

## **Provoked by Charlie Hebdo** **Visual Satire and Management Studies**

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## WHAT INSPIRES THE ACADEMY: BOOK REVIEWS AND BEYOND

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### Provoked by *Charlie Hebdo*: Visual Satire and Management Studies

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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).

Satire, especially in visual form, has long  
played a significant role in balancing the powers  
of those in control of societies, communities, or  
organizations. Focusing on the cover of the "Survivor's issue"—that is, 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 give visual satire its potency to provoke readers into to reconsidering 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 on the cover of the Survivor's issue prompts us to reflect on our own academic writing practice and the possibilities of incongruity, irony, and caricature for management research. We do not begin with a gap in knowledge but, rather, with the tragedy.

#### 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

its 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" (see <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 morning of January 7, 2015, two masked gunmen clutching Kalashnikov rifles 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 were injured. The next day, two men claiming allegiance to the *Hebdo* attackers took hostages in a Jewish supermarket, resulting in further casualties and 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, communities 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 1.7 million tweets on January 7 using #JeSuisCharlie), on 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

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Thanks to E.C. for her time, effort, and generosity in securing a copy of *Charlie Hebdo* one week after the tragedy.

been drawn naked or carrying a bomb—when 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 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—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 the next issue of Charlie Hebdo would be published 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, rather, 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 Survivor's issue—on the first magazine cover printed following the attack—we make two points that were inspired by this particular cover of the magazine. 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 through a visual format and the sophisticated use of incongruity, caricature, and irony. Second, the Survivor's issue of *Charlie Hebdo* inspires us, as management scholars, to question our own work in light of the limitedness, incoherence, or paradoxical contradictions 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 endeavors?

We acknowledge from the outset that ours is a very limited viewpoint on the events, written by authors whose connection with both the attacks and 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 SURVIVOR'S 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 Survivor's issue.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In this essay we use vignettes from Gail, whose immediate reactions to events and images provoked conversations and debate among the three of us (coauthors) as to whether and how the events around the *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.

<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>).

<sup>3</sup> This and the other covers we mention can easily be found on the internet. Following discussion with the *AMR* editors, we decided not to reprint them in this journal.

*Vignette 2: After the attack, circulation figures for Charlie Hebdo's Survivor's issue had reportedly exploded—over 7 million copies in six languages with international distribution in most 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 in 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 p.m. 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 (January 14, 2015, No. 1178) was of a grieving Prophet holding a "Je Suis Charlie" placard, with the contemplative headline "Tout est Pardonné" [All is Forgiven].

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 the form of another blasphemous 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*), 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; a liberty to laugh at powerful kings, clerics,

politicians, or management; an invitation to debate that which we thought we knew, to upset the ways we are typically organized to see, understand, and manage things.

While satire may appear crude, its construction often revels in grossly distorting specific body 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 audience's mind. For the philosopher Henri Bergson (1911: 113–114), 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 about, indifference toward, or refusal to comply with these demands is something particular and occasional, becoming a distinct class of things that we might be in awe of or afraid of—or that we might laugh at (Bateson, 2016). 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. Only a week after the earlier 2011 arson attack, for example, the magazine published a cartoon showing a seemingly Muslim man passionately kissing another man made out to be one of the magazine's cartoonists (November 1, 2011, No. 1012). With the accompanying caption, "Love is stronger than hate," this was a "properly

irreverent combination" (Davidson, 2015), in the form of a carnal interpretation of love as a unifier, a same-sex act conducted by a representative of a unifying religion that does not condone such behavior, and yet incongruently depicted in precisely such an act. Another example is the magazine's depiction of presidential candidate Trump (June 18, 2016, No. 1247)—whose speeches and more recent edicts systematically curtail the rights of the LGBT+ community—as a defender of that very community against hate crimes, only to insult Muslim and LGBT+ communities alike through gross and derogatory language.<sup>4</sup>

