



Journal of Public Interest Communications

ISSN (online): 2573-4342

Journal homepage: <http://journals.fcla.edu/jpic/>

The Public Interest Behind #JeSuisCharlie and #JeSuisAhmed: Social Media and Hashtag Virality as Mechanisms for Western Cultural Imperialism

Phillip Arceneaux

University of Florida

Article Information

Received: September 24, 2017

Accepted: March 21, 2018

Published online: May 31, 2018

Keywords

Hashtag
Virality
JeSuisCharlie
Electronic Colonialism Theory
International Law

Abstract

As social creatures, humans are highly involved in storytelling. With the continued advancement of communication systems, the mechanisms for telling the narrative of human events also have evolved. Social media and the memetic properties of hashtags' going viral are the apex of modern, digitally mediated, storytelling tools. This critical essay discussed two hashtags, i.e., narratives, of the Charlie Hebdo Paris shooting to illustrate how hashtag virality can be a mechanism for the spread and enforcement of Western perspectives. It then explored precedents under which international law could potentially warrant regulation of such behavior. Concerned with the protection of human diversity and cultural pluralism, this essay advanced a normative course of action to facilitate social change as conceived by an interdisciplinary framework.

Introduction

Communication theorist Marshal McLuhan (1994) coined the term technological determinism to illustrate the circular nature of influence both society and technology have on each other. He argued that technological advancements improve society, yet also that society is responsible for advancements in technology (Marx & Smith, 1994). Like other facets of society, the history of politics continually has seen drastic and foundational changes as politicians have responded to new communication technologies. From Martin Luther's challenging papal power through the printing press, to Donald Trump's direct address of the public through Twitter, new

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communication technologies have been continuously associated with drastic shifts in both political practice and power distribution. Although many of the advancements of the past half century have been marvel at the time, they evolved in a rather linear way. The introduction of social media, however, has provided something new compared to what has preceded it, a near complete democratization of the ability to be heard in a public forum (Hanson, 2008).

This bringing together of all levels and corners of society, i.e., globalization, has been the topic of much academic discussion (Bond, 2015; Cowen, 2002; Tomlinson, 1999; Turner, 2007). One theme that has dominated such discussions has been the tendency of smaller cultural groups to be consumed by larger, more expansionist, societies (Hebert-Leiter, 2014; Liew, 2012; Vigouroux, 2013). Considering such cultural encroachment, the United Nation's (UN) Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has joined many mid-tier sovereign powers in advocating for the societal contributions of diverse cultures, perspectives, and ideologies (Galt, 2004; Natens, 2014; Vanston, 1999).

Although the current legal standards regulating international behavior address the actions of states, international organizations (IOs), and corporations, they do not address, if even recognize, the potential consequences a single, unified public voice can have in enforcing a cultural perspective or even attacking opposing perspectives. Although no such voice really existed prior to the 2000s, the societal assimilation of social media has provided a means for mass audiences to join both national and international discussions with a relatively unified voice, made possible by meta-data tagging, or hashtags. The ability of millions of people to create a single prescriptive discussion has begun to entrench power distribution in parallel to certain disparaging metrics associated with the digital divide.

Even though many hashtags have trended out of empathy and solidarity, the ability to engage in such influential digital behavior, in the hands of the already most advanced and elite corners of civil society, should raise many concerns for the fair and balanced framing of human events. Given the unprecedented power elite publics now hold, bodies of international law (IL) need to be willing to recognize and address such behavior. Hence, informed by essays and other qualitative works at the nexus of critical communication studies and intercultural issues (Butchart, 2010; Khrebtan-Hörhager, 2013; Wolfson, Crowell, Reyes, & Bach, 2017), this critical essay attempts to draw attention to such an instance of cultural imperialism facilitated by social media.

To understand how the oversimplification of narrative storytelling, or picturing the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting through the famous #JeSuisCharlie as compared to the less famous #JeSuisAhmed, illustrates, the power social networking platforms and hashtags have in shaping the narrative of the human story, particularly in the way such narratives can be for or against cultural groups. Indeed, this essay seeks to advance both mass communication and critical communication literature by demonstrating how the viral usage of overly simplistic and ambiguous hashtags can be a mechanism for the reinforcement of majority perspectives, primarily those of dominant power states, i.e., modern colonial powers, and their citizens. Recognizing such social repercussions, this essay asserts under what legal grounds IL could be

warranted in regulating such behavior. Beyond asserting *what* the problem is and *that* it can be addressed by IL, this essay also suggests a framework for *how* IL might effectively regulate such social media behavior without violating rights to freedom of speech.

