

News rituals of participation: Negotiating temporalities, categories, and hierarchies of news-making on YouTube

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Abstract

This article explores YouTube as an emerging news medium in the context of media anthropology. It applies virtual ethnography to the news-making in the case of flotilla news: on 31 May 2010, the Israeli Navy intercepted a flotilla of six boats carrying aid to Gaza. In the navy attack, nine passengers were killed. A YouTube news video was published on the day of the attack by the professional news agency Russia Today, and it received 13 video responses from professional news producers and amateurs, including YouTubers. The virtual ethnography brings about a ritual aspect of participation in YouTube news. The authors of this paper suggest that news rituals of participation play a critical role in the process of re-negotiating hierarchies and practices of news making as they offer novel ways of structuring the unexpected in this evolving culture of news. Consequently, ritualised participation on YouTube news is changing not only this who are making news, what news is, but also the process of studying news making in these fluid contexts.

KEYWORDS: media anthropology, YouTube, news, ritual, participation, video response, Gaza/Israeli flotilla

YouTube – an emerging news medium?

In the early hours of Monday, 31 May 2010, the Israeli navy intercepted a flotilla of six boats carrying thousands of tons of aid to Gaza. The 748 passengers of the flotilla were activists, doctors, writers, and politicians. The list of passengers also included documentarists and journalists who were prepared to document, film and broadcast the journey to Gaza. In the navy attack on the Mavi Marmara (the flotilla's largest boat) nine Turkish passengers were killed. In this article, we examine the making and sharing of the flotilla news in an evolving news context – YouTube. A brief statistical overview helps a reader to contextualise YouTube as an emerging news medium.

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Firstly, according to the Pew Research Center statistics (Matsa & Mitchell 2014) YouTube is the second-largest social networking site after Facebook. Furthermore, YouTube's significance as a news platform is growing, and it appears particularly so in times of crises. To give one example, the twenty most watched Japan tsunami videos in 2011 were viewed 96 million times worldwide during the week of the disaster. (Rosenstiel & Mitchell 2012). Secondly, regarding audiences and media users, half (51%) of the U.S. adults use YouTube and 10% of the U.S. adults report getting their news on this platform (Matsa & Mitchell 2014). A note of methodological nationalism is present here, as it should be noted that this study was conducted only among U.S. adults. According to YouTube's statistics, 80% of YouTube's views are from outside of the U.S. (YouTube 31.10.2015), hence the global nature of this platform. Thirdly, there is a multiplicity of actors *producing* news simultaneously on YouTube. Several established news organisations, such as Reuters, CBS, Al Jazeera English, Russia Today, BBC and the Associated Press have their own channels, and hundreds of thousands of subscribers for them. In addition, there is a strong presence of 'ordinary media users' participating actively in the production of news on YouTube, thus, forming a complex news ecology on YouTube together with the traditional news organisations (cf. Deuze 2003; Allan 2006; Crawford 2011; Meikle & Redden 2011; McChesney 2011; McNair 2011; Zelizer 2009; Wahl-Jorgensen 2010; van Dijck 2009; Hermida, Fletcher, Korell & Logan 2012; Russell, Hendricks, Choi & Stephens 2015).

From another perspective, many YouTube scholars, such as Jean Burgess and Joshua Green (2009), Patricia Lange (2007a, 2007b, 2007c), Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (2009) and Michael Strangelove (2010), have characterised YouTube as a *site of vernacular and/or popular culture*, a complex *mélange* of professional and amateur visual culture. In this framework, one of the key concepts stimulating the discussion around YouTube has been the "culture of participation", a term coined by Henri Jenkins (2006), which is often used to examine the link between user created content, accessible digital technologies and the shift in the power relations between professional agents such as media industries and consumers. It most often refers to bottom-up participation and vernacular activity. Moreover, participation culture raises such issues as: who gets a voice, visibility and attention? What rewards are there for creative work? How can expertise and authority in this emerging, new visual culture be defined? (cf. Strangelove 2010; Wasko & Erickson 2009; Sumiala 2011; Boyd & Ellison 2007).

In this article, we argue for the relevance of acknowledging YouTube's potential as an emerging news medium. As Katherine Fry (2008: 546) reminds us:

Social networking and videosharing sites such as Myspace, Facebook and YouTube, no matter the level of accuracy, are prominent venues for information of all sorts, from the internationally consequential to the most personal. These sources are changing where and how some people are getting their news. They are also changing news.

