

## PROVOKED BY CHARLIE HEBDO:

### VISUAL SATIRE AND MANAGEMENT STUDIES

#### ABSTRACT

Satire, especially in visual form, has long played a significant role in balancing the powers of those in control of societies, communities or organizations. Focussing on the cover of the 'survivors' issue', the first publication of the French satirical magazine 'Charlie Hebdo' following a deadly terror attack on its staff, we explore how incongruity, irony and caricature afford visual satire its potency to provoke readers to reconsider values and beliefs. Set in contrast with the seriousness of most management research, visual satire done well can resist fixed categorizations and binary oppositions to communicate and debate sophisticated knowledge claims. The mirror play of humor and tragedy in the cover of the 'survivor's issue' prompts us to reflect upon our own academic writing practice and the possibilities of incongruity, irony and caricature for management research. Atypically, we do not begin with a gap in knowledge, but commence with the tragedy.

“I fear for your revolution, my dear sir; I fear it will never succeed because you’ve not yet learnt to be frivolous” (Eagleton, 1987: 129)

## BLOOD

Every Monday a group of award-winning visual satirists gathered in Paris for the editorial meeting of [Charlie Hebdo](#), a low-budget French magazine with a weekly circulation of 60,000. While distribution numbers were small compared to other Paris weeklies, Charlie Hebdo stood out for their hornet-nest style of animated provocation, a self-described “angry magazine ... a gazette of the grotesque – because that’s what so much of life and politics is” (Charlie Hebdo <https://charliehebdo.fr/en/>) With the sting of its satire aimed at anything and anyone deemed sacrosanct or sacred, from French prime ministers to religious faiths, the magazine gained notoriety in both intellectual and fundamentalist circles inside and outside France. For some, Charlie Hebdo’s garish pranks were no laughing matter: in 2011 their offices sustained an arson attack and their comic production was relocated to a secret hideout under police protection.

But the secret did not hold, and on the cold January morning of January 7th, 2015, two masked gunmen clutching Kalashnikovs forced their way into the building killing eleven people, including the magazine’s editor, cartoonists, columnists, office staff, an assigned guard, a building maintenance worker and a visitor to the office. As the events spilled outside, a French Muslim police officer was executed at close range and others injured. The next day, two men claiming allegiance to the Hebdo attackers took hostages in a Jewish supermarket, resulting in further casualties and their deaths when police stormed the building. A female accomplice was purported to have escaped to ISIS controlled territory in Syria. Finally, by Friday, the hunt for the two male Charlie Hebdo attackers ended in a fatal shoot-out in an abandoned warehouse.

Globally, many responded with a groundswell of support for the magazine. Mourners crowding the streets of Paris held placards declaiming ‘Je Suis Charlie’, a collective expression of public empathy repeated many times over on twitter (with analytics website Topsy reporting 1.7million tweets on 7<sup>th</sup> January using #JeSuisCharlie), Facebook and on the magazine’s website.

Online, the attackers claimed their actions to be a violent response to Charlie Hebdo’s irreverent cartoons of Muslims and especially of the Prophet Muhammad, who in past issues had been drawn naked or carrying a bomb. The very depiction of the Prophet is widely perceived to be blasphemous in Islamic tradition.

*Vignette 1<sup>1</sup>: Since the massacre I had been glued to the internet and social media trying to try to find answers. I remember seeing the hashtag #JeSuisCharlie suddenly appear and then it went viral (as did, albeit with less resonance, the slogans ‘I am Jewish’, ‘I am police’ and ‘Je suis Ahmed’ in reference to the killed Muslim policeman). Within a day, cartoonists around the world began tweeting images of their own visual response –*

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<sup>1</sup> The essay uses vignettes from Gail whose immediate reactions to events and images provoked conversations and debate between the three of us (co-authors) as to whether and how the events around Charlie Hebdo attack resonated in the way we work as academics in the field of management studies. In this, the image from the cover of the 'Survivor's issue' of Charlie Hebdo was a grounding provocation.

