

MEDIATIZED CULTURAL ACTIVISM

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#JE SUIS CHARLIE:

NETWORKS, AFFECTS AND DISTRIBUTED AGENCY OF MEDIA ASSEMBLAGE

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KEYWORDS

Event, assemblage, fluid space, affect, network, digital ecosystem, meme, cultural activism

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the Je suis Charlie movement as an affective assemblage. It looks at digital network activism around the Charlie Hebdo shootings in the perspective of the Deleuzian concepts of assemblage and event. The essay argues that new participatory activism can be understood in two ways: as a (territorialised) 'assemblage' (after DeLanda, 2006) and as a constellation of 'things' into what Thrift (2007) calls a 'transient structure' (Salovaara 2014). Drawing from assemblage theory (Deleuze & Guattari 1996; DeLanda 2006), the essay explores concrete and virtual sides of a media assemblage as event spaces. Empirically, the analysis explores the assemblage, as well as related memes, hashtags and narratives around #Je suis Charlie activism.

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INTRODUCTION

On 7 January, two armed Muslim brothers entered the office of the satirical, left-wing publication *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris. They shot and killed eleven people and left twelve other staff members injured before leaving the building. Later, the brothers identified themselves as being a part of an Islamist terrorist group, Al-Qaeda's Yemen brand.

One hour after the incident, Joachim Rocin, the music journalist for *Stylist* magazine, posted a picture meme on Twitter consisting of three words in white and grey: 'Je suis Charlie'. These three words became a metaphor for organising news flows, opinions, affects and participatory events in the digital media ecosystem. It became a global slogan adopted by supporters of the freedom of expression. Metaphorically, it communicated the identification of a speaker or a supporter of the victims of the *Charlie Hebdo* event, and quickly extended to cover supporters of the freedom of expression. Within two days of the attack, the slogan had become one of the most popular and polarising hashtags in Twitter's history promoting cultural activism.¹

Traditionally, media studies and social sciences approach events through representational, sociological and organisational methods (Dayan and Katz, 1992; Kellner, 2003; Katz, 1980). These after-the-event analyses have focused on the roles of news organisations, media 'logics' and 'processes of mediatisation'. Such works have tended to treat the macro-level structural background, including the broader social and temporal contexts, as the causal determinants of events and their dissemination. 'Mediatised' events are often plotted and embedded into path-dependent linear timelines, contextualised to explain them, as preceding causes and effects are believed to predetermine the events themselves (see Kaiser, 2012). The spatiality of events, their networked structure, and the role of human and non-human actors re-assembling complex political subjectivities, remain largely unaddressed.

Recently, these approaches have been challenged by non-representational theories based on actor-network theory and the theory of assemblages. Their methodological starting point refers to a neo-materialist position that negates the 'linguisticity of experience', including a critical stance towards reductionist sociological, organisational and normative approaches. Instead, these approaches focus on mobile processes, fluid/relational spaces: questions around performativity, assemblages and practices engaging a more active understanding of spatiality. These approaches also work with the 'associate account' of the 'social', drawing from actor networks and their relational-material nature (Anderson and Harrison, 2010, p. 13).

This paper applies the methodological technique of reassembling an event by tracing the related concrete and incorporeal events within the networked 'ecology of things' around *#Je suis Charlie* activism (Latour, 2005, p. 16). The approach relates closely to Manuel DeLanda's (2006) theory assemblage and social complexity that stems from Deleuze's theory of assemblages (Deleuze, 2001; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

RE-ASSEMBLING AN EVENT

Gilles Deleuze (2005) has defined an event as a spontaneous, often negative occurrence that reveals our inability to envisage it, despite its determinate forces: affects and circumstances that have been in place for some time. The event is a rupture in a temporal flow that seems to stream forward until an (often unfortunate) event marks a break in its temporal texture. As Deleuze (2005, p. 172) ponders:

Why is every event a kind of plaque, war, wound or death? Is this simply to say that there are more unfortunate than fortunate events? With every event there is indeed the present moment of its actualization, the moment in which the event is embodied in a state of affairs, an individual or a person, the moment we designate by saying, ‘*here*, the moment has come’. (Deleuze, 2005, p. 172)

