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## **‘Our words are stronger’: Re-enforcing boundaries through ritual work in a terrorist news event**

On 19 December 2016, news of the Berlin truck attack began to unfold in the global news media. A lorry had driven into a Christmas market at Breitscheidplatz, Berlin, near the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church. Several news outlets reported that the ensuing attack had killed 12 people and injured more than 50. Among the victims was the truck’s original driver, Łukasz Urban, who had been found shot to death in the passenger seat. Soon thereafter, the news reported that the perpetrator, Anis Amri, was a failed Tunisian asylum seeker. According to the global news, his actions were motivated by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). As the news story developed in the gamut of online news sites, police found and shot Amri near Milan, Italy, four days after the attack. Before Amri’s death, an initial suspect was arrested but was later released due to lack of evidence.

This article investigates the ritual work in terrorist news events, using the Berlin truck attack as a case in point. Terrorism is defined in this article as an action that is meant to terrify (Juergensmeyer, 2001: 5). The etymology of the word is as follows: the Latin *terrere* means ‘to cause to tremble’. The effects of trembling are judged by witnesses – those who are terrified. Thus, the public response to violence of this nature, represented in news media, plays an essential role in the social construction of terrorism as a phenomenon (Juergensmeyer, 2001:5).

This article applies a media anthropological approach (see, e.g. Bird, 2009; Ginzburg et al., 2002; Morley, 2007; Rothenbuhler and Coman, 2005; Pertierra, 2018; Postill, 2009). This means that we think about the role of news media not only as a means of communication but, more broadly, as a condition in which the present organisation of social life is carried out, here, in particular, in relation to terrorism (cf. Anonymised, 2013; Peters, 2015; Wagner-Pacifici, 2017). Our project connects with the larger cluster of anthropologically inspired communication research on public rituals in news media (see, e.g. Cottle, 2006; Couldry, Hepp and Krotz, 2010; Dayan, 2005; Katz and Liebes, 2007; Liebes, 1998; Liebes and Blondheim, 2005; Morse, 2018). In line with this tradition, we are interested in the ritual work in terrorist news events and argue that rituals not only ‘are’ but also ‘do’ things in news media, as they attract meanings, cultivate values and shape shared social lives carried out and experienced in various media-saturated contexts (see, e.g. Grimes, 2014; Pertierra, 2018; Rothenbuhler and Coman, 2005). In other words, ritual work is approached here as a set of practices of ‘doing’ (see Grimes, 2014: 7), by which news media give ritual-specific meanings that differ from those existing prior to the rupture. In particular, we examine whom journalists in news stories consider (through ritual work) to be ‘us’ and ‘them’. This

is to say that emic ('us') and etic ('them') perspectives are engaged with one another in the analysis through a critical dialogue (see Pike, 1999; Bird, 2009; Heider, 2004: 2). It is important to note that this type of media anthropological starting point comes with methodological consequences. Instead of constructing news media as a traditional object of study, news media in this approach are constructed as an ethnographic *context* in which digital media ethnographic fieldwork on ritual media practices and related representations is carried out in diverse online news media sites (cf. Caliandro, 2018; Knox and Nafus, 2018; Pink et al., 2016).

Our fieldwork consists of recurring visits to 15 online news sites: *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Independent*, *Le Monde*, *Le Parisien*, *Helsingin Sanomat*, *The New York Times*, *Aljazeera English*, BBC, CNN, YLE, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, Sveriges Television and *Svenska Dagbladet*. Special focus was given to the four days around the acute situation (i.e. 19–22 December 2016) in Berlin. The fieldwork offered a thick description of the collected materials and cultivated an approach in which we identified and analysed the ritual work of media representations of the attack in the news (cf. Ortner, 2006; Sanjek and Traitner, 2016). Through this process, and following Turner's (1969) theorising on death rituals as rites of passage, we identified and analysed certain key phases and elements through which the ritual work of the news media was created and carried out. We looked specifically at the rupture in the news event (ritualised as *the strike*), the liminal phase (ritualised as *the manhunt*) and the re-constitution of order following the attack (ritualised as *the mourning*).