*some angry, many grief-filled. A weeping Tintin<sup>2</sup> brought me to tears, as did facebook posts by my Muslim friends and colleagues; all equally outraged and pensive. Newspapers reported that Charlie Hebdo would publish their next issue the following Monday. I wondered, what would this mean? Would everything erupt now? Would they back down and, with it, capitulate on the French love of freedom of speech; or would they continue as usual? And would that lead to more deaths and retaliation? (Gail)*

In this essay we attempt to trace this capacity of visual satire to move and incite, not by realistically representing states of affairs but by caricaturing, distorting, magnifying and therefore loosening rigid connections to the real. Satire done well remains incongruous and ironic; it is relevant and heard in a world that is awash with real and fake news, facts, and theories. Focusing our discussion on what became known as the ‘Survivors’ issue’, the first magazine cover printed following the attack, we make two points that are inspired by this particular cover of Charlie Hebdo. First, visual satire is a powerful means by which society can communicate and debate sophisticated knowledge claims; a ‘satirical consciousness’ that thrives on *not* knowing better; on *not* being serious in order to sublimate the clever strategies and traditions of knowledge that continually divert focus from ‘normal life’ (Sloterdijk, 1987: 536). This defiance of strategic and ideological resolutions and the binary opposition of ‘truths’ versus ‘falsehoods’ is achieved not through academic argumentation, but rather through a visual format and the sophisticated use of incongruity, caricature, and irony. Second, the Survivors’ cover of Charlie Hebdo inspires us, as management scholars, to question our own work in light of the limitedness of knowledge claims when set against the uncertainties and abysses of a (dis/)organized world. Are we as management scholars certain of the unassailability of our often rigid adherence to traditional methodologies and objective reporting, or is there room for us to raise emotions, gather attention, or speak to wider concerns without striving for resolution and equally important endeavor?

We acknowledge from the outset that ours is a very limited viewpoint on the events, written by authors whose connection with both the attacks as well as with the specific French context is through the mediation of news feeds, social media and liberal democratic background conditions. In the spirit of an essay on visual imagery, we withhold comprehensive assessments, instead trying to highlight implications of visual satire for our field; a question that also touches more generally on the limits imposed on academic knowledge claims.

## THE COVER OF CHARLIE HEBDO’S SURVIVORS’ ISSUE

In the week following the tragedy, Charlie Hebdo went into print again. The French daily broadsheet Libération provided the surviving staff with secure office space, and donations covered publishing expenses of issue #1178 which became known colloquially as ‘the Survivors’ issue’.

*Vignette 2: After the attack, circulation figures for CH’s Survivor’s issue had reportedly exploded -- over 7 million copies in six languages with international distribution in most*

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<sup>2</sup> Tintin is one of the most popular European comic characters of all time – a young reporter created by Belgian cartoonist Hergé see <http://en.tintin.com/essentiel>

*major markets. But it was impossible for me to find an outlet where I lived outside of France. I facebooked my friend, Elodie, in Paris to see if she could buy me a copy of the next Charlie Hebdo. She told me she would try. With tight purchasing restrictions in place (one copy per person), long queues started in Paris the early hours of the morning. The question on everyone's lips was what would the cover look like? Would Charlie Hebdo buckle? Would they attack the religious faith of the perpetrators? At 17:51 pm on the publication date, Elodie sent me a facebook message: "Got one!! You're lucky! I had a miracle to get it! Give me your address." The very thought of owning a copy became strangely important, if not thrilling. The issue for me was not about religion but about violence and freedom of expression. Others felt very differently. (Gail)*

When the issue was finally unveiled, the cover image was of a grieving Prophet holding a 'Je Suis Charlie' placard, with the contemplative headline "Tout est Pardonné" [All is Forgiven]. See Figure 1.

----- Insert Figure 1 about here -----

We argue that this image expresses much of both the power and danger of visual satire; its imagery forcing most readers to contemplate a reaction; to fall in with an apparent public sentiment, to be confronted with their own values, emotions and knowledge claims about the world. At one and the same time it delivers both an insult in form of another blasphemic image that elicits further worldwide threats and criticism, and a soothing injunction for forgiveness. In the tradition of satire, defined as "the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues" (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.), this image raises more questions than it answers. It opens up the tragic (in the undecidability of values) and the comic (playing with such undecidability); a provocation to think differently, to debate that which we thought we knew, to upset the ways we are typically organized to see and understand things.

While satire may appear crude, its construction often revels in grossly distorting specific bodily features or caricaturing what others hold sacred or desire most; be it a figure of moral, religious, or public standing. But to be successful it depends on a sophisticated development of a sense of *incongruity*, *caricature* and *irony* to create complex but necessarily unverifiable knowledge claims for political and social effect.

