

## EENA Case Study

# Brussels Attacks

### Crossover between research and reality

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### Authors and contributors to this document

This document was written by members of EENA:

Authors	Country/Organisation
Nicolas Vanderbiest	Reputatio Lab, Belgium

Contributors	Country/Organisation
Benoît Ramacker	National Crisis Centre, Belgium
Gary Machado	EENA, Belgium



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## 1 Executive Summary



During a conference of the European Emergency Number Association on Public Warning on October 2016, I was given the opportunity to present my theory of the 6 phases illustrated by the experience of Benoît Ramacker, spokesperson of the National Crisis Centre of Belgium (SPF Interior). It was a great opportunity to share knowledge. However, this narrative, and the positions taken, are mine.

## 2 Introduction

While the crisis cycle has been studied by many researchers (*Fink, 1986, Lagadec 1991, Mitroff 1994, Coombs 2014*), there is almost no theory of the life cycle of crisis responses, besides the 5 (or 7) stages of loss by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (*Kübler-Ross et al, 2014*): shock, denial, anger, sadness, resignation, acceptance and reconstruction.

At the same time, while the importance of Twitter during crises is growing (*Vieweg, 2010; Yates & Paquette, 2011; Kelly, 2014*), the state of the scientific art focuses on the sentiment (*Theilwall and Al, 2011*) or on information (*Austin, et al., 2012; Castillo, et al., 2011; Mendoza et al., 2010*) and does not analyse the entire process.

## 3 Methodology

To understand how people react to a crisis on Twitter, I analysed conversations on Twitter using rooted theory which is a process of continuously analysing and collecting data to develop theories using the theoretical sample (*Glaser & Strauss, 1967*).

I have made observations that can be defined as "the systemic description of events, behaviors or artefacts in a social setting chosen for study" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989), during the last 6 crises with heavy casualties to identify the reaction cycle on Twitter:

1. The attacks of Charlie Hebdo
2. The crash of the German Wings
3. The collision of the Villa Castelli
4. The Brussels bombings
5. The attacks of Paris and Bataclan
6. The attack in Nice

After these 6 crises, I reached the saturation effect (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) since there were no new emerging theories of data.

## 4 Results and cross-references

There are 6 phases during a crisis on Twitter.

### 4.1 The information phase

During this phase, people learn about the event. The reactions on the social networks are "neutral".

*Example: "An attack takes place in Paris, French media announce deaths #Paris"*

During Brussels, the tweet of the Crisis Center is thus perfectly representative of the moment:



During this period, the hashtags used will be: the location of the event (eg #Paris, #Zaventem); Generic name of the event (eg #fusillade, #bomb); The name of the organisation affected (eg #GermanWings); Name of the constructor (#Boeing); Serial number of the aircraft or train (#MH370, #4u9525, #SNCF3657)

On the crisis centre side, we are also in the information phase. Soon, as a spokesman for the Crisis Centre, Benoît Ramacker sends a very short message (in illustration, screenshots of his smartphone) to the main spokespersons of the ministers, authorities and services concerned: **"explosion. Information as soon as possible. Dead people."**

Subsequently, Benoit Ramacker put in place a "reflex communication". Sent to the same group of spokespersons, this one aims to give the first "elements of language" which generally give the context of a first information in crisis based on three key messages: we know, we do, we care.



This way of doing things will be relevant since we observe that from the first moments, journalists relay the messages resulting from this reflex communication. Journalists are the first partners in this kind of situation.