The Deleuzian event is by definition sudden, and it elevates affects and senses of surprise as it contains a trace of the unforeseen. Examples of such events could include the Indian Ocean tsunami, the discovery of black holes, the French revolution or the 9/11 attacks. These events go beyond their historical context and yet are curiously determined by the context’s various forces and affects. As Deleuze clarifies, ‘the event is not what occurs (an accident), it is rather inside what occurs, the purely expressed’. Hence the event’s three preceding determinations include that it has to be ‘understood, willed and presented in that what occurs’ (Deleuze, 2005, p. 170). After the event has taken place, the future and the past are evaluated only in respect to the definitive moment that forms the presence. However, the moment when the event takes place is decisive. ‘The temporal pasts and futures of events will be impersonal and pre-individual, as well as neutral, neither general nor particular.’ (Vallee, 2012, p. 62)

The main feature of the event is that it always produces something new, though the new appears in the context of the familiar. As Vallee (2005, p. 63) puts it, ‘the paradox of the event is that what is new can only emerge from within coordinates of repetitions of the familiar’. Hence, the event is a process and not something tangible. The central idea of the event is the transformation, the on-going process of life. The production of *new* is a discoverable event that disturbs the tedious similarity of the familiar and repetitive everydayness.

Deleuze’s *event* curiously shares the criteria of news. In the repetitive rhythm of the everyday, events become news items in the news agencies’ feeds, as they are the production of novelty. As news cannot capture processes, they gauge social reality through difference instead of repetition. Processes are, however, re-assembled with the help of connecting similar events from digital archives, linking and bridging them through the comparison and creating timelines through succession and geographical patterns. Hence, media re-assemble events into a temporal repetitive pattern and create connections by solidifying the formation of events as networks. These networks create their mash-up narratives by

drawing from human and non-human actors: the crowd, political discourses, historical narratives, visuals, civil society institutions, legacy media and citizen journalism. In these events, every element of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is also effectiveness proper to the grouping as such: an agency of assemblage. An assemblage thus not only has a distinctive history of formation, but a finite life span.

Events themselves can be both virtual and actual, as Kaiser (2012) notes. Hence, their virtual, incorporeal side is as real as it is intensive and affective as the concrete event as it refers yet actualised dimension of existence. Incorporeal events are virtual processes: they create the reality of a task to be performed or a problem to be solved (Deleuze, 1994, p. 209). Here the problem orientates, conditions and engenders solutions (Deleuze, 1994, p. 212). Virtual events are 'counter actualizations' (Deleuze, 1990, p. 150-152), which determine anew the conditions of the problem itself and 're-pattern a system' (Protevi, 2009, p. 13; Kaiser, 2012).

