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## TO BE OR NOT TO BE CHARLIE: TWITTER HASHTAGS AS A DISCOURSE AND COUNTER-DISCOURSE IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2015 CHARLIE HEBDO SHOOTING IN FRANCE

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### Introduction

Following a shooting attack by two self-proclaimed Islamist gunmen at the offices of French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* on 7th January 2015, there emerged the hashtag #JeSuisCharlie [I am Charlie] on Twitter as an expression of condolences for the victims, solidarity, and support for the magazine's right to free speech. By 9th January, the hashtag was used over five million times, making it one of the most popular topics in the platform's history.

However, there too emerged #JeNeSuisPasCharlie [I am not Charlie], almost simultaneously and explicitly countering the former, affirmative hashtag. Since the former hashtag entailed a tragedy of twelve deaths and support for the universal values of freedom of expression, #JeNeSuisPasCharlie carried the inherent risk of being viewed as opposing accepted social norms. Despite the risk, the negative hashtag was used more than 74,000 times over the next few days since 7th January. Against this backdrop, we set out to achieve an in-depth understanding of what was going on under that hashtag, with a focus on three interlinked questions as below.

1. What are the characteristics of the network formed around the #JeNeSuisPasCharlie hashtag on Twitter?
2. How did users of #JeNeSuisPasCharlie position themselves discursively with regard to the #JeSuisCharlie hashtag?
3. How did the activities under #JeNeSuisPasCharlie evolve as the broader public discussion of the shooting attack developed?

### Literature Review

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The present study draws upon a combination of three strands of work in the current scholarship: the network characteristics of Twitter-mediated discussion; the roles of hashtags in such discussion; and the expressions of identity in social media activism.

## Methodology

Based on a complete corpus of 74,074 tweets (41,687 unique contributors) containing the hashtag #JeNeSuisPasCharlie and posted between 7th and 11th of January 2015, we identified peaks in the Twitter activity (through a 'breakout detection') as well as what accounted for those peaks (through a semantic cluster analysis).

We first employed the text mining techniques provided by the textcat R package (Feinerer et al., 2013) on the corpus of all tweets in the dataset. We created a by-minute time series (N=6,444, AVG TPM=11.5) of activity and used the Breakout Detection R package, which had recently been open-sourced by Twitter (James, Kejariwal, & Matteson, 2014), to identify breakouts or shifts in the mean of tweet per minute (TPM).

The Breakouts tool detected 14 breakouts, including three moments of high user engagement (Table 1).

from	to	N (tweets)	N (rt)	N (@replies)	AVG TPM
07/01 6:07 PM	07/01 11:44 PM	9,194	7,392	150	50.00
08/01 11:42 AM	08/01 11:37 PM	16,048	11,688	472	23.56
09/01 11:55 AM	10/01 00:44 AM	10,159	6,899	465	13.57

Table 1. Moments of high user engagement

On each subset of tweets created during one of the three moments, we calculated a document term matrix of the most frequently used terms and then grouped those terms according to their co-occurrences.

Finally, to qualitatively complement the findings from the above techniques, we are currently conducting a content analysis of all original tweets created during the three identified peaks, i.e. 1,652, 3,888 and 2,795 respectively.

## Discussion of Analytic Findings

Two of the most frequently shared tweets in our dataset contained hyperlinks to drawings by two cartoonists, the Arab Brazilian freelance political cartoonist Carlos Latuff and the Maltese American cartoonist/journalist Joe Sacco. Those drawings represented a concern over the alleged 'double standards' on freedom of speech that justify growing Islamophobia in Europe.

Along the same lines, another heavily retweeted message recalled the incident of Australian newspaper *The Sydney Morning Herald* being forced to issue an apology and remove a satire that was considered anti-Semitic in August 2014.

We discovered that French (30%), English (25%) and Spanish (12%) accounted for most of the tweets. It was unsurprising that French was most frequently used, but the proportion was smaller than expected, seemingly underscoring its reference to #JeSuisCharlie.

The fact that the most frequently shared external sources were images and not a single article, together with the fact that this French hashtag was used mostly in non-French tweets, suggests that #JeNeSuisPasCharlie was not about the news of the shooting itself. Its primary goal was instead to mark and declare an identity by distinction. To that end, 2% of the tweets in our dataset contained nothing but the hashtag.