## INCONGRUITY

Satire, and the laughter it can induce, begins with the creation of a sense of incongruity in the audiences' mind. For the philosopher Henri Bergson (1911: 113-4) laughter erupts when we encounter a stasis or interruption in movement, language, or thought that makes distinct an event that is out of place with the ordinary fluidity of ongoing life. This shattering of what is congruent, this upsetting of normal patterns is the source of comic force. For Bergson (1911: 170) all humor thrives on the commonness of such incongruities, the more quotidian the better. In playing on incongruity, comedy surfaces the demands we all encounter in living sociably. We are expected to read situations, and fall in with their demands, compliant in ways that allow

us to adapt and survive. Ignorance, indifference towards, or refusal to comply with these demands is something particular and occasional, becoming a distinct class of things of which we might be in awe or afraid - or at which we might laugh. Satire isolates and emphasizes such incongruous character traits, behaviors, or situations in order to undermine their presumed status; it deflates the pumped-up and grounds the elevated, relying on the force of an image to which the viewer adds meanings, often multiple ones, rather than relying on text to explicate a position.

In this practice Charlie Hebdo at times excels with its covers commonly portraying incongruous subjects and ideas (with a recent cover commenting on the US Presidency, see Figure 2).

----- Insert Figure 2 about here -----

This exemplifies Bergson's argument that the comic - especially satire - is a contrivance of plausible interruption which creates a feeling that events are out of joint. In taking actions and meanings out of context caricature serves to undermine their presumed authority, revealing the contradictions by which creeds typically structure action. Satire depicts incongruous scenes between different people, social groups, or ideas - all expressed ironically, saying one thing, but meaning many others. This sets up incongruous forms: discrepancies between what is considered to generally be the case; the stable classes, rules, commonsensical understandings, habits, or Gestalten, and what happens in the specific moment. Such a distorted logic can be expressed in syllogistic form (c.f. Bateson, 2000: 205):

Believers are committed to the one truth.

Here two believers with different beliefs are committing to one another.

They are being truthful.

Charlie Hebdo thrives on visually scripting incongruities such as these. In Figure 1, we find another example of something deeply incongruous at play in the response to the attacks evoked by the cover of the Survivor's issue. This time its depth comes from breaking with Charlie Hebdo's otherwise overtly aggressive custom of satire; the expected behaviors of victims or perpetrators; and with the flow of events as they unfolded. In a cartoon that, once again, depicts the Prophet Muhammad, the remaining editorial staff spun a comic tension between smooth and skillful negotiation of the world and its looming abrupt interruption, religious mockery, and divine forgiveness. They interrupt themselves, their own structures, exemplifying their tradition by turning, briefly, on their own urge to satirize.

## CARICATURE

Caricatures are Charlie Hebdo's vehicles to elicit the kind of comedic humor by which underlying incongruities are brought into sharp relief. Typically, there is something crude and simplistic about Charlie Hebdo's cartoons: drawn in skewed, often

emphatic lines that signal from the outset: ‘this is not real’. This is apparent in the Survivor’s issue, but also more recently in Charlie Hebdo’s depiction of world figures such as Donald Trump (see Figure 2). These cartoons establish their own internal consistencies: signifiers that relate to each other in the cartoonists’ own making of the image, yet which have to connect somehow to the established world of referents.

The work of caricature is not confined to a singular feature of a group as such, but to actively manipulate group features, so they are twisted, diminished, expanded, re-oriented and differently animated (Sullivan, 2016). A portrait - art - attempts likenesses that reveal both type and uniqueness of character, one steeped in its own and wider histories, whereas caricature pulls the personal into a category of clumsiness and inelasticity, the chosen feature occluding everything else, the small overriding the big through a break in natural order which yet remains somehow natural, like an eclipse. For most caricaturists, the face is usually the point of emphasis, for it is the face that bears a person’s life most apparently. The style of caricature used by Charlie Hebdo, like all caricatures, is never wholly preposterous, though can verge on it: a facial feature exploded, a momentary and unconscious twitch extended into a cruelly long span, a sallow demeanor spread like a virus to cover an entire scene, a face touched – as in the case of the Survivor’s issue cover – by ‘inappropriate’ forms: a tear echoed by a genital-shaped turban (Figure 1).

In each case the person is absorbed by the generality of the feature in a kind of reverse facial takeover. Sometimes this caricature descends into the puerile, the cruel, becoming a provocation of offence; and taking offence (as well as laughter) is what Charlie Hebdo want, in part, because with anger can come a space of dis-sensus and emotional upset in whose fray all manner of meaning can emerge. Though with anger there is also the possibility of closing off, a reaction of direct opposition that sharpens rather than complicates existing tensions.