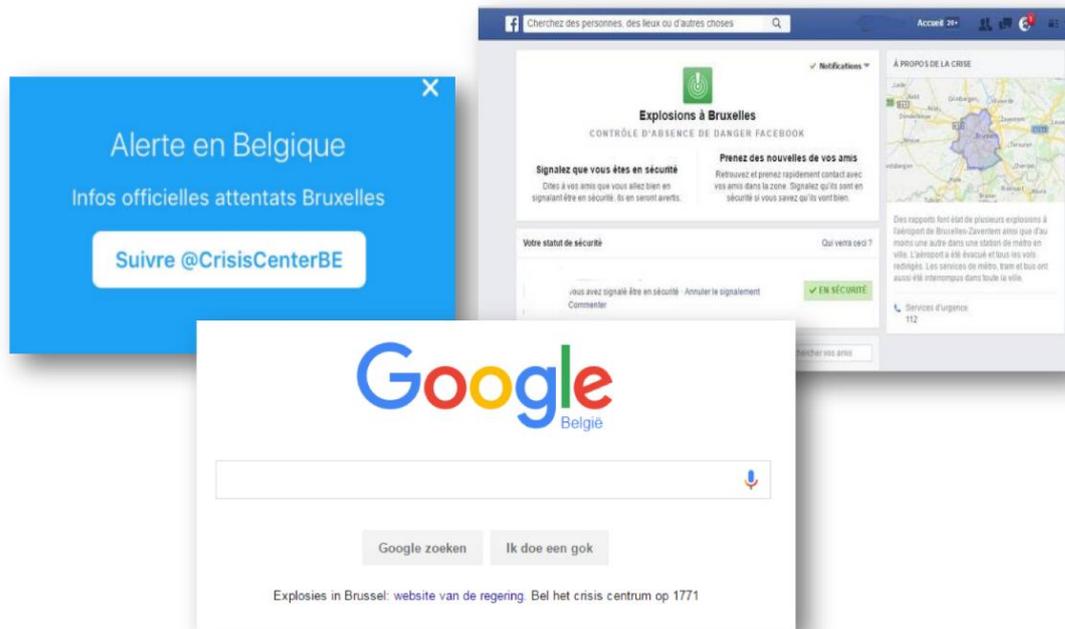
It is then necessary to inform the population as well as possible about the procedure to be followed while giving information in a context where they are lacking. Around 9:10, social networks are activated.





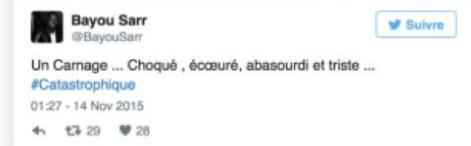

And the social networking platforms also come to help. Very soon, Twitter gets in touch via a "Direct Message" and then by telephone with the communicators of the Crisis Centre, asking if they could help. Facebook has set up Safety Check and Google has put a link on its main page referring both to the website of the Crisis Centre or the information number 1771.





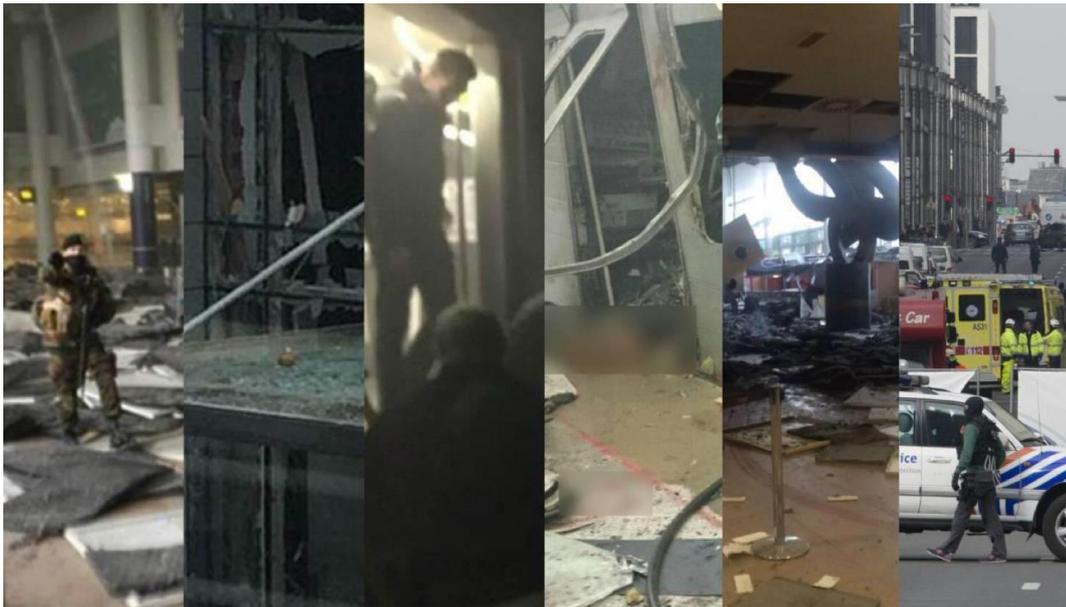
## 4.2 The phase of emotion

During this phase, people will express their emotions such as denial, shock, sadness, anger, etc.



There will be no specific hashtag during this period except for those already used or the name of one of the victims. One might think that this phase is less informative for the authorities, but it is not. What happens outside must be perceived to communicate well during a crisis.





