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Project

Je suis Charlie – The Symbolic Battle and Struggle of Attention

This project description introduces a project on Charlie Hebdo 2015 as a transnational and disruptive media event that consists of elements of mourning and grief as well as hatred and anger. The project has an interdisciplinary focus and brings together media studies, ethnography and computer science. The project is conducted at the School of Communication, Media and Theatre, University of Tampere, Finland. This description includes a short outline of the background, aims, theoretical framework, research methods and preliminary findings of the project.

On 7 January 2015, two terrorists attacked the Paris headquarters of Charlie Hebdo, a satirical weekly magazine. Twelve people were killed in the attack, including celebrated cartoonists and police officers that were trying to prevent the bloodshed. The shootings instantly exploded into a transnational media event. Newsrooms all over the world followed the developing situation, and new updates constantly appeared on Web sites, YouTube and news broadcasts. Social media sites were inundated with comments, links and images

connected to the event, and these were shared and commented on by both journalists and ordinary citizens. Amateur video material filmed in the streets of Paris showing masked gunmen shooting at the police also started to circulate rapidly.

The reality of the event, as presented by professional journalists and big media houses, was mixed with the reality of the memes and comments that citizens from different countries shared via social media. In addition, various strategic and spontaneous (both political and religious) interest groups made use of and competed over attention and circulated information about the events, with content aimed at different audiences.

This project investigates how this event was created, experienced and circulated by multiple media platforms and how it united and/or polarized differing types of imagined communities (of mourning, grief as well as hatred and anger) contributing to the event.¹

The Paris shootings were not pulled out of thin air, nor were they interpreted in a void. The attention that the event attracted was linked to European and even global societal development trajectories, which have in recent

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decades been characterized by a juxtaposition between the ‘Western’ and ‘Islamic’ worlds. The political tension between these two entities has increased since 9/11 (e.g., the conflict in Syria), as has the rise and spread of ISIS’s presence in the Islamic world. A heated public discussion has been taking place on the topic of multiculturalism, accompanied by questions concerning minority rights, individual freedom, discrimination and growing economic inequalities.² Thus, the Paris attacks and the reactions to the violent event need to be interpreted as part of more extensive and longer-term cultural and political tensions.

Theoretical framework

The Internet and Web-based media played a central, significant role in capturing and disseminating the events, thus transforming them into a global spectacle of violence and contested solidarities. Our theoretical analysis of the Paris attacks as a violent media event is based on a research tradition that has its roots in the 1990s, when Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz published their work titled *Media Events. The Live Broadcasting of History* (1992). The book gave rise to a vigorous scientific discussion on media as the centre stage of events in modern society. Dayan and Katz focused on exceptional public events, such as royal weddings, coronations and funerals, significant historical moments, like the landing of man on the moon, and the rewriting of political history, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Some researchers, such as Tamar Liebes,³ Douglas Kellner⁴ and Barbie Zelizer,⁵ have shifted the focus of research to unexpected, violent events and the role of media as a shaper of the meanings attached to these events. However, other researchers, such as media sociologist Nick Couldry,⁶ have criticized Dayan and Katz’s theory of a television-centred outlook, claiming that it views media events and community from a needlessly streamlined perspective and places too much emphasis on the ceremonial aspect.⁷ Our point of view draws on this critical research tradition to study today’s media events but expands it into

new methodological terrains and contexts, namely, digital ethnography on the Internet and social networking sites as a critical platform for advancing the analysis of transnational disruptive media events.⁸

Research aims

The project has three key aims: (1) develop the theoretical understanding of the workings of transnational disruptive media events that consist of elements of mourning and grief as well as hatred and anger, (2) perform an advanced methodological analysis of those events in new digital networks, with a particular focus on a new type of dialogue between qualitative digital ethnography and quantitative social network analysis, and (3) produce new empirical knowledge on the principles, logics and motivations that facilitate the circulation of symbols and direct the attention surrounding a particular media event, thus offering new analytical tools for the broader social and cultural discussion about media ethics and the issues of political and cultural responsibility and power in relation to transnational disruptive media events.

Method

Empirical material was collected by combining qualitative netnographic fieldwork⁹ with quantitative social network analysis.¹⁰ The quantitative network analysis included gathering a large quantity of media data by using search words such as ‘Je suis Charlie’, ‘Je ne suis pas Charlie’ and ‘Je suis Ahmed’. This material was drawn from all the digitalized information in the mainstream media and social media circulated in France, Great Britain, Finland and Turkey in French, English and Finnish, from 7 to 16 January 2015. Based on quantitative network analyses, the project illustrates different types of intensification of communication around certain symbols and contests around interpreting those symbols, and how those communicative networks communicated or did not communicate with each other during the course of events.

