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<CH>#JeSuisCharlie, #JeNeSuisPasCharlie and ad hoc publics

<AU>Simon Dawes

<A>Introduction

The attack at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* on 7 January 2015 happened at about 11.30am local time. At 12.52pm, Joachim Roncin, a designer and journalist who lived in the neighbourhood, posted a tweet on his @joachimroncin Twitter profile featuring an image with the words 'JE SUIS CHARLIE' written in white and grey letters on a black background in a typography that called to mind that of the magazine's logo. By 22.50 his tweet had been favourited 500 times; by 8.33 the following morning, more than 1,000 times.

Meanwhile, from 12.59 onwards, just 7 minutes after Roncin's original tweet, the hashtag #JeSuisCharlie began to circulate – sometimes with, sometimes without the image. By 21.30, it was being tweeted 6,500 times a minute; in one day, the hashtag was used 3.4 million times; in less than a week it was used more than 5 million times. Both slogan and image were appropriated and transformed: 'JE SUIS – POLICIER, JUIF, MUSULMAN, CHRETIEN, ATHEE, FRANÇAIS, CITOYEN DU MONDE'. The morning after the attack, the front page of *Libération*, the French left-wing newspaper, declared simply 'NOUS SOMMES TOUS CHARLIE'. Roncin's image and adaptations of it were used as avatars on Facebook and Twitter, and, on the evening of the attack and during the republican march the following weekend, variations were chanted and displayed on banners. The rapidity with which the 'JE SUIS CHARLIE' slogan flowed over from social media onto the streets and into the mainstream media framing of the event elevated the status of the slogan to that of the emotive symbol of national unity (Badouard 2016).

Beneath the façade of unanimous solidarity with Charlie, however, discordant voices sought to make themselves heard to say that, although they also condemned the attacks, they were not Charlie. It took several days for traditional French media to even acknowledge this polyphony and question the reasons for it. The opposite was the case online, however, as the #JeNeSuisPasCharlie hashtag (and equivalents), as well as Facebook groups and blogposts, were heard instantaneously (Badouard 2016). Although the popularity of the #JeNeSuisPasCharlie hashtag was nowhere near as great as #JeSuisCharlie – being tweeted 'only' 74,000 times in the days following the attacks (Giglietto and Lee 2015) – its virality nevertheless also constituted it as a trending topic. When the mainstream media did eventually pick up on the phenomenon, it was to denounce 'apologies for terrorism', making little attempt to distinguish between those condemning and those celebrating the attacks through their diversion from the dominant frame. And when effort was made to give voice to those who were clearly condemning the violence but nevertheless saying that they were not

Charlie, it was to try to understand why so many (young) people did not ‘share republican values’ or ‘believe in free speech’.

The hostility towards (and perhaps genuine incomprehension of) alternative frames was echoed in elements of the French media’s reactions to open letters from left-wing academics condemning the hypocrisy of the republican march, and to the Anglo-Saxon media’s internal debates on whether or not to reprint images from *Charlie Hebdo*. The political and journalistic focus, for perhaps understandable reasons, has been to insist on ‘national unity’ in the face of recurrent acts of mass violence. But as well as the obvious risks of such a strategy being used to suppress any criticism of the government or security forces, or of the open-ended state of emergency and proposed surveillance measures, the insistence on national unity has also diverted attention away from sociological inquiry into the backgrounds of the assailants and debates on social inequality in France. In republican and laic France, generally, national unity is invoked by the mainstream media at the expense of recognising difference between ethnic communities within the French citizenry. In the particular case of the aftermath of the murder of the editors of *Charlie Hebdo*, the framing of national unity in terms of identification with a magazine that many people find offensive – and holding up the magazine as a symbol of free speech when many see it as synonymous with the stigmatisation of the Muslim community – ignores the feelings and opinions of a large minority of the population and promotes a highly selective interpretation of free speech.