In discussion, we provide insights into the ritual work of news media, including the process of intensifying meanings and the related boundary work on 'us' and 'them' as well as the ways in which this boundary work contributes to the building of solidarities and/or disruptions and polarisations in terrorist news events, as ritualised in news media (cf. Anonymized, 2018; Liebes, 1998; Morse, 2018; Nossek and Berkowitz, 2006). The article concludes with an interpretation of the broader social implications of the ritual work and related naturalisation of 'friends' and 'foes' in news media and the larger society. We suggest that this type of ritual work may not only enforce media power and the 'mediated myth of the centre', as Nick Couldry (2012, 2003) advocates, and neither is the ritual work only focused on terror events that take place at a distance, as Nossek and Berkowitz (2016) argue; instead, our media anthropological investigation suggests a collective mythologization of terrorism in the studied news media. In this shared imagination around the 'evil other', the idealisation of 'us' plays an important role.

## **Theorising ritual in news media**

In the early history of research on ritual in news media, the work of Dayan and Katz (1992) had significant influence in theorising the relationships between ritual, media and society (see also Couldry, Hepp and Krotz 2010). In their original theory, Dayan and Katz (1992) emphasised the ritualised ceremonial role of news media in forging social cohesion during exceptional moments, namely ceremonies. Their theory was revised to better grasp disruptive events of a violent and/or terrorist nature, the aim of which is to divide rather than unite nations (see, e.g. Cottle, 2006; Dayan, 2005; Liebes, 1998; Katz and Liebes, 2007). Furthermore, Nick Couldry (2003, 2012) has offered a reading of media ritual, which provides a critical view on media events, focusing on the ritualised practices through which media enforce their own power as a central tenet of society. In Couldry's (2003: 37–53) analysis, this is a process of masking power; thus, media rituals constitute 'the myth of the mediated centre' in society.

In recent years, research on ritual media events has taken a global turn (see, e.g. Couldry, Hepp and Krotz, 2010; Mitu and Poulakidakos, 2016), and the original focus on national news media (TV) – with the central stage on national media events – has been critiqued for its narrowness and inability to grasp the global spread of terrorist violence and the related contested social imaginaries of 'us' and 'them' circulating global communication media, both in terms of news and social media (see, e.g. Anonymized, 2016; Sreberny, 2016).

While scholars of ritual media events have mainly focused on the ritual function of these events, a more journalistically oriented strand of research has aroused interest in the very practices in which this ritual work is carried out in news media. In their book, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual*, Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994: 97-98) define ritual as follows: 'Action is ritualized if the acts of which it is composed are constituted not by the intentions which the actor has in performing them, but by prior stipulation... In adopting the ritual stance one accepts...that in a very important sense, one will not be the author of one's acts' (see also Grimes, 2014: 189). In the context of journalism, this type of ritual action suggests a mode of storytelling in which journalism becomes a courier of certain highly coded mythical and culturally shared narratives, whereby it loses autonomy over its own acts. According to Nossek and Berkowitz (2006), this type of ritual mode is typically activated when society's core values are threatened. Liebes (1998) calls this type of ritual reporting a disaster marathon, and it is most typically activated in the immediate aftermath of major disruptive events in society. In more concrete terms, the ritual mode of reporting is carried out by imposing normative roles on ritual participants (e.g. journalists, audience, victims, witnesses). It demands the identification of certain disaster materials (news stories, images, posts, tweets of violence), proposed times and places (story time vs. 'real time', platforms, studios as ritual centres

of events, reports on the crime scene), ideal gestures and language (affective, coded and mythical use of language, visualisation of symbols of mourning, victims, destruction and, if available perpetrator(s)) and collectively shared thoughts of the ritual outcomes (social cohesion, increased polarisation) for both individuals and large collective entities, such as communities and societies (see also McClymond, 2016: 3-4). The main purpose of these practices is to help the audience make sense of the unexpected violence and to support the restoration of a sense of community following the trembling terrorist experience (cf. Nossek and Berkowitz, 2006: 692-693; Kunelius and Nossek, 2008; Rothenbuhler and Coman, 2005).