Literature review

Since the creation of the UN, the organization has been regularly involved in the oversight of global telecommunication systems (Falk, 1967; McPhail, 2014; Slaughter, 1993). A specific organ of the UN, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) has been involved in the conformity of international communication standards since the introduction of the telegraph. As a part of the UN, the ITU has been an influential actor in establishing binding IL (Hill, 2014). Beyond the ITU, UNESCO also has been involved in overseeing international communications. Investigating the adverse effects of trans-national communication, the Commission for the Study of Communication Problems addressed such concerns and offered tangible measures to curtail such adverse outcomes. Referred to as the MacBride Commission, findings articulated a severe over-dependence of developing countries on Western-based media systems. Special concern noted how such over-dependence significantly mirrored the colonial power relationships of the 19th and 20th centuries (Mansell & Nordenstreng, 2007).

In response, the International Program for the Development of Communication (IPDC) was established to institute special broadcasting policies specific to diverse continental and national regions. The goal was to develop and implement specific news coverage practices that highlighted cultural themes and perspectives as opposed to adopting those of the already well-established United States and United Kingdom news industries. This attempt at breaking the West's monopoly on trans-national media coverage was known as the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) (Buchanan, 2015).

As the MacBride report is almost 40 years old, its conclusions do not necessarily address the digitized 21st century media environment. Social media, one of the most prevalent outlets for information consumption, are a two-directional communication channel, as dependent on user-generated content as they are on content from traditional media. Social media have severely damaged the hold traditional gatekeepers had on the information cycle (Lipschultz, 2014). The ability of average persons to be equal creators of content alongside traditional media outlets requires a new, more democratic interpretation of information dissemination. Whereas the media answer to corporate stakeholders and the public regarding their behavior, the accountability of a public voice rarely has been of concern. Although social media offer a greater extent of democratic information sharing, one of their drawbacks is the extent to which information becomes overly simplified to cater to shortening audience attention spans.

Concerns of social media simplification, or the creating of overly succinct digital messages, has begun to propagate in scholarly discussions (Bechmann & Lomborg, 2013; Benson, Haghghi, & Barzilay 2011; Kandias, Galbogini, Mitrou, & Gritzalis, 2013; Magro, 2012; Syed-

Abdul et al., 2013). According to Benson et al. (2011), information dissemination via social media has been a concern when associated with the education of factually derived information:

Social media messages are often short, make heavy use of colloquial language, and require situational context for interpretation. . . . Not all properties of an event may be expressed in a single message, and the mapping between messages and canonical event records is not obvious. (p. 1)

As a function of the way social media platforms physically present content, i.e., their modality (Sundar & Limperos, 2013), these platforms are not ideal tools for educating mass audiences. Social media naturally reduce information in both quantity and quality to make messages conducive to audience preferences for visually stimulating, compact information. With such a reduction of fact-based content, social media messages do not sufficiently provide context through which audiences can appropriately process, apply, and comprehend consumed information.

Concerns of information quality and contextual comprehension are a recurring theme in this new area. Looking specifically at literature on anorexia, research shows that audiences identified with online social media content that was overly sensationalized and more easily comprehensible (Syed-Abdul et al., 2013). Not unlike the medical profession, IR is often filled with highly complex jargon that does not synchronize with the average person's understanding of international affairs. Despite such a need for tenuous explication, IR is often newsworthy and frequently serves as a topic for discussion on both professional and personal social media accounts, effectively raising awareness, recruiting, and retaining the interest of a mass public audience. What role then might such a new and powerful public voice have on the function of modern IR?

Although the classic perspective of IR involved behavior between nation-states, non-governmentally associated groups have become significant actors on the international stage since the end of World War II. Specifically, these non-governmentally associated groups have mimicked state behavior by engaging in strategic communication geared toward shifting public opinion to achieve significant changes in society, usually politically, socially, or environmentally (Betsill & Corell, 2008; McConnell, Moreau, & Dittmer, 2012; Zacher, Brehm, & Savelsberg, 2014). Indeed, the concept of embedded institutionalism posits there are special roles both organizations and individuals can play in effecting change in the realm of IR, regardless of any association with formal state actors (Slaughter, 1993).

One of the reasons these new non-governmentally associated entities have come to wield such significant social power relates to the framing of their causes as based on charitable, philanthropic concerns for improving the quality of human life. Utilizing such altruistic framing, these less formal actors have become effective agents of soft power. Indeed, they have discovered an effective manner for using telecommunication systems to circulate humanitarian content designed to appeal to basic human instincts of empathy to make the culture of the sender seem more appealing and desirable to the receiver (Nye, 2004).

This ability to utilize modern communication channels has significantly changed modern approaches to formal IR. As Triesman (2007) stated:

Where influence was once the preserve of the elites—diplomats meeting ministers in gilded ministries and the exchange of formal written notes—it is now diverse and dispersed. The influence of the mass market, the power of the pressure groups, the media and the internet has led us to rethink diplomacy and how we deliver influence where it will have the most impact. (para. 6)

Although digital telecommunication systems have redefined what it means to engage in formal 21st century IR, they have done so by redefining who has the capacity to impact the act. With a global social media audience reaching in the billions, new voices of public opinion are the products of a democratized information dissemination process, placing the discussion of IR in the relative hands of everyday people. The two-way involvement of global populations in modern IR is the very heart of many public interest communications ventures.