Our take on the enterprise of YouTube news making is media anthropological. Media anthropology has not appeared as a distinct school; instead, it could be characterised

as a loose, multidisciplinary orientation that engages a range of communication and media scholars, sociologists, cultural analysts and anthropologists, who share an interest in studying media and people using it in a cultural frame of analysis (see also Farnsworth & Austrin 2010; Wahl-Jorgensen 2010; Zelizer 1993, 2004; Rothenbuhler & Coman 2005; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughold & Larkin 2002; Askew & Wilk 2002; Peterson 2005). When studying the news, media anthropologists typically regard it as a shared symbolic system that constructs, organises and shapes our surrounding reality through various cultural practices and in which individuals are offered different opportunities to participate in the construction of that social reality (Bird 2010; Boyer 2011). The works of media anthropologists have, thus, been guided by a strong commitment to cultural interpretation of meaning making, an account of reality: its creation, maintenance, and dissemination, regardless of whether the analysis has centred on news production, news text, and images or the reception of news (cf. Berkowitz 1997).

Our focus here is specifically on certain *ritual* aspects of participation in news making called “news rituals of participation”. To use the vocabulary of Catherine Bell (1992), we examine how ritual mastery, an ability to shape the social experience of news events, is negotiated and performed in flotilla news making by certain key actors and elements of ritualisation. Our analysis draws on one particular event of participation, a YouTube news video that was published on the day of the attack, 31 May 2010, by the professional news agency Russia Today and the 13 video responses it received. This news material has been collected as part of a larger media ethnographic research project on YouTube news.¹ The empirical material was collected by conducting virtual ethnographic research: participatory observation on YouTube (cf. Kozinets, 2010; Hine 2000, 2005). In our fieldwork starting soon after the attack we followed daily (during two weeks) how the flotilla news travelled on YouTube. The virtual ethnographic work on YouTube clearly confirmed that it is a highly interactive and fluid news platform. During the time of our research, it offered its users different categories based on specific themes they can follow, including “Entertainment”, “Music” and “Science & Technology”. The categories can be classified based on popularity such as “Most Viewed” or “Top Favorited”. The category we followed most closely, “News and Politics” contained, perhaps unsurprisingly, the highest number of videos on the attack. We also used the YouTube search engine to find and follow the flotilla news.

As we followed the news, we were able to identify certain key actors who made and shared it on this platform. We then categorised these actors into two main groups: professional news/media organisations, such as Al Jazeera English, Russia Today and Idfnadesk (PR organisation of the Israel Defence Force), and non-professional or semi-professional actors, also known as “YouTubers”. Moreover, the virtual ethnographic research revealed that the time span of the flotilla news was rather short. The news peaked

¹ *Charlie Bit My Finger! What the News Media Can Learn from YouTube?* research project (2010-2011) aims at offering new knowledge about the use of visual communication media and how YouTube establishes communality and a sense of belonging in today’s media-saturated society. The project was carried out by the Communication Research Centre at the Department of Communication, University of Helsinki and it was funded by Helsingin Sanomat Foundation.

on YouTube on 9 June with 7,870 videos. After that, the story started to fade away from YouTube’s news agenda and began to be displaced by other news stories. Typical of YouTube, the news did not disappear entirely. At the time of writing this article, the flotilla attack is still making news on YouTube when searched with the proper keywords.

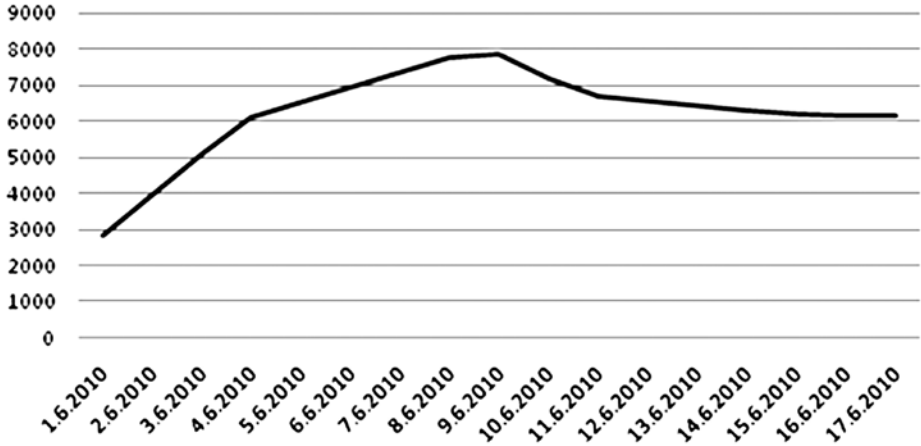


Figure 1: Number of videos on “Israeli flotilla” during 1–17 June 2010.