The power of such caricature rests with their ability to conjure in the audience both a sense of surprise and confirmation as well as outrage and sympathy, something ‘accurate’ representations rarely do. The comic comes in acknowledging which feature to emphasize in which context: a certain garment, facial feature, a preponderant color or mannerism. How can drawings of something specific and singular, or a beard or a piece of cloth act as synecdoches for much wider conditions and bring them into direct, graspable focus? As Bergson explains, in successful caricature the restraining supervision of reasonableness is loosened, as is the presumed capacity to arrange oneself symphonically, as a collection of parts. In the skewed emphasis of caricature the cartoonist reveals the conceits of attempting to represent situations as a unity, showing how the tendencies and qualities inherent in the material ‘parts’ themselves can push back up through the façade of an organized whole to assume their own, wild potency:

“The art of the caricaturist consists in detecting this, at times, imperceptible tendency, and in rendering it visible to all eyes by magnifying it. He [sic.] makes his models grimace, as they would do themselves if they went to the end of their tether. Beneath the skin- deep harmony of form, he divines the deep-seated recalcitrance of matter. He realizes disproportions and

deformations which must have existed in nature as mere inclinations, but which have not succeeded in coming to a head, being held in check by a higher force” (Bergson, 1911, I §3)

Caricature has no inherent morality. It is, suggests Baudelaire, a dangerous form of expression in that a sense of superiority over others (laughing at their apparent weaknesses) reveals also a weakness in those who laugh (Hannoosh, 1992, 31). The emphatic, self-sustaining, manic stare on this Charlie Hebdo cover is an image that sits in the same tradition as the egregiously drawn cartoons of Julius Streicher, published in the infamous propaganda pamphlet *Der Stürmer* (part of the German National Socialist programme to de-humanize Jews in the 1930's). Charlie Hebdo's caricatures are sometimes dangerously close to Streicher's and to other racist satire (e.g. Malmqvist, 2015). We might ask whether it is caricature at all, given the way representatives of a religious group – Muslims, a class of whom, of course, there is a plurality of members – are being depicted as a general singularity and often with hostility? One answer may rest with considering whether the Charlie Hebdo caricature is aimed at defaming a group of people or the pretensions of religious doctrine: where Streicher's hooked noses clearly served to incite hatred against a group of human beings, Charlie Hebdo's images might be said to veer toward a general irreverence toward revealed religions; but this is only a matter of degree, especially given the context of Charlie Hebdo's purported long-standing obsession with Islam. To Muslims - individually or collectively - such degrees might be vague indeed. Another way, perhaps more potent, is to consider the intent of caricature, whether it aims to close off inquiry and critique by emphasizing what 'is' the case, or open up inquiry, by damning those who look to close down curiosity and experimentation in human endeavors. Against such ideologues, satiric mockery serves as 'stubborn insistence on the seriousness of life against the frivolous word garlands of abstraction' (Sloterdijk, 1987: 535). In this way, caricature works not so much by its content as by being an irritant to all truth claims, notably against those living in, and benefitting materially from, the 'proper places' (Certeau, 1988) of power such as those afforded, inter alia, by religions.

The physiognomic eloquence of a caricaturist can rid the subject of grace and manners -- they lose their civilized or intellectual sheen, such as it is, and become either more manic or mechanical, held by forces to which their individuality has no adequate response; leaving them open to ridicule, for such a public loss of autonomy and dignity. Care needs to be taken when belittling people in this way. If Charlie Hebdo's caricatures urge on readers a view that Muslims are all equally obsessed with organizing human affairs according to a singular, religiously inspired, absolutist design then they are no better than Streicher's. If, however, the caricature pushes back at those who believe and insist life is a unity and who seek to impose their designs on others, then the satire becomes ethically charged. It works because caricature refuses to occupy the elevated space that those claiming to speak for others want to occupy. In this refusal, caricature opens up discursive space for what is inherently risky, alien, and disturbing. Streicher's work is no longer satire because it turns the quest for truth into one of dogmatism and in interfering with dialogue it no longer ruptures the world, so much as propound a singular, demanding and insistent all-sided viewpoint that is doomed because of its

inability to tolerate multiplicity in human life (Sloterdijk, 1987: 19). Caricature only works if it ridicules those figures who assert singular views on the world, figures who expose themselves to being the object of humor because they demonstrate what for Bergson (1991, III, §4,) is:

“... a very special inversion of common sense. It consists in seeking to mould things on an idea of one’s own, instead of moulding one’s ideas on things, - in seeing before us what we are thinking of, instead of thinking of what we see.”