While I have addressed elsewhere the differences between free speech and counter-speech, and between French- and English-language mainstream media framing of this event (Dawes 2015a, 2015b, 2015c), this chapter focuses on the viral and memetic spread of the #JeSuisCharlie and #JeNeSuisPasCharlie hashtags. Considering the extent to which use of the latter hashtag contributed to a subversion of the dominant media frame and an expression of the voice of a marginalised community, the chapter also discusses the extent to which these Twitter discussions can be considered in terms of the emotive and value-driven identity-building of ‘hashtag communities’, as well as their significance for public discourse and media participation. In the first part, I discuss the wider literature on the general emergence of such communities and the role of social media in their formation. In the second, I turn to recent analyses of the Twitter data that has been collated post-Charlie.

<A>Hashtags, hashtag communities and ad hoc publics

In the days and weeks after the shootings at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, both #JeSuisCharlie and #JeNeSuisPasCharlie hashtags constituted trending topics, which is to say that they were discussions on Twitter that were simultaneously dense (lots of tweets) and viral (rapidly propagating) (Badouard 2016). As well as going viral, however, they were also memetic. Although internet virals and memes tended to be conflated in early social media research, a distinction has more recently been made between virals – which comprise a single cultural unit that propagates in many copies – and memes – which are better understood as collections of texts that function as part of remix and participatory culture (Shifman 2014). Although memes share common characteristics of content and form, they are circulated, imitated and/or transformed – sometimes parodied – via the internet by many users. Memes,

and in this case the diverse variations on the model of the original #JeSuisCharlie hashtag and typography, may subvert dominant media messages or have implications for identity-building, public discourse and commentary in a participatory media environment (Huntington 2013). As such, it is important to analyse memes as socio-cultural practices of creation and sharing that are embedded within and beyond digital culture (Shifman 2014).

Social media offer opportunities to people, opinions and feelings that are otherwise hardly visible in the public sphere – for instance, even though Islam is a recurrent theme in French media, Muslim voices are largely absent from such debates (Badouard 2016). The differences between the mainstream media framing of post-Charlie France, on the one hand, and the discussions and debate that were taking place on social media, on the other, prompt us to consider how dominant media frames privilege and legitimise certain perspectives, and marginalise and delegitimise others. They also prompt us to analyse the forms of political participation that are unique to social media, wherein opinion flows and collective actions are often made through informal and everyday discussions on a relatively more horizontal plain (ibid.). The ‘social’ part of social media refers to its distinction from ‘traditional’ media (Murthy 2011, 2012), and its capacity to facilitate social interaction, collaboration and the sharing of digital media. Social *networks* provide one way of disseminating information through social *media*. Within social networks – that is, web services that enable users to maintain a “public or semi-public profile within a bounded system” and through which they can “articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection” (boyd and Ellison 2007) – ‘ordinary’ people in ordinary social networks (as opposed to professional journalists, for example) can create user-generated ‘news’ (Murthy 2011, 2012) which they can share among their respective networks. One way of disseminating news through social media beyond one’s own social networks is to use hashtags.

There is no limit or classification system for Twitter hashtags. Like many Twitter innovations, they are a user-led innovation, developing as ad hoc ‘channels’ out of user requests for ‘groups’ based on interests or relationships (Bruns and Burgess 2011). Because discussions on Twitter are speedy and unstructured, hashtags are necessary for organisational purposes (Giglietto and Lee 2015). They are commonly used to keep up with media events and spectacles (#royalwedding), for which original tweets are more likely, and crises and emergency events (#tsunami), for which retweets and the inclusion of URLs are more common (ibid.). They are also used for contributions to contemporary political developments (#Brexit) and for commentary on popular television programmes (#GameofThrones), to coordinate emergency relief (#SandyHelp) and even to form ad hoc issue publics (#imwithcorbyn) (Bruns and Burgess 2011).

Twitter hashtags enable the indexing and collation of disparate tweets under the same topic, thus structuring discussion between isolated users on a particular subject (Badouard 2016). Prefixing short keywords with the hash symbol ‘#’ is a means of coordinating a distributed discussion between more or less large groups of users who are not connected through existing ‘follower’ networks. Specific hashtags are visible not only to the user’s own followers, but also to anyone else following the hashtag conversation (Bruns and Burgess 2011), and

retweets of material from the hashtag conversation, or the addition of the hashtag to other (re)tweets, are also visible to the conversation-follower network. As well as enabling diverse and subtle uses of information within a limited textual space (currently 140 characters per tweet), the hashtag thus constitutes the insertion of the text into a much greater *context* (Merzeau 2015). To say #JeNeSuisPasCharlie, therefore, is not just to declare as such to your own networks, but to participate in a much larger conversation with others to which you are not otherwise connected.

