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WITNESSING LIKE A USER: MOBILE NOTIFICATIONS AND THE LAYERED CONSTRUCTION OF MEDIATIZED TERRORISM

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Extended Abstract

This paper examines the construction of mediatized terrorist attacks as *datafied media events* through mobile media accounts circulated by media outlets, users, platforms, and devices. Emerging out of a wider study of the intersection of mediatized responses to accounts of terrorist attacks and shifting mobile audience usage due to the data-driven political economy, this study analyzes the role of smartphone push notifications in the reception of mediatized terrorism.

Recent user and digital audience studies employ a range of methods including survey panel, trace data or traffic metrics (e.g., Kim, 2016; Nelson & Webster, 2017; Taneja, 2017) and in-depth interviews (e.g., Edgerly, 2017). This paper provides an embedded examination of mobile media use in line with Kormelink & Meijer's call for methods affording examination of "micro-moments" such as video ethnography, tracking, or as used here, screen capture (2018) – providing analysis of media use across time and close to the rapid level of nonconscious thought at which datafied mobile media often operate (Hayles, 2017).

Using a data collection framework that logs screenshots of participants' mobile devices every five seconds during longitudinal studies (Reeves et al., 2019), I ethnographically observe screenshots capturing the mobile media usage of 16 U.S.-based participants in Southern California from late May to late June 2017, including the mobile reception of two mediatized terrorist attacks in Europe: the Stockholm Truck Attack and the London Bridge Attack.

This empirical approach provides a detailed view into how users use media platforms and encounter affordances and media texts *in situ*. As such, it affords study of "layering" across mediatized contexts within a single device from a user's point of view (Schrøder, 2019), in complement to studies of the layering of contexts between life beyond the screen and media reception (e.g., Kormelink & Meijer, 2018).

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In the minutes following the first reports of an attack, push notifications often pop up on mobile phone screens. For multiple users studied, these notifications are an immediate path to pursuing further information about an attack and reading news articles or watching news and bystander videos. In one instance, when an Indian international university student gets a push notification from the New Delhi TV app, “3 Attackers Shot Dead by Police Outside London P...” they immediately tap the notification to go in and read the article. At other times and for other users, the push notifications sit within the Android mobile devices’ “notifications center,” often until a point of later engagement.

Push notifications blur the line between nudges, habit (Chun, 2016), and ritual (Burgess et al., 2019; Kertzer, 1988) in the wake of a terrorist attack. One participant, a white middle-aged Hollywood actor who, Trump supporter, and close follower of updates on the UK’s impending parliamentary elections, receives a push notification of a text from a friend, “TERROR IN LONDON” from a friend and then immediately looks for more information on Drudge Report. The push notification serves as a *microevent* (Beck & Gleyzon, 2016; Collins, 1981) that activates a latent ritualistic potentiality to this user’s habitual checking of news aggregators like Drudge Report and RealClearPolitics at various times throughout the day, which for this user is then re-encoded into their subsequent collective reaction to and discussion of the attack’s political ramifications in *mediatized microrituals* on comment threads and in text messages within their far-right media ecosystem – often blaming the Labor party and European liberal multicultural policies more broadly.

When notifications about the Stockholm Truck Attack are pushed to participants’ phones and they are sleeping, they are often either cleared by the subject immediately upon seeing the notification among others when the phone is woken up in the morning, or, in some cases, the notifications sit in their “notifications center” until they are engaged with after the users have caught up on their email, personal messages they received over the night, and the rest of their mediatized morning routines. Therefore, while encountering news through asynchronous microevents may be maligned for reducing the import of the topics—much as platform-designed political engagement may be considered “clicktivism” or “virtue signaling”—or for de-ritualizing news in its individual, seemingly sporadic asynchronous experience (Poindexter, 2012), in the observed instances, it maintains elements of ritual by trying to create a sense of “order” and connection to others in the collective decoding of mediatized terrorism, even if this “order” is fragmented by an users’ rapid switching of mobile applications and asynchronous with a deferred sense of liveness relative to other users, bystander videos, and news reports.

Push notifications are an understudied phenomena in critical audience research and serve as a valuable marker of how micro (both temporally and textually) affordances and features of datafied mobile media can function as *mediatized microevents*, prompting *microrituals* in response to these attacks, ascribing an importance that belies not only their relative distance to users or the overall casualty count, but also the users’ time spent with formal news reports of the attack. In exploring the role of push notifications about terrorist attacks in sparking mediatized microrituals and the broader construction of attacks as datafied media events, this paper also highlights the *layering*

of mediatization, wherein the above-mentioned intertwining of alerts from news outlets or interpersonal messages, device interface design elements and notification settings impact the circulation of and responses to mediatized terrorism.

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