Although the involvement of these newer voices of public opinion personify Slaughter's (1993) concept of embedded institutionalism, it is imperative that scholars and practitioners be willing to address any unforeseen, negative consequences they could have. In IL, the principle of legal personality maintains that entities can act as international actors in exchange for the responsibility of being held accountable for such acts (Brownlie & Crawford, 2012). Even though such parties have this responsibility, non-state actors have been found to be equally as responsible for their behavior (Reparations for Injuries, 1949). Given an understanding of hard and soft law, the natural conclusion is that there are hard and soft breaches of IL. Considering these new soft violations of IL, what specific wrongs might a voice of public opinion be capable of committing? An answer conceptualized in this current framework is that of the maintained, if not reinstated, dominance of Western cultural perceptions over the opposing cultural perspectives of smaller, more diverse, periphery states.

The topic of developing states' dependence on Western economies, militaries, and technologies is well documented in scholarly literature (Kiely, 2014; Lazear, 2000; Smith, 2016). Although the histories of militaristic, religious, and mercantile colonialism are often talked about in academic classrooms, less often are students taught about the contemporary presence of colonial domination, as facilitated through telecommunication systems. Since the invention of the Gutenberg Press, Western society has dominated the communication industry and the flow of information including the telegraph, radio, cable television, satellite broadcasting, and the Internet—leading Western societies to be in constant control (Hanson, 2008).

Since the end of World War II and the relative fall of military and mercantile colonialism, countries like the United States and the United Kingdom have utilized telecommunication systems, at times intentionally and at others unintentionally, to establish both governmental and corporate media empires (Kellner, 2012; McPhail, 1987; Schiller, 1969; Tunstall, 1977; Winseck & Pike, 2008). Electronic Colonialism Theory (ECT) helps scholars to understand the effects power states and their media empires have on the development of less media-influential states and cultures through the dissemination of Western values, ideologies, and perspectives in a

global information market via a relatively one-way, top-down flow of content. As McPhail (2014) noted, “The concern is that this new foreign information, frequently favoring the English language, will cause the displacement, rejection, alteration, or forgetting of native or indigenous customs, domestic messages, or cultural history” (p. 13).

Inspired by scholars of the Frankfurt School, ECT is a critical theory that seeks to macroscopically explore and detail unbalanced relationships in international power politics and media system ownership. Specifically, ECT moves beyond the narrower scopes of traditional mass communication theories such as agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), agenda-building (Cobb & Elder, 1971), and framing (Entman, 1993) to offer a theoretical framework for the articulation of global effects of communication by outlining the disparity in political, economic, and technological assets across the international stage. Further, ECT attempts to show how, as a byproduct of such disparity, the opinions and perspectives of the world’s social, political, and media elite dominate over the opinions and perspectives of less influential minority groups and populations. Making this point, McPhail (2014) stated, “Collectively they [the elite] have the real potential to displace or alter previous cultural values, language, lifestyles or habits, activities, and family rituals” (p. 16).

Not unlike how the study of political economy attempts to understand the power dynamics, influence, and ownership inherent in political structures, ECT attempts to assess global power dynamics, influence, and ownership inherent in telecommunications broadcasting and determine to what extent those structures mirror the more traditional conceptions of military, religious, and mercantile colonialism. The purpose of ECT, put broadly, is to better understand the true reality of international communication influence, namely promulgated by Western society, and to draw attention to the rights of regions, states, cultures, or persons who do not have the necessary power, influence, or ownership in the realm of telecommunication broadcasting to effectively advocate for their own cause (McPhail, 2014).

Indeed, ECT is a critical theory ripe for application in the field of public interest communications. Although traditional colonialism is perceived as external domination, media effects literature suggests that mass communication has the capability to significantly alter cognitive, attitudinal, and even behavioral tendencies (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; Potter, 2013), leading to a kind of internal shift in colonization tactics. Often referred to as colonization of the mind (Hunter, 2014; Matthews, 2017; Stanley, 2003), this phenomenon consists of the internal struggle to retain cultural and cognitive identity independence from the pervasive opinions and perspectives of cultures that have the capability of engaging in long-term message bombardment. As Sohail (2015) argued, “Western culture and its symbols are valued over native customs, which lead to a kind of colonization of the mind and colonization of the mind is one of the root causes of the identity crisis we . . . face today” (para. 4). Where traditional forms of colonialism used force to ensure the oppressed did what the oppressors wanted, ECT facilitates a less direct form of domination, one where continual bombardment of framed messaging attempts to make the oppressed think and act how the oppressors desire without the use of external force (Henley, 1974).

Informed by the theoretical framework of ECT, the following section offers a critical analysis of the social media hashtags #JeSuisCharlie and #JeSuisAhmed. Particular care was taken to show how the global usage of each hashtag, or relative lack thereof, emphasized a predominantly Western narrative of the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* shooting, leading to the reinforcement of antagonistic perspectives against Islamic and Middle Eastern cultures.