This exemplifies Bergson's argument that the comic, especially satire, is a contrivance of plausible interruption that 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, be it in the governance of a nation or the management of an organization. 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 or rules (including those of management theory), commonsensical understandings, habits, or *Gestalten*—and what happens in the specific moment. Such a distorted logic—for instance, that of the kissing men—can be expressed in syllogistic form (cf. Bateson, 2000/1972: 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. On the cover of the *Survivor's* issue, we find another example of something deeply incongruous at play in the response to the attacks. 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 spins 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 the magazine'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. These cartoons establish their own internal consistencies: signifiers that relate to each other in the cartoonists' own making of the image yet that 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 manipulating group features so they are twisted, diminished, expanded, reoriented, 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 that 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 in *Charlie Hebdo*, as with all caricatures, is never wholly preposterous, although it 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.

In each case the person is absorbed by the generality of the feature in a kind of reverse

<sup>4</sup> The English translation of the cover reads as follows. Headline: "Trump as President?" Image of Orlando nightclub called "Pulse," after the shootings. Trump speech bubble: "They have to go, those towel-heads who come kill our pansies [or faggots]!"

facial takeover. Sometimes this caricature descends into the puerile, the cruel, becoming a provocation of offense, and taking offense (as well as laughter) is what *Charlie Hebdo* wants, in part, because with anger can come a space of dissensus and emotional upset in whose fray all manner of meaning can emerge. Although 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 caricatures 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 element to emphasize in which context—a certain garment, facial feature, a preponderant color, or mannerism. How can drawings of something specific and singular, a kiss or a beard or a piece of cloth, act as synecdoches for much wider conditions and bring them into direct, graspable focus? As Bergson (1911) 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 facade 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 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: 22).

Caricature has no inherent morality. It is, suggests Baudelaire (1981/1855), 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 the Survivor's issue *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 program to dehumanize Jews in the 1930s). *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 kissing Muslim man or its blaspheming drawings of the Prophet Muhammad 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 to 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 benefiting 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 vision, then they are no better than Streicher's. If, however, the caricatures push

back and disassemble unities designed to insist that life be lived in a certain way, then the satire becomes ethically charged. It works because caricature refuses elites their desire for elevation, therefore opening up discursive space for what is inherently risky, alien, and disturbing. Streicher's caricature is not satire. By inference its accentuation elevates an elite who propounds a singular, demanding, and insistent all-sided viewpoint doomed because of its inability to tolerate multiplicity (Sloterdijk, 1987: 19). Satirical caricature only works if it ridicules those figures who assert singular views on the world, figures who expose themselves as being the object of humor because they demonstrate what for Bergson is

a very special inversion of common sense. It consists in seeking to mold things on an idea of one's own, instead of molding one's ideas on things, in seeing before us what we are thinking of, instead of thinking of what we see (1911: 184).

Thus, the satirical caricaturist steps into the gap left by this inversion of common sense because nothing else can fill it. 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 can and will conform to their idea of it.

### IRONY

A third aspect to visual satire is irony. Richard Rorty contrasted the ironist with the metaphysician. By metaphysician he meant someone who attempts "to know about certain things—quite general and important things" (1989: 76)—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 Survivor's 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 Survivor's 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 reaffirm, 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 toward ethnic minorities, immigrants, or refugees (Fassin, 2015: 4). The positioning and clashing of these metaphysical positions are 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 Survivor's 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 to entreat 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 is an emotional distance: "The comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple" (1911: 5). The intellect here is realized by remaining a spectator, giving a distance to 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—makes 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* issue 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 specter of forgiveness, and against a background of violence, readers are invited into an ongoing discussion where 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 its 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 operating in hiding, with limited funding, with no drive for academic rigor, without a reputation for serious reporting, and equipped merely with a talent for vulgar transgressions and profanities, could bring such contradictions and oppositions into the public discourse the way it did. *Charlie Hebdo's* imagery had worldwide resonance that irritated and offended readers, but also excited them 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 in 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 by asking it to do the work of ongoing interpretation, and, in so doing, they wrest open a space where meaning resists closure and settlement without, therefore, being considered irrelevant.