News as ritual

In news studies, ritual has proved to be a fruitful, yet problematic concept (e.g. Becker 1995; Ehrlich 1996; Chaney 1986: 117). From the anthropological perspective, news rituals can be seen as offering ‘a periodic restatement of the terms in which [people] of a particular culture must interact if there is to be any kind of a coherent social life’ (Turner 1968: 6). In this ritual frame of analysis, news is approached as a cultural and social phenomenon: creation, content and dissemination of shared symbols through performance, repetition and patterned communication consequently shaping our shared social imaginaries and collective understanding of the world (see also Bird 2010; Zelizer 2004; Coman 2005; Allan 2006).

A short historical review of studies that investigate ritual practices of news making in print and broadcast news media shows that the concept has been used to refer to routine practices (Tuchman’s rituals of objectivity) that help journalists to deal with the unexpected and protect them from criticism and help reporters to control their work (Tuchman 1972). In his article *Press Performance as Political Ritual*, Phillip Elliott (1980) coined the concept of “press ritual” to describe certain repetitive patterns of communication that news media apply to legitimise the existing power relations in a society (cf. Ehrlich 1996; Becker 1995). Perhaps the most influential scholar bringing ritual into news studies has been communication theorist James Carey (1989). In his theory of ritual communication, Carey analyses news reading as a ritual act through which social bonds are produced and maintained (cf. Zelizer 2004; Zelizer & Allan 2002; Rauch

2007; Fry 2008). In recent decades, major news events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks have inspired scholars like Carolyn Kitch (2003), Eric Rothenbuhler (2005), and Tamar Liebes and Menahem Blondheim (2005) to apply the ritual perspective to the news. Much of this work has drawn on Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz's seminal work on *Media Events* (1992) and the lively debate created around the book (see also Fiske 1994; Scannell 1995; Couldry 2003; Katz & Liebes 2007; Hepp & Krotz 2008; Couldry, Hepp & Krotz 2010; Rothenbuhler 2010; Sumiala 2013; Mitu & Poulakidakos 2016).

Even though somewhat different in their orientation, all these studies discussed above, point to a direction in which the news is approached as a cultural phenomenon and symbolic communication that aims at constituting a shared social reality and giving order and structure to social life. These studies have also put clear emphasis on making, practice and action as the core of news work; by doing so, they have increased our understanding of how ritualised news practices may constitute communality and (re)produce social and professional norms and existing power relations (political and economic elites, media power) and, we would like to add, how news rituals also may call into question those very same forms of social life; norms and power relations on other occasions (cf. Ettema 1990; Becker 1995; Ehrlich 1996; Couldry 2003; Rothenbuhler 2005; Coman 2005; Kitch 2003; Pantti & Sumiala 2009).

News rituals – structuring continuity and chaos

In our work, the emphasis on the ritual perspective on news making points to news making as a cultural and social practice that struggles to balance order and disorder and thus contributes to establishing a sense of community among the actors participating in the news ritual. We follow Barbara Myerhoff (1984: 150) and proceed from the premise that ritual plays a key role in all areas of uncertainty, anxiety, impotence, and disorder. One of the key functions of a ritual is that it gives us a sense of order and helps us to (re)structure our worlds in times of transformation and rupture (Rothenbuhler 1998). Today, much of what we know about the uncertainty and disorder of the world is learned, experienced and lived through media. The mediation of chaos offers news media a double role. Media nurture uncertainty around us by circulating shocking news, yet at the same time, it is through rituals that newsrooms cope with the very unexpected (Ehrlich 1996; Becker 1995; Seaton 2005). Katherine Fry (2008: 545) makes a similar point by stating:

A ritual take on the enterprise of news-making, dissemination and reception explains that, while events reported in the news might be unusual, they are, nonetheless, predictable. Both the events and the reports about them fall within the realm of the expected. We have a culturally shared understanding of what constitutes news and what would not be considered *newsworthy*.²

News rituals, therefore, offer a way to create and reinforce our sense of continuity as a community and culture in the midst of uncertainty by providing us a message of pattern and predictability and thus helping to restructure the chaotic flow of events around us.

² Italics original.