To be able to listen and look out, one must understand the crisis communication methodology newly set up by the Crisis Centre. This was used on 22 March 2016 by nearly 40 people.

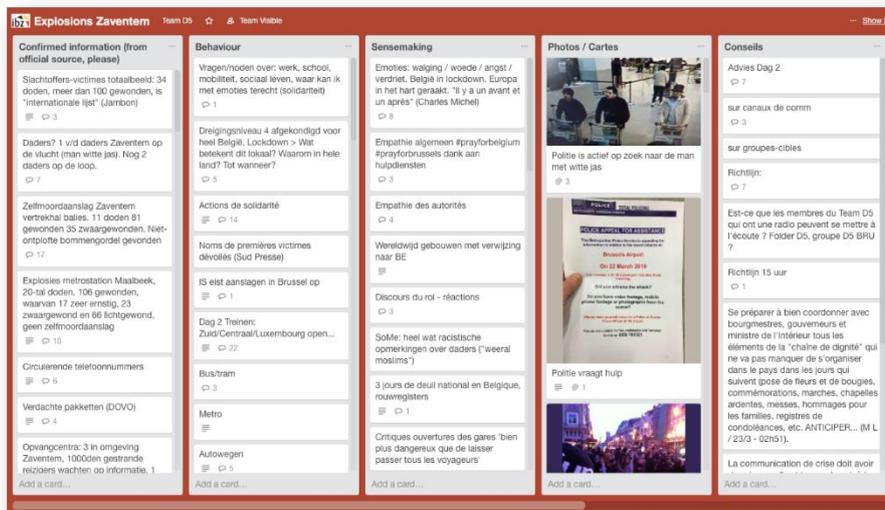


### 1. The analysis:

A team is in charge of monitoring and analysing information circulating among the population (in) directly concerned and via the traditional media (tv, radio, print) or online (websites, social media, etc.). This monitoring team uses the Trello application to classify and analyse relevant information collected according to 3 categories: I.B.S.

- **Information:** What is the factual information circulating? Identify information disseminated primarily by journalists and social media
- **Behaviour:** what behaviours are found? Understand the behaviours and reactions of people to act at best.
- **Sense making:** what is the perception of the situation? Monitor emotions to understand the state of mind of the population

In addition, pictures, plans or illustrations are also collected in this table (a picture is sometimes worth more than a few words).



Picture: Trello Panel during Brussels Attacks

In the end, this team of analysts offers advice in crisis communication based solely on these identified needs.

## 2. The strategy.

Once the information is captured, processed and dispatched, it is transmitted to the spokesperson (s) and communicator (s) concerned so that they determine the strategy and crisis communication actions based on the analysis carried out. What is interesting and intelligent in the organisation of the Belgian Crisis Center when compared to the French models (where the communicators function silo and without the least power) is that at the Crisis Centre, strategies and actions are discussed and validated in two strategic and decision-making locations:

- **"Strategic Unit" of spokespersons.** In concrete terms, all the spokespersons of the ministers, authorities and departments concerned were gathered together in the same room to develop the actions and messages and to orchestrate the communication together. It happened that a telephone call came to a spokesman whose journalist said at the end of the call "I will call the public prosecutor". What the spokesman said "Wait, he's right next to me."



Pictures: Team of active analysts in the Crisis Centre on the 22nd of March

- **"Management unit" of the decision-makers:** once the communication plan, the actions and the messages were established, Benoit Ramacker was in charge of raising the proposals within the "Management Unit" which was in charge of all the decisions related to the management of the attacks.



The strategy was always focused on the same methodology in 4 axes present from the reflex communication:

- **We know** (factual)
- **We do** (action)
- **We care** (empathy)
- **We will be back** (continuity and follow-up)