The Survivor's issue cover of *Charlie Hebdo*, or the more recent one of (now) President Trump, illustrates 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 seven thousand words of this essay and over millions of words written about the wider issues at stake. An image's power to bring together, in a specific image, much wider patterns of knowledge requires sophistication belying any apparent crudeness. This caustic sophistication is difficult to attain in scientific work aimed at defining boundaries and settling truth claims, because the very processes of defining and settling sever those connecting patterns that link perhaps more suggestively and disturbingly to other issues. There is, then, 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. 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, and 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 through 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 complexities, contradictions, and paradoxes 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 people to reconsider their standard forms of expression.

Although 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 effects. 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 and matrixes 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 and managerial readership to actively participate in the ongoing construction of meaning so as to leap out of theoretical boxes into the wider universes of knowledge that influence any specific managerial issue?

Even 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 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 to bring ensuing contrasts into sharp relief. In some ways this is what academic work also does, always running the danger of caricaturing subjects whenever complex organizational affairs are reduced to specific, isolated features. When we depict organizations, managers, or workers, we all too often emphasize certain aspects, 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.

So one way of learning from caricature is to accept and be wary of the distortions that lie within knowledge claims. Where typically the distortion is carefully managed by claims of verifiability and reliability, or overcome by strategies to disarm paradoxes (Smith, Lewis, Jarzabkowski, & Langley, 2017), simply making it apparent, as in caricature, could be an interesting source of honesty. Relatedly, but more deliberately, caricature—notably, visual caricatures—projects disproportions and deformations that exist latently but that require the cartoonist's pencil to come to full prominence. This, too, could be an interesting technique—to deliberately target what is apparently small or incidental in

a phenomenon and find therein something telling and profound, without being literal. Such insight is only ever suggestive and requires much from the reader to work with it, again perhaps challenging the typical way in which a reader of an academic article engages somewhat passively, absorbing the knowledge being presented. With caricature a more active, suggestive relationship is envisaged. To be successful, caricature must accentuate and so reveal problematic or hitherto unacknowledged associations, yet the challenge being issued thereby must also be sensitive to an audience. Caricature risks hurting people emotionally and promoting a lack of social or organizational compassion. And compassion, as Hanson and Trank (2016) showed when studying a death penalty defense team, is as overlooked an area of concern in management research as satire (Tsui, 2013). Last, caricature can teach us not to be too blinded by apparently dominant figures and to practice a skepticism of the presumed prowess of those we research (Skoglund & Redmalm, 2017).

### Irony

The comic medium refuses authority to knowledge claims, and where it makes its own claims, it tends to do so indirectly and avoids elevating them beyond their immediate presentation, allowing the impact to work its way as it might. Visual satire in particular invokes a fluidity that is at odds with the methodological promise of secure foundations. The verb "satirize" means to indulge in and accommodate what matters in the here and now by invoking a multiplicity of wider meanings to upset what claims certainty. This requires a capacity for both basic beliefs and commitments to such certainties. *Charlie Hebdo* covers are temporary in nature, carrying maximal ironic resonance only for a moment before becoming historical, but in this moment they can elicit a communal insight into seemingly intractable conditions—even if only for a while. As its potency fades, irony loses this organizing capacity; as the fault lines in society change, so does the relevance for any ironic image. The provocation here is twofold: First, can we use irony similarly, to gather audiences quickly to better discuss contentious issues? Second, do we think hard enough about the how enduring the images we do develop—the typologies or matrixes—really are? 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, which 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 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 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 egregious 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; Kenny & Euchler, 2012), 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; instead, it merely points out and, thus, brings into glaring light the incongruence of various sides. 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." The covers of *Charlie Hebdo* not only play with the association between the image and the object but do so with a deliberate intent of provoking the audience to think of the effects of making such associations, and of their own complicity in them. They present "things," "facts," and "data" in ways that have the audience acceding and then questioning them at one and the same time.

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 we are prompted to reflect on 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 since 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 management 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, and 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 [see Munro, 2005] 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, political information warfare, environmental impact, or labor 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 we, already do.

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