As shared conversation markers, hashtags are useful and even essential for organising and participating in such discussions and as part of such networks (Bruns 2008). But hashtags can be much more than simply conversation markers; they can also perform as discursive devices, facilitating the construction of self- and collective identity. Those who use the hashtag become not just participants in the hashtag conversation but also temporary members of the ‘hashtag community’, with the potential to act as a bridge between this community and their own follower network (Bruns and Burgess 2011). By rendering such conversations searchable, hashtagging enables users to connect with an impermanent community by bonding around evolving topics of interest (Zappavigna 2011) and collectively producing shared values and understandings (Rieder 2012).

They can even be useful for structuring *connective*, if not *collective*, action (Bennett and Segerber 2012). The logic of connective action applies increasingly to life in late-/reflexive-/liquid-/post-modern societies (Maffesoli 1996; Bauman 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), in which formal organisations are losing their grip on individuals, and group ties are being replaced by large-scale, fluid social networks (Castells 2000). These networks are particularly suited to the organisational processes of social media such as hashtag conversations, and their logic does not require strong organisational control or even the symbolic construction of a united ‘we’ (Bennett and Segerber 2012). While there is evidence of both homophily and polarisation in hashtag-based discussions (Giglietto and Lee 2015), a tendency has been noted for people to participate increasingly through large-scale personal expressions of identity, which can be accommodated on multiple layers within social media-based discussions (ibid.). The individual expressions of emotional response to the dominant and exclusionary frame of #JeSuisCharlie, for example, enabled the formation of a ‘weak tie’ network (Granovetter 1973) typical of individualised societies. Such networks are more inclusive than common group or ideological identifications, and less purposeful than a desire for public action or to contribute to a common good, which becomes an act of personal expression, recognition or self-validation (#JeNeSuisPasCharlie), accomplished by the sharing of ideas and feelings (justifications for not being Charlie) and the making of a connection (Bennett and Segerber 2012).

Rather than a fragmented society composed of isolated individuals, Bruns has argued that what we see emerging is more “a patchwork of overlapping public spheres centred around specific themes and communities”. This ‘network of issue publics’ replaces the conventional, normative and universal public sphere of the mass media age, which becomes just one among many other such public spheres (Bruns 2008: 69; Ratinaud and Smyrnaio 2015). Normally,

issue publics form only *post hoc*: some time after the fact. In contrast to many other such issue publics, however, Twitter hashtag communities can respond with great speed to emerging issues and events, and so issue publics can indeed form virtually *ad hoc* (Bruns and Burgess 2011). Although limited in time and dependent upon the engagement of a transient and ad hoc public (Ratinaud and Smyrnaiois 2015), civic engagement through digital media participation is nevertheless a symbolically empowering, legitimising mechanism, which can contribute to the agenda-building process of public issue formation (Bucy and Gregson 2001).

Such ad hoc publics can be said to have emerged in the moments following the January 2015 attacks on the editors of *Charlie Hebdo* (Ratinaud and Smyrnaiois 2015). Whereas an initial public (#JeSuisCharlie) developed around an emotive and reactionary defence of free speech, another public (#JeNeSuisPasCharlie) was formed in direct response to the first, and to the dominant media framing of the event in terms of an attack on universal free speech. Far from a rejection of free speech or other ‘republican’ values, this equally emotive and reactionary public developed around a debate on the limits of free speech, and, in part, gave expression to a sense of voicelessness for the Muslim community in the French public sphere.

<A>#JeSuisCharlie and #JeNeSuisPasCharlie

In contrast to the initial dismissiveness of some intellectuals towards the ‘semantic poverty’ and ‘political vacuity’ of the slogan ‘Je Suis Charlie’, it responded to, opposed and resisted the violence of the attacks through what was essentially an *emotive* expression (Merzeau 2015). More than just an expression of facile empathy in a victimised register, however, it was also a vector of *identity* construction that was simultaneously individual and collective (Badouard 2016).