### **Online fieldwork in news media**

The methodological approach applied in this article is best characterised as digital media ethnography (cf. Airoldi, 2018; Caliandro, 2018; Hine, 2015; Knox and Nafus, 2018; Kozinets, 2016; Pink et al., 2016). As a methodological orientation, it allows an ethnographic gaze to online news media. In this empirical endeavour, a researcher is encouraged to observe and follow (here, ritual patterns and connections) a variety of online news sites instead of being fixed to a single news platform. Through this research practice, we argue that it is possible to begin to gain new understandings of ritual workings in terrorist news events and how they construct social realities that travel from one context to another to contribute to the global ritualisation of news media. Here, the digital media ethnographic analysis of ritual work expands its analytical scope far beyond ‘methodological nationalism’ and the German news media, with the prospect of seeing ritual work in news media as a fundamentally global construction (cf. Bird, 2019).

The news media, which were observed and followed, include 15 online news sites from seven national and media cultural contexts. German news sites were selected as the closest context for the ritual work in question. Other European news sites were selected based on their geographical and cultural closeness (UK, France, Finland and Sweden all share the tradition of Christmas markets and celebrate Christmas as a high holiday and tourist event) to the event as well as their national and international prominence as news media sites. *The New York Times* and CNN were chosen as geographically distant sites as well as for their culturally and relatively close connection to the event. *Aljazeera English* was selected for the fieldwork, with the expectation that it would shed light on ritual work carried out in the ‘non-Western’, globally influential news media context (cf. Robertson, 2014).

More specifically, we documented our observations by tracking and tracing news (articles, chats, images and videos) published in *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Independent*, *Le Monde*, *Le Parisien*, *Helsingin Sanomat*, *The New York Times*, *Aljazeera English*, BBC, CNN, YLE,

*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, *Sveriges Television* and *Svenska Dagbladet* during the four days around the acute situation (19–22 December 2016). Through this process, and following the Turnerian (1969) idea of rites of passage, we identified three key phases in which ritual work was put into action in the observed news media: *the strike* as the rupture, *the manhunt* as the liminal phase and *the mourning* as the re-construction of a new order. In Turnerian's (1969) conception of life-crisis rituals, the first phase is called the rupture: the sudden, violent public awareness of an unexpected loss of life. In terms of news media, this sense of rupture is brought to the public in the form and shape of news of violence circulating in diverse news media platforms. News media, thus, make disruption a shared social reality, while simultaneously providing a means of coping with the situation. This brings us to the second phase, the liminal stage, during which emotionally laden discursive and symbolic responses are activated within news media. As a transformative period, the liminal phase also offers the opportunity to express anger or even malicious enjoyment at the death of someone (see, e.g. Anonymised, 2014). After the liminal phase, a new order is established, and mourning is overcome. News media are ready to return to the 'normal' condition of mundane news – until the emergence of a new rupture.

While we focused on similarities in the three phases of ritual reporting to better recognise the patterns in the material, differences, when noted, were also identified and acknowledged. To exemplify, the German news media published a larger quantity of stories compared to the other international news media sites examined. Also, certain topics and news frames, particularly those connected with the national political debate related to Muslim migration policy in Germany, gained greater visibility in the ritual work of the German news media. Nevertheless, the fieldwork revealed that in the ritual work analysed in the diverse online news media sites, far more similarities than differences appeared in the ritual mode of reporting. We shall return to this observation after our empirical analysis in the concluding section of this article.

## **The Berlin truck attack**

### *The strike*

The first phase in the ritual work regarding the mode of reporting is *the strike*. During this initial phase – the rupture – various news media begin to differentiate among groups and individuals (what we call the emic and etic perspectives). This differentiation is instantiated across a variety of discursive, narrative and symbolic practices of mythical nature. For example, time becomes an asset for diverse news media, which use it to dramatize the horror of the strike. In this context, the time

preceding the strike is described in different news media as an idealisation of a harmonious, even romantic time, and the time after the strike is described as devastating. An example illustrates this type of ritual discourse around time:

Just half an hour before the truck hit, they were enjoying the Christmas market and had gone back to their hotel just 50 meters away. ‘It was so beautiful, so charming. I cannot quite comprehend the chaos that came directly afterwards’. (Connolly Kate and Oltermann Philip, *Daily Mail*, 19 December 2016)

The Swedish daily *Svenska Dagbladet* writes in a similar tone:

In Berlin, the Christmas peace changed during Monday evening to a bloody chaos when a black or dark Scania- lorry ploughed into a crowd of people, killing at least twelve and injuring some fifty persons. (Eric Bergin, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 20 December 2016)

