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# Blurring Lines: Libraries and Video: Measuring ROI ... Really, How?

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# Little Red Herrings — Charlie Hebdo and the Moral Equivalence Fallacy



by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

The tragedy of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris kicked off what we hope is not a harbinger of 2015 things to come. The massacre by radical Muslims of some dozen employees of the satirical Paris magazine has set off a wave of newfound “freedom of expression” advocates. And so it should. While freedom of expression does not mean that one must accept what another says, it does vouchsafe the right to say it.

That the French version of what Americans would think of as *Mad Magazine* or *The Onion* is at the heart of this controversy may be fitting but if truth be told, we’d all prefer it to be a serious journal of opinion. *Hebdo* is not a grand magazine with high-flown ideals. It’s *The Harvard Lampoon* for adults, making fun of everyone and everything without regard to race, creed, color, religions, or peoples. *Hebdo* has attacked Jews, Christians, Adventists, clergy, politicians, governments, and now, of course, jihadists. Until *Hebdo* took on that last group, most Americans had never heard of the magazine. Now, the whole world knows about it.

Any librarian could have told any one of those jihadists that they were making a gross tactical mistake with respect to trying to silence the magazine. True to form in cases of censorship, the magazine that struggled to sell 50,000 issues per publication cycle, published three million last week, all of which sold out in less than two hours. The magazine will publish another two million and release those, making sure that what once stumbled its way to 50,000 an issue is now well on its way to 100 times that many. For how long is anyone’s guess. But for now, everyone knows *Hebdo*. If those bloody jihadists were looking for some sort of remorse, they were mistaken. The prophet Mohammed is on the new cover declaiming, “Tout est pardonné,” or all is forgiven.

Now everywhere we see “Je suis Charlie,” I am Charlie, a message of solidarity with the magazine and in mourning for the lost lives who never saw it coming. But the question occurs to me whether those who wear these signs of solidarity fully understand what they are saying. Americans especially are prone to believe that all countries and peoples embrace the same ideals on which this country was founded. We believe, optimistically, if naively, that if we can just sit down with our enemies, beer or not, we can talk them through our differences with each other and all will be well. With a naiveté known only in Americans, we worked out this routine regularly during the Cold War. American political leaders were “played,” often with promises of summits, diplomacy, and breakthroughs, all to no avail typically because our opponents simply did not share the same, some, or any of ideals as did we.

This is not to say that America never makes mistakes, hasn’t been wrong, or ever embraced the wrong ideals. Our history is replete with our mistakes. But the fact of the matter is that the

country has striven to do better. We work hard to overcome our missteps and do make strong efforts to make restitution when possible. We have the worst form of government...except for all the rest.

This is not so much the case with all other countries. Many do not share our desire for a free press; many do not believe all people are created equal, and some do not like the idea that everyone shares an equal opportunity to the riches that America proffers to its citizens. This does not mean, of course, that there are equal outcomes.

If nothing else, *Hebdo* has taught us that there really are bad ideas in the world, and that bad people try to inflict those bad ideas on others. It has also taught us that there are people in the world for whom discussion and compromise are simply not options, or more specifically, options that are dramatically and murderously ruled out. It’s easy to think of standing firm on principle when, secretly, or perhaps subconsciously, we think that if given the chance, we can talk these folks to reason. Jihadists have proven again and again they are not capable of such things.

In at least one way, when we hold up our “Je suis Charlie” signs, as we doubtless should, we are also saying that we are not what jihadists are, or what any other group that defines itself by the term “radical” is. We are saying that we stand firm on the principles that founded this

country and any other that values freedom of speech and religion. But it means that we stand ready to defend those principles beyond mere sign-holding and phrase-making. It means a very uncomfortable admission for some Americans, not to mention some librarians: some ideas are so bad that they need to be eradicated.

That’s the hard part: when you get to the place where you realize that moral equivalence is a fallacy, and that talking, discussing, or shuttle diplomacy are simply empty and meaningless gestures to groups that deny them, hate them, and are willing to die to prevent them. When we say “Je suis Charlie” we are saying in effect that we plan to be as firm in this belief as those who wish to eradicate it are in their misguided one. That flies in the face of all that multiculturalism has tried to teach us. In the end, realizing that there are good and bad ideas and that there are good and bad people, and that there are bad people who hold horrific ideas and must be marginalized, is a giant step into the adulthood of ideas.

Shuffling off our multicultural moral equivalent coil may prove easier said than done. Events like *Charlie Hebdo* help get us to an uncomfortable crossroad. Whether we will hold up only signs, or do more to disenfranchise those who hold these wrongheaded ideas, will be the difference between letting freedom ring, or merely continuing to gong the tintinnabulation of the moral equivalent fallacy. 🌱

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## Blurring Lines — Libraries and Video: Measuring ROI ... Really, how?