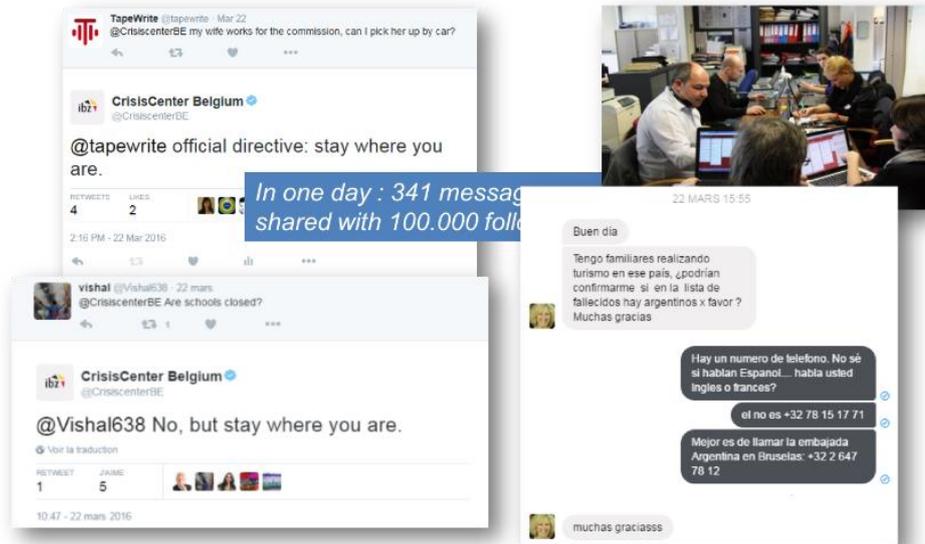


### 3. Action.

Once the communication strategy is in place, it must be deployed. For that also, there is a dedicated team for this purpose. The approach is multi-channel and is based on four pillars: press relations, a reference web site, social media and an information number 1771.



Something also unthinkable in France, but access to the Twitter and Facebook accounts of the Crisis Centre were given to members of the "Team D5" who came to support. This "Team D5" is a network of emergency communicators formed a few years ago and made up of communicators from different horizons (city and towns communicators, Governors, federal administrations, private partners, etc.). Framed by regular briefings and clear guidelines, the tweets and posts were not re-read nor validated hierarchically before being published. The importance was to be attentive and to inform the Internet users. This allowed for more room for manoeuvre and faster reactivity that yielded excellent results. (In one day: 341 tweets and more than 100,000 followers involved from all countries).



#### 4. Effects.

The follow-up of the effects of the disseminated communications then passes by the analysis team in order to adapt the strategy and the actions if necessary. The circle is complete.