On social networking sites such as YouTube, the cultural demand for ritual can be argued to be even greater since they offer a platform for everyone (at least in theory) to make and share the news. This can potentially increase the amount of news produced in the world but it also brings about a rich variety of different angles as altered news stories can be told and varied interpretive positions can be taken to discuss and comment on the same event. Furthermore, YouTube can also challenge conventional views on what is news, who is competent to make news and what forms news can potentially take. YouTube news thus has both a destabilising and an enabling potential as it establishes new practices of news and news making. In this sense, YouTube news may well resemble a Trojan horse.

To date, not much research has been conducted on the rituals of news making in new media environments such as the Internet and social networking sites (cf. Kitch 2000, 2003; Rauch 2007; Fry 2008). This article takes one step in this direction 1) by looking at the news making on YouTube and 2) by introducing “participation” as a key concept and practice of ritualising news in this mediascape (see also Jenkins 2006; Burgess & Green 2009). In many studies on news rituals, there has been a tendency to favour research on production over reception and news content. As Gordon Coonfield and John Huxford (2009) note in their article *News Images as Lived Images: Media Ritual, Cultural Performance, and Public Trauma*, while scholarship on news making as ritual has proven a productive alternative to the “transmission”, that is sender-oriented view on news, there is still a tendency to give more focus to the sites and practices of news production, whereas the audience is given the largely passive role of spectator. This calls for research that is capable of analysing news-making rituals from a more dynamic perspective and one better equipped to grasp the complex interplay between the different actors involved (producers, recipients, and prosumers of news) and their roles in the rituals of making and sharing the news.

To summarise, we argue in this article that news rituals need to be examined within a framework that acknowledges (i) news rituals’ potential to promote both consensus and conflict and to look at how this dynamic is played out in those ritualised forms of communication, (ii) the extent to which news rituals involve active participation and/or passive consumption, (iii) the site of news rituals and how it affects the workings of the rituals. The classic anthropological understanding of ritual has implied a strong focus on ritual space and/or place and the dynamic between the ritual center and periphery. Evolving contexts, such as YouTube, invite scholars to perceive rituals as more fluid and ubiquitous, capable of simultaneously acting out in different virtual spheres (cf. Coman & Rothenbuhler 2005).

Russia Today news: video responses, actors and elements

At the time of our virtual fieldwork on YouTube, one of the special features of ritual news making on YouTube was the uploading and sharing of video responses. The video response feature on YouTube was introduced in late 2006, and it generated a new practice of interaction (Adami 2009). This feature allowed users to interact through video-based

communication. Users could create a video response thread with an opening video, which was followed by video responses from other users. Each clip could respond to one video. The uploaders of the opening video were the editors of the video response thread built around their video. They could disable responses, or accept or refuse any of them (Adami 2009; Benevenuto, Duarte, Rodriguez, Almeida, Almeida & Ross 2008). The majority of the video-based interactions in YouTube occurred between a small fraction of users and were concentrated on a small fraction of the videos (cf. Benevenuto et al. 2008).

As a means of communication, video is an extremely popular form of communication in social media; consequently, videos are widely circulated in various platforms (cf. Sumiala & Tikka 2011a; 2011b). As suggested by the Pew Research Center, half (50%) of the social networking site users have shared or reposted news stories, images or videos (Matsa & Mitchell 2014). In a study by Benevenuto et al. (2008), about 42% of all video responses were posted within one month from the posting of the original video.

When comparing videos and textual comments as forms of ritualised participation in news making and sharing, it seems that videos travel, circulate, and cross different sites, platforms and related contexts more easily than textual comments, which tend to stay on the platform and eventually vanish in the evolving thread of comments. This is an observation we wish to discuss in more detail at the end of this article.

One of the most active producers of flotilla news was Russia Today, a 24/7 TV-news channel funded by the government of Russia; it joined YouTube on 28 March 2007. One of its videos was titled *Gaza Flotilla Attacked: Israeli Troops storm aid ships, up to 20 feared dead*. It was released on the day of the attack at 09:01 GMT. The news video clip is 11:38 minutes long and it shares the form of a traditional TV news report: The video begins with a studio anchor's introduction to the subject and continues with detailed information presented by a correspondent from Ashdod Port, Israel. As the correspondent is giving a report on a smaller screen, the big screen behind her is showing dramatic visual material filmed by passengers and surveillance cameras on the Mavi Marmara during the attack. The news video also includes many interviews and comments, for example from the Head of the Gaza Hamas Government, the Hamas Government's deputy foreign minister, a former Palestinian minister, Gaza activists and a British Muslim Initiative spokesperson reporting from the ship. The commentaries are repeatedly framed by visual material from the Mavi Marmara as well as video clips from the demonstrations in Turkey. The whole news video is framed by the logo and colours of RT.