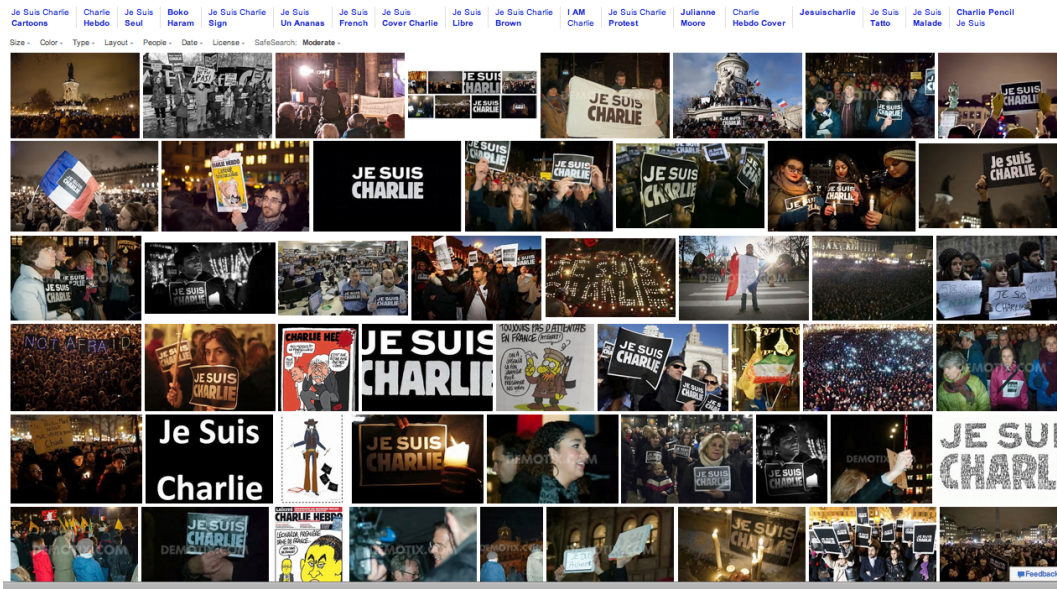
URBAN AND CORPOREAL EVENT SPACE

The actual, corporeal event, 'the Charlie Hebdo shootings', took place at 11.30 CET on 7 January 2015, at 10 Rue Nicolas-Appert, 11th arrondissement of Paris, France (48.85925°N 2.37025°E). As in any capital city, the cars, pedestrians, the flow of traffic and affects were multiple, as on any typical Wednesday morning.

In terms of environment, urban space is suitable for 'events', as it has affordances that are action possibilities latent in the environment and independent of the individual's ability to recognise them. Urban affordances are qualities of that specific environment, which also allow an individual or a group to perform an action. For example, modern urban space affords open spaces and broad boulevards for gatherings, rallies, demonstrations and terror attacks that receive maximum public attention in the densely populated milieus. Urban space is also highly connected with digital networks, as most news organisations and institutions of knowledge production are situated in capitals (see Salovaara, 2014; Salovaara, 2015 forthcoming)

Urban space also has affordances for displaying concerted public affects, such as supportive demonstrations, memorials, remembrances, tributes and vigils. Within twenty-four hours, *#Je suis Charlie* activism had created a geographical network that included ten cities in France, with another forty-seven global cities joining the support demonstrations and vigils creating their own participatory network consisting of *#Je suis Charlie* tributes and commemorations. The networked space of the demonstrations modified the concrete event topography based on the grid of urban events.

The virtually archived visuals are elements that become a part of the connective tissue of the participatory and affective network. They act as a digital body of the event's memory and the evidence of the connected action of solidarity and remembrance, carving a separate topography into the dynamic event space.



Picture 1: The Bing assemblage on *Je suis Charlie* demonstrations and vigils in January 2015.²

The third geographical and locational ‘network organiser’ was created by open source developers, and this *Je suis Charlie*’ application for smartphones was designed for freedom of speech supporters.

Unite for the freedom of speech on your Android with *Je suis Charlie*. *Je suis Charlie* is a free app for the Android which basically lets you tell the world that you are for the freedom of speech and marks your location in the world. By downloading the app, you are expressing your support and solidarity against any form of violence against the freedom of speech, whatever your country is, your beliefs, and opinions, you express your support through this app. Download the *Je suis Charlie* now and give your utmost support for the freedom of speech.³

This smart phone application enables users to use locational services and make their location known to other *Je suis Charlie* activists and connect with them. The application creates a map of the environment around the user, showing fellow activists in the vicinity.

INCORPOREAL EVENT SPACE

The *#Je suis Charlie* (media) assemblage has a thick and densely networked, digital aspect, where the counter-actualisations for the concrete spatial locations of corporeal activism are re-assembled. Two minutes after the actual event, after the first tweets had arrived, the BBC World News reported the shootings on their platform. Live streaming and updates followed, with Twitter feeds, on-the-ground inserts, uploaded YouTube videos and visuals, as well as international reports on the reactions of the global community.