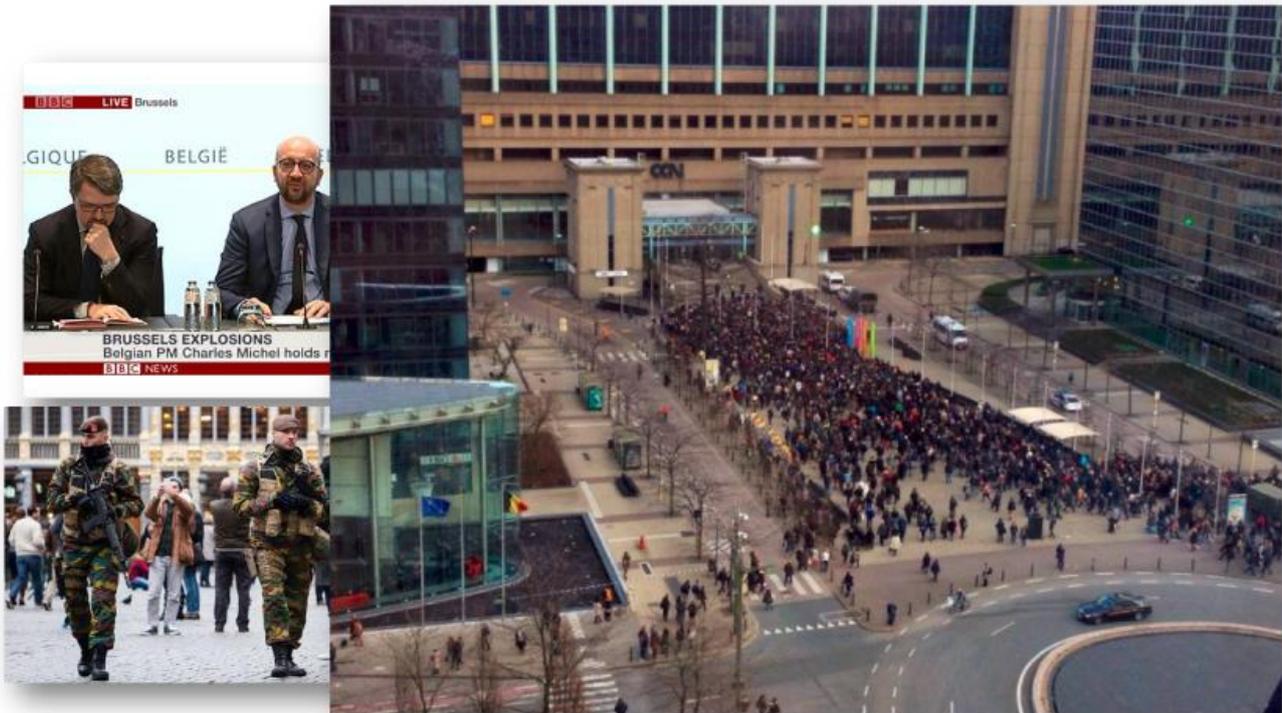
### 4.3 The transition phase

The transition phase is explained by the rapid spread of information. We are not equal when it comes to the reception of information. Do we have a smartphone? Do we have a "passive" occupation? All these variables mean that we do not live through the same phase at the same time. We will therefore see the two previous phases come together as new information will come from the scenes of the incidents (so there will again be an information phase and perhaps an emotional phase depending on the new information.)



There will also be a "switch" of hashtags in conversations. The hashtag of the city becomes too difficult to follow, and not always relevant. We then migrate to a fusion between the city and the statement of the type of event.

On the Crisis Centre side, we are migrating from emergency communication to communication with non-directly affected audiences. This communication during crisis management is difficult. Indeed, everyone needs to be helped to go home calmly, with increased security measures, while many people rushed to the stations to get home as quickly as possible, leading to somewhat paradoxical images under a full terrorist threat.



#### 4.4 The organisational phase

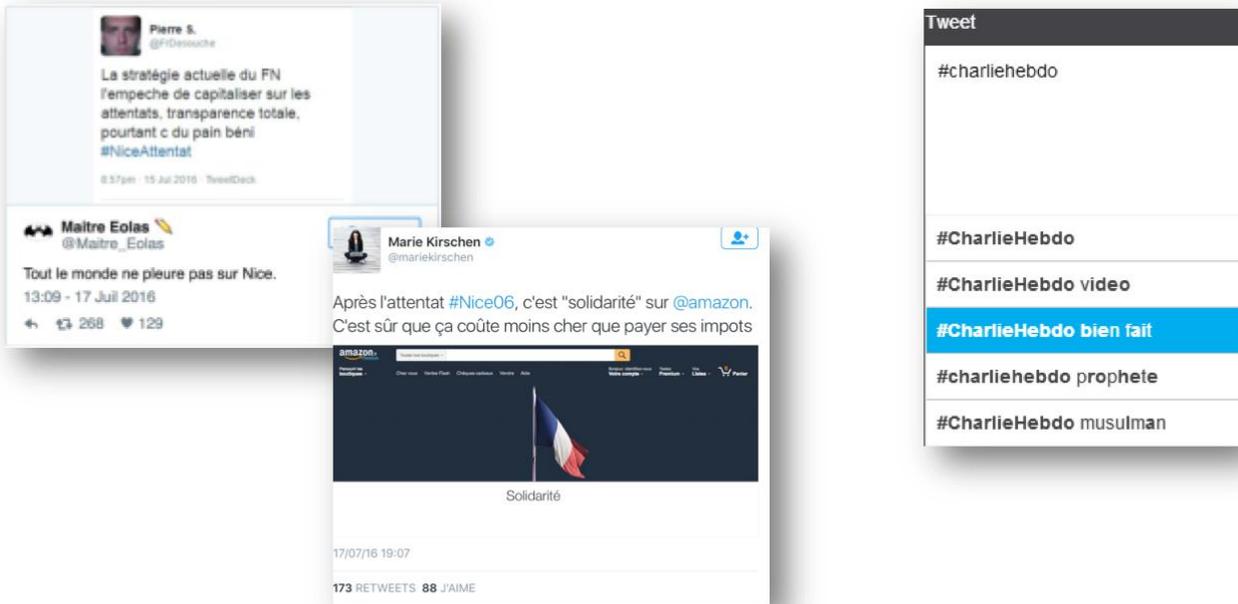
Information is now widespread. We observe an organisational phase. People will structure themselves and choose their hashtag to communicate (#jesuischarlie, #PrayforParis, etc.). The first elements of language will emerge as a collective social consensus. The strongest and most widespread values will open the way for conversations (often these values are identity codes of the country).