Analysis

In January 2015, two Muslim members of Al-Qaeda carried out a violent assault on the Paris-based satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*. In all, 12 people were killed and 11 injured, including an Islamic Parisian police officer, Ahmed Merabet, who was executed during the attackers' escape (Molloy, 2015; Mosendz, 2015). The social media hashtag #JeSuisCharlie quickly appeared, used by people across the globe to show empathy and solidarity with the victims of the attack. Two journalists even went so far as to call #JeSuisCharlie, "the cry of defiance," (Linning & Boyle, 2015, para. 1). Moreover, the hashtag evolved in usage over the span of its lifetime from a functional mode of communication to a more ideological expression. According to Harrower and Heravi (2015):

The hashtag #JeSuisCharlie began as a direct response to the rampage at the Charlie Hebdo office. . .but it quickly came to stand for an attitude which had many facets, from protecting free speech, to claiming a kind of unified French identity that many saw as exclusionary. (p. 110)

In all, #JeSuisCharlie was one of the most viral and memetic hashtags in the relatively infantile history of social media, reaching as many as 6,500 tweets in single minute (Goldman & Pagliery, 2015; Guynn, 2015; Whitehead, 2015).

In contrast to #JeSuisCharlie, a second hashtag began to trend, one devoted to Ahmed Merabet, the Islamic Parisian officer killed by the Paris shooters. In light of the virally trending #JeSuisCharlie, French-national and fellow Muslim who publishes a magazine in Morocco, Julien Casters (@JulesLmeghribi), began using a hashtag devoted to Merabet's sacrifice; the hashtag read, #JeSuisAhmed. In Casters' words, the hashtag was aimed at reminding people of the social integration Muslims had achieved in French society. As he told reporters from the BBC, "It is a snub to the stigmatisation of Islam and a reminder that Muslims in France are not all Islamist radicals" (Peek, Sampat, & Torres, 2015, para. 8). The hashtag began to gain momentum once it was picked up by Dyab Abou Jahjah (@Aboujahjah), the founder of the Arab European League (Kuruvilla, 2015). In the span of only a few days following the attack, #JeSuisAhmed was published on social media approximately 150,000 times (Giglietto & Lee, 2015), as compared to nearly 6 million for #JeSuisCharlie (Goldman & Pagliery, 2015).

Although #JeSuisCharlie was not representative of *all* Western perspectives on the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting (Petrof, 2015), it did serve as the predominant social narrative. Specifically, the hashtag highlighted frames that victimized Parisians, the French, and Western civilization itself

at the hands of Islamic and Arabic aggression. Although the violence behind the Paris shooting was indeed highly unethical and illegal, the societal narrative laid out by #JeSuisCharlie placed no emphasis on the fractionally minute number of Muslims belonging to Al-Qaeda, nor did it address the cultural and religious aggression perpetrated against the Islamic faith via the continuous satirical publications of the *Charlie Hebdo* newspaper. #JeSuisCharlie enforced a subjectively Western interpretation of the shooting (Payne, 2016), one that did not holistically express the context of the event. And as #JeSuisCharlie spread virally through Western social circles, i.e., the largest number of social media users on trans-national platforms at the time (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016; “We Are Social,” 2015), the hashtag became the standard interpretation of the Paris shooting, drowning out any alternative accounts through sheer volume.

#JeSuisAhmed served as a counter narrative to the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting, attempting to show the equalizing harm radicalized terrorism had on Islam as well as Western society. In the end, the equalitarian perspective of #JeSuisAhmed was ultimately rejected by the global social media audience in favor of the #JeSuisCharlie perspective. This power of Western-oriented hashtags’ going viral has been seen numerous times. Starting as early as the #PrayforLondon hashtag following the 2011 London riots (Glasgow & Fink, 2013) and the #BostonStrong hashtag following the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing (Lin & Margolin, 2014), social media have been a powerful tool for showing online solidarity during times of social unrest or domestic terrorism. However, the use of social media following times of internationally instigated terrorism has shown the extent to which Western narratives tend to prevail.

Beyond #JeSuisCharlie, other examples of virally trending hashtags include #PrayForParis after the 2015 Paris attacks (Laurent, 2015), #PrayForBrussels and #JeSuisBruxelles following the 2016 Brussels bombings (Earl, 2016), #PrayForNice after the 2016 vehicular attack in Nice (Boult, 2016), and #PrayForBerlin and #IchBinEinBerliner following the Berlin market Christmas attack (Harris, 2016). Although these were by no means the only internationally terrorism-related hashtags to trend in recent years, for example, #PrayforTurkey, they did capture the attention of the global social media public in a way that others failed to do. Indeed, these hashtags thrived virally in a time when no significant hashtag mention was made of similar, and much more prevalent, terrorist activity in Africa, the Middle East, South America, or Asia (Figueiredo, 2015).