Bennet (2014, p. 24) defines assemblages as *event spaces* that are ‘ad hoc’ groupings of diverse elements and heterogeneous materials. Assemblages have uneven topographies, because some of the network points at which the various actors, affects and bodies cross lines, are more heavily trafficked than others, and so network power is not distributed equally across its grid. These networked assemblages congeal into constellations through convergence and stratification, and their main characteristic is malleability as they expand.

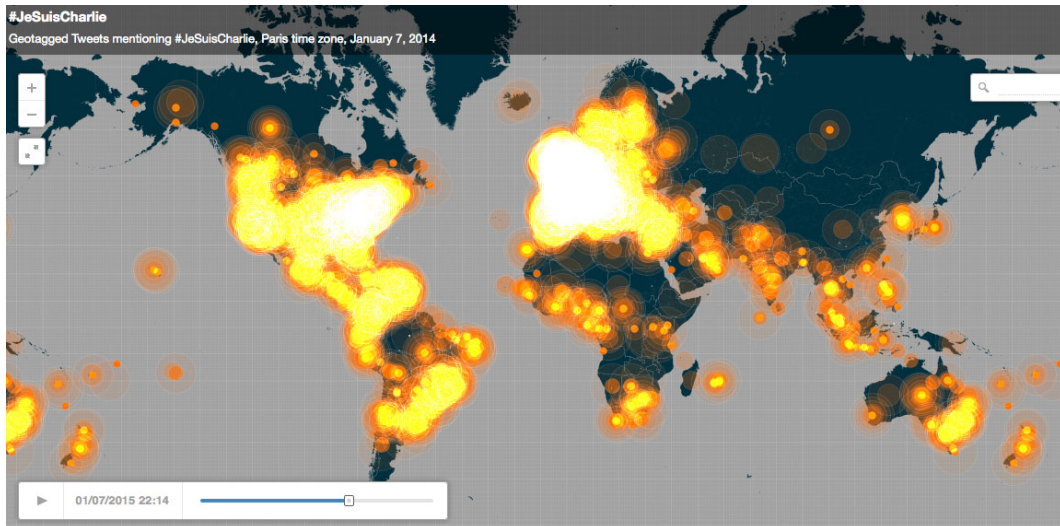
According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 386), these synergies are productive in the sense that they can gather ‘things’ into a singular context: forging new meanings and possibilities. The assemblage can also be seen ‘as a process of positioning multiple and heterogeneous elements in the service of *establishing a territory*’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 376-80). An assemblage is the mix of *contingency* and *organisations*. *Contingency* relates to occurrences and happenstances around the events, where organisations act as digital archives, dense nodes and network builders. In the assemblage, human and non-human actors connect with things, technologies, materials and networked flows of information (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Kruger, 2012).

The first crowdsourced site, the *Charlie Hebdo Shootings* wiki page, was created at 11:50 CET on 7 January 2015 by the wiki editor Dweller, i.e. about an hour after the shootings took place.⁴ After that, the wiki page was edited continuously during the following days and has been updated 4997 times in total by 766 voluntary editors. The page has been translated into 72 languages (including Japanese, Chinese and many minority languages). Thus, the wiki platform is a semantic space that is connected with various content from news organisations, social media ecosystems and crowdsources (memes, blogs, hashtags, updates, pictures and public statements).⁵ As such, with embedded hyperlinks, the platform is creating its own information network linking miscellaneous sources into a crowd-generated version of the event narrative and edited and modified by the produ(s)ers.

The Charlie Hebdo shootings were an unforeseen event, but at the same time it was curiously repetitive and familiar. In regards to path-dependence, the event was soon connected to the ‘anti-representational’ cartoon conflicts between political Islamism and European state secularism. The term ‘anti-representational’ refers here to the Islamic tradition of non-representational art in depicting sacred objects. This assemblage comprises human actors, events and discourses around democracy and freedom with a historical timeline⁶ of eight cartoonists who have been threatened or attacked due their activity as cartoonists. They include Kurt Westergaard in Denmark (2005), Ali Ferzat in Syria (2011), Ali Dilem (2001-) in Algeria, Lars Vilks in Sweden (2009-2014), Zunar (Zulkiflee Anwar Alhaque, 2010) in Malaysia, Prageeth Eknaligoda (2010-) in Sri Lanka, Bonil (Xavier Bonilla, 2014) in Ecuador, Musa Kart (2014) in Turkey and Asem Trivedi (2011) in India. This timeline became part of the assemblage and was later connected to the #Copenhagen shootings, extending its concrete geography with the new urban grid of the assemblage.