With regards to the Brussels attacks, these were the organizational hashtag: #PrayForBelgium, #All, #ikwilhelpen



The elements like the fries, the Belgian flag (etc) will be mobilised in the conversations. All the discordant elements to this consensus are pointed at. For instance, during the attacks of Charlie Hebdo, one of the most researched sentences on Twitter was "Charlie Hebdo well done," which shows that people were looking for discordant elements. On the other hand, Amazon is accused of advocating solidarity, without paying taxes, and so on.



To understand the difference between the information phase and the organisational phase, you can see here the tweets around Charlie Hebdo in the information phase that go up very quickly and disappear little by little while the tweets with #JesuisCharlie rise gradually and are maintained over time.



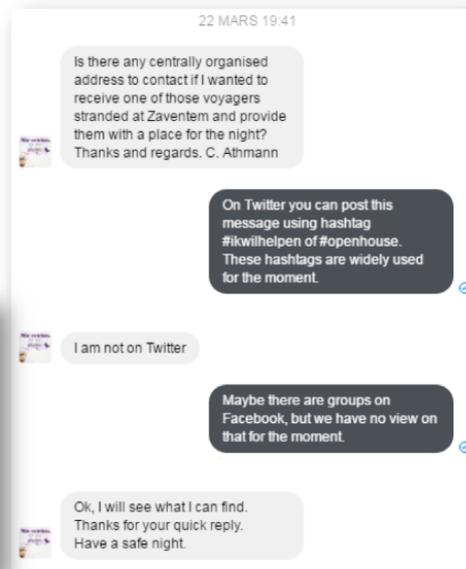
On the Crisis Centre side, we will also see this phase of organisation with many people who offer their help and want to participate. The Crisis Centre supports this solidarity during crisis and relays initiatives that do not prevent the intervention of rescue services.



Neighbors and restaurants / snacks provide free meals at the reception center in Zaventem.

In Brussels, all taxis are invited to carry passengers free.

Telenet opens its web hotspot network at all for 24 hours.

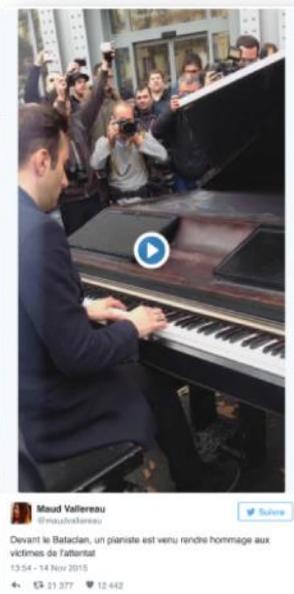
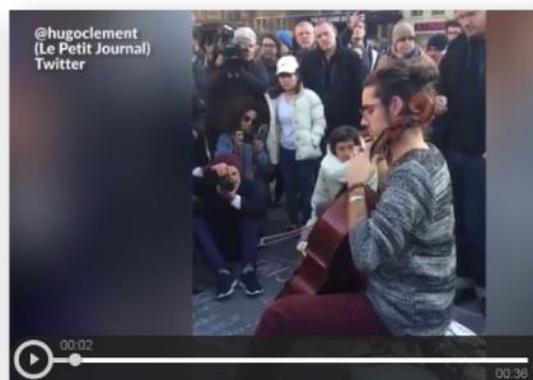


#### 4.5 The phase of interest

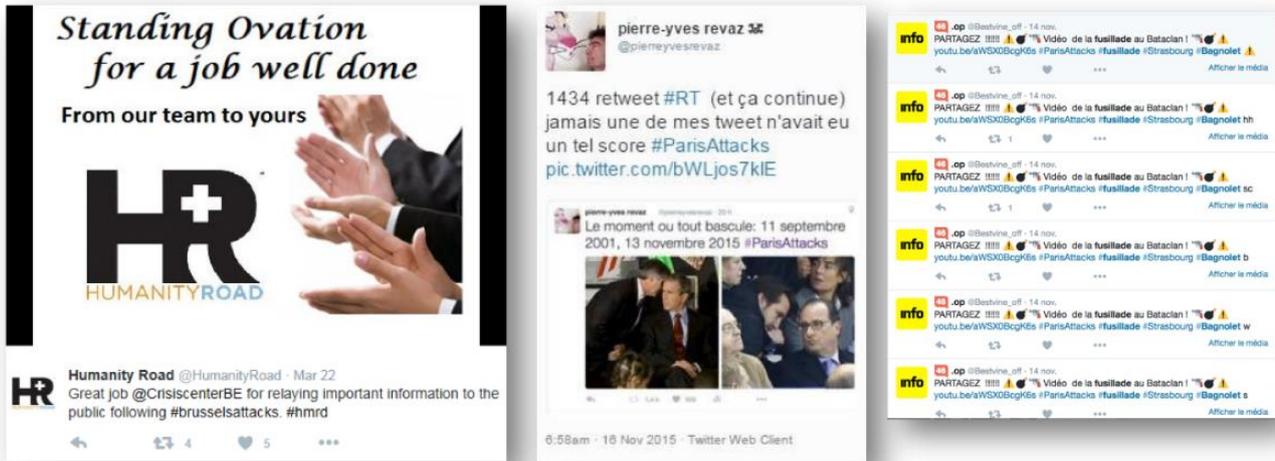
The phase of interest has two meanings:

