To be or not to be Charlie Hebdo: Ritual Patterns of Opinion Formation in the Social Networks

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Abstract

The social sciences have mostly focused on the formation of social opinions from a semantic point of view: given a certain semantic field, interviews, statistics, and other analytical instruments are commonly deployed in order to map the distribution of views, their evolution, their conflicts and their agreements. Socio-semiotics, social semiotics, and the other semiotic branches that bear on social inquiry have contributed to the effort by providing semiotic grids of categorization. These grids too, however, have been mostly related to semantic contents circulating through societies and their cultures. The present paper pursues a different hypothesis. After briefly recalling the events of 7-9 January 2015 in the Parisian area, the article seeks to survey and map the syntax of progressive differentiation of opinions circulating in the social networks about such events. Some patterns are identified and semiotically described: 1) cleavage; 2) comparative relativizing; 3) blurring sarcasm; 4) anonymity; 5) unfocused responsibility; 6) conspiracy thought. A new semiotic square is created to visually display these patterns, their positions, their relations, and their evolution.

Keywords

Charlie Hebdo; response to terrorist attacks; social networks; formation of opinions; socio-semiotics; rituality; narcissism

Author's short bio

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Καὶ ἡμῖν δὴ οὖν ἀγῶνα προκεῖσθαι πάντων ἀγώνων
μέγιστον νομίζειν χρεών, ὑπὲρ οὗ πάντα ποιητέον ἡμῖν
καὶ πονητέον εἰς δύναμιν ἐπὶ τὴν τούτου παρασκευήν, καὶ
ποιηταῖς καὶ λογοποιοῖς καὶ ῥήτορσι καὶ πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις
ὁμιλητέον ὅθεν ἂν μέλλῃ πρὸς τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς ἐπιμέλειαν
ὠφέλειά τις ἔσεσθαι.
Basil of Caesarea, *Oratio ad adolescentes*, II, 8

1. Introduction.

Social sciences have mostly focused on the formation of social opinions from a semantic point of view: given a certain semantic field, interviews, statistics, and other analytical instruments are deployed in order to map the distribution of views, their evolution, their conflicts and their agreements. Socio-semiotics, social semiotics, and the other semiotic branches that bear on social inquiry have contributed to the effort by providing semiotic grids of categorization. These grids too, however, have been mostly related to semantic contents circulating through societies and their cultures.

Conversely, the present paper will pursue a different hypothesis: the formation of opinions in current societies, and especially in those that have massively embraced social networks as a predominant form of personal manifestation, cannot be studied any more from a semantic point of view only. Individual voices, indeed, as well as groups and communities of belief, are increasingly turned into the knots of a gigantic bundle, in which positions take shape more according to a syntactic logic than according to a semantic one. That is not to say that people do not believe what they say or do not care about it; they certainly do. Nevertheless, their individual position in the bundle, and as a consequence their range of opinions, stem more from an unquenchable thirst for differentiation than from actual contact with social matters. That partially explains the often extremely conflictive character of the present-day social formation of opinions: radical negation of previous positions is a more effective path of differentiation than adherence to a mainstream trend. Are the current technology and modality of communication turning most social actors into blind contrarians? That is the main question around which the present article revolves, adopting as a case study one of the most controversial and yet central issues of contemporary societies: the terrorist[2] attacks perpetrated by violent jihadist fundamentalists against those who, in their view, dared to satirize Islam.

After briefly recalling the events of 7-9 January 2015 in the Parisian area, the article seeks to survey and map the syntax of progressive differentiation of opinions circulating in the social networks about such events. Some patterns are identified and semiotically described: 1) cleavage; 2) comparative relativizing; 3) blurring sarcasm; 4) anonymity; 5) unfocused responsibility; 6) conspiracy thought. A new semiotic square is created to visually display these patterns, their positions, their relations, and their evolution.

[2] Although the definition of "terrorism" and "terrorist" is highly problematic, it will not be discussed here. For a detailed examination of the semantics of these two terms, see Leone 2014: 810.

2. The tragedy and the ritual.

Like most European citizens, I followed the tragic events of 7 January 2015 with anguish. Being in Lyon as visiting professor made the news about terrorist attacks in Paris sound even closer and, to a certain extent, surreal. I know Paris very well. I jogged endless times through the streets where the killings took place. It was unbelievable. Yet, as reports and commentaries proliferated (I was monitoring media in several languages), I sought to preserve a dimension of detachment. I tried to keep a part of myself calm enough to analyze - not the events, which still appear overwhelming to me, but the discourse on the events. While the terrorists were still besieged by the French police special forces, I could not help asking myself: how long will it take before the usual patterns that structure the reception of news in the present world reproduce themselves? How many days after the events will the usual, recurring voices surface and propose an interpretive grid for what has happened?

The answer was: immediately, or almost immediately. Just hours after the shocking news, stereotypical patterns of interpretations were arising, to the extent that I started wondering, as I will be wondering in this paper, whether the point was not the content of these receptions, but their inner structure[3]. The content indeed might appear as novel, as the

[3] The semiotic analysis of public opinion is still a relatively underdeveloped field, especially as regards social networks. See Ehrat 2010 for a semiotic study of the representation of 'scandalous' events in the media; see also Gaines 2010. On the one hand, such field is close to the research area on "framing"; for a partially semiotic approach, see Botan and Soto 1998; Zhoun and Moy 2006; Boomgaardenand and de Vreese 2007. Research on formation of public opinion regarding terrorism attacks has blossomed after 9/11. See Greenberg 2002; some recent contributions are Gerhards 2001; Frindte and Haussecker 2010; Archetti 2013. From the theoretical point of view, on the other hand, the topic of the semiotic analysis of opinion formation intersects the area of the semiotics of 'lifestyles', 'forms of life', 'modes of existence'; see Fontanille 2006; Zilberberg 2011; the French semiotic journal *Nouveaux Actes Sémiotiques* contains several articles devoted to such topic; see for instance Landowski 2012. On the formation of interpretive frames in the social networks, see Liu 2007; in the same journal issue, Lange 2007; see also Adami and Kress 2009.

situation to which it reacted seemed to be without precedent. However, the form of this reception was, in a certain way, ritual[4]. I refer not to the sophisticated comments that started to flourish in the press, with interventions by professionals ranging from military experts to metaphysical philosophers. I am referring, instead, to comments, and comments on comments, in the anonymous, scattered press of our epoch, the social networks[5]. I will now try to schematize some of these interpretive trends and formulate hypotheses about why and to what purpose they repetitively exemplify the response to tragic events like the Paris terrorist attacks of January 2015.

3. Cleavage.

The first line this article will point out is progressive differentiation, which in the French press often goes under the somewhat derogatory name of "*clivage*" ["cleavage"][6]. The emotional response to the extermination of Charlie Hebdo's cartoonists was rapid and, in a way, commensurate with the symbolical kernel of the tragedy. The victims were mostly famous satirical cartoonists; they were killed by jihadist terrorists because, to the terrorists, the cartoonists had repetitively dared to represent the Islamic prophet Mohammad, often

[4] The application of ritual studies to the analysis of contemporary communication is not new, at least since the Manchester school; see for instance Handelman 1977; Liebes and Curran 1998; on 'framing' in ritual studies, Handelman 2006.
[5] The formation of opinion in social networks is matter of increasingly intense research especially in the domain now known as "social informatics"; see Javarone and Galam 2015; a recent survey on n-ethnographic approaches for the study of social networks is Hine 2015; on trolling as modality of opinion formation in social networks, see the thought-provoking Whitney 2015; on the spreading of unfounded news through social networks, Aron 2014; on the socio- and psycho-dynamics of identity in social networks there exists an abundant and growing literature; recent useful contributions include Balick 2014 and Barbieri 2014; for a survey, Power and Kirwan 2014.
[6] On the conceptualization of terrorism in western media, see Schwarz-Friesel and Kromminga 2014.

with heavily sarcastic tones[7]. Messages of emotional proximity to the victims, therefore, took the expressive form that was under attack; cartoons started circulating throughout the web, mostly in social networks. The viral power of responses increased as a result of people initially reacting not verbally but visually. Not everyone can draw, and as a consequence people mostly spread images that professional cartoonists had made, posting them in their social networks. The visual discourse that initially reacted to the killings concentrated in a few images, widely circulating through the web. They could be analyzed one by one, so as to show their precise perspective on the events, but most tended to coalesce around the same message, which can be verbally summarized as follows: "cartoons are stronger than weapons, they will eventually triumph" (Fig. 1)[8]. There were other semantic lines, for instance that of cartoons showing the victims in ironic after-life situations; but they were less predominant.