Four unique sources of law comprise what is conceived of as IL: treaties, international custom, general principles of law, and judicial decisions (Brownlie & Crawford, 2012). Considering the analysis provided, an argument was made under which each source of IL warrants the legal jurisdiction through which bodies of IL are justified in attempting regulation of social media at a societal level.

Multi-lateral treaties

In 1966, the UN passed the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). While ICESCR was a piece of the International Bill of Human Rights (IBHR),

Article 13 established the necessity for educational initiatives so that all citizens of UN member-states could “participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups” (General Assembly Resolution 2200A, XXI, 1966, p. 4). ICESCR came into force in 1976 as a legally binding source of treaty law (Annex, 1996).

More recently, UNESCO passed the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (UDCD) in 2001. In that declaration, the first two articles established the normative social value in maintaining and growing humanity’s diverse cultural background as an intangible asset to the human race, comparing such diversity with the importance of nature’s biogenetic diversity. Further, in Article 4, the UDCD states, “The defence of cultural diversity is an ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for human dignity” (Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, 2002, p. 4). Similar to the ICESCR, the UDCD offered a course of action through education initiatives, particularly in “incorporating...traditional pedagogies into the education process with a view to preserving and making full use of culturally appropriate methods of communication and transmission of knowledge” (Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, 2002, p. 6).

While neither the UDCD nor the ICESCR stands as clear legal statements for the proposed regulation of social media usage and hashtag virality, they do exemplify the extent to which some multi-lateral treaties are dedicated to the preservation of cultural pluralism via the pedagogical course of effective education techniques. As social media’s characteristic simplification reduces their function as a sole educational tool, it should become necessary for the parties of such multi-lateral treaties to question the social narratives such hashtag virality is creating. As a telecommunication technology, social media should supplement the educational process, alongside other proven pedagogical approaches, not stand alone as the leading source of information, particularly in the overly complex arena of IR.

International custom

Beyond elements of treaty law, many states have taken it upon themselves to implement measures for the protection of their respective cultural ways of life from domination by the more expansionist cultures of world powers including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan (Hebert-Leiter, 2014; Liew, 2012; Vigouroux, 2013). Although China is viewed as a country that is potentially dominating other regional cultures in East Asia, the founding of the Great Firewall of China was based on a mentality of protecting the Chinese cultural way of life. One of the first elements of the Great Firewall was the Golden Shield Project aimed at closing off Chinese borders to the spread of the political and social ideologies of leading power states in the West (Tai, 2010). The very essence of the Golden Shield Project was to maintain the cultural way of life in China representative of its history.

Looking at Europe, France has been an ardent defender of its cultural identity. Since the mid- to late-20th century, the Republic of France has made repeated attempts to defend a

Francophonic perspective in a largely Anglophonic international landscape. Looking specifically to the communication sector, France has held to the principle of cultural exception (*l'exception culturelle*) to retain a competitive advantage for French commercial imports and exports (Prowda, 1996). Therefore, France has been successful at limiting the diffusion of American culture in the French homeland as compared to other members of the European Union (“Cinéma,” 2011; Riding, 2005). Beyond the more general idea of culture, France has been proactive in protecting the French language, passing the Toubon Law in 1994, requiring the sole use of the French language in all communication imports and exports broadcast inside the country (Vanston, 1999).

Moving beyond unilateral action, many states have engaged in bi-lateral treaty agreements geared toward the protection of their cultural competitive advantage. Specifically, the United States and Japan have been key actors in Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs) with countries including Canada, Switzerland, India, and South Korea, regarding the protection from oversaturation of U.S. and Japanese content in the less competitive media markets. The outcome of these bi-lateral treaties, respectively, gave the audio-visual industries in each smaller media market a significant advantage with which to compete against U.S. and Japanese content (Natens, 2014).

General principles of law

In 1948, the UN General Assembly passed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) detailing the basic entitlements understood to be universally conferred on all persons. While the UDHR passed and has been a standard of UN behavior toward human rights concerns for over half a century, as a declaration of the General Assembly it was, and still is, not legally binding (Brownlie & Crawford, 2012). However, the principles of the UDHR have been enumerated in such a wide variety of state legislation and international agreements that the principles are legally binding as a source of customary law, in essence, “rules of international law recognized by the legal conscience of civilized peoples” (Brownlie & Crawford, 2012, p. 34).

Judicial decisions

Although a large majority of IL takes place in legislative proceedings, judicial processes also play a role in creating binding IL. Criminal violations against culture have been listed as charges in international judicial hearings, but they have been supplementary charges only (Casaly, 2016). However, in 2016 the International Criminal Court (ICC) took its first case based solely on criminal acts maliciously directed toward culture. The court found Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi guilty of destroying protected cultural artifacts in Mali and sentenced him to nine years in prison (King, 2016). In rendering the verdict, the court clearly asserted the imperative of all sovereign states to take necessary action to preserve and defend the diverse richness of human culture:

The wide diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace are indispensable to the dignity of man and constitute a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfill in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern. (Prosecutor v. Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi, 2016, pp. 26-27)

With the first successful court ruling directly targeting crimes against culture, the ICC established the protection of cultural pluralism as worthy of attention from a legal context (Clarke, 2016). Additionally, the court's ruling established a judicial precedent for the proactive protection of cultural pluralism from harm caused by non-state actors on the international stage.