Around concrete urban spaces, the digital ecosystem acts as a myriad information network with its powerful and connective non-human actors. Specifically, search engines, in this case Google, are dominant network builders creating a dense digital grid of keywords within the heterogeneous information space. For the keywords ‘Charlie Hebdo’, the Google search agent comes up with 93,900,000 results in 0.26 seconds. Google’s algorithm called ‘Page Rank’ (after Larry Page, the algorithm developer) crawls billion pages in a second: organising the information architecture in different locations. Google searches⁷ are often the first access point into (media) assemblages – as people log in to the local information architecture through search engines. The technology companies Google and Apple also functioned as actors with intentional, political agency, as the companies, as corporate citizens, chose a side by publicly memorising those who were killed and supporting the freedom of expression.⁸

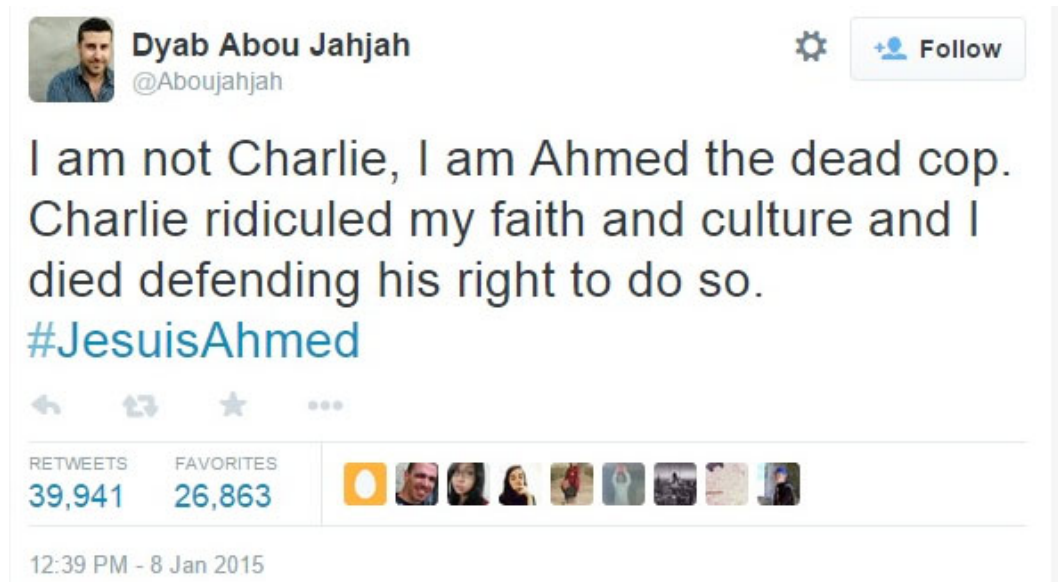
Hashtags⁹ around *#Je Suis Charlie* proliferated fast, in addition to visual memes, crowdsourced visuals and maps. The heat map of geo-tagged tweets on Twitter¹⁰ shows the geographical territory, the event space created by *#Je suis Charlie*. The area is global, but shows its densest impact in large first world, highly connected cities. The heat map also shows that the expansion and density of the hashtag was at its highest around 10pm CET on 5 January 2015.