Fig. 1: Cartoon emphasizing the strength of Charlie Hebdo's satire against the terrorists.

[7] Bibliography on the cartoons affaire is quite extensive. For a survey, Klausen 2009; Grenda, Beneke, and Nash 2014; Sinderman, Petersen, Slothuus, and Stubager, 2014; on the Danish context, Sinram 2015; on the German context, Ata 2011; for a comparative study, Avon 2010.
[8] The semiotic analysis of cartoons has a long tradition; see Contemori and Pettinari 1993; El Refaie 2009; on the semiotic analysis of cartoons as response to terrorism (9/11), Hart and Hassencahl 2002; on the methodology of using the semantic analysis of cartoons in order to study public discourse on crucial issues, Giarelli and Tulman 2003.

A second, as widespread and immediate reaction was also visual, although including both verbal and graphic elements. People started posting a specific visual rendering of the sentence "Je suis Charlie" ["I am Charlie"], adopting the traditional lettering of the magazine, usually in black and white, and in various languages[9]. This very simple sentence was rhetorically strong because it was based on empty deictic positions (Benveniste 1966, 1971; Manetti 2008; Ono 2007): an "I" identifying with Charlie; a time coinciding with the enunciation of the sentence itself; no indication of space. As a consequence, everyone in the world could appropriate this "I", inhabit the time of its enunciation, and transport its content to whatever latitude. What did "Je suis Charlie" mean? In the beginning, a quite unarticulated expression of human proximity, of empathy toward those who had been brutally killed for having visually expressed their ideas of sarcastic contempt toward what they considered Islamic obscurantism. In other words, the many instances of "Je suis Charlie" that proliferated in the web would not explicitly mean "I agree with the ideas of the killed cartoonists", but rather "I am you since you were killed because what you thought", or even more generally, "I am you because you were brutally killed while doing your work"[10].

These first two orders of reaction, which we might call viral visual response and first-person identification, showed some spontaneity, perhaps because they intervened in the first instants after the tragedy, when facts were still evolving[11]. By contrast, in the succeeding phase, when the social reaction to the tragedy turned from an emotional, visual, and intimate monologue to a rational, verbal, and collective dialogue or polyphony, stereotypical patterns started to shape the public discourse. In other words, while the first, emotional reactions were

[9] French graphic designer Joachim Roncin created the slogan and its visual Gestalt in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. Roncin chose the typographic style of his own magazine, *Stylist*, for pronoun and verb ("Je suis", "I am") and the typographic style of *Charlie Hebdo* for "Charlie". The slogan spread first on Twitter, then virally everywhere on the web.
[10] On the semiotics of empathy, see Koch 1989; on narrative empathy, Keen 2006. Cfr Boler 1997.
[11] For a socio-semiotic analysis of such collective emotional responses, see Landowski 2004.

fresh and surprising, what came after was, to a larger extent, perfectly predictable. It was mechanical, and as such it was also often, and sometimes intolerably, inhuman. The cold predictability of social discourse was borne out by the ease with which a moderately expert analyst could foresee, sometimes in detail, what the next move would be. The first of these moves was the simplest move by which human beings usually produce value, and therefore identity: negation[12]. While millions of people were reproducing the same Titanic cartoons in the social networks, as well as adopting the same slogan, very soon other people felt compelled to stand out, to display their individuality, and to manifest their membership of a minority.

Arguably, this strategy of opposition and individualization is relatively independent from its actual content, and actually reproduces itself in the semiosphere, and especially in social networks, every time that a collective response takes place. In other words, when the social networks produce a viral interpretation "A", it is only a matter of seconds before some individuals in the same social networks start to proclaim "non-A". However, the point is that they are not really interested in "A"; they are mostly interested in "non-", that is, they are irresistibly excited by the possibility of empowering, through negation, their own identity. While millions of people take existential comfort in merging their emotional individuality in a collective reaction, some other people feel almost threatened by it (Canetti 1960). They feel the urge to stand out from the crowd no matter what it takes.

Being a contrarian, negating that which everybody is repeating, is the first degree of individualization in social networks, because it inevitably leads to the necessity of nuances. Indeed, while the slogan "Je suis Charlie" can be embraced without justification (its

[12] Literature on negation is extensive. For a semiotic perspective, Centre de recherche sémiologique 1991, Nöth 1994 and Ibo 2012; issue 114 of the *Nouveaux Actes Sémiotiques* (2011) was also entirely devoted to negation (accessible at http://epublications.unilim.fr/revues/as/2730; last access April 29, 2015); cfr Donà 2004; an early study of the social psychology of negation is Wason 1962; for a general survey, Yang 2005.

justification is in its circulation itself, in the almost evolutionary identity of its emotional efficacy), the contrarian must, conversely, justify the reasons for which "Je ne suis pas Charlie" ["I am not Charlie"] is uttered. Disparate arguments were given to justify this first degree of cleavage. The most common of them all was the idea that, while feeling empathy for the tragic destiny of the cartoonists and the other victims, a statement of identification with the satirical magazine was not in order, because people proclaiming "Je ne suis pas Charlie" strongly disapproved of its contents and tone. It was not fair, these voices affirmed, to denigrate religion in the way the magazine did. Therefore, total endorsement of it through a personal statement of identification was impossible. The disquieting aspect of such first-degree cleavage was its coldness: how was it possible, while the corpses of eleven people were still warm, brutally massacred in the name of ideology, concentrating not on the unspeakable violence of murder, but on the editorial line of the magazine? That was possible because, in a way, it was not about the magazine. It voiced, on the contrary, a 'human, too human' instinct of differentiation. One feels empathy, but nevertheless wants to stand out; one doesn't want to merge with the "Je suis Charlie" crowd. One shouts out, in contrast, the "Je ne suis pas Charlie" slogan. What matters is not the tenability of such a stance, but its individuality, the capacity to project an exclusive profile around one's opinion and persona.

But were not these two proclamations, the positive and the negative one, on the same level? Why should the former be considered as an emotional, instinctive, and collective reaction to the tragedy and the latter as a cold, meditated, and individualistic counter-reaction to it? There are several reasons for this distinction, but one of them is fundamental. Those who chose "Je ne suis pas Charlie" were not reacting to reality. They were reacting to a discourse on reality. Their relation with the killings was second-degree and, therefore, from a certain point of view, devoid of human empathy. But was not the "Je suis Charlie" party also reacting to a representation of reality provided by the media? Most of the members of this

collectivity indeed had not witnessed the tragedy directly, but through the nerve-wracking storytelling of French and international media. Nevertheless, those displaying unconditioned empathy toward the victims situated their reaction on a hierarchical level that was different than the one hosting the "Je ne suis pas Charlie" statements. As shall be seen, one of the main discursive complicacies affecting communication in social networks nowadays is exactly the widespread incapacity to distinguish among levels of discourse: between a message that bears on the reality of death and a message that bears on a message bearing on the reality of death, and so on.