In addition to time, space also carries significant meaning in the ritual work within the rupture. The strike happened at the Berlin Christmas market near Memorial Church. The market is a space associated, in the news reporting on the event, with sentiments of charm, beauty and harmony. The Finnish daily *Helsingin Sanomat* published a comment by Jyrki Katainen, the then Vice President of the European Commission, who had just visited Berlin. Mr. Katainen commented:

Christmas market is one of the most shocking targets for Europeans – this is a shock for everyone (Mykkänen Pekka, *Helsingin Sanomat*, 19 December 2016)

Both the German paper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the Swedish paper *Svenska Dagbladet* underline the sharp contrast between the Christmas spirit and the attack:

Where the lorry drove, there stands a gate, and you can still read the inscription: ‘Merry Christmas’. However, that evening the pre-Christmas mood abruptly disappeared. Crowds of people, quite unsuspectedly, came to the place of the event, to meet up with friends and colleagues. Shortly after, there was no more passing through. (Nico Fried, Verena Mayer, Jens Schneider, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 20 December 2016)

Christmas markets are an essential part of the German Christmas celebration. People meet after work and spend some time together. Have a glühwein. They are an expression of warmth and community, says Hans Brun. (Jan Majlard, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 20 December 2016)

The closeness to a church implies proximity to a sacred space. During the rupture, the harmony of the Christmas market and the sacred space of the church were broken – a point that was repeatedly underlined in the initial news broadcasts on the attacks. As *Aljazeera English* reported:

During the day Tuesday, Berliners laid flowers at makeshift memorials around the market while inside, investigators continued to gather evidence and pieces of the truck. At noon, people gathered at the next door Kaiser Wilhelm memorial cathedral to light candles, pray and pay respects to the victims – including a group called Muslims for Peace, wearing shirts reading, ‘Love for all, hate for none’. (Bhatti and Waters, *Aljazeera English*, 21 December 2016)

*Frankfurter Allgemeine* reminds readers of the history of the site in which this terrorist violence took place. These lines give special historical significance to the space of the attack and its symbolic value.

For decades, here in the middle of West Berlin on the Breitscheidplatz, right on the Kurfürstendamm, stands a memorial against the horrors of war. A symbol of what happens when a person leaves the ground of civilization and becomes violent. (Eckhart Lohse and Markus Wehner, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 20 December 2016)

Another practice in the ritual work applied by multiple news media in their ritual mode of reporting involves framing the event with emotions. One of the core elements of this news mode is the representation of fear. In one news image published in *The Independent*, an elderly man is captured holding a homemade placard addressed to the chancellor and mayor of Berlin:

‘Beloved leader’, it reads. ‘I am afraid of dying in Germany’. (Dearden Lizzie, *The Independent*, 22 December 2016)



Through emotional language and symbolic expression, diverse news media in the UK, France, Germany and Sweden relate the Christmas market attack to similar past attacks, such as the truck attack in Nice, creating a warlike discourse (see also Anonymized, 2018). Key here is the horrification of the unwanted rupture:

Klaus Bouillon, interior minister of German's Saarland State, said the country was in a 'state of war'. (Hunter Matt, Joseph A and Akbar Jay, *Daily Mail*, 19 December 2016)

In terms of both chosen target and method, the Berlin attack has echoes of the slaughter brought to the French coastal city in July by a Tunisian-born French resident... (Borger Julian and MacAskill Ewen, *The Guardian*, 20 December 2016)

The condolences from Nice came an hour before midnight. 'I'm a Berliner', tweeted Philippe Pradal, the mayor of that southern French city, on whose beach promenade on July 14, an Islamist assassin rolled over and murdered 85 people in a truck. Nice, according to Pradal, was the terrible model for the terror in Berlin: 'The same approach, the same blind violence, the same hatred against happy people', wrote the conservative Frenchman. (Christian Wernicke, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 21 December 2016)

References to the news event as 'the slaughter' and 'blind violence' have implications not only for the understanding of the seriousness of the rupture but also for the identities of the actors or stakeholders in this horror scenario. The ritual mode of reporting asks who 'we' are as targets and who 'they' are as those who commit these bloody deeds.