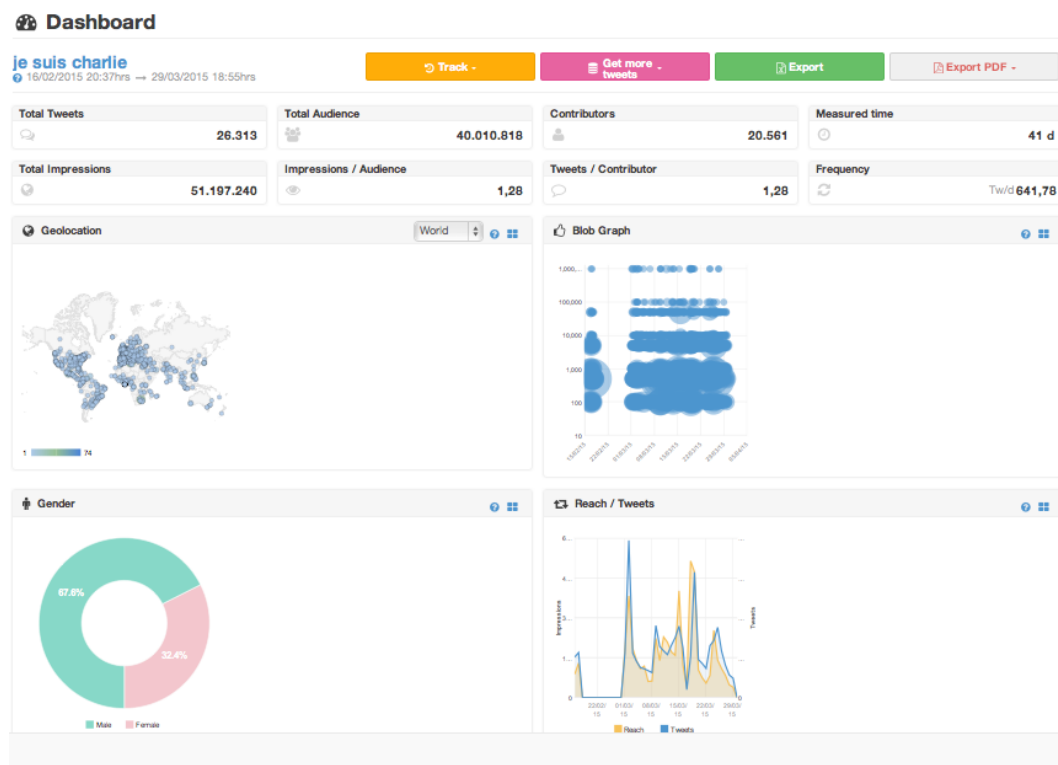
Picture 2. The Twitter heat map on the *#Je suis Charlie* impact area

Hashtags became network designers by organising, gathering and directing affects, bits of information, political statements, memes and visuals, and by circulating them within the expanding assemblage. *#Je suis Charlie* also inspired counter hashtags, such as *#Je ne suis pas Charlie*, *#Je suis Jüde* and specifically *#Je suis Ahmed*. The counter hashtags were a critique of the alleged Islamophobia within the social media ecosystem, identifying with

the cause of defending Islam. Specifically, the *#Je suis Ahmed* hashtag voiced the opinion of Muslims in multicultural societies, showing that no assemblage is homogeneous but gathers together heterogeneous elements, beliefs and humans into one constellation.



Picture 3. *#Je suis Ahmed* counter hashtag



Picture 4: Follow the Hashtag *#Je suis Charlie* Dashboard

The *Follow the hashtag* analysis¹¹ below shows that #*Je suis Charlie* 1) became a global network organiser of information flows, 2) is gendered, 3) is global by nature, as the location of hashtag has no relevance, and 4) its followers are institutions, organisations and individuals. It is a semi-permanent sign with a distributed agency for the assemblage, and as a non-human agent it acts as a network organiser, builder and designer within the assemblage.