4. Comparative relativizing.

Such incapacity is even more striking in the second form of rhetorical differentiation, which stemmed not simply from cleavage (you say "yes", therefore I say "no"), but from another stereotypical dynamic of the present-day social discourse. It could be called "comparative relativizing". The structure of this argumentative pattern is extremely common in social networks and can be summarized as follows: every time that a collective subject expresses empathy or simply proximity to a cause "X", an individual subject will construct its identity by relativizing such proximity through comparison. In the case of the "Je suis Charlie" movement, in a matter of hours after its manifestation on the web, "Je ne suis par Charlie" were proliferating not only through criticism of the magazine's contents (cleavage), but also through relativizing comparison: what about the journalist "X" persecuted and killed in such or such country? What about the victim "Y" of such or such terror? Why don't people say "Je suis X" or "Je suis Y" for them? This process of differentiation is in a way even more pernicious than the first one, for it projects an ideological grid on empathy. Following this argument,

there is always one victim, one massacre, one genocide, etc., that is worthier of consideration than the present one. “Are my victims worse than yours? Then stop complaining”, the comparative relativizing argument says. The viral consequence of this rhetorical pattern on the web is a multiplication of instances of empathic redress: in the cacophonic conversation that, minute after minute, expands on the social networks, each participant comes up with a cause, a source of injustice, a wound that lies somewhere and sometime else in space and history, and whose message to the current situation is: “consider me, not Charlie Hebdo, I’m as worthy or even worthier of attention”.

To give an idea of the surrealist paroxysm this argumentative pattern can lead to, consider the following example. In the city of Turin, Uber, the web-based private transportation network, is becoming increasingly popular, especially with students and young people. Taxi drivers are angry, complaining about losing customers and having their license decrease in value. Thus, they keep protesting, sometimes quite aggressively. Recently, during a new wave of protest, they started pasting on the windows of their taxis a sticker. It was identical to a “Je suis Charlie” sticker, with the same design, colors, and lettering, but “Charlie” had been replaced by “taxi legale” [“legal taxi”] (Fig. 2). A slogan that had been created to show collective empathy toward the victims of a terrorist attack was therefore used to attract empathy toward taxi drivers endangered by Uber. That is the moral oddity the process of comparative relativizing can lead to: myriads of more or less serious grievances are pushed to compete for media attention through the meme of “Je suis Charlie”. The problem is that, from a discursive point of view, none of them wins.

Fig. 2: A "Je suis taxi legale" poster on the car window of a taxi in Turin

At a first glance, it might seem that this argumentative structure is additive. "Let's not say only 'je suis Charlie'; let's say also 'je suis X' or 'je suis Y'". In reality, though, this argumentative pattern is subtractive. It parasitizes the emotional charge that a collectivity is sharing around a certain issue in order to channel away some of that charge elsewhere. The minimal formula of this subtraction is a simple word: "but". It is a word that has equivalents in practically all languages and that logically and above all semantically introduces a negative differentiation[13]. "Je suis Charlie", but…The semantic configuration that this word prompts is the same that emerges from one of the most paradoxically racist sentences of the contemporary social discourse: "I'm not racist, but…" This "but" actually nullifies any anti-racist self-definition, as well as it disintegrates any empathy behind the "Je suis Charlie" identification. Pragmatically, this "but" invites the crowd to snap out from its emotional trance, and to cognitively re-direct its empathic attention elsewhere.

Is this comparative relativizing justified by the multiplicity of ideological agendas that, as it is natural, circulate through the social networks? Attentive observation of this complex discursive arena seems to legitimize the suspicion that this second-degree differentiation too stems more from a formal pattern than from sensibility to a particular content. In other words, what matters seems to be not the urgency to bring to the fore such or such grievance,

[13] On "but" as one of main operators of differentiation, cfr Greimas 1975.

but to somehow downplay the one that is under the spotlight, to break the spell of an enchanted collectivity and reintroduce a motive for its re-fragmentation. It is as though an ancestral fear of the crowd manifested itself every time that an emotional collectivity forms in the web. An instinctive reflex of individuation leads many to stand out, to speak out their stance of contrarians, and to gain a few seconds of public attention as a result.

There is always a modicum of profiteering behind any differentiation. The simplest form of it is attention: those who create value through the emergence of difference receive attention. In some cases, value is created not through negative differentiation but through positive creativity. After the terrorist attacks against Charlie Hebdo, a drawing by Banksy started to spread throughout the global web, in which a "today" and a "tomorrow" were visually compared. "Today" was the image of a broken pencil. "Tomorrow", the picture of the two fragments, turned into two sharpened pencils. The drawing was clever because its message was direct, powerful, and unequivocal: today cartoonists are killed; tomorrow they'll multiply. Freedom and creativity overcome obscurantism and repression. The drawing was immensely successful also because its form embodied its message: Banksy's creativity was extolling creativity's resilience. As a result, the image became immensely popular and was widely shared on the Internet (Fig. 3).

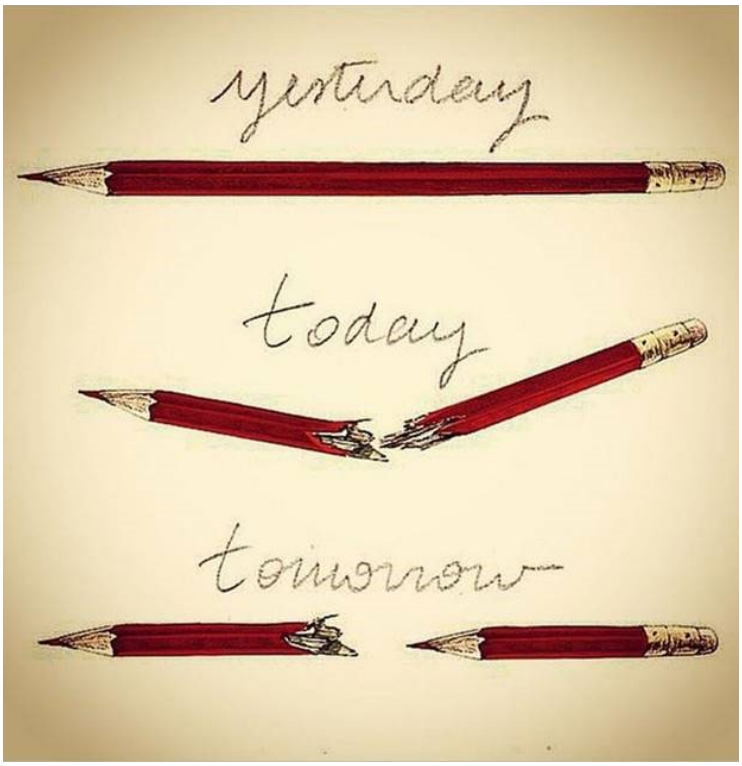

Fig. 3: Bansky's cartoon for Charlie Hebdo

However, beside the positive differentiation of creativity, whose potential of individuation is huge, there subsist myriads of microscopic instances, which do not create difference through creativity but through negation. Cleavage and comparative relativizing are two examples of it: when "Je ne suis Charlie" is posted on Facebook, or when a "Je suis taxi" sticker is displayed, some of the force of the collective empathy is parasitized in order to gain a moment of attention, be it even an outraged, annoyed attention. But does that entail that the collectivity has a copyright on its slogans, and that no minority, alternative stance is possible? Such a claim would be tantamount to advocating a dictatorship of the collectivity. At the same time, a logical difference obtains between those agnostics who simply do not partake in the collective empathy, for instance by not displaying any "Je suis Charlie" sticker, and those who, on the contrary, willingly produce negative deviation from the collective block.