Thus the caricaturist steps into the gap left by this inversion of common sense because nothing else can fill it. So when Trump is caricatured, his lips spitting out words from underneath a blond, permafrost hair, the incongruities in his apparent relations to ethnicity and the LGBT community are ruptured through the device of a simple conjunction. Reason is impotent when appealing to such figures who instinctually believe their ideas present a complete view of the world, and caricature works by disabling their presumption that the world is at all consistent enough to conform to their idea of it.

## IRONY

A third aspect to visual satire is irony. Richard Rorty (1989: 76) contrasts the ironist with the metaphysician. By metaphysician he means someone who attempts “to know about certain things – quite general and important things”, typically by differentiating knowledge claims from opinion and speculation. The aim of the metaphysician is to move from ‘thinner’ and more flexible terms to essences and certainties. The metaphysician believes there are answers to problems, that these answers are shareable, in that others can be persuaded of their veracity and cogency, and that - as answers - they cohere in some way, showing truths that reveal an order to the world that we cannot deny, irrespective of our socially and historically unique situation.

Irony infringes on this revelatory process as a foil by which ideas, claims and values are made to stand out and then are assessed for their plausibility and potential. For the ironist, theories and doctrines are never true, just as the pursuit of truth itself cannot be a sacred act; truths are just more or less persuasive and, above all, indicative of the sorts of beliefs, desires and attitudes of those uttering them (Rorty, 1989: 79). At its most extreme, as in the heretic form of Hebdo’s cartoons, irony can upset those concerned with societal norms or religious dogma precisely by not taking them too seriously.

The Survivors’ issue ironically incorporates and plays with the many metaphysicians involved in the events surrounding the attack on Charlie Hebdo’s offices and the anticipated response to the Survivors’ issue. We see metaphysicians in the form of religious believers occupied with the revelation or seeming enforcement of scripted orders. There are also politicians for whom the foundations of the French Republic were at risk. And there is a part of French society for which ‘Je Suis Charlie’ is a rallying call to re-affirm, in unquestioning solidarity, the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity to preserve the existing economic and social order and its institutionalized and selective



restrictions to freedom, its inequalities and its exclusions – especially towards ethnic minorities, immigrants or refugees (Fassin, 2015: 4). The positioning and clashing of these metaphysical positions is an invitation for irony. It is precisely in these grave situations where the ironist's work can be most effective: tackling that which is blackest.

The cover of the Survivors' issue takes this up, in part, finding room for the flick of a smile in the darkest of events. At the same time, the cover's ironic impact fails or, at least, comes into question because of Hebdo's choice of reaping satirical capital from an already marginalized group often excluded from public debate whose frustrations on living in, or being affected by the West have, at times, spilt into a righteous bitterness. This is even more the case when we consider a similarly righteous element inherent in Charlie Hebdo's simultaneous claim to the sanctity of western values associated with free speech - the sort of knowledge claim that its cartoonists have made a career of lampooning. Placing the Survivor's cover in a mirror requires one to reconsider such sanctities, and entreaty more careful consideration of the minority group being lambasted. Here we glimpse the limits of Charlie Hebdo's use of irony and are beholden to question whether there is a place too dark, too grave where the seriousness of events forecloses on its disturbing flippancy; events such as the shootings in Paris?

To find humor in the bleakest hour (Weeden, 2013) the ironist maintains what for Bergson (1911: I §1) is an emotional distance: “[t]he comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple”. The intellect here is realized by remaining a spectator, giving a distance on events that means people can acknowledge the often comic nature of otherwise intensely possessing situations. That they must do so in public, as incongruities must be shared, and so does their amusement - for we rarely laugh alone, and never for long - making satire a peculiarly occasional experience and one that requires a shared background of the complexities involved to succeed. Yet in such distancing, the ironist is often at risk of replacing one hierarchy of values with another: their own. This is not least because they, being ironic, suppose their intervention to have had an effect, when often all that seems to have happened is a form of temporary nihilism. To the extent the cover of the Survivor's issues avoids such nihilism it recurs to an implied metaphysical position of the 'superiority of the West'. To the extent it embraces it, it accuses all claims for metaphysical certainty as being complicit with the tragedy. Through its offensive gesture, coupled with the spectre of forgiveness, and against a background of violence, readers are invited into an ongoing discussion in which people might find agreement were they allowed to talk ideas through critically, knowledgeably and persistently. The upshot of such engagement cannot be purifying, or transformative, but in Rorty's (2004: 137) laconic phrasing, “a little more grown-up”, ironically by often being a little more puerile.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT SCHOLARSHIP