In review of each of the four sources of IL, none alone makes for a strong argument warranting the regulation of social narratives as portrayed via social media. However, combining all four shows a history of international behavior that is a testament to a growing willingness to address aggressive behavior toward elements of human cultural diversity. With 1) the breadth of multilateral treaty agreements addressing the necessity to preserve cultural pluralism, 2) the proactive actions of nation-states to protect their own cultural identity, 3) the far-reaching spirit of the UDHR, and 4) the willingness of the ICC to acknowledge the legal principle of crimes against culture, a clear evolution in the field of IL can be seen. Although much progress has been made since the mid-20th century, social media and the rise of unified voices of public opinion, made possible through hashtag virality, pose an unprecedented obstacle for the legal protection of cultural pluralism. As previously argued, if bodies of IL are in fact capable of regulating such behavior, what methods might IL employ to achieve such goals?

Suggestions for regulatory tactics

With over two billion active users on Facebook alone (Ingram, 2017), social media are highly integrated into modern society, particularly in the lives of Western nationals. It would be impractical to suggest international bodies regulate the hashtag usage of such a large population, supplemented by legal concerns regarding violations of free speech. Therefore, this critical essay utilized the foundation of humanitarian law in suggesting regulations be placed on the state, rather than private parties or persons. As discussed in Brownlie & Crawford (2012), humanitarian law stresses the obligation and responsibility of the state in overseeing private civilian behavior as well as the behavior of national broadcasting industries. Indeed, not only are national population sizes more conducive to regulation, but states already have existing structures to oversee the behavior of both their citizenry and broadcast industry.

Considering the consolidation of broadcasting ownership and influence in Western countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, the emphasis for state-encouraged regulation among such primarily democratic states would fall on traditional media outlets and representatives of the government, encouraging the dissemination of fair and balanced news to national audiences. Given that all persons maintain the right to freely express their thoughts and opinions, as laid out in the UDHR, any sort of interference in the information dissemination process on the part of the federal government would be a violation of IL.

However, given the government's social responsibility to ensure the public has access to fair and truthful information, as recognized in democracies like the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, regulation of any kind would need to be directed toward how messages are disseminated, rather than the content of the message. In light of such an issue-filled duty, bodies of IL could seek to implement a strategic regulatory system that mirrored similar regulatory tactics of the United States' Hutchins Commission or the Commission on the Freedom of the Press.

Following the mass adoption of propaganda-based media tactics prior to and during World War II, media theorists were concerned as to the purpose and function of telecommunication technologies in a modern democracy. Although authoritarian control of the press did inspire federal legislation guaranteeing freedom of speech, the government's laissez-faire approach in the early 20th century saw the corrosive and socially, as well as politically, destructive effects an unregulated press core could have on a democratic society (Spencer, 2007). Trying to strike a compromise between authoritarian and libertarian media models, the Hutchins Commission offered a new model of social responsibility (Nerone, 1995; McQuail, 2002). The most prominent conclusion of the report asserted that people in the United States had a right to 1) factually correct information provided in context, 2) a medium for free expression, 3) truthful and accurate portrayals of social groups in society, 4) a clear and continuing statement of societal values, and 5) unhindered access to all available information (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947). Since the mid-20th century, the social responsibility theory of the press has guided a relatively balanced relationship between free expression of the press and governmental assurances that United States citizens had the possibility to be accurately informed (Pickard, 2014).

While the Hutchins Commission directly targeted the media core, the 21st century landscape requires updating, with amendments to the original principles of the Commission. Along with traditional media, representatives of the government have access to personalized telecommunication systems with a global reach, i.e., social media. Government representatives now have the appropriate microphone to reach out to mass audiences, free of the traditional media, and engage in the framed dissemination of information. With a fundamental responsibility to provide the public with objective and factual information, it thus becomes necessary for representatives of the government, along with the media core, to make proactive efforts to circulate a realistic social narrative of world events. Social media content, especially hashtags, are carefully constructed to tell specific stories, ones that reflect the *intentions* of their creator in a physical *presentation* that is determined by the architectural composition of the medium or platform (social media simplification). The result is a powerfully simplistic interpretation of world events that, through the evoking of an emotional response, informs the public in such a way that is not 1) factually correct and/or provided in context, 2) a truthful and accurate portrayal of diverse demographics in a global society, 3) a clear and continuing statement of societal values, and 4) representative of the cumulative sum of information relevant to the subject of the content (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947).