A contemporary scholar's duty is not only to reflect on what happens to a society when it expels any instance of negation, as in the case of dictatorships, but also on what happens to

a community when collective empathy is constantly frustrated by operations of cleavage and relativizing. Is this individualism of contrarian reactions not also conducive to a sort of moral paralysis, in which the continuous juxtaposition of competitive claims disrupts any attempt of moral project? In other words: what happens to a society when it is no longer able to hold a minute of silence for its victims of terror without individual voices to break the void? The narcissism that pervades social media is a mighty force, which sometimes works to the detriment of social cohesion.

As has been pointed out, there is nothing easier than gaining attention through negation. The crowd says "Je suis Charlie", I differentiate myself through cleavage or comparative relativizing; I therefore win the attention of a small group of followers, who maybe think what I think, but most probably are also eager to differentiate themselves through the paradoxical formation of a minority. In order to integrate a minority I must share the opinions of others (individual minorities are as difficult to conceive as individual languages are). However, the kind of homologation that the individual suffers in a minority is different from that which the majority or the mainstream impose. It is a homologation that nevertheless keeps the value of 'differentiation through negation' attached to it.

5. Blurring sarcasm.

A third degree of differentiation, however, exasperates the semantic and pragmatic effects of cleavage and comparative relativizing: messages are introduced in the semiosphere that not only seek to negate the emotional cohesion of the crowd or to displace its focus toward other domains, but clearly constitute an anti-statement. That is the case of the French satirical

comedian and anti-Semitic activist Dieudonné M'bala M'bala[14]. On January 11, 2015, in order to show solidarity to the victims of the terrorist attacks, a giant crowd marched through the boulevards of Paris; the French comedian, a notorious contrarian, conversely Tweeted "*Sachez que ce soir, en ce qui me concerne, Je me sens Charlie Coulibaly*" ["please notice that tonight, as far as I am concerned, I feel like Charlie Coulibaly"], mixing the name of the satirical magazine with that of one of the terrorists, Amedy Coulibaly[15]. He was therefore prosecuted and condemned by the French authorities for being an apologist of terrorism.

Dieudonné's statement, however, was not isolated. Soon after, other versions of the same slogan started to spread through the social networks, sometimes adopting the graphic shape of the "Je suis Charlie" sign. These versions, however, would also replace, like Dieudonné's, the name of the magazine with the name of the terrorists, that is, again Coulibaly or the infamous brothers Kouachi, perpetrators of the Charlie Hebdo massacre[16] (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3: An image posted on the web, adapting the "Je suis Charlie" slogan so as to show support to the terrorists.

[14] Fontenay-aux-Roses, Hauts-de-Seine, France, 11 February 1966.
[15] Juvisy-sur-Orge, Île-de-France, France, 27 February 1982 – Paris, 9 January 2015.
[16] Chérif and Saïd Kouachi, born in Paris, 29 November 1982 and 7 September 1980; both died in Dammartin-en-Goële, France, 9 January 2015.

These counter-slogans would also frequently openly endorse violent Jihadism or anti-Semitism. It is quite evident that the degree of differentiation that these slogans seek to bring about is situated on a different level of antagonism. They do not limit themselves to deny the identification of the crowd with the victims, nor do they simply replace the victims with other supposed victims, but they propose a disquieting identification with the terrorists. As is evident in the case of Dieudonné, this third degree of differentiation produces scandal, and as a result attention and audience, as well as imitators and supporters. Since the present article is about abstract patterns of semantic differentiation in the semiosphere more than about their actual content, what is at stake here is not so much the absurdity of proposing to the media, and especially to the social networks, an identification with the assassins, as these statements' capacity for virally spreading throughout the semiosphere. Proposals of this kind, indeed, are worrying because of their semantics of violence, but they worry even more because of their pragmatic efficacy: many people on the Internet were eager to receive and relay them, thus contributing to their diffusion. How can one explain that? Whereas differentiations of the first two sorts (cleavage and negation) defy the crowd through moderate counter-narratives, followers of Dieudonné or supporters of the Kouachi brothers endorse a dramatically antisocial view, according to which the crowd that manifests against terrorism and in solidarity with its victims is not only wrong (we should not be "Charlie", we should be someone else) but turns, de facto, into an enemy. Shouting "Je suis Coulibaly" means designating the whole pro-Charlie crowd as the next potential victim.

To this regard, a further distinction should be made. On the one hand, opinion leaders like Dieudonné openly utter these statements. They are well aware of the legal consequences that they will have to face as a result. Indeed, for as punitive as these consequences might be, they inevitably turn into the most effective megaphone these opinion leaders might have. That is one of the dilemmas Western societies must deal with in the present time: on the one side,

limiting the diffusion of hate speech; on the other side, facing the risk that any limitation becomes involuntary propaganda (Bleich 2011; Leone 2011). That is exactly what happened after Dieudonné was prosecuted for his seemingly pro-Coulibaly statement: thousands of anonymous voices on the Internet started to depict him as a martyr of freedom and as a victim of censorship and repression, even comparing him with Charlie Hebdo. The evident difference between the cartoonists, who had been brutally killed for what they had drawn, and Dieudonné, who was being prosecuted according to the French law, was totally ignored. Dieudonné, as well as being a contrarian and provoking opinion leaders like him, knows very well how to use public outrage as a lever to gain popularity and, as a result, political and financial benefits. Hence, it is not difficult to explain the rationale behind these rhetorical patterns of provocation. Unfortunately, the more morally outrageous they sound, the more they attract media attention; hence they acquire social status in specific niches. What is more difficult to explain is why these niches proliferate in the present-day political panorama. Why should someone endorse a statement that openly justifies or even glorifies brutal terrorism, if no apparent benefits derive from such endorsement?

6. Anonymity.

An element to be considered is certainly the paradoxical effects that the anonymity of communication introduces into the semiosphere (Roesler 2007; Stryker 2012; Poletti and Rak 2014). Anonymity is not a modern invention. Anonymous letters, pasquinades, graffiti with no manifest author have been there with us for some considerable time, often playing a central role in society (Griffin 2003; Mullan 2007; Pabst 2011): given the unbalance of power and the social hierarchy in a community, the only way for unrepresented and repressed voices to

circulate is to be communicated without apparent attachment to a persona. Anonymity defends the dissident or the minority from the violence of power. What happens, though, when anonymity becomes not the exception, but the rule of socio-political communication? Internet journals and magazines are full of comments and opinions that react to each other in an infinite chain, and yet very few of them are attached to what, in the pre-Internet era, would be called "an author". Fictitious avatars with fantastic names constitute today the bulk of communication on the Internet. Lengthy and complicated investigation is required, even for police forces or secret services, in order to reattach these avatars to the persona of a citizen. In some cases, such reattachment is utterly impossible. The traces that link a body and its Internet voices fade away in the continuously moving ocean of the web.

Proliferation of anonymity in the public arena is not without consequences. As it was underlined earlier, secrecy allowed dissidents of the past to voice messages that would have been otherwise brutally repressed. In the present time, however, it is not only fear of repression that prompts authors to conceal themselves behind avatars, but a new version of the aesthetic thrill that Canetti had recognized in the formation of crowds. On the one hand, there is anonymity in every crowd, at least to a certain extent. Those who marched through the boulevards of Paris shouting "Je suis Charlie" were also enjoying the aesthetic pleasure of merging into an overwhelming collectivity. On the other hand, fusion in a real crowd is never complete: no matter how much supporters of a political cause or a soccer team stick together, they remain individual bodies, sentient beings, occupying a specific portion of time and space. They might shout outrageous slogans, but they will never be able to totally shed responsibility for that shouting. They might ecstatically lose themselves in the multitude, sometimes with tragic, violent consequences, but they will still exist in it as singularities, and as such they will be faced by police forces, videoed by secret services, arrested.