*Vignette 3: As Paris continued to reel from the attacks, most religious and political leaders categorically denounced the violence. Many in the general public, including ourselves, voiced disbelief and engaged in axiomatic debate: How can a few poorly-drawn cartoons matter against millions of printed holy books? Did Charlie Hebdo go*

*too far with their inflammatory imagery; or is this idolatry an exercise of freedom of speech and press and thus a basic right or necessity of a democratic society? I was inspired by the peaceful vigil of millions meeting in the streets of Paris – could this outweigh the dispatch of gruesome violence by the attackers? (Gail)*

At first glance, the pages of the *Academy of Management Review* seem far away both from the sophomoric provocations of Charlie Hebdo and from the bloody events in Paris. A second look, however, leads us to ask how a small magazine with limited funding and operating in hiding, with no drive for academic rigor, without a reputation for serious reportage and equipped merely with a talent for vulgar transgressions and profanities, can bring such contradictions and oppositions into the public discourse in the way it did? Charlie Hebdo's imagery had worldwide resonance, irritated, offended, but also excited readers and polarized the public in a way few Academy scholars have ever done, despite their training and academic skill – but perhaps also in a way no Academy scholar would or should ever want to do.

Yet we have been provoked by the Survivor's cover of Charlie Hebdo to consider whether there is room in management studies for the characteristics that make visual satire powerful, and the exposure and challenge it lays bare. In closing we sketch out the potential relevance of these four themes for management scholarship: the use of visual satire, incongruity, caricature and irony.

#### Visual satire

While it seems clear that comic provocation, vulgarity and savageness alone are a poor recipe for an alternative *content* of scholarly discourse, there is something about the way visual satire such as Charlie Hebdo's works, the way comic writers and artists on occasion 'hit home' and make an audience think – and sometimes respond. There seems to be an issue of *form* that attests to the capacity of satire, especially when embedded in visual imagery, to enjoin us into deep and important debate while simultaneously alienating and excluding; something that gathers both order and disorder, the seeable and the inexplicable, a form of wisdom that lives alongside the rigid knowledge of the sciences and the complexities of history (Cooper, 1986). Something that provokes as well as edifies through the power of open-ended visual narratives.

Where scholarship espouses precision, clarity and objectivity, the visual satire of Charlie Hebdo's Survivor's issue creates intellectual and creative disruptions and organizes interpretation and response. Cartoons such as this, veering between ostentatious crudeness and caustic heresy, aim to lessen the impress of abstract ideological and knowledge claims. While they draw little effect from artistic subtlety and suaveness, they employ a minimalism in visual technique and meaning coupled with an astute sense and appreciation of the peculiarities of the world. Good visual satire is never one-sided; its simple but skillful interjections into massively complex situations disturb precisely because they do not try to provide definitive or rigorously drawn answers. Satirical cartoonists interject a rigid view into the overflowing mixture of opinions, arguments and facts – they draw in their audience asking them to do the work of on-going interpretation and in so doing they wrest open a space in which meaning

resists closure and settlement without, therefore, being considered irrelevant.

The Survivor's cover of Charlie Hebdo, or the more recent one of (now) President Trump (Figure 2), illustrate the agitating power of visual satirical 'forms' alongside textual narratives, even if that power to affect others lies in the failure of the satirical attempt. One image speaks over the six thousand words of this essay and over millions of words written about the wider issues at stake. Their power to bring together, in a specific image, much wider patterns of knowledge requires sophistication belying the crudeness of the satirists' craftsmanship. Such sophistication is difficult to attain in scientific work aimed at defining boundaries and settling truth claims as the very processes of defining and settling sever those wider patterns that link wider knowledge relations. There is a complementary quality to scientific and visually satirical narratives. The former aims at arresting meaning by specifying particular relations while the latter tries to free relations to evoke wider patterns that connect. Like being its negative, visual satire's lack of scientific specificity affords a grasp of wider concerns that so often limits the relevance of academic claims. How then may our considerations of visual satire's threefold characteristics help when considering the process of scientific knowledge production?