You could feel the tension in the air—it was hostile. It seemed people were scared of people from the Middle East. (Hunter Matt, Joseph Anthony and Akbar Jay, *Daily Mail*, 19 December 2016)

We argue, then, that in this ritual work, stirred by the rupture, the various news media on which we conducted our fieldwork immediately turned to ritual mode of reporting and began drawing mythical and symbolic boundaries between the phases preceding and following the attack, describing the attack as a serious rupture in the 'normal' course of events of the festive season in Berlin, a time characterised by beauty and harmony. Furthermore, in this mode of reporting, the

rupture is portrayed in a variety of news media as a strike whose victims and witnesses are described as innocent, in stark contrast to the evilness of the perpetrator.

### *The manhunt*

After the rupture comes the second or liminal phase, which is ritualised in the array of news media reporting as *the manhunt*. During this phase, the manhunt manifests through the mode of reporting triggered by excitement and brutality linked to the chase of the perpetrator. Typical of the Turnerian (1969) liminal phase, diverse news media report confusion about several questions: the identity of the perpetrator, his/her motives, the number of victims and the immediate consequences of the attack in different contexts. As there are no guaranteed answers to these questions or the outcome of the manhunt, the news media in question engage in the production of social imagination (cf. Appadurai, 2006). In this case, the process results in repetitive speculations about the perpetrator and the type of terrorism involved. Special attention in the reporting is given to speculations about the perpetrator's refugee background.

Stephan Mayer, a CSU MP... said 'There are clear hints that there is a terrorist background to this horrible attack. There are rumours that the attacker was either Pakistani or Afghan and he made it as a refugee to Germany, either last year or this year, and he lived for a long period of time in Berlin in a refugee camp'. (Connolly Kate and Oltermann Philip, *The Guardian*, 20 December 2016)

In this ritual work of the liminal manhunt phase, the first unknown and then identified perpetrator is represented in reporting as a *persona non grata*. Suppositions are advanced to paint the perpetrator in this mode of reporting as an asylum seeker, unwanted both in Germany and his homeland of Tunisia. Following the identification of Anis Amri, his personality is portrayed through a variety of terms underlying the *etic other*.

A brother of the suspect in Tunisia, Abdelkader Amri, told AFP news agency he could not believe his eyes when he saw his relative's face in the media. 'I'm in shock and can't believe it's him who committed this crime', he said, before adding: 'If he is guilty, he deserves every condemnation'. (BBC, 22 December 2016)

As the story unfolds, it is revealed that the attacker had also been denied Tunisian citizenship, positioning him as an outsider, perhaps even an outcast, of every plausible group. Thus, the ritual work of the manhunt grants Amri a terrorist identity, portraying him as a human being who lacked any reference or connection to organised society (e.g. neither Tunisia nor Germany). Thus, the emic and etic manifest not only as concepts but also as actual and absolute ways of differentiating – or, rather, alienating – the perpetrator from the rest of (organised) society, positioning him in this type of reporting as the ultimate evil ‘Other’ (see also Greer, 2004).

In the ritual work of the manhunt, the lorry, the vehicle used in the attack, also becomes part of the news media’s othering. The lorry is visually represented in a range of news media outlets as a mediator of the evil that destroyed the lives of innocent victims (i.e. tourists and local people). It can be interpreted as a war machine that lacks an identity or nation, and it drives the emic representation of individuals as innocent victims, discursively represented as family members (e.g. *my father, my mum, my girlfriend, Daily Mail*, 19 December 2016). Thus, the ritual work is built around the contrasts among three elements in this mode of reporting: the lonely perpetrator, the lorry as a war machine and the peaceful crowd enjoying the warm spirit of Christmas (i.e. tourists and local people). The conflict can be seen as manifesting a profound tension between the mythical threat from the etic outside and the emic social centre, which includes imagined communities established in news media not only around the German news media but also other European, US and non-Western news media, such as *Aljazeera English* (see also Bala, Chalil and Gupta, 2016; Couldry, 2003).

### ***The mourning***

The liminal phase is followed by a re-structuring of order within the ritual mode of reporting in the studied online news media sites. During this phase, public mourning in reporting plays a significant role, as it creates a sense of togetherness, a feeling of belonging and a consciousness of societal continuity (e.g. Anonymized, 2013).

One of the mourning practices closely associated with the ritual work and identified from the news media material is the *politics of symbolic gestures*. When the German Chancellor Angela Merkel promenades through the Christmas market at Breitscheidplatz, clutching onto white roses and displaying a sombre facial expression, she plays in news media the role of the concerned and compassionate leader.