Crowds on the Internet are more powerful. Avatars join causes, express solidarity, manifest concern, incite to hate, side with the victims or with their assassins, call for empathy and action, attract to- or distract from such or such goal, etc. practically without boundaries. A brutal message written in a web forum and the actual persona of his or her author, living in a space and time, are so distant that only exceptional circumstances recreate a binding connection between them. At the same time, though, the essentially virtual character of the contemporary Internet crowd also generates some disquieting consequences. What kind of opinion is, indeed, one that is radically disconnected from its body? Threads of comments that develop at the bottom of whatever news in the websites of journals, especially in relation to controversial topics, often feature a particular semantic characteristic: they are syntactically related in the thread, formally connecting to each other through appropriate anaphoric references, but they nevertheless seem to avoid fully engaging with the semantic field opened by others. Solipsism is the meaning effect that emerges from such an arrangement. Is this a consequence of anonymity? It partially is. Avatars do not converse like human beings, not only because — despite the development of more and more sophisticated emoticons — verbal exchange is constantly detached from other systems of signs and languages (facial expressions, intonations, etc.), but also because voices detached from bodies tend to drift in the semiosphere without any hindrance or obstacle to divert their trajectory.

On the one hand, any avatar on the Internet easily finds a constituency: no matter how outrageous a proposal might be, it will sooner or later garner, if not support, at least other avatars' willingness to find differentiation and value in the virtual semiosphere through adhering to that proposal. Avatars and people behind them are starving for value, and sometimes find it in the most morally unacceptable stances. On the other hand, given the conformity of the virtual semiosphere, even the most controversial stance will not come across resistance, but develop a sort of a niche in the unlimited semiotic space of the web.

Terrorist jihadist web forums justifying the stoning of adulterous women inject in the Western semiosphere criminal ideas, yet they mostly remain unchallenged, inhabited and visited only by those who have already shaped their avatar identity by playing the obscurantist game of the forum.

That should not suggest that no connection exists between the way in which ideas are exchanged on the Internet and the way they circulate outside of the web. Controversial leaders like Dieudonné, for instance, gain political and financial status, exactly because they are skillfully able to inhabit the ridge between virtual and non-virtual, Youtube and theatres. However, what fuels their political and economic power - that is, their supporters - rarely stand out from the anonymous crowd and actually rarely manifest themselves only through vague avatars. The double standard that characterizes the expression of opinions in the Western semiosphere as regards the relation between the square and the web-square accentuates this phenomenon: since real personae must face censorship and sometimes legal consequences, while avatars mostly develop their personal moral world undisturbed, the former increasingly disappear behind the latter, shaping a social arena in which semantic content is created and communicated without responsibility.

The semiotic analysis of patterns of opinion formation in the virtual semiosphere should not turn, however, into a plea for censorship (Leone Forthcoming *Censura*). On the contrary, democratic observers cannot but rejoice, themselves, at the new spaces of expression of ideas that the Internet has offered to human beings. These spaces are absolutely fundamental, especially in those societies in which speaking in person, and not only through an avatar, might be a cause for persecution and even death. At the same time, semiotic analysts must open their eyes, and the eyes of others, vis-à-vis the possible consequences, for a community, of a social conversation and a formation of public opinion that mostly develop

virtually, without or with transient connection to a physical and administrative persona. The keyword here is responsibility.

7. Responsibility.

Responsibility is certainly not a syntactic characteristic of communication, although it affects its syntax. The same goes for the semantic level. Responsibility is, however, not simply a moral concept either, but also a semiotic, and specifically pragmatic one. Etymologically, it designates the circle of individuals or institutions to which a subject ideally responds, to which a subject is accountable. Who will ideally answer the conversation that I start on the web, and what do I owe to this conversation partner(s)? What are the rules that I have to abide by in order for my statement to receive an appropriate answer? Understanding what responsible communication is can be easier if its negative counterpart is analyzed first, that is, irresponsible communication.

Let us go back to Dieudonné's contrarian statement "Je suis Charlie Coulibaly". In defending himself against the accusation of "apology of terrorism" leveled at him by the French State, Dieudonné declared that his intention was rather that of "avoir voulu dépasser la logique 'des gentils et des méchants'", "going beyond the logic of 'the kind ones and the evil ones'". The degree of responsibility of this statement, and of the statement it seeks to justify, can be measured in relation to the audience to which Dieudonné potentially responds. Such an audience is not simply composed of the comedian's relatives and friends, but consists in the vast arena of people who, through theatre shows and especially through social networks, are reached everyday by Dieudonné's words and performances. Dieudonné's Facebook page is presently followed by more than 900.000 supporters; Twitter, 129.000; "Quenel+",

Dieudonné's Youtube channel, almost 100.000. At the same time, Dieudonné is not an elected official; he is a private citizen, with the same right of expression as other French citizens. The point here, though, is not legal but pragmatic: what is the force of Dieudonné's voice, his capacity to create contents that, injected in the semiosphere, circulate through it and even reach its kernel? What is the probability that Dieudonné's anti-Semitic ideas, for instance, 'infect' the nucleus of the French society?

Given the position that the comedian holds in the French and Francophone semiosphere, his ironic insights on the Republican March of 11 January 2015 — posted on Twitter and other social networks — and especially the abovementioned infamous sentence "please notice etc." are pragmatically irresponsible. To this regard, the most revealing segment of the sentence is not the repulsive juxtaposition of the name of the victims with that of the assassin, but the incidental clause "as far as I am concerned" ["en ce qui me concerne"]. A public opinion leader with such a grasp over a large part of the French audience cannot qualify his statements with "as far as I am concerned", since it is clear that whatever he publicly does or says will affect hundreds of thousands of people. In order to better gauge the measure of this irresponsibility three elements must be analyzed: 1) the pattern of opinion formation that this sentence exploits; 2) its "trajectory" in the semiosphere; 3) the actual semantic content that it circulates in the contemporary French arena.

As regards the first element, it is clear that Dieudonné builds the value of his message and identity not only through simple cleavage ("I am not Charlie Hebdo"), or relativizing comparison ("We should not be Charlie Hebdo, we should be X or Y") but by an ambiguous combination of both, which is essentially sarcastic. Given the tragic situation that Dieudonné's statement comments upon, his sarcasm is desecrating. It precisely consists in blurring the distinction between the innocent and the murderer. It calls its audience for an ambiguous, oxymoronic, de facto impossible identification, which embraces in the same empathy the

victims of terror and its perpetrators. Since this identification is hardly conceivable, especially in the aftermath of the tragic events, the sarcastic character of the message prompting it stands out: Dieudonné's statement is not actually advocating consideration on the same level the death of Charlie Hebdo's cartoonists and that of Coulibaly; it is mocking those who express spontaneous identification with the murdered. Therefore, the pattern of opinion formation that this sentence exploits cannot be considered as purely syntactic, as a way to forge, albeit for a minute, the frisson of a contrarian's identity; it is, conversely, a calculated moral chimera, offered to Dieudonné's web audience in order to strengthen the comedian's position as a maverick in the French semiosphere, as an opinion leader able to go beyond the mainstream thought imposed by information lobbies.

As regards the second element (the "trajectory" of Dieudonné's sentence in the semiosphere), it developed through three different lines. Along the first one, the sentence immediately generated repulsion and, consequently, a legal action against the comedian, accused and then condemned for apology of terrorism. Along the second line, though, the more the sentence was quoted, and condemned by the political, media, and intellectual establishment, the more copycat versions of it started to circulate in the web, frequently topped by versions that, abandoning the veil of sarcasm contained in the original sentence, would bluntly endorse an identification with Coulibaly, the murderer. There were, it is true, web followers of Dieudonné who expressed concern about the comedian's new provocation (third line), but they were a minority. Overall, he managed to reinforce his image of contrarian and victim, persecuted by a repressive establishment.