### Incongruity

In acknowledging the incongruity of cartoons we find a different framing for academic work; not just as a purveyor of facts and textual interpretation, but as a way of challenging the prevailing constraints in organizational life. Business leaders, strategists, advisors, analysts, but also and especially academics, through their methodological procedures, tend to divide the world into parts; parts that can then be ascribed characteristics: stable and fleeting; inside and outside; good and bad; right and wrong. The ensuing promise of clarity and order comes not simply through knowledge claims but a wider politics of symbolic, material and legalistic barriers and incentives that protect entrenched divisions and orders. These operations of power sustain ideas, to the point where rival ideas and their exponents are considered alien disturbances to the productive utility of knowing things for certain. Believers (whether religious, or in academia, business and politics) compete with one another for wider membership, each arguing for their organizational prowess while using institutionalized power to silence what fails to fit into the belief system. Into this plate-tectonics of belonging, humor steps like an unwelcome guest; a reminder of the contradictions and complexities in any belief system, without taking sides, or striving for closure. The humorist is serious in refusing to provide answers, throwing the task of interpretation back on the audience, urging them to reconsider their standard forms of expression.

Though perhaps Charlie Hebdo intervenes on questions of belonging in a more visceral and provocative way than those typically considered by members of the Academy of Management, we might still learn from its affects. In what ways does the Academy erect and protect its borders? Can we, too, laugh at our convictions about methodological and theoretical integrity and therefore face up to the many things that do not fit into the explanatory boxes (e.g. 2x2 matrices) we have drawn? Can we accept the social and political nature of what counts as knowledge? In what ways, for example, are

‘wayward’ methods tolerable, especially when they fail to provide rigorous definitions and certainties? What about images such as Hebdo’s: can they count as carriers of meaning alone, without the need for a prescribed interpretation? And can we expect the academic readership to take active participation in the construction of an unfinished knowledge claim or to engage in debates that appear just too far from the factual evidence to be taken seriously (such as the form of climate change skepticism/denial apparently embraced by Donald Trump) (Skoglund & Jensen, 2015)?

And more generally, visual satire encourages us to question academic rigidity in many ways, such as academic contributions emphasizing theoretical over applied contribution, the oft-mentioned capacity for ‘relevance’; the integrity of disciplinary distinctions, the validity of journal lists or rankings for performance evaluations, and so on. The intent is not to necessarily break these down, but to bring them into questionability, perhaps by being able to laugh about the foolishness of our belief that we can know anything for sure at all and our attempts at trying to establish stable causal connections in a world that is continually changing.

### Caricature

Caricature rests on distortion, on grossly over-emphasizing one element at the expense of all others; caricature brings ensuing contrasts into sharp relief. Already, much academic work unwittingly runs danger of caricaturing organizational life whenever complex organizational affairs are reduced to specific, isolated features (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). When we depict organizations, managers or workers, we all too often emphasise certain features, be it strategies, routines, processes of sensemaking, or institutional forces as if these were definitive of these groups as a whole, as if we could recognize and judge them just by these features, we run danger of grossly distorting our representations. This is more obvious in visual caricatures which project disproportions and deformations which have exist latently, but which require the cartoonist’s pencil to come to full prominence. By refusing to be serious or trying for representational clarity, can management studies bring organizational contrasts into sharper relief?

This requires making what is apparently commonsensical stand out, for instance through visual means or through a loosening of language and wayward descriptions so that these wider patterns of knowledge can be recognized and discussed and thus read, without being taken too literally. Successful caricature is a tightrope walk between demasking stereotypes while avoiding becoming stereotypical itself; it requires braveness to acknowledge the unknown and unsettled nature of affairs. Yet it also risks hurting people emotionally, and promoting a lack of social or organizational compassion. And compassion, as Hanson and Trank (2016) show when studying a death penalty defense team, is as overlooked an area of concern in management research as satire (Tsui, 2013).

### Irony

The comic medium refuses to make knowledge claims, and where it does make claims, it does not attempt to elevate those insights beyond their immediate, raw impact. Visual satire in particular invokes a fluidity that is also at odds with the methodological promise of secure foundations. As a verb, to satirize is to indulge in and accommodate

what matters here and now by invoking a multiplicity of wider meanings. This requires the capacity to both question basic beliefs as well as commitments to such certainties unlike Rorty's (1989) metaphysicists who finds questioning such beliefs deeply unsettling. Charlie Hebdo (including Figure 1) is temporary in nature – it carries ironic resonance only for a period but it achieves a communal achievement by which complexities are brought together and shared – even if only for a while. As its potency fades, irony loses its organizing capacity; as the fault lines in society change so does the relevance for any ironic image. The provocation here for us is as follows: how certain are we that management typologies or matrixes provide enduring insights? Visual satire, as exemplified in the Survivor's cover of Charlie Hebdo, provides us with a momentary and ironic glimpse of the profound rifts that cut across the fundamental principles of culture, organizations and humanity, continually urging us to remain nimble in our thoughts and cautious of all too certain ideas.