- **Interest in the sense of "interesting"**, i.e. content that will bring details to the information or that will be related to it. Video of the truck, information on social contacts, etc.
- **Interest in the "selfish" sense of the term.** The usual derivative products and the promotions of artists.

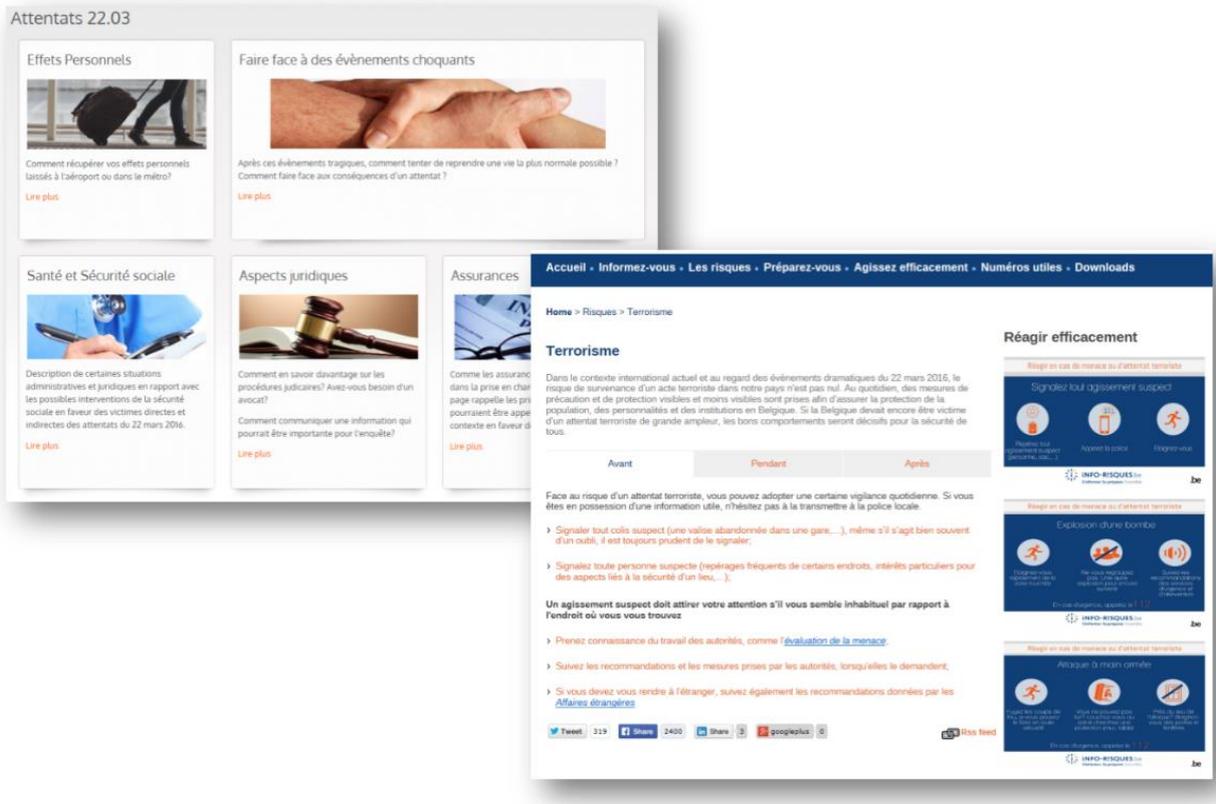
As everyone speaks only of this, some will try to fit into this flow of information and benefit from it. For example, there will be a piano player in front of the Bataclan. Brussels will also have his violin player.