As regards the third element, that is, the actual content that Dieudonné's statement circulated in the French and Francophone semiosphere, it deploys itself on different levels. First, it seeks and probably succeeds in using irony, or rather sarcasm, in order to break the spell of a nation that unites, in an almost religious moment, to commemorate the victims of

brutal murder. Second, it insinuates that such an outpouring of indignation is misplaced, since it should consider how the perpetrators are themselves victims when considered from a more 'enlightened' perspective. Third, it shows a model of desecration, offered to all those that, for such or such reason, might side with the terrorists: muddying the water of moral judgment by blurring the distinction between murderers and murdered. Fourth, it pursues a strategy of provocation/victimization, by forcing the French authorities to prosecute the comedian for his statements; the strategy is particularly pernicious since it explicitly proposes a (pseudo)parallel between Dieudonné and Charlie Hebdo, which would be both victims of obscurantism and repression.

Given this analysis, the pragmatic irresponsibility of the comedian also situates itself on several levels. First, as it was suggested before, Dieudonné's is not a common citizen, but an opinion leader, albeit a 'comic' one, who economically and also politically profits from the growth of his popularity, which in turn is directly proportional to his ability for provocation, for denying the established consensus. But isn't provoking laughter the first duty of a comedian, no matter what the situation is? Isn't shedding irony and even sarcasm on all sort of reality the core-business of a humorist? It probably is. The question then is: who was supposed to laugh at Dieudonné's 'joke', and who actually did? Could relatives and friends of the victims laugh at this 'joke', feeling relieved by it? Could the millions of French mourners rejoice at the humor, thankful for the way it lifted their spirits? It is difficult not to be firmly convinced that the only audience that could reasonably laugh or smile or feeling euphoria at Dieudonné's sarcastic sentence was composed by those somehow siding with the murderers. Dieudonné's 'joke' was therefore titillating terrorism sympathizers. That is the first reason of his pragmatic irresponsibility: a comedian should be able to propose the best interpretation of the extent to which a certain pragmatic context is open to laughter or not. Cracking a joke at a funeral can provide relief even for mourners, but if the joke implicitly debases the dead, then

it is not a joke anymore, but simply bad taste[17]. When bad taste is shared with hundreds of thousands of people, then, it turns into a bad opinion, and sometimes even into a bad plan of action.

On a different level, Dieudonné's statement is irresponsible not only toward the pragmatics of the context, but also toward the genre itself to which it purports to refer. Laughter is a serious matter, as the history of philosophy and semiotics shows.[18] The one who is able to make people laugh is able to give those people a rare aesthetic and almost physical pleasure, whose rules of creation escape any standardized production. There are, of course, techniques to provoke laughter, but people still rightly consider great comedians as people of talent or even genius, since they can touch other people in a powerful and yet mysterious way. From this point of view, humour is a gift, and as such should be cultivated. When a successful humorist transposes this gift from the arena of entertainment to the political one, abusing laughter as an alibi to convey the most controversial stances, then that comedian is implicitly betraying the pact of genre that links the artist and the spectator, the jokes of the former and the laughter of the latter. A comedian who, performing in his/her theatre, uses humor, irony, sarcasm and laughter to wittily unveil the unbalances of human life is one thing; a comedian who, having gained through his/her ability the consensus of millions, abuses humour, irony, sarcasm and laughter to rage on victims of power is another. That is the ultimate irresponsibility of Dieudonné: in inciting his fellow citizens to joke about Charlie Hebdo's tragedy and to side with its perpetrators, he encouraged them to laugh at the unarmed victims, not at their armed killers.

[17] For a more detailed analysis of the role of humor, irony, and sarcasm in the present-day socio-political panorama, see Leone 2014. Cfr also Leone 2002 and Leone Forthcoming *La pallavolo*.
[18] Literature on the topic is extensive. An obvious reference is Eco 1985.

8. Conspiracy.

Thus far, three patterns of opinion formation in the semiosphere were analyzed: differentiation through negation; differentiation through relativizing comparison; opinion leading through sarcasm. The last and fourth pattern that this article will analyze is that of conspiracy theories. Whereas the first pattern says "I am not Charlie Hebdo"; the second, "I am not Charlie Hebdo, I am X"; and the third, "I am Charlie Hebdo's assassin"; the fourth pattern explicitly states: "Charlie Hebdo does not exist". Mere hours after the brutal attacks in Paris, statements of this kind started to proliferate in the social networks. They often took an elaborate, professional or semi-professional form, aiming at 'debunking' the hoax 'Charlie Hebdo'. Through pointing at details in the dynamic of the events, and especially through (pseudo) analysis of the many pictures and videos representing them, these theories gained differentiation and, therefore, value by insinuating that there were no terrorist attacks and that, instead, the killings had been staged by some secret and often undefined agencies[19].

At least in the beginning, several of the circulating conspiracy theories did not propose an identity for these alternative agencies but limited themselves to denying the mainstream hypothesis about who the perpetrators were. Later on, the same conspiracy theorists tried to designate the real instigators of the killings, often indicating the 'usual suspects' (Israel, etc.). For instance, only a few hours after the attacks, Mr Carlo Sibilia[20] — a Member of the Italian Parliament elected in the "Five Stars Movement", a political party that often espouses what mainstream commentators define as 'conspiracy theories' — declared that it was "Incredibile che a #CharlieHebdo sia rimasto ucciso l'economista Maris che denunciava irregolarità su emissione moneta" ["it is incredible that the economist Maris, who denounced the

[19] The bibliography on conspiracy theories is huge; for a survey, Kimminich and Leone Forthcoming; for a semiotic perspective, Leone Forthcoming *Double*. On the visual rhetoric of conspiracy theory, Leone Forthcoming *Pareidolie*.
[20] Avellino, 7 febbraio 1986.

irregularities in the emission of currency, was killed at Charlie Hebdo"], referring to the tragic death of French economist Bernard Maris[21] during the terrorist attack against Charlie Hebdo. The ambiguous sentence was insinuating ("it is incredible") that the attacks had not been perpetrated by jihadist terrorists, but rather orchestrated by obscure agencies whose only aim was to silence a hostile economist. The absurdity of the theory was evident, to the point that Sibilia's blog was soon full of sarcastic comments about how, on the contrary, all the other victims of Charlie Hebdo had been "credibly" killed. However, it is important to underline that the epistemic soundness of conspiracy theories is not the only issue at stake here. The episode indeed reveals that there is an audience for these kind of surreal interpretations, and that opinion leaders can differentiate and acquire value by explicitly or implicitly endorsing them.

The range of rhetorical means that conspiracy theories deploy often includes images. Rosario Marcianò, one of the most active supporters of 'chemtrail conspiracy theories' in Italy, also close to Beppe Grillo's[22] M5S movement, soon after the killings started 'analyzing' pictures and videos of the events; he reached the conclusion that it was all staged, and that the video of the brutal murder of peace guardian Ahmed Merabet during the attacks was actually a hoax with an actor. This conspiracy theory and its visual analyses are clearly a fake debunking; not only do they point at absurd 'signs' in images and videos, but above all they fail to propose a coherent reconstruction of reality: if Ahmed Merabet did not die, who are the relatives crying at his funeral? Are they all actors? However, again, the epistemic soundness and rhetorical sophistication of these conspiracy theories is not the main point. What is alarmingly more important is that there is a consistent minority that is ready to endorse and spread these interpretations in the labyrinth of social networks. In other words, for many present-day individuals, desire for a stronger identity, to be created through endorsement of

[21] Toulouse, France, 23 September 1946 – Paris, 7 January 2015.
[22] Genoa, 21 July 1948.

non-mainstream representations of reality, is more compelling than human empathy. While Ahmed Merabet's relatives are crying around his coffin, anonymous commentators experience the existential thrill of denying the truthfulness of his death. That is why opinion leaders who circulate these kind of conspiracy theories in order to secure followers and status are as irresponsible as those who side, like Dieudonné, with the murderers. Whereas the former laughs at the victims and promotes emotional proximity with the assassins, the latter divests the victims of their role, turning them into the extras of a bad spy movie.

