Solidarity in Paris against Terrorism'	49
2.6.	After the 'Je Suis Charlie' Momentum	51
Chapter 3	Actors and Affordances	57
3.1.	Accounts and Hashtags	59
3.2.	The Anatomy of the <i>Charlie Hebdo</i> Attacks on Twitter	60
3.2.1.	Actors	63
3.2.2.	Dynamics	65
3.3.	Tracing #JeSuisKouachi: Affordances of Hashtags	72
3.4.	Hybrid Media Events Amplify Themselves	75
Chapter 4	Attention	77
4.1.	Ahmed Merabet's Death Goes Viral	77
4.2.	The Media Makes Merabet an Ideal Victim	80
4.3.	Controversy over the Video	81
4.4.	'Je Suis Ahmed' as a Symbol of Public Solidarity	83
4.5.	Politicizing the Muslim Body	86
4.6.	Accumulation and Circulation of Attention	87
Chapter 5	Affect	89
5.1.	Rituals Intensify the Sense of Solidarity in Media	91
5.2.	'Je Suis Charlie' in Social Media	95
5.3.	Funerals	96
5.4.	Narratives Opposed to 'Je Suis Charlie' Solidarity	99
5.5.	Circulation of Fear Addresses Diverse Audiences	102
5.6.	Hybridization and Ritual Practices	104
Chapter 6	Liveness and Acceleration of Circulation	107
6.1.	Hostage Situation in Dammartin-en-Goële	108
6.2.	The Kosher Market Siege	113
6.2.1.	Live Broadcasting Puts Hostages in Danger	116
6.3.	The Aftermath	116
6.4.	Acceleration of Circulation in a Hybrid Media Event	119

Chapter 7	<i>Charlie Hebdo</i> and the Circulation of Terrorist Violence in a Hybrid Media Event	123
7.1.	Circulation Connects Key Elements	126
7.2.	Towards a Discussion of the Social and Ethical Dimensions of Hybrid Media Events	127
7.3.	What Can Be Done?	130
	References	135
	Index	149

List of Figures

Chapter 2

Figure 2.1. Number of Hashtags #JeSuisCharlie, #JeNeSuisPasCharlie and #JeSuisAhmed on Twitter during the First 10 Days after the Attacks	39
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Chapter 3

Figure 3.1. Top 20 Most Used Hashtags in Twitter Messages Posted on the <i>Charlie Hebdo</i> Attacks	62
Figure 3.2. Scatter Plot of the Relationship between Number of Twitter Users' Followers and the Numbers of Retweets They Received	67
Figure 3.3. Network Visualization of the Most Authoritative Actors in the Twitter Data	69

List of Tables

Chapter 3

Table 3.1.	Top 20 Users with the Largest Number of Retweets	64
Table 3.2.	How Twitter Actors Mention Twitter in Their Tweets	71

List of Photographs

Chapter 2

Place de la République, 11 January. Image by Olivier Ortelpa,
Creative Commons Flickr 50

Chapter 4

Ahmed Merabet on News Covers. 79

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Preface

This book has many beginnings, but one stands out above all others: the attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* offices in Paris on 7 January 2015. When news about the shootings began to pour into our social media feeds, we decided straightaway to start compiling research data. We followed the messaging on Twitter and Facebook, we tracked Finnish and international news sources and we witnessed the appearance of the #JeSuisCharlie hashtag.

Charlie Hebdo was not a chance selection, nor were we interested in the event simply because of the huge attention it attracted. We had already been researching attention for many years, exploring the creation and circulation of attention in a changed media environment: we wanted to understand how things, notions, ideologies and values come into being and how they exercise an impact and influence on the media through circulation. We had also studied the ways in which different actors participate in and the roles they had in these circulation processes. Furthermore, we shared an interest in the different ways that religion is thematized in the media. For years, Johanna had followed and studied violent media events, while Katja's research interest was focused on the global media circulation of different phenomena. Most of this work was grounded in an ethnographic approach, but in this case we wanted to expand and diversify our methodological toolkit. Our ambitious plan, initially, was to collect all the data from all possible sources, to study circulation patterns from one platform to another and to develop methods that combine an ethnographic approach with computational methods. However, we had neither the funding nor the resources to do this.