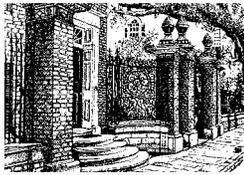
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In my role at **Alexander Street Press** as the head of the editorial and licensing department, I am constantly called on to decide what new video content we will license for library distribution. But it is not simply a question of what video we will distribute but also through what delivery platforms, e.g., single titles for subscription and purchase through our academic video store as DVD or streaming, PDA, curated collections, large, multi-disciplinary aggregations or our own evidence-based acquisition model. Where an individual title lands in this distribution schema is the result of a dialogue between the content producer (licensor) and **ASP** about aims. And aims are, in my view, at the heart of the ROI discussion I see popping up in conference presentations, blogs, list serves and other venues where investment in video and PDA are being discussed by librarians. In short, it is my opinion;

we appear to be reducing the measure of value (ROI) down to number of views (playbacks) on an annual and annualized basis, thus touting PDA as the ultimate tool for realizing ROI.

Video content providers love all the choice we are offering as to how they can distribute: single title, collection, subscriptions, purchases, exclusive to **ASP**, non-exclusive and available via multiple distributors, PDA, EBA... This myriad complex of distribution decisions allows the video content provider to decide, based on their values, the appropriate level of access, if access is defined as cost to access and volume/term of access. ROI, for a producer of video content, may be measured by number of views and dollars earned, but it may also be measured by length of views (engagement), number of classes where the video is central to the syllabus (impact

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of view) or longevity of views (number of years the video remains active within the academic community). This is a decision complex that is infinitely more nuanced than a simplistic measure of value as defined by playbacks on an annual and annualized basis. Thus we find ourselves in a scenario where libraries and librarians are being asked to make an ROI call that is incomplete and out of alignment with distribution/access decisions the video content provider and the video distributor (ASP) are weighing. In effect, I am positing that a more nuanced discussion of how ROI in video viewing is “measured.”

At the **National Media Market** this past November in Charleston, I sat in on a presentation on PDA and video that featured a slide emblazoned in bold letters that read: **“We Only Pay For What We Use A Lot!”** This is the battle of cry of PDA and ROI. And, indeed, it is an effective mechanism to ensure that library dollars only go toward videos with a critical mass of views in the course of the academic year. The discovery process is elegant, the triggers are certain and the acquisition cost is clearly defensible. This is a model for an age of data-driven management and decision making. But how will this model capture ROI for content creators when five or more views in a short window of time does not capture ROI from the perspective of a filmmaker?

Consider a scenario: A small, independent producer committed to telling the untold stories of activists in “you name the cause” pours

his or her resources and time into producing a stellar film that perfectly captures the ethos of a moment. The film is a perfect fit for a variety of courses in the school of social sciences and makes it onto the profile list for PDA across the country. It is new, it is relevant, it is well crafted, but it is niche. Still 50 or 100 professors discover the film via the library discovery service and, after previewing the film, put it on their syllabus. The film then gets shown twice a year, in a classroom, to many students, even hundreds of students, but the total “views” are two per institution, one in the fall semester and one in the spring semester. The film may well be seen over the next few years by thousands of students, but the aggregate number of views per institution may well never hit the purchase trigger. This is ROI “won” for the institution, but ROI “lost” for the film producer.

Consider a second scenario: An anthropologist/filmmaker spends several years capturing via visual ethnography a once-in-a-lifetime ritualized transition of power amongst a people typically reticent to opening their intimate practices to the outside world. The film is well crafted and well produced and is an immediate hit in anthropology courses the world over. It is profiled in PDA across the country and, because links to the film are placed in many hybrid and online courses, the views quickly surpass all triggers and hundreds if not thousands or purchases are made in the first 18 months after release. The film earns awards

from the scholarly community and, over the next five to 10 years, becomes part of the important history of anthropology education. But demand, over time, wanes and though the film is watched in many classrooms, the volume of views declines. The impact of this film has not diminished, but the aggregate number of views has. Does a model that only places a value on a film viewed a critical number of times in a period capture ROI? How does one measure the value of a film watched once by a student who, so inspired, goes on to change the world? All works, even world-changing works, travel a “long-tail” from very high usage to slowing usage; but this has nothing to do with impact or value in the future.

Libraries and librarians have always been the discipline’s voice for what is to be archived and shared for research and learning. Data analytics has enabled the library and the librarian to allow usage to drive how dollars are allocated. I am all for this efficiency as no institution can afford to simply allow purchases to proceed on human opinion, informed though it may be, when data can enhance and improve the decision outcome. But we would do well to eliminate the very business-like term “ROI” from our discussions around PDA as it will inevitably, if too widely embraced, lead us to a place where we have lost our sense of nuance in how impact and value should be truly measured when it comes to scholarly and learning output in video or any form of content, for that matter. 🌿