9. The semiotic square of ritual opinion formation.

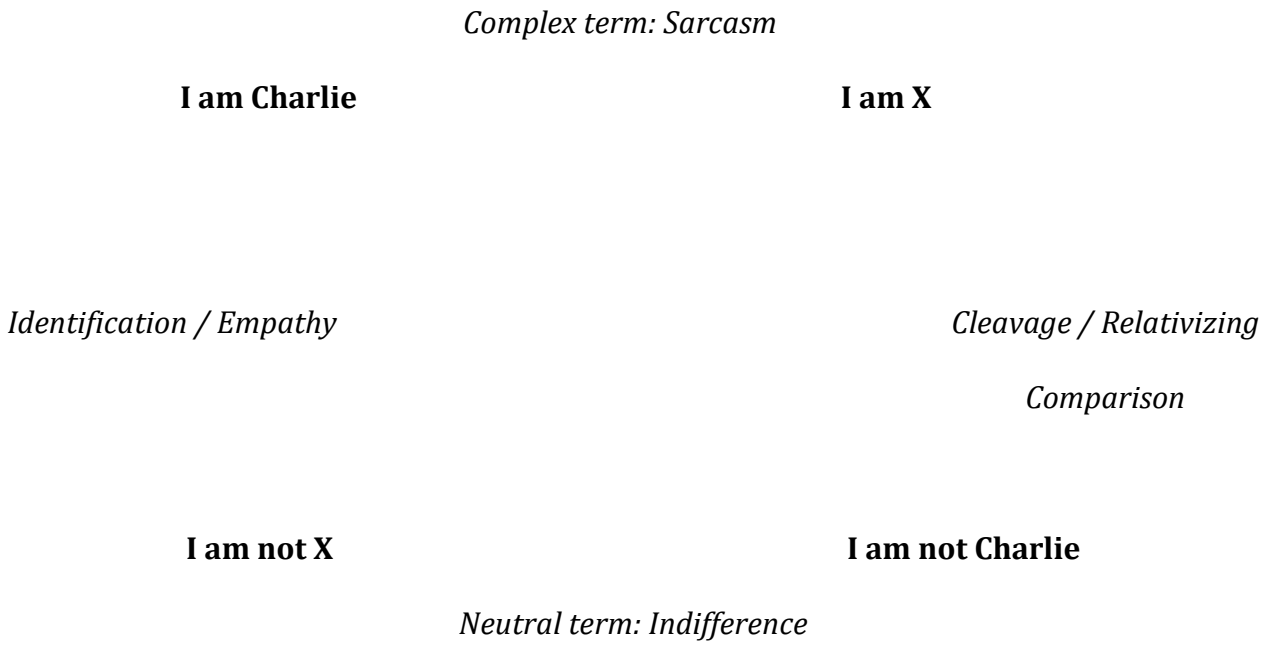

Fig. 4: The semiotic square of ritual opinion formation

The four patterns of opinion formation identified and analyzed thus far can be visually inter-defined through a simple diagram, the so called 'semiotic square' of Greimasian semiotics. First devised by Greek philosophers, the semiotic square was adapted by Greimas and his

school in order to articulate and explore the semantic categories of a text[23]. From a technical point of view, applying this instrument of micro-textual analysis to the macro-level of opinion social formation is not without risks and methodological uncertainties (Leone 2012). However, it is an operation that has been already carried on several times by socio-semiotics, ethno-semiotics, etc. A difference in the present application, though, must be pointed out. The semiotic square will be used here syntactically more than semantically. In other words, it will show how the social discourse creates value, without attaching a particular importance to the content of this value. In Hjelsmlev's terms (1943), the diagram will model the substance of opinions patterns, not their form. Behind this unconventional methodological choice (the semiotic square is usually employed to articulate sememes, that is, semantic patterns and trajectories in a text) there lies a provocative hypothesis: talk in contemporary society is more ritual than communication; it aims at creating, destroying, reinforcing or weakening positions of value as empty places, independently from the actual content they hold. However, it is exactly this ritual dimension of social discourse that opinion leaders in the new media and especially in social networks can easily manipulate and turn to their favour.

Mixing Lotman's idea of the semiosphere and Greimas's conception of semantic differentiation, the semiosphere can be imagined as composed and recomposed by texts that move along all the trajectories of the semiotic square in order to gain centrality and, therefore, semiotic status and power. That implies the ability to model and remodel all the signs, texts, and fragments of discourse that circulate in the semiosphere. In simpler words, what positions of value seek is becoming a primary pattern which models other contents according to a predetermined axiology. The expansion of a syntactic position of value therefore coincides with the diffusion of an ideology.

[23] For an introduction, see Hébert (2006).

As Greimasian semioticians know, a relation of contradiction underlies the first and simplest movement of differentiation in the semiotic square: A is denied into non-A. This relation of contradiction corresponds to the pattern of opinion formation identified above as "cleavage". I differentiate myself from you by simply denying your content. You say "I am Charlie Hebdo", I say "I am not Charlie Hebdo". The second movement in the semiotic square does not manifest a relation of contradiction but a relation of contrariety. In such case, I differentiate myself from my interlocutor not simply by denying its position, but through qualifying mine as an alternative one. I do not simply acquire a ritual position of value by saying "I am not Charlie Hebdo", but by saying "I am not Charlie Hebdo, I am X". This movement is certainly more semantically relevant than the first one, since it proposes to 'hook' a position of value to an alternative content in the semiosphere. Nevertheless, it retains its predominantly syntactic nature for it mainly acquires meaning and status through relativizing comparison: what matters in the statement that defines my position is not that I declare my identity with X, but that I define it as contrary to the mainstream identification with Charlie Hebdo. The third trajectory that characteristically brings about and visualizes value in the semiotic square stems from contradiction in order to affirm contrariety: "I am not Charlie Hebdo, therefore I am X". The ideological nature of this implication is evident: although there is no need to deny one's identity with Charlie Hebdo in order to 'be' X, the statement implies that whoever 'is' Charlie Hebdo cannot 'be' at the same time X, and should therefore cease 'being' Charlie Hebdo in order to 'be' X. Again, it is reasonable to hypothesize that what matters in this diversion toward an alternative object of identification and empathy is diversion itself, rather than the object.

What about the position of value and the consequent pattern of opinion formation created by statements like the one uttered by Dieudonné? How should they be represented in the semiotic square? Dieudonné's sentence "I am Charlie Coulibaly" does not simply deny

identification with the victims, nor does it merely propose different victims to identify with, but undermine the idea itself of identification. The value of this ritual position is constructed neither through contradiction ('I am not Charlie'), nor through contrariety ('I am not Charlie, I am X'), but through blurring and even suspending the semiotic square itself. From this point of view, Dieudonné's statement adopts a meta-point of view on the semiotic square of empathy toward the victims, and endorses a position in which empathy itself is placed in a network of alternative syntactic positions. Among these positions, Dieudonné's statement clearly adopts that of 'complexity', that is, the position of value manifested in a discourse whose content is "A and B": "I am Charlie, but I am also Charlie's murderers". The adoption of this syntactic position on a meta-level disrupts the semantic category of empathy and turns it into a different genre: sarcasm (Haiman 1998; Rockwell 2006). The statement can be read as a bitter-ironic comment belittling the value of the positions and patterns of opinion formation seen above. It is as though Dieudonné and his followers were saying: the problem is not to choose the victims to empathize with; the problem is the status itself of victim.

