Social solidarity in times of tragedy

By Louise Marsland

The tragic events of the past few days, both in Paris and Beirut, have fuelled a debate about whose lives matter most on social media. Mainstream media has come in for this kind of criticism many times, but this time there was a strong challenge to social organisations like Facebook and its Safety Check app.

In solidarity and sympathy with the French people after the brutal terror attacks in Paris on Friday night, 13 November, Facebook allowed users to overlay their avatars with the French flag - as they have started doing with significant global events, like offering a rainbow flag when the US Supreme Court legalised gay marriage in June.

It also enabled one of its most socially significant features for the city of Paris: Safety Check, which enabled family and friends to check on the safety of their loved ones in Paris - provided they were on Facebook of course. Safety Check was created by Facebook to enable people to alert others as to their status in a natural disaster. More than four million people inside Paris used Safety Check within the first 24 hours, reports Mashable.

Since it has now also been enabled for a man-made disaster like the #ParisAttacks, Facebook is being asked why it hasn't done so for similar terror attacks like those in Beirut on Thursday last week, a day before the Paris attacks.

Facebook emphasised that the Paris attacks was the first time safety check was turned on for something other than a natural disaster and that Paris was a test case that would be evaluated and that discussions would take place around how to use the feature effectively. It was stated that it would work less effectively in areas where there was ongoing conflict. Said CEO Mark Zuckerberg in his statement, as reported by The Verge: "You are right that there are many other important conflicts in the world. We care about all people equally, and we will work hard to help people suffering in as many of these situations as we can."

The debate about 'Western bias' in apparently valuing some lives more than others, continued with the hashtags #PrayForParis and #PrayForBeirut and also #PrayForEveryone. And of course there were those who insisted the world needs less prayers and more action to prevent war and the sale of arms around the world.

Australian columnist Chris Graham summed up the "selective grief and outrage" that Western media are being accused of: "But how do we explain our identification with French suffering and our apparent indifference to Lebanese suffering?" He also referenced the muted global outrage that greeted the massacre of 2000 people in the Nigerian town of Baja in a terror attack that annihilated an entire town just before the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris 11 months ago.

Image by Jean Jullien

From sadness and anger, emotions played out on social media platforms as mainstream media bombarded the world with blanket news coverage of the Paris bombings, vigils were held in cities around the world in sympathy with Paris and key city landmarks bore the blue, white and red colours of the French flag.

Hashtag heroes

There were also quite a few significant social trends that happened around the Paris attacks this weekend. One of the most heartwarming was #PorteOuverte (#OpenDoor), which Parisians in the affected suburbs were using to tweet their addresses to take in those who were caught up in the carnage on the streets and had nowhere to go to be safe during the ongoing police action against the attackers.

DigitalTrends.com provided a good overview of some of the moments that created hope and outlines how new services like Twitter Moments has its 'moment', becoming a critical information source for journalists, with visuals, video, warnings and information.

The *New York Times* lifted its paywall to provide access to live updates and in depth coverage of the Paris attacks. As global landmarks turned blue, white and red, Muslims used the hashtag #NotInMyName to condemn the attacks in Paris and elsewhere. #TerrorismHasNoReligion started trending too as the attacks were denounced further, in both Paris and Beirut.

I take heart from the fact that these debates are happening on social media and about the increasing role of social media in

disasters, man-made or not. That I follow enough intelligent people and diverse news organisations who serve up views other than the mainstream to challenge my thinking and my worldview. Without social media I wouldn't be exposed to such a diversity of opinion within 12 hours of a key event.

And that there is always hope through the incredible acts of bravery and love that emerge as a triumph of the human spirit, not just hate spewed forth to add to the carnage we were bombarded with this weekend.

Somebody shared poem on Facebook yesterday by Somali-British writer and poet, **Warsan Shire**, which I thought was relevant:

"later that night
i held an atlas in my lap
ran my fingers across the whole world
and whispered
where does it hurt?

it answered
everywhere
everywhere
everywhere."

ABOUT LOUISE MARSLAND

Louise Burgers (previously Marsland) is Founder/Content Director: SOURCE Content Marketing Agency. Louise is a Writer, Publisher, Editor, Content Strategist, Content/Media Trainer. She has written about consumer trends, brands, branding, media, marketing and the advertising communications industry in SA and across Africa, for over 20 years, notably, as previous Africa Editor: Bizcommunity.com; Editor: Bizcommunity Media/Marketing SA; Editor-in-Chief: AdVantage magazine; Editor: Marketing Mix magazine; Editor: Progressive Retailing magazine; Editor: BusinessBrief magazine; Editor: FMCG Files newsletter. Web: www.sourceagency.co.za.

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