Having federal state bodies oversee the digital communicative behavior of both the media and their own representatives could, at the most, serve to highlight non-Western narratives of world events, or at the least aid in mitigating the memetic spread of culturally antagonistic narratives. The landscape of IR has evolved due to the democratizing power of digital telecommunication systems like social media, and it is imperative that IL modernize its perception of information dissemination from a one-way model to an interactive two-way model. The ability of millions of bytes of user-generated content to unite under a single hashtag creates a powerful voice of public opinion that does not abide by the theories and practices of IR. Although these societal voices establish the frames through which mass audiences interpret world events and perceive foreign persons and cultures, they are doing so subjectively and often to the detriment of cultures and ways of life that are less capable of defending themselves in a digital universe. Though proposed international legislation mirroring the Hutchins Commission may mitigate the problem of virally trending hashtag narratives, it still allows for freedom of expression in accordance with IL.

Overall, with a need for some place to begin, the principles of the Hutchins Commission could functionally serve as a base model for the UN and ITU to draft effective legislation geared toward the protection of cultural perspectives in modern telecommunication systems. Although no framework is perfect, beginning to model a plan based on how one of the leading Western powers in telecommunication self-regulates its own media system could offer insight into effective strategies for the regulation of those states with substantial influence, on behalf of those that do not have the influence themselves. Although the U.S. model was offered in this essay as the starting place, it should only serve as a conversation starter, with future research investigating other successful strategies employed in more diverse, international contexts.

Discussion

The aim of this critical essay was to contribute to mass communication and critical communication literature by utilizing a telecommunications perspective to draw attention to contemporary challenges social media have on the fields of IR and IL. Hashtag virality is a contemporary phenomenon of digital information dissemination with memetic properties, a situation in which both scholars and practitioners must be capable of recognizing and addressing the societal consequences of a mass adoption of subjective narratives.

The memetic adoption of #JeSuisCharlie, as opposed to #JeSuisAhmed, saw a mostly Westernized, global social media audience adopt a subjective interpretation of the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting. Such a narrative helped to situate Western perspectives toward an Islamophobic and anti-Arabic ideology that reinforced an already existing social and cultural divide between the Christian West and the Islamic Middle East. This divide is nothing new or modern, but its assimilation into the overly-simplistic digitized world of social media allows the divide to

become a more subconscious, latent activity. This ability to spread subliminal messages of social stratification and isolation is a potential threat to real-world peace and security.

The wide majority of those who adopted the use of #JeSuisCharlie did so out of solidarity for the victims of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack. Thus, this research is not aimed at criticizing the intentions behind such behavior. This analysis is aimed, normatively, at having a social conversation to discuss and debate the potential social harm such overly simplistic online mediated behavior can have. The plain of IR is highly complex, one that is based on extensive explication. Reducing such behavior to the 280-character limit of social media platforms like Twitter already invites significant potential to misrepresent the actions and intentions of formal international behavior. To further shorten such complexity to something as compact as a single hashtag guarantees an interpretation or perspective that is not holistically informed by facts. Although social media simplification and hashtag use do boil IR down to levels that are more easily understood by the public, messaging techniques of this nature are not sufficient to stand on their own. Information over-simplification may solve modern issues of public accountability and transparency; however, this framework suggests that over-simplification also leads to just as many new problems as the ones it helped to solve.

It is important to emphasize again that this perspective does not equate people who tweeted or posted #JeSuisCharlie with criminals like Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi. The memetic adoption and usage of subjective narratives that are antagonistic, intentionally or unintentionally, to social and cultural ways of life slowly chip away at their validity and acceptability in a global marketplace of ideas. Such misrepresentation thus becomes a modern digital tool for cultural aggression in relation to intellectual and cognitive acceptance, or at least respect, for differing perspectives, cultures, and ways of life. In a landscape of climate change, over population, and dwindling natural resources, digitally-mediated subliminal aggression toward different cultures and religions reinforces primal instincts of tribalism, and a We vs. Them perspective only reinforces the already present dangers to world peace and security.

Theoretical contributions

Considering the Us vs. Them mentality invested in the competition between #JeSuisCharlie and #JeSuisAhmed, this essay attempted to advance ECT by applying its macroscopic lens to the newer concept of social media simplification. Where mass communication literature suggests that people have defense mechanisms to critically evaluate media messages, the literature also tells us that extended and repetitive exposure to mediated messages still have the psychological capability to affect cognitive, attitudinal, and even behavioral changes (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; Potter, 2013). The 24-hour, high traffic nature of social media creates a forum for precisely this kind of extensive exposure. Considering the extent to which these messages are going viral, understanding the implications of the overly simplified content is important for evaluating the quality of information informing mass audiences.