The semiotic square includes also a fourth position, which is the one that manifests itself in text and discursive formations in which it is not the complexity of values that is affirmed (A and B) but their neutrality (non-A and non-B). In relation to the case of Charlie Hebdo, this syntactic position too is a meta-one; unlike Dieudonné's stance, though, it is essentially empty. It advocates not the blurring of the distinction between Charlie Hebdo and the murderers (A and B), but indifference. That is the position of those who sleepily receive the news about Charlie Hebdo, listen to the commentaries, talk to people about the events, but are fundamentally impermeable to their tragedy. They feel empathy neither toward the victims nor toward the murderers; they do not deny such empathy either and neither do they propose an alternative object of compassion. They just live and continue to live their routine existence, anesthetized by indifference or trauma.

The most interesting aspect of the semiotic square is not its capacity for statically visualizing relations of values, but its ability to visually render their dynamics, thus turning into a field of tensions. It is indeed fundamental to underline that these patterns of opinion formation are not crystallized into an immobile semiosphere, but constantly fluctuate under the pressure of corresponding rhetorical strategies. A successful rhetoric of identification, for instance, will convince more and more members of a society that they have to declare their solidarity with the victims without exceptions; conversely, proliferation of cleavages and relativizing comparisons will deflect signs and texts from identification toward non-identification, or toward alternative identification. Finally, the two meta-rhetoric patterns of sarcasm (complexity of values) and indifference (neutrality of them) will encourage the semiosphere to actually expel the position itself of empathy and identification.

10. Conclusion: against a trolling society.

Semioticians can themselves be indifferent, coldly observing these fluctuations of patterns as if they were the stars of a distant galaxy. However, two considerations should at least ripple the surface of this imperturbability. The first might sound moralistic if it is not articulated in a formally acceptable way. Any preference attributed to the positions described above, indeed, is tantamount to advocating an axiology in the semiosphere, and therefore to embrace an ideology. From the impassible perspective of the scholar, there is no formal reason for which empathizing with the victims of terror should be a more praiseworthy ideology than sponsoring alternative patterns of opinion formation. That is a moral problem, not a strictly semiotic one. However, as it was suggested above, semiotics cannot ignore that a specific responsibility, not only in moral terms, but also and above all in pragmatic terms, is attached

to opinions and interpretations that fluctuate in the semiosphere. Semiotics must not endorse such or such opinion, but must definitely highlight the asymmetries of the semiosphere, which translate into imbalances in the pragmatic force of stances and statements. As was pointed out in relation to the Dieudonné affaire, statements hold different pragmatic responsibility in relation to the vantage point from which they are circulated in the semiosphere. Different discursive genres require corresponding care in the manipulation of rhetoric and in the consequence formation of opinion. We do not demand the same interpretive carefulness from the judge and from the sport commentator, as we do not demand the same interpretive carefulness from the bar sport commentator and from the famous sport anchorman. The semiosphere models meaning asymmetrically, and pragmatic responsibility is, in semiotic terms, awareness of one's position in the semiosphere and consequent care in crafting or re-crafting meaning.

The second consideration deploys itself on a meta-level and might seem more abstract. It is actually more disquieting. Semiospheres can be differentiated not only in relation to the axiologies that they allow to predominate through the position held by primary modelling signs, texts, and discursive formations, but also in relation to the distinction between syntactic and semantic ideology. As was pointed out from the beginning of this article, there is something uncannily automatic in the way in which patterns of opinions take shape in the contemporary semiosphere, and especially in social networks. The semiotic observer has the impression that relations of contradiction, contrariety, complexity, and neutrality are deployed with no real semantic engagement, but in a sort of ritual, where what is a stake, for instance, is not denying identification with Charlie Hebdo, proposing an alternative identification with X, sarcastically placing Charlie Hebdo and its killers on the same moral level, or manifesting indifference; what matters is, on the contrary, precisely these syntactic moves: contradiction, contrariety, complexity, and neutrality. In other words, what matters to

the members of the virtual semiosphere is narcissistically creating a position through these moves, not the specific semantic contents that these moves circulate. The predominance of this syntactic, empty skeleton of patterns of differentiation over the actual semantic contents that they structure bestows a certain cold, inhuman rituality to the formation of public opinion. Opinion leaders act as the skillful priests of this syntactic game, pulling its strings with no real interest in the semantic core.[24]

Is that simply the content of a subjective impression, due to an axiological bias? In other words, it might be that attributing a narcissistic etiology to different opinions is merely the outcome of the ideological presuppositions of an observer inclined to embrace the cause of 'Western consensus' and oblivious of the alternative voices that, in the world, criticize such mainstream political line, as well as, in the most extreme cases, the 'fiction' of democracy itself, and its Arabophobic / Islamophobic nature in the French context. Arguably, though, there are at least three objective elements that can be referred to so as to demonstrate that such accusations of narcissism do not simply result from the ideological biases of the semiotic analyst but actually intrinsically characterize many current patterns of opinion formation in the social networks: 1) most of these patterns do not give rise to any attempt at influencing the formation of opinion outside of the social networks; those who unconditionally adhered to the "Je suis Charlie" slogan filled the streets of Paris; the objectors, on the contrary, remained a scattered virtual community with no visible off-line manifestation or political project (unless terrorism is considered a political project, but to that see point n. 3); 2) social networks agents that objected to the "Je suis Charlie" consensus recurrently reappeared,

[24] It should be underlined, nevertheless, that the patterning model of patterns presented in the present paper maps the formation of opinions in the social networks, and mainly in response to highly dramatic events. Other patterns (luckily) keep subsisting both online and off-line. However, as the formation of opinions in the social networks more and more becomes *the* formation of opinions in the contemporary world, and as the agenda setting of such formation is increasingly shaped around dramatic events — in certain cases even receiving political legitimation — such model might become central and effective in mapping most short-circuits and paradoxes in the present-day creation of the political semiosphere.

previously and subsequently, in order to manifest the same objections over and over again concerning the most disparate issues; in other terms, there is objective evidence so as to demonstrate that their posts or comments are not specifically critical but generically critical; they are not against the "Je suis Charlie" movement in particular, but against whatever is mainstream; that is why they qualify as syntactic, non-specific, and even ritual patterns of opinion; 3) one could claim that terrorism itself is a way to express one's opinion, and that support for terrorist acts is a viable position in a democracy, or at least in the global conversation; however, this argument would be paradoxical not only because it would be implicitly deny the democratic framework, but also because it would intrinsically annihilate the semiotic framework; equating terrorism and communication, indeed, implicitly endorses a non-semiotic point of view on humanity (from the Peircean perspective, one could claim that terrorist acts are dyadic more that triadic, since they seek to change the world without resort to language; I do not persuade you not to blaspheme my God; I kill you).

Again, semioticians might observe with a cold analytical look this hypertrophy of the level of syntactic ideology to the detriment of the semantic one. At the same time, they should not overlook the risks that this hypertrophy entails. Living, thinking, and producing meaning in a semiosphere where syntactic ideology prevails means existing in a universe where pragmatic responsibility is not an issue anymore, because every opinion is actually not a semantic, twenty-first-century opinion anymore, attached to a body, to a community, to a genre, to a grid and to a style of interpretation, but a syntactic position in a game, where ideas oppose each other in various ways but seem to have lost their earnestness. The proliferation of syntactic ideology and its increasing centrality in the contemporary semiosphere will entail the risk of giving rise to a sort of trolling society, in which what matters is not to define or redefine social relations through exchange of meaning, but the simple frisson that sparkles from inconsequential difference, from the creation of-, and the permanence in- an echo-

chamber. Unveiling the inhuman consequences of such a trolling society is one of the urgent tasks of present-day semiotics.

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