#### CODA: VISUAL SATIRE AND MANAGEMENT SCHOLARSHIP

*Vignette 4: Two days later, I received a brown envelope in the mail – it contained my copy. When I messaged Elodie to see how much I owed her and she replied, “Nothing! It's the Charlie Spirit. And I do trust you to make good use of it.” I realized then that she had sent me her own copy. All of this brought the world into perspective and I kept asking myself how my and our work matters when compared to a simple piece of visual satire. I had forgotten about my day job as a scholar. I joined the masses. (Gail)*

Within the pages of management studies, tragedy and humor are often hidden or marginalized: where levity intrudes, seriousness takes a break; where success is at stake, limits are out of bounds. There is little concern for the tragic in management practice and scholarship chiefly aimed at success, achievement and growth and with little concern for the limits of humanity and the possibility of the futility of struggle and strife (Tsui, 2013; Walsh, 2010). Despite the growing literature on care and compassion (e.g. Tomkins & Simpson, 2015), a focus on the graphic or egrigious remains outside the norm (Whiteman & Cooper, 2016). And so are satire and polemics which can ‘scarcely be hidden under mask of scholarly respectability’ (Sloterdijk, 1987: 18). The consequent lack of frivolous text and imagery in the pages of management scholarship makes the pursuit of economic returns as textual and serious as the suits worn by the pursuers. Where humor is present, it is deemed to be acceptable only if it has a purpose within an already understood web of relevances; a topic to be studied (Collinson, 2002; Hatch, 1997) rather than an approach to studying topics.

The images and narratives drawn by visual satire are the polar opposite of those typically appearing in top management journals– the cover of Charlie Hebdo embraces the stable and the volatile; the known and the unknowable, what can be said and what resists linguistic grasp. It does all this without claiming authority, merely by pointing out, and thus brings into glaring light the incongruence of various sides. And, at the same time, it packs both an intellectual and emotional punch despite no longer resembling a definite ‘thing’ or ‘fact’ or piece of ‘data’. Rather than trying to keep things

representative, within the cover of Charlie Hebdo, the comic and the tragic belong together, and with the drama of the attack any difference between comedic levity and real-life relevance becomes irrevocably blurred.

We do not advocate visual satire as a replacement for orthodox management theory and empirical research; nor are we at ease with the style or sentiment of Charlie Hebdo's publications. And yet we are intrigued by the mirror play of humor and tragedy in visual form and prompted to reflect upon our own academic writing practice, which, in contrast, we found to be humor-free. Taking inspiration from visual satire means considering alternative ways of mattering; not just by providing new factual content or theoretical accuracy, but by probing into the form of the things that are studied. And as life is always complex and opaque, satire may help open up spaces for multiple interpretations without either having to take sides or having to settle things for good: by staring into the unknown, complex, and multiple without flinching or looking away.

Charlie Hebdo's cover image after the attacks has provoked and repelled us in complicated ways. It has also left us with many unanswered questions for organization studies. Charlie Hebdo's staff were killed in their boardroom, and the police officer was killed while on duty, in acts of terrorism, and there have been many other instances of course. Yet apart from a few notable exceptions (e.g. Cornelissen, Mantere & Vaara, 2014; Starbuck, 2002) the organization of terror is not well covered in management studies, and even then it scarcely places the academics themselves into the frame. How, then, can we give greater thought to emerging global phenomena such as terrorism and war, but also to environmental changes, pan-national supply chains, digital technology when their often complex, changing, or clandestine characters defy management journals' concerns for specificity and clarity? As populist rhetoric rises, as expertise is belittled and jokes win elections (Nussbaum, 2017), can the Academy (like many others, including those providing the networked infrastructures that convey those ideas) remain focused on establishing small connections while ignoring the wider patterns that connect them all? What of the links between terrorism and finance, trade deals, industrialized farming, environmental impact or labour migration? Visual satire shines a light on these relations that affect real life without trying to fully interpret or define them. Management responses to and from within these phenomena can benefit from similar scholarship. If nothing else, it shows us that academic writers on management issues have their own abysses to consider and some, much braver than us, already do.

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