This analysis was complemented with netnographic fieldwork, using selected networks (based on a social network analysis). In the digital ethnographic fieldwork, the events were followed from 7 to 16 January by tracking and tracing the different Web sites, observing what kind of symbolic representations were circulated, which symbolic representations became a subject of open controversy, and among which groups. The research team participated in those groups as “lurkers”.

Findings

Our preliminary findings suggest that in today's world, disruptive transnational media events such as Charlie Hebdo may best be characterized as relatively fluid social intensifications that are mostly created in a complex network of Internet-based communication technologies.¹¹ The case of Charlie Hebdo as a disruptive transnational media event was comprised of elements of ceremonial mass media communication of public mourning and grief, also consisted of vernacular mass self-communication in which ordinary people participating in the media event used a variety of communicative tools to comment on the events in Paris. Some participants posted and circulated media material that communicated compassion for the victims (e.g. ‘Je suis Charlie’), others defended the perpetrators and shared messages of hatred and anger as they circulated images and slogans such as ‘Curse for Charlie Hebdo’.

The element of liveness (e.g., media event happening right now!) in Charlie Hebdo's case was intensified in real-time circulation of texts and images (such as ‘Je suis Charlie’ or ‘Je ne suis pas Charlie’) of and about the event in several locations simultaneously (e.g., Facebook Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, CNN World, Le Monde, etc.).

The level of connectivity between the ‘official’ and ‘viral’ narratives (contesting the ‘official’ narrative) of the event did vary greatly, depending on a given media context and its interpretive community. Hence, the concept of the ‘whole world’ watching Paris needs to be understood as an experience that was scattered to a multiplicity of screens and embedded in a variety of cultural, social, political and religious contexts. While people participated in Charlie Hebdo by circulating, sharing and posting images, symbols and texts, they were connected to it in different ways. That is, they used different forms of communication media to follow the event, associated with different and competing narratives (e.g. compassion or anger) circulating about the event, and they felt connected with different groups, identities and imagined communities involved in the event.

Consequently, a multiplicity of shared experiences was created while following and participating in the event. However, this ubiquity of a disruptive transnational media event does not, by any means, diminish its social and cultural power. On the contrary, we argue that today's transnational media events, such as Charlie Hebdo, can be perceived as more global, visible and omnipresent than ever before, and thus, they speak to larger audiences. Consequently, questions related to the ethics, politics of attention and power surrounding these events need to be addressed at several levels.

Publication plans

Contribution to a special journal issue on Charlie Hebdo (Media, War & Conflict)

Edited volume co-authored by Sumiala, Tikka & Valaskivi (2017): *Je suis Charlie – Re-thinking Disruptive Transnational Media Events* (Emerald)

About the project

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Project Team

Research Director: Docent Katja Valaskivi (University of Tampere) is the research director of Tampere Research Centre for Journalism, Media and Communication. She is a media scholar who has published widely in the issues of media and the nation, nation branding, social theory, innovationism, as well as Japanese media and popular culture.

Principal Investigator: PhD Johanna Sumiala (University of Tampere) is an adjunct professor at the Department of Social Research/Media and Communication Studies, University of Helsinki. She is an expert in the fields of media anthropology, virtual ethnography and visual culture. She has recently published articles on mediatized violence and ritualized (online) communication, and she is the author of the book *Media and Ritual: Death, Community and Everyday Life* (Routledge, 2012).

Researcher: Minttu Tikka (University of Tampere) is a PhD candidate at the Department of Social Research/Media and Communication Studies, University of Helsinki. She is an expert in virtual ethnography and the study of social networking sites. She has published issues of crisis and social media, YouTube and news and methods of studying Internet.

Researcher: Jukka Huhtamäki (Intelligent Information Systems Laboratory at Tampere University of Technology, TUT) is a co-founder of Innovation Ecosystems Network. He is specialized in developing methods for extracting, accessing and analyzing heterogeneous data for system-level insights on various kinds of networked phenomena.

Notes

1. Hepp, Andreas & Couldry, Nick (2010).
2. e.g., see Lentin & Titley (2011).
3. Liebes, Tamar (1998).
4. Kellner, Douglas (2003).
5. Zelizer, Barbie (1992; 2010).
6. Couldry, Nick (2003).
7. See also Hepp (2015) Hepp & Couldry (2010); Eide, Kunelius, & Phillips (2008).
8. cf. Hepp (2015)
9. e.g., Kozinets (2015)
10. e.g., see Boyd & Ellison (2007).
11. cf. Sumiala & Korpiola, 2016.

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