The formulation had its precedents, of course, such as ‘We are all Khaled Said’ (the name of a Facebook page created as a memorial to a man brutally killed in police custody, and which helped incite the Egyptian Revolution of 2011). The popularity in France of the first name Charlie may also have helped encourage an emotional identification (Badouard 2016). According to Roncin himself, the word ‘Je’ offered a vehicle through which each individual could express themselves in terms of threats to freedom and tolerance (Giglietto and Lee 2015). Others have suggested that the ‘Je Suis’ element, tapping into a desire for self-reference, encouraged not only the viral sharing but also the memetic appropriation and modification of the slogan (Merzeau 2015).

Enabling users to express emotion in the first person has a transformative dimension on people’s perception of their world and of their influence and possibility of action within it (Badouard 2016). The use of the first person corresponds to the way in which opinion movements and collective actions are structured online, presenting individual and collective dimensions simultaneously. By spontaneously adopting the slogan, thousands of people gave body to a collectivity, a mark of recognition and a rallying cry, which developed from pathos to a collective ethos (Merzeau 2015).

In the traditional media, three distinct phases could clearly be discerned: live news for the first few days; national emotion during the weekend of the republican march; then debate the week after (Badouard 2016). On social media, some diagnosed similarly distinct phases, with initial interventions focused on the real-time description of unfolding events, before successive stages of indignation, homage, commentary, debate and polemic (Ratinaud and Smyrnaiois 2015), while others have emphasised how online debate tended to be mixed with news, and how emotional expression tended to be accompanied by the taking of a particular position, and all of this immediately after the attack. This may be partly explained by the tendency for different registers of expression – opinion, analysis and emotion – to be used simultaneously on social media (Badouard 2016).

Contrary to the dominant discourse of identification with Charlie, however, a counter-discourse developed that explicitly countered it (Giglietto and Lee 2015). Among the initial tweets were indeed those celebrating the attacks – #ch eh (‘well done’ in Arab) – and identifying themselves with the assailants rather than with the victims – #JeSuisKouachi, for instance, was used 49,000 times on the day of the attack alone, meaning that it too became a trending topic. However, the majority of these occurrences were not from those expressing a simple and literal message of support, but from those raising attention to the existence of the hashtag in order to condemn it, and by those from the far right manipulating it to strategically exaggerate the level of support for terrorism among the Muslim community in France (Badouard 2016). Of these tweets, a smaller (though significant) number – 3,700 – were identified by police as warranting investigation for ‘apology for terrorism’. Other slogans such as ‘#JeSuisAhmed’ (in reference to the police officer killed the same day as the editors) or controversial (and allegedly anti-Semitic) comedian Dieudonné’s ‘Je me sens comme charliecoulibaly’ (juxtaposing the controversial but socially acceptable satire of Charlie with the murder of Jewish people) were also singled out as potentially celebratory of the attacks, although their occurrence alone is perhaps more ambiguous than obviously offensive. Indeed, 76.5 per cent of those tweeting #JeSuisAhmed also mentioned #JeSuisCharlie (An et al. 2016). Similarly, conspiracy theories doubting the official versions of events were also popular, but a mix of seemingly sincere uses and those being apparently ironic makes it again difficult to use the number of tweets as evidence of widespread support for terrorism (Badouard 2016).

Distinct from such counter-discourses, however, were those that included variations of ‘Je Ne Suis Pas Charlie’ in their tweets, condemning the attacks but distancing themselves from the magazine, and often seeking to justify their reasons for doing so. Among these tweets, Badouard (2016) distinguishes between three main categories. First, and most numerous, were those from a broadly left-wing, critical position. Within this category were criticisms of the façade of national unity and the hypocrisy of those who had never read or supported the magazine before, of the hypocrisy of the march for the presence of controversial world leaders, of the threat of reactionary surveillance and security measures, as well as of the stigmatisation of Muslims in the name of free speech. Secondly, there was a mixture of conservative voices, ranging from Catholic to the far right, and sharing an ideological critique of the magazine for incarnating the 1968 generation of anarchist and libertarian criticisms of

traditionally French values, such as family and religion. And thirdly, and least numerous, were those self-identifying as Muslim and criticising Islamophobia in France, the exclusion of Muslims from the public sphere, the selective value of free speech and the double standards applied to Muslims and those criticising Muslims, as well as pleading for the recognition of the right to be offended. Badouard identifies a number of French and Belgian intellectuals (and foreign politicians) speaking on behalf of the Muslim community, but no French politicians.