Brands are trying to take advantage of the event also by making their publicity (like this brand that congratulates the Crisis Center, without failing to promote itself). Someone will be very happy to have finally had its hour of glory in terms of retweets.



On the Crisis Centre side, the phase of interest is more in targeted towards important stakeholders. Thus, it will set up a web portal containing useful information for victims and their relatives as well as anyone involved in it directly. It will also launch a specific page, via the [info-risques.be](http://info-risques.be) website, with concrete advice in the event of a terrorist attack.



#### 4.6 The disorganisation phase

During this phase, we will observe the formation of communities which will leave the majority. They will be structured and make a block. They reject the general version and the dissatisfaction expressed by the majority has no negative effect on the movement. On the contrary, it structures and defines its identity.

- The PrayForNice hashtag is too religious
- I'm not Charlie



- During this stage, some communities will try to break the organization reached in stage 4. For example: #IAmNotCharlie, #”PrayForParis is too religious”, etc.



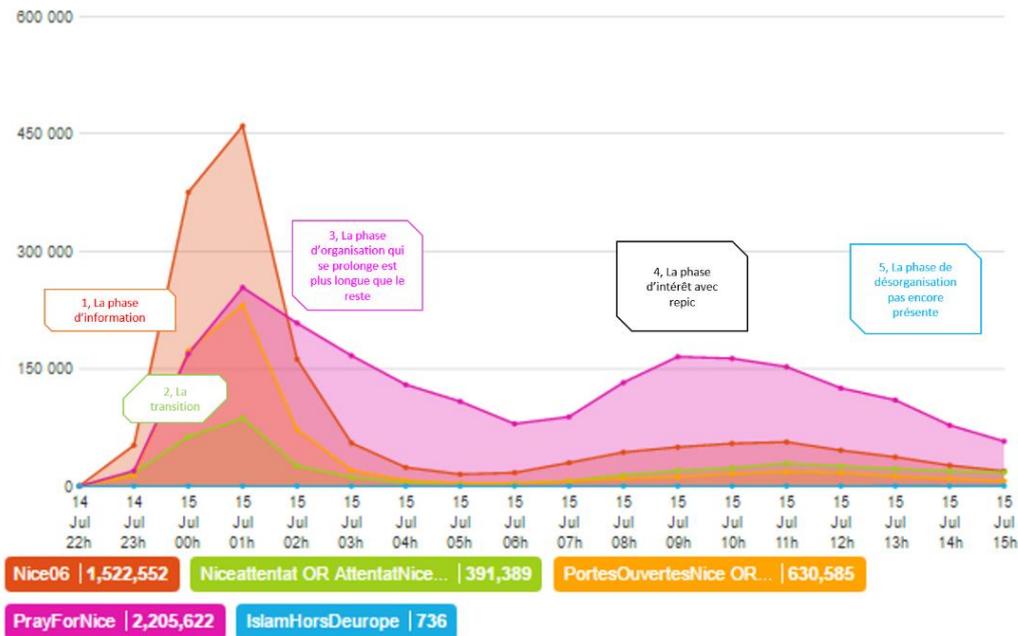
In Belgium, for example, there will be divisions around politics, or around demonstrations, since a demonstration will be organised by hooligans or we will witness the arrest of a human rights' leader in Belgium.

On the Crisis Centre side, disorganisation will crystallise around completely different communications. There will be political communications, communications from the authorities in charge of security and others in charge of monitoring victims, with multiple spokespersons. For the citizens, this multiplication of communications around different issues will not necessarily be clear.



## 5 Findings

The theory of the 6 phases is confirmed. However, these become more and more rapid and less and less spontaneous. The phase of organisation and disorganisation is happening faster and faster because people are becoming more and more aware and accustomed. A parallel can be made with the United States where this theory of six phases does not seem to work because, as soon as there is an attack with weapons, many call for more regulation on weapons during the first minutes.



On the side of the Crisis Centre, it is necessary to be present with people and for people.



For the teachings, there are three main ones:

- **It is best to have a single spokesperson** instead of multiple issuers.
- **Take more account of the foreign press in communication.**
- **Further promote the in-house method.** It happened that on the day of the attacks, an in-depth training on this method had to be given to the members of Team D5. This incredible chance allowed some fifteen communicators of the TeamD5 to be present from the first minutes of the attack.

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