While the hashtag started as an immediate reaction to #JeSuisCharlie, nevertheless, its nature changed over time.

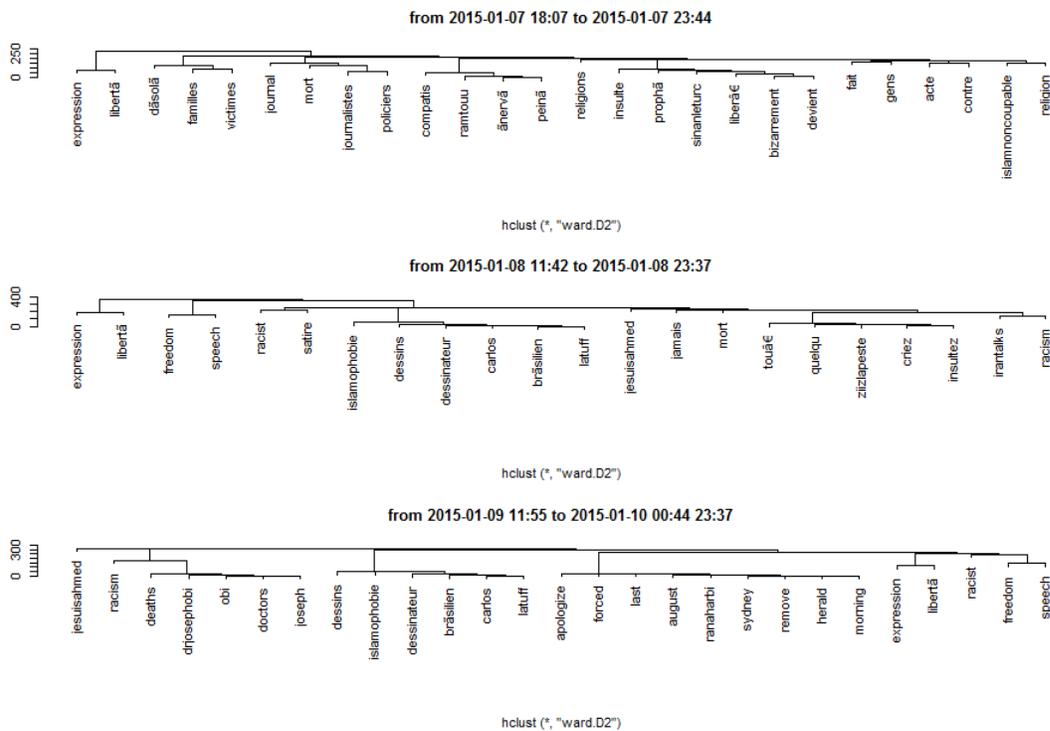


Figure 2. Most frequently used words and their associations across the three key moments

There are a few noteworthy dynamics in Figure 3. First, word clusters containing désolé [sorry], familles, victimes, and compatis [sympathise] were present in the first dendrogram but not in the following two. Liberté and expression (and their corresponding English words) were prominent in all three moments, confirming that the freedom of expression and its contested limits were the real leitmotif across the entire dataset. Terms such as racism and racist stood out in the second and third moments since users of #JeNeSuisPasCharlie started to approach *Charlie Hebdo's* satires from alternative perspectives than free speech, such as hate speech, Eurocentrism, and Islamophobia.

## Conclusion

Users of #JeNeSuisPasCharlie showed resistance to the mainstream framing of the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting as the universal values of freedom of expression being threatened by religious intolerance and violence. In this context, retweeting something that would justify their resistance was a way of marking their identity as distinct from what was accepted in the mainstream. We also observed a unique practice of tweeting nothing but the said hashtag, amounting to 2% of the dataset. This is a strategy that can be explained in a similar vein.

Over time, there were three distinguished phases in the manifestation of this resistance: Grief (i.e. joining the mourning for the victims but indicating a reservation against the proposed frame); Resistance (i.e. starting to voice out the resistance); and Alternatives (i.e. fully developing and deploying alternative frames). In this study, the hashtag was not a conversation marker as previous studies identified but a discursive device that facilitated users to form, enhance, and strategically declare their self-identity.

Findings from the content analysis of the 8,335 sample tweets currently being conducted will enable us to delve further into the ways in which users of #JeNeSuisPasCharlie expressed their stances despite the sensitive nature of the issue at hand and put forward alternative perspectives.

## References

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