Because of the inherent risk involved of being viewed as opposing accepted social norms and endorsing violence, many users accompanied the hashtag with a justification for doing so. While the uses of this hashtag also changed over time – from condolences with reservation about the mainstream frame, through resistance against that frame, to proposals for alternative frames (such as hate speech, Eurocentrism or Islamophobia) – they shared in common a desire to debate free speech and its contested limits (Giglietto and Lee 2015). On the ‘#JeNeSuisPasCharlie’ Facebook group (with over 40,000 members joining in the weeks following the attacks), Badouard notes that criticism of the magazine was rare and that most posts were about affirming a Muslim identity suffering from discrimination in the French public sphere, with the ‘JeSuisCharlie’ slogan seen as exclusionary and as an injunction. Badouard also notes the tone of victimisation, powerlessness and fatalism in the posts: that is, the complete absence of any call for mobilisation or collective action, and merely the intention to socialise around a shared experience, with the expression of mutual suffering constituting the cement that bound the community.

The members of the #JeNeSuisPasCharlie hashtag community did not speak with one voice or one call for action. Rather, participants in the conversation sought to express and formulate their shared reaction to the dominant frame. Some spoke as Muslims, others on behalf of Muslims, and others distanced themselves from the magazine for reasons that had nothing to do with communitarianism, let alone a rejection of republican values. The hashtag was not about support for terrorism or collective action; rather, its primary goal was for users to form, enhance and declare their self-identity, with the hashtag serving as a vehicle through which a collective identity could be developed by distinction (Giglietto and Lee 2015). It was a discursive device, rather than just a conversation marker, which facilitated the declaration of self-identity and the heterogeneous construction of the collective identities of the hashtag community. Further, through the performance of connective action, and the mixture of emotion and opinion, it helped form an ad hoc issue public around the broad theme of free speech and its limits immediately following the attack on the editors of *Charlie Hebdo*.

The opposition between the #JeSuisCharlie and #JeNeSuisPasCharlie hashtags is, therefore, mostly artificial, illustrating less a polarisation of public debate than the formation of different issue publics, between those arguing for free speech and those offended by the dominant editorial framing of the event (Badouard 2016; Merzeau 2015).

<A>Conclusion

Considering recent analyses of the Twitter data collated post-Charlie in light of the wider literature on ad hoc issue publics and hashtag communities goes some way to help us understand the causes and effects of the viral spread and memetic appropriation of the hashtags. Approaching the #JeSuisCharlie and #JeNeSuisPasCharlie hashtags as discursive devices as well as conversation markers, we can start to make sense of how the large-scale, emotional responses were significant for personal expression, recognition and self-validation, for the sharing of ideas and feelings, and for the collective production of shared values and understandings. And although both hashtags were used emotively and often in a victimised register, they were also significant for self- and collective-identity construction. The socialisation around this shared experience of victimisation demonstrated that users were not just participants in their respective hashtag conversations, but also temporary members of their ‘hashtag communities’.

It is also important to note that use of the #JeNeSuisPasCharlie hashtag was in most cases not associated with criticism of the magazine itself, but with criticism of the slogan ‘Je Suis Charlie’ and, therefore, with the dominant media framing of the event. That the event should have been framed in this way, and that the frame should have generated such a reaction, is symptomatic of both the republican and laic emphasis adopted by dominant French media, and the perception among some members of the public that this emphasis is exclusionary. Users’ justifications for using the hashtag helped to legitimate their dis-identification from Charlie, as well as to empower the community to give voice to that dis-identification and raise attention to their exclusion from the dominant public sphere.

The differences between the mainstream media frame and the debates on social media illustrate the privileging and legitimisation of solidarity with Charlie, and the concomitant marginalisation and de-legitimisation of dis-identification from Charlie. That some of the tweets may have been offensive, and that most were emotive, does nothing to reduce their significance for raising awareness of the stigmatisation of Muslims in the French media and their lack of voice in the public sphere, as well as of the vacuity of the presumption of national unity.

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