JE SUIS CHARLIE AS A MEME

As *Je suis Charlie* is a meme, it is also a metaphor designed according to the early political meme from John F. Kennedy's speech 'Ich bin ein Berliner' of 26 June 1963 in West Berlin. It turns an individual statement into a general one and embeds 'universal' values on an assemblage that connects territory, historical moment, human and non-human actors. Metaphorically, this translation from the specific to the universal states that we are all Charlie – we are all Berliners. As 'metaphor' (Gr. *metaphora*) means 'transport' and 'carry over', Serres and Latour (1995, p. 66) have referred to it as the method of Hermes, the Greek God of transitions and boundaries:

He exports and imports; thus he traverses. He invents and can be mistaken – because of analogies, which are dangerous and even forbidden – but we know of no route to an invention. The messenger's impression of foreignness comes from this contribution: that transport is the best and worst thing, the clearest and the most obscure, the craziest and the most certain. (Serres and Latour 1995, p. 66, in Bingham and Thrift 2000, p. 285)

As 'traversing' Hermes, the *Je suis Charlie* metaphor is both mimetic and memetic. Richard Dawking's (1996) concept of the meme captures the idea of a traversing hashtag or a picture as 'a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation'. According to Dawking, the meme can be an idea, texts and practices. In order to be able to spread, memes are loaded on various vehicles of transportation, such as images, artefacts or rituals. According to Shifman (2013, p. 364 -365), circulating memes have three features. First, they can be understood as cultural information that passes along from person to person, yet gradually scales into a shared social phenomenon or becomes part of the assemblage. Although they spread as microform, their impact is inevitably macro.

Secondly, memes reproduce by various means of imitation. In the case of *Je suis Charlie*, imitative reproduction included the counter hashtags, reproduced events spaces for Charlie demonstrations and memorials, expanding to music, technology and popular culture. Memes sometimes also occur as repackaging through various means of imitation, such as mimicry and remix. The remix could be your own meme, remixed and designed through mimicry. The third feature is their diffusion, which takes place through competition and selection. That is, if the meme is affective (funny, moving, meaningful etc.) it survives, traverses, and its distributed agency gains global impact.



Picture 5. The remixed meme designed by the author by <https://imgflip.com>

Memes are cultural units that assemble into crowd-generated narratives. The *Je suis Charlie*¹² meme narrative was created on 8 January 2015 and constructed in collaboration with the three meme narrative editors (Bahi, Brad and Tomberry) on the *Know your meme* platform. The networked people, who follow the platform and events, have contributed with videos, comments and visuals. The editors crowdsourced the network to ‘help confirm the entry by contributing facts, media, and other evidence of notability and mutation’. This re-assembled meme story narrates unfolding events including videos, descriptions and the construction of the narrative timeline. The event, the ‘Charlie Hebdo shootings’, also generated a meme narrative in a social media ecosystem.¹³ Both these meme narratives are based on the *crowdsourced produsage* within the assemblage, where the network members add the digital content. The various materials created by the crowds will be archived on the internet. The visual mash-up narratives are based on descriptions, memes, videos, news inserts and visuals created by the people in the networks around the events.

As assemblages, Bennett (2010, p. 24) points out that they are not governed by any central(ising) node: no type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the assemblage. The effects generated by an assemblage can be seen more as emergent properties, emergent in their ability to make something happen.

The *Je suis Charlie* meme with its distributed agency acts as an emergent story agent drawing different elements together into a narrative constellation. As the group is posited by its members, a *Je suis Charlie* agent acts in virtue of a narrative account, which ties distinct phases and elements together into a coherent story. Hence, *Je suis Charlie* functions as a non or post-human agent that tells a story on the behalf of *we*, *the assemblage*. Using Charlie as '*we*' does not only define the action and experience, but the narration itself.

In the digital media ecosystem, the implied 'agent' is almost irreplaceable. The narrative structure including 'we' ('black people', 'freedom fighters', 'Muslims') provides a narrative with an ideological trajectory. The connection between time, space, narrative and history becomes clear as the group achieves a reflexive self-awareness as a 'subject' that is analogous of the individual. Al-Jazeera, for example, is constructing an affective 'we', the envisaged community in the broader narrative, and acts as a transnational and regional organiser of modern Muslim narratives. *Je suis Charlie* is an organising implied agent in a digital ecosystem that modifies and organises narratives around the freedom of expression, diversity, multiculturalism, terror and suppression.