We, therefore, decided we should assemble a team, start to write funding applications and narrow our perspective. We were joined by Jukka Huhtamäki from Tampere University of Technology, who we had worked with before at the Tampere Research Centre for Journalism, Media and Communication COMET; and by Minttu Tikka, with whom Johanna had collaborated for many years. Throughout the project all of us on the team have shared a common commitment to better understand the changes happening in the media environment and the relationship between media and society in general — and to develop the tools and

research methods we need to achieve this understanding. This team effort is still ongoing.

Thankfully the funding we needed came very quickly. First, we secured a grant from the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation in 2015, mainly for our project ‘Je suis Charlie — The symbolic battle and struggle over attention’, which was focused on studying the media attention surrounding the attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* newspaper. Later, in 2017, the Academy of Finland awarded us funding for a project dealing with the relationship between the media and terrorism more generally. This ongoing project is called ‘Hybrid Terrorizing: Developing a New Model for the Study of Global Media Events of Terrorist Violence (HYTE)’.¹

However, even though we had the funding in place, it was not until six months after the events in Paris that we could start compiling the research data. As it turned out, data collection and data administration became a long-drawn-out rigmarole that went on for almost three years. Once we get the chance, we will report on this in greater detail. Based on what we have heard, colleagues in other countries seem to have very similar problems when it comes to accessing and administering large datasets. The problem is particularly difficult in cases where we have to rely for data on commercial service providers — which we do in order to gain access to social media datasets.

Because we had problems gaining access to historical data and because the volume of data was so huge, we chose to concentrate on messages circulating in Twitter. The dataset was obtained from a company called Pulsar, which specializes in mining and collecting data from different social media platforms. The decision to use Twitter data proved to be a good one, in that Twitter is very much the epitome of the hybrid media environment: it has large amounts of circulating data that are produced in different ways and organized by hashtags. Our decision was driven by practical considerations, even though we were aware that Twitter attracts disproportionate research attention compared to its user numbers. The reason for this lies in Twitter’s technological design, which allows for easy data collection and data transfer in different formats. As well as taking advantage of these technological features, we have collected supplementary data from international online news providers, and to a minor extent from Facebook and YouTube.

The idea for this book was born in 2016, shortly after we had hosted the Tampere ‘Workshop on Media, Event and Social Theory —

¹Grants number 308850 (Valaskivi) and 308854 (Sumiala).

Transnational Challenges for Analysis’. Feedback from our first project’s advisory board and inspiring dialogue with the invited workshop speakers made us realize that we had tapped into a subject that might well have the makings of a book. We wish to thank the members of the advisory board of ‘Je suis Charlie — The symbolic battle and struggle over attention’: Marwan Kraidy, Gawan Titley, Tuomas Martikainen, Anna Roosvall and Farida Vis for inspiring discussions, feedback and support. In addition, we wish to thank the other workshop speakers: Sabina Mihelj, Andreas Hepp, Peter Hervik, Chris Rojek, Anu Kantola, Risto Kunelius and Nico Carpentier. Nick Couldry had to cancel his attendance at the workshop, but he has always been a constant source of support and help. We’d also like to thank other colleagues who have commented on our work at several conferences, including the members of the ECREA temporary working group on media and religion round-table discussion ‘Media, Religion and Conflict — Contemporary European Perspectives’ in Prague in 2016.

Our thanks also go to Media and Communication Studies at the University of Helsinki; the Faculty of Communication Sciences at the University of Tampere and its predecessors; the Tampere Research Centre for Journalism, Media and Communication COMET; Tampere University of Technology; all our colleagues at these institutions for their support and inspiring discussions; the Nordic Network on Media and Religion and its annual retreat-like gatherings in Sigtuna, Sweden; and the Finnish Institute in Rome (Villa Lante), where Katja had the opportunity to concentrate on full-time writing in March 2017. Thanks also to David Kivinen, Anu Harju and Paula Kallio for their assistance in finalizing the manuscript. We are indebted to our editors at Emerald, Jen McCall and Rachel Ward, whose friendly support and encouragement got us through the final hectic stages of writing. And lastly and most importantly, we owe a special thanks to our family members for their patience and love — and for being there.

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