Merkel joined the mourners on Tuesday afternoon, walking slowly past the scene accompanied by ministers and bodyguards and carrying white roses. Inside the church – a symbol of reconciliation after the second world war – she signed a book of condolence. (Connolly Kate and Oltermann Philip, *The Guardian*, 21 December 2016)

Dressed in black and making her first public comments about the incident late Tuesday morning, she called for unity in the country... ‘This is a very difficult day. I, like millions of people in Germany, am horrified and deeply sad about what happened yesterday in Berlin’. (Pleitgen Frederik, Dewan Angela, Griffiths James and Shoichet Catherine E., CNN, 21 December 2016)

Angela Merkel ended her speech beautifully: ‘Also, when it feels difficult we must find the strength to continue to live as we want to in Germany: freely, jointly and openly’. (Linda Nordlund, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 21 December 2016)

In this mode of reporting an imagined nation – that is, ‘us’ – gains not only a central position but also a new meaning in media. The public presence of leaders (here, Chancellor Merkel) can be read to convince the audience, the emic ‘we’, that ‘we’ are not a society under threat; rather, ‘we’ are the opposite. ‘We’ stand strong, moved by the sheer weight of our emotions; ‘we’ become an entity – the nation – with one mind and one heart. This ‘we’, while constructed in diverse news media, however, does not include everyone; therefore, when the Chancellor refers to the ‘millions of people in Germany’ (CNN, 21 December 2016) who are grieving, she does not consider the perpetrator or others who are sympathetic to the deed as part of the ‘we’ of the mourning society and nation. By contrast, in this mode of reporting, the person who ‘sent shockwaves of fear throughout Europe’ (*Daily Mail*, 19 December 2016) becomes a symbol of evil: a person who divides the imagined nation into those who are ‘we’, i.e. those who are ‘good’, and those who represent a polar opposite – and, thus, must be excluded from ‘us’.

As an outcome of the ritual work played out in this mode of reporting, ordinary people also become recognised actors in the creation of an imagined and mythical sense of primal togetherness and belonging. One practice of this ritual work is the representation of the vigil, during which ordinary people, i.e. ‘us’, gather to experience sorrow by mourning together.

As evening fell on Tuesday, thousands of people gather at the church for a memorial service. Those unable to enter the packed building wait outside in the winter air, many hugging each

other, crying, or silently clutching candles... The shuttered market, in the shadow of the church, is transformed into its own place of worship. (Jones Bryony, CNN, 20 December 2016)

The front of one of the closed stalls has been turned into a notice board for messages of condolence and support. 'We stand together, we share the grief of victims and their families', a note reads in German and English. Other messages express a sense of togetherness: 'Our words are stronger,' 'no fear' and 'words are stronger than weapons.' (Jones Bryony, CNN, 20 December 2016)

This ritual work of mourning can be discussed in the context of a *closed circle*. The mode of reporting associated with mourning contains descriptions of powerful symbolic acts such as people standing in a ring, holding hands and looking inwards.

Many people stood in a circle holding hands during a minute of silence. In the church a speaker is heard referring to Berlin's night of terror. Meanwhile, outside loudspeakers share the lyrics of a song being played as part of the service. 'So what are we fighting for? What do we live for? What do we pray for? What do we die for?' (Jones Bryony, CNN, 20 December 2016)

The symbolic act of standing in a circle can be interpreted as simultaneously inclusive and exclusive. In the news image (CNN, 20 December 2016), three young women are standing close to each other, clasping at their candles. The emic 'us' is underlined in this mode of reporting by their appearance and becomes a symbolic representation of 'white' 'Western' mourners. This division becomes even clearer when compared in reporting to another news footage of another group of mourners:

Muslims at a vigil in Berlin spoke of their love of the city and of Germany. (BBC, 21 December 2016)

These mourners are constructed in this mode of reporting as etic. They become a sub-group of other mourners – distinct from the 'natural' emic mourners – who are not characterised by, for instance, an epithet, as in the case of 'Christians'. Consequently, what is of relevance in the ritual work on

mourning is not only what is said and represented in this mode of reporting but also what is left outside and silenced. In one picture, a group of people look into the camera. The caption reads:

Berlin's Muslim community sends message of peace and solidarity after the Christmas market attack. (Dearden Lizzie and Forster Katie, *The Independent*, 21 December 2016)

In the ritual work there are also attempts to emphasise solidarity among people and groups, though the communication manages to create an emic Christian and an etic 'other':

Berliners, tourists, Muslims and Jews could all be seen among the crowds braving the freezing cold in a show of defiance against the terror wreaked less than 24 hours before. (Dearden Lizzie and Forster Katie, *The Independent*, 21 December 2016)

'We are very sad', says the 18 year old Saleem. He and his classmates have just signed the book of condolences in the Church. Saleem's classmate, Mohammed, who was born in Damascus, also says: 'we are Muslims, but we have nothing to do with terrorism'. (Jakob Schulz, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 21 December 2016)

Compared to the closed circle of mourners encountered above, we find interesting remarks on religion, again constituting the simultaneous unification and separation of groups in the ritual work of mourning carried out in this mode of reporting. This suggests that both the citizens of Berlin and visitors are constructed as non-religious, whereas Jews and Muslims are defined by their religion rather than by where they live.

Another important perspective in public mourning is the emphasis on 'neighbourly solidarity', with *Le Monde* (19 December 2016) publishing tweets of prominent French public figures demonstrating solidarity with the victims in Berlin. A tweet from the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, reads:

People in Paris feel solidarity for the victims, their families and all those brothers and friends in Berlin. #Berlin

A German online news site *Franfurter Allgemeine* underlines this sense of neighbourly solidarity as follows:

In the night between 19 and 20 December something happened in front of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church that made visible, through both media and social media, the mutual destiny of the German-French community. (Jürg Altwegg, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 20 December 2016)

This type of ‘neighbourly solidarity’ goes beyond the ‘emic’/’etic’ division based on religion and underlines the idea of ‘neighbour’, ‘brother’ and ‘friend’, referencing to a metaphorical European kinship. It is important to note, however, that the ritual work around the mourning practices is anything but neutral in its construction of consensus. Instead, this type of ritual work carried out in various news media reports mourning as a form of mythical closure or a harmonisation of liminal chaos. Thus, the ritual work of mourning carried out in this mode of reporting can be seen as having the power to determine signifiers, creating a relatively specific meaning of ‘us’ as the targets of the attack and prompting corresponding emotional and symbolic responses. In this condition, there are almost no open ends or different solutions or paths for the audience to follow. *Aljazeera English* (21 December 2016), however, makes one explicit exception in this collective ritual work carried out by most of the studied online news media outlets. On its site, it provides a visually rich counter-narrative, openly critiquing some international media outlets for their enthusiasm in ‘jumping to conclusions’ and blaming the Muslim community for the violence. Here, the ritual consensus is momentarily broken.

### **Re-enforcing boundaries in news media**

The attack against the Christmas market in Berlin serves as a thought-provoking media anthropological study for analysing ritual work in the observed German, other European, US and non-Western news media and the interplay between news media and the symbolism that is carried out on these platforms through the ritual mode of reporting. In our analysis, we conducted fieldwork inspired by digital media ethnography in diverse news media platforms and examined ritual work in ritual mode of reporting through three Turnerian (1969) phases: rupture (the strike), the liminal phase (the manhunt) and the re-structuring of order (the mourning). Although these phases may not always follow a purely linear order (e.g. mourning may occur simultaneously with the mode of news reporting of the strike) in all the news media observed, each phase, however, contributes to a perhaps surprisingly similar mythical narrative, thus rendering a relatively cohesive meaning and shared explanation of the terrorist violence.

One of the observations that clearly stood out in the material was the similarity of the mode of reporting in the studied online news media following the truck attack. In other words, the ritual

work was based on very similar strategies of making sense of this type of terrorist violence; at the heart of the ritual work in a variety of news media seems to be the very emic/etic distinction, regardless of their cultural or geographical position or location. The news event can thus be interpreted through the establishment of boundaries between those who are the innocent ‘targets’ of the attack and those who are to blame. The ritual mode of reporting follows a similar pattern. Our finding points to a very different direction than that offered by Nossek and Berkowitz’ (2006) claim that the ritual mode of reporting, associated with and rooted in mythical narratives of a given culture, tend to have a more prominent role when the reporting involves terror attacks in more distant locations. Our fieldwork, which focused on the first four days after the attack, revealed a rather unanimous story of mythical ‘us’ as innocent victims and mythical ‘them’ as ‘evil perpetrators’. This story is repeated not only in the studied German and French media sites but also in the studied British, North American and Scandinavian media and even *Aljazeera English*. What we claim is that this type of ritual work in global news media is far from neutral, and it is certainly not inconsequential.