As a distributed agency, Je suis Charlie is also affective. As affect refers to the non-representational mode of thought, exchanges are not predictable. The actors (humans and non-humans) that participate in these exchanges are always affected differently. Massumi (2002) demonstrates that affect pervades our experience of emotional and rational, cognitive and physical moments of human lives. Affects pervade human lives in post-human digital environments as well as in urban landscapes. Deleuze's ontology emphasises the significance of this type affective interchange, as it is no less real in the virtual environment as it is in concrete places (Massumi, 2002).

CONCLUSIONS: THE FUTURE OF POST-HUMAN ASSEMBLAGES

New political and cultural assemblages find their niches in the combined socio-technical systems of current societies. In the techno-socio-political system, it is no longer possible to separate virtual systems from political systems. These new post-human subversive networks are open-ended and affective, and as such are never completed or finished, which makes assemblages capable of hibernating or re-assembling after periods of time.

According to Serres & Latour (1995), the agency of things within these assemblages draws our attention to *an efficacy* of objects and their *agency*. These actors never act alone, but in a concerted network constellation. The 'thing agency', according to Bennett (2010, 4), always leans and depends on collaboration and interactivity with many bodies and

forces. As a (territorialised) ‘assemblage’ (after Delanda, 2006), *Je suis Charlie* created its own, concrete geography. As a constellation of ‘things’, what Thrift (2007) calls a ‘transient structure’, it generated a virtual, dense network space. Hence, it emerged as a political ‘thing agent’ within the larger assemblage, weaving its own history and possible futures.

As the digital media ecosystem offers new affordances to non-corporeal counter-actualisations of events, it also facilitates re-patterning networks around older assemblages by constructing temporal trajectories. Within the digital ecosystem, event spaces organise and circulate narratives, bridging the gaps, defining problems and solutions, and finally binding them as part of the ‘repetition’ of the constant everyday. In this process, new events form constellations that include current political narratives and embed them with suitable existing stories from digital archives. Therefore, new participatory activism can be understood in two ways: as a transient assemblage of things, discourses and institutions, and as a more permanent assemblage that creates its own concrete *territoriality* with its digital *historicity* – and hence has its own infinite lifespan.

These various assemblages represent complex ecologies of subjectivities in which agencies, such as ‘Charlie’, emerge as a consequence of the distinct articulation of a number of heterogeneous elements. These assemblages cannot be understood in terms of the engagement of an autonomous actor with a number of action possibilities. On the contrary, the actor’s agency is spread and can only be understood by tracing the complex ecologies that are distinctive to an assemblage, its network structures and its specific time-space.

Participatory assemblages fertilise a complex ecology of subjectivities that can be political, religious, ideological, cultural, ethnic or a melange of all of them. In general, this captures the ontological materialism of post-human subjectivity that is the product of an assemblage and only makes sense within it. Moreover, the distributed agencies create spaces of engagement for other actors and other agencies. As part of the whole, they become reflexive of the collective and its networked power that they draw upon.

Finally, if we consider a digital ecosystem as its own self-organising system — a system with its own agenda and pressure to survive — then the history of assemblages becomes even more interesting. These new affective spaces and assemblages are now, more than ever, becoming fully involved in the modulations of tensions and transformations in cultural activism, religious conflicts, ethnic strife and political conflicts, adding new pieces to our understanding of technology, agency and affect as uncharted territories of current participatory politics. If our socio-political future will be among the post-human assemblages, we may just have to start understanding them as equal partners of participatory activism and collaborative living.

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NOTES

- 1 <http://money.cnn.com/2015/01/09/technology/social/jesuischarlie-hashtag-twitter/index.html> (retrieved on 31 March 2015).
- 2 The Bing search assemblage on *Je suis Charlie* demonstrations: <https://www.bing.com/images/search?q=Je+suis+charlie+demonstrations&FORM=HDRSC2> (retrieved on 31 March 2015).
- 3 Download Je suis Charlie 1.0 for Android <http://downloads.tomsguide.com/Je-suis-Charlie,0301-58386.html> (retrieved March 31, 2015).
- 4 The homepage of Dweller: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Dweller> (retrieved on 31 March 2015)
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