To recognize social media simplification as a tool for the reinforcement of social values, as a function of social learning, is to recognize the extent to which it can be a 21st century tactic for colonizing the minds of social media audiences. Placing this mass audience effect in the context of broadcasting influence, or the macroscopic perspective of ECT, further informs as to the extent to which those who are the primary drivers of social media content, i.e., primarily Western states, citizens, and private corporations, craft the narrative through which global audiences understand world events. As Gitlin (1980) argued, “Hegemony is the ruling class’s domination of subordinate classes and groups through the elaboration and penetration of ideology into their common sense and everyday practice” (p. 253). When Western perspectives begin to supplant the pre-existing social values and cultural identities of social media audiences around the world, as happened through the socially learned context behind #JeSuisCharlie, a clear extent of cultural imperialism has, and is, taking place.

Although political states have been the traditional drivers of colonization, social media uniquely enable Slaughter’s (1993) concept of embedded institutionalism, or the idea that mass publics and private companies can now be influential forces of cultural imperialism. The concepts of public diplomacy (Golan & Yang, 2014) and digital diplomacy (Bjola & Holmes, 2015) articulate such frameworks of private citizen and private corporate involvement in foreign cultural and political affairs, namely from the fields of mass communication and political science. Indeed, the realm of diplomatic studies further supports such an argument for the international importance of non-traditional actors, with the recent appointment of diplomatic envoys to Silicon Valley, serving as a direct line of communication between sources of international power and technology companies like Facebook, Google, and Apple (Gramer, 2017; Jacobsen, 2017).

Practical contributions

Although this analysis may have few practical implications for specific industry purposes, it does seek to start a social conversation by highlighting the cultural and narrative tensions existing behind #JeSuisCharlie and #JeSuisAhmed. Just barely a decade old, social media are fundamentally affecting psychological, sociological, political, and economic elements of society. The foreign influence Russians had on the 2016 U.S. presidential election through social networking platforms, whether state-sponsored or not, was a subversive use of digital broadcasting platforms that constituted a breach of U.S. sovereignty and self-determination. The purpose of the influence was to impose simplified information on a society that reflected the perspectives of foreign ideologies, aimed at destabilizing the existing social framework of the United States (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Graber & Dunaway, 2018; Inkster, 2016; Persily, 2017).

Following this, the onset of societal awareness that social media could be used as a form of foreign influence has started a conversation in the literature and research on the subject. However, this essay sought to start a social conversation by addressing the public interest behind

the foreign influence of social media. Powerful and influential countries like the United States must be willing to conceive, normatively speaking, of the extent to which their governments, people, and companies are intentionally and unintentionally mapping their perspectives on other countries and cultures via social media. Not unlike how social media were used to alter the U.S. political system in 2016, an oppositional aggressor to Russia, so too have countries like the United States been party to the use of social media to subvert and dominate foreign entities, most recently Arabic and Middle Eastern countries and the Islamic culture overall.

In a fast-paced modern world characterized by friending, following, posting, tweeting, and Fears of Missing Out (FOMO), social media have penetrated the daily lifestyles of billions of people. This new telecommunications technology is still in its infancy, and an understanding of its impact on society is still far from holistic. This paper attempted to offer a communication perspective on both the social ramifications of social media and hashtag virality in a digitally-mediated 21st century landscape. The telling of the human story has been a part of people's social tradition for thousands of years, and social media are the contemporary tool through which many people choose most often to tell that story. The ability of one faction of society to control such a narrative is one of the ultimate sources of domination over a culturally diverse world.

In contemplating the meaning behind this analysis, history is a tale told by the victor. Uni-cultural perspectives on world history have long been present; however, such perspectives were established by an elite few. That such perspectives are still present in the digitally democratized age of social media, via virally trending hashtags, means that cultural division and aggression are traits that run through all levels of society. Although such animalistic instincts of tribalism have long served humans, we are now reaching an apex of civilization where issues of climate change, over-population, limited natural resources, and nuclear war mean that we must be willing to work across racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious lines to reach states of peace and security.

The social narrative told through #JeSuisCharlie was founded in solidarity and moral principle. However, the narrative over simplistically reinforced anti-cultural sentiments toward both the Arabic and Islamic worlds. Although maybe subtle in a three-word data string (hashtag), the breadth with which #JeSuisCharlie evoked a digital understanding of the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting put it on a global pedestal for hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people to see. Such memetic qualities removed any subtle nature the hashtag alone had and became an aggressive cry of defiance against an ethnic and cultural demographic which, because of the digital divide, was ill equipped to defend itself. Rectifying this situation now falls to proponents of public interest communications to advocate for legitimate enforcement powers to address the protection of cultural diversity. The disparaging extent of global power distribution often falls along cultural lines, and such a divide is not conducive to a fair and balanced intellectual marketplace of cultural ideologies. It should therefore fall to bodies of IL to codify and regulate such social behavior in a digitally mediated universe. But as the wheels of justice are responsive in nature and tend to turn slowly, scholars and practitioners must strive to employ public interest communications strategy to advocate for those in the global village who are less capable of doing so on their own, based on the realities of the ever-present digital divide.

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