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WEAPONIZATION OF LIVENESS: HOW LIVE STREAMING GENERATES HYBRID MEDIA EVENTS OF EXTREME VIOLENCE

Minttu Tikka
University of Helsinki

Johanna Sumiala
University of Helsinki

Anu A. Harju
University of Helsinki

Katja Valaskivi
University of Helsinki

This paper investigates the concept and idea of *liveness* and the ways in which it generates contemporary hybrid media events of violence (Sumiala et al. 2019). By liveness, we refer to the socio-technical practices that enable the mediated transmission of real-time events (as well as the recording and circulation of these afterwards). We see liveness as a constellation whose constitution varies depending on the conditions of institutions, technologies, and users (van Es 2017).

While the concept 'media event' (e.g. Dayan & Katz 1992) refers to an incident or occasion that breaks the routine flow of media coverage and attention, the notion of 'hybrid' makes explicit the interconnectedness of different users, technologies and institutions that populate the hybrid media terrain and together construct the hybrid media event. Moreover, violent hybrid media events are distinctive both in their unexpectedness and rapid dissemination across the hybrid media environment. Thus, the concept of hybrid media event here refers to the type of media event of violence that is typically created in and by digital media, where legacy media together with other

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media actors (including perpetrators) all contribute to the 'live making and sharing' of violence (Sumiala et al. 2018).

Describing some of the findings of a research project still in progress, the paper analyses constellations of liveness, its production as well as its consequences. The empirical analysis draws on media research on the Christchurch mosque attacks in New Zealand in March, 2019.

In particular, we look at the live streaming activity undertaken by the perpetrator, and demonstrate i) how, utilizing the hybrid media environment, the perpetrator produced liveness through the live streaming of the massacre; ii) how this material circulated in diverse digital platforms; and iii) what kind of struggles around visibility and erasure took place on different platforms and by different media institutions.

The empirical data on the Christchurch mosque attacks was collected using a method of digital media ethnography (Airoldi 2018; Caliandro 2018; Sumiala & Tikka 2020). The empirical material consists of online news media articles as well as YouTube and Twitter material. The material was collected between May 15th, 2019 and February 26, 2020. In this paper, we argue that liveness was an integral part of the emergence and formation of the Christchurch attacks as a hybrid media event of extreme violence.

When looking at the issue of liveness from the perspective of production, the data demonstrates that the perpetrator live-streamed the massacre (where 51 people were killed) on Facebook. The perpetrator carefully designed the attacks to attract media attention, as well as meticulously planned the dissemination of the event via digital media platforms. Before committing the attack, the perpetrator left digital traces of his plans on Twitter, Facebook, and 8chan, including a 'manifesto' and a link to his Facebook account. As intended, the first-person video of the massacre spread instantaneously across the hybrid media environment (cf. Munn 2019).

In addition to production, circulation of liveness also played a significant role in triggering attention in the hybrid media event of extreme violence. While only less than 200 people watched the massacre as it unfolded live on Facebook Live, copies of the video were instantaneously relayed on imageboards (8chan, 4chan) and file-sharing sites (e.g. MediaFire, Zippyshare) associated with the dark web, displayed on social media platforms (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter) and presented on mainstream media sites (Daily Mail, The Sun, The Mirror, Sky News Channel, 10 Daily News) (see e.g. Graham 2019, Tech Against Terrorism).

A hybrid media event is formed through accumulation of attention, and a live streamed terror attack was planned to draw maximum attention. The incitement for the event was the live-streaming of the terror attack, seen by a small number of people; however, the fact that the attack was live streamed attracted attention in itself, which further enhanced the circulation of information about the attack, but also of the video itself. The digital content was simultaneously removed and reproduced as social media institutions, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, attempted to remove the video from their platforms using content moderation (Gillespie 2010), there were still several media organizations that provided clips of the video on their news sites.

In conclusion, we posit that the constellation of liveness in the Christchurch mosque attacks resulted in the weaponization of liveness (Callahan 2017). While a relatively small number of people watched the massacre take place in 'real time' (*en direct*), a much larger audience captured the 're-enactment' of liveness through the active circulation and sharing of the video on different platforms. This, we argue, shapes the hybrid media events of extreme violence of today as a phenomenon of intensified and accelerated death experienced online. As Yves Citton (2017) emphasizes, the direction of collective attention is the basis for our social construction of reality. The contemporary communication technology affords users to live stream their content - including violent attacks - for others to see. The responsibility for the accelerated circulation of the content, and the resulting accumulation of attention, however, lies with institutional actors, such as social media platforms and established media institutions.

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