In the last part of this article, we wish to reflect more closely on some of the consequences of this ritual work for the larger society and the role of news media within it. We argue that this type of ritual work has several implications for the social construction of the reality around such terrorist events, well beyond their local or national contexts. The ritual work carried out in these news media through a certain mode of reporting ‘nails down’ meanings and interpretations concerning the attack, thus exerting social power over its participants (namely, the public). In this sense, the ritual work on the attack is not only one occasion of a signifying or meaning-making process; it is also a social and cultural demonstration of how ‘the social’ is understood in the studied news media when interpreted within a media anthropological framework (see also Pertierra, 2018).

By re-structuring order and a sense of continuity in the post-attack phase, the ritual work in the observed news media provides not only an interpretive frame for what is going on but also reasons for public participation (cf. Cottle, 2006). The ritual work is, thus, a demonstrative affair. It applies repetition and mythologization as a key socialising power to address the public as ‘we’ and ‘them’. Thus, ritual work in news media produces a closed system that amplifies its own practices by applying its own circular logic and a powerful dynamic of ‘othering’ through the very ritual mode of reporting. Consequently, there is little space for open-ended explanations or alternative paths to interpret the event left in this reporting style. In this frame of thinking, the constitution of the emic ‘us’ through ritual work in the case of terrorist violence is not only a descriptive act; it is a demonstrative affair and a moral act that reinforces media power well beyond its local and national contexts (Couldry, 2012). In this condition, the news media and ritual become momentarily



inseparable (cf. Grimes, 2014). News media take on an organising and obtrusive role in carrying out ritual work in society through its highly patterned mode of reporting. Here, they perform the function of appointing themselves as agents with the right to orchestrate how unity and meaning are produced and how those boundaries and belongings are affirmed in the reporting of the terrorist news event. In this sense, following Couldry's (2012, 2003) argument, we claim that the ritual work in the Berlin truck attack serves the media's goal of establishing themselves as the mediated 'centre' of contemporary society, with the power to cement mythologization of terrorism and related emic/etic distinction.

We would like to end with a note for a reflection of the media anthropological approach and its contribution to the study of media events of terrorist violence. We argued earlier in this article that media anthropological approach applied to the study of media events allows us to look at media as a ritual condition in which the present organisation of social life is carried out in relation to terrorism. Empirical fieldwork reveals that the social life in question is prominently structured in diverse media around binary oppositions between 'us the innocent victims' and 'them as the evil perpetrators. This observation discloses a perspective of mediatized social reality as fixed and closed and in which social cohesion, a classical function of media events (Dayan and Katz 1992), is in this case built around a projection over an enemy. In addition to expanding the idea of the workings of media events as ritualised social reality in relation to terrorist violence, ritual view and media anthropology also point to the significance of looking into journalistic practices of coping with such disturbing events. Hence, the ritual view does not only look at the condition of social reality, but also (ritual) practices in journalism that contribute to producing such condition. Needless to say, both aspects are profoundly intertwined with each other. As a final issue, we wish to argue that for the future research to advance media event theory combined with media anthropology and ritual analysis we need to scrutinise not only the mythical 'other' that is ritually constituted in the emic/etic distinction as demonstrated in this article but also the mythical 'us' that is created in the media event in question. We have to critically engage with a concern, what kind of an idealised victim, to use Greer's (2004) vocabulary, is created in this highly mediatized ritual venture? How does this type of idealisation of purity and innocence of 'us' shape 'our' collectively shared self-perception, and what does it prevent 'us' from seeing about 'ourselves' as social, cultural and political actors in the present global society saturated by disruptive events and terrorist violence? We believe that to carefully examine these blind spots, created perhaps as an unwanted consequence of the ritual mode of reporting and the related ritual work, we may gain new understandings of the workings of today's media events and the social realities they constitute.

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