This particular RT news received a total of 13 video responses: six on the same day, two on 1 June, one on 2 June, one on 4 June, one on 9 June, one on 12 July and one that was uploaded on YouTube already on 1 January 2009. The number of video responses was not very high compared to, for example, video responses to YouTube celebrity Lady Gaga, who received more than 6000 video responses for her music video *Bad Romance*, uploaded 23 November 2009.³ In contrast, not all videos on YouTube received any response. In some cases, there was no opportunity to post a response, in other cases, there might just not be enough interest. One of the video responses to our material was later

³ Viewed on 10 August 2011.

blocked due to copyright violation and could no longer be viewed during our research period. Furthermore, one of the responses was first uploaded to YouTube in 2009 and later linked to the RT news video. These two examples remind us of YouTube's fluid character. First, there is an ongoing battle between amateur and professional YouTube users arguing over copyright legislation; second, the material on YouTube is constantly in flux and just waits to be contextualised and relocated into new environments as new actors become involved in the process of YouTube news making (cf. Burgess & Green 2009; Strangelove 2010).

When examining the 12 available video responses to the original news video of *Russia Today*, we found that they represent very distinctive types of users. Six of the video responses were made by actors we call "professional media" and six by "ordinary users". The video responses from the professional media were from *Exclusive News* (Malaysian news channel), *News Australia*, an Arabic-language, independent TV-network / news medium called Aramramtv and, in two cases videos were from RT itself. The ordinary users who uploaded the responses were different kinds of ideological actors participating in the discussion around the flotilla attack and Middle East politics, such as jsnip4, SaudiSpirit, and LSRochon. Furthermore, every user had the potential to provide profile information, including age, country, website and personal details.

Based on this information some initial conclusions can be drawn; for example, whether the content is user-created or produced by professionals, such as large media companies. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that a researcher conducting virtual ethnography on YouTube is very much dependent on the information offered by the users themselves. It is often difficult to verify whether this information is true or not. Certain traces can be followed, but many questions remain on the origin of certain YouTubers. This made it challenging to contextualise the videos. However, the question of unclear origin is not something with which only scholars of YouTube struggle. All people searching news on YouTube are faced with the same issue. At times, it is also difficult to draw the line between the amateur and professional newsmakers. In flotilla news, the categories between different users sometimes overlapped as the news material, certain visual material, travelled from one video clip to another making it difficult to distinguish not only between the different actors (who is behind the news) but also between the amateur and professional news content as well (cf. Burgess and Green 2009).

Furthermore, video response as an item of YouTube news is a rather heterogeneous category. The videos differed from each other in several ways (in their style, form, and content) yet there were also similarities between the videos. After a careful close "reading" of the videos, we created three preliminary categories to classify this type of news material. The classification is based on the key content elements of the videos. The categories are partly overlapping and do not rule each other out but are nevertheless helpful when attempting to understand the ritual dynamics of news making on YouTube. The categories of participation in YouTube video responses are: reports, commentaries, and frames.

The first category – reports – is made up very much of the same elements as traditional TV news: an anchor in the studio and a local correspondent covering the events,

video clips from the scene, interviewees telling the story from different perspectives. The video responses in this category were produced by Exclusive News, News Australia and RT. The second category is here is commentaries. These news videos made by yassau and jsnip4 represent a very different type of news making, and they were produced in a vlog format. In its most typical form, a vlog is a simple video with a talking head speaking directly to the camera in a home-like setting and commenting on or discussing something. Vlogs are considered a conversational platform that is somewhat emblematic of YouTube's amateur, user-led or vernacular content creation. Although vlogs are not unique to YouTube, it is a typical form of participation on this platform (Burgess & Green 2009). The antecedents of vlogs can be found in webcam culture and personal blogging. Vlogs are considered to represent a genre of communication that emphasises liveness and immediacy as well as conversation, critique and debate. They were a central mode of video response in a category of commentaries. The two vlogs in our material were both uploaded on the day of the attack and came from a male user commenting on the Israeli Navy's interception of the Mavi Marmara as well as wider Middle East politics. They both raise questions in their commentaries and actively seek interaction with others.

Our third category, the largest and the most heterogeneous group of video responses, attempts to grasp the issue of framing; therefore, we call it "frames". Video responses in this category had been produced by both users and professional newsmakers. There were also some hybrid actors who seem to operate both as YouTubers and members of some semi-professional group. Two of the videos in this category were uploaded on YouTube by users, one by Aramramtv and one by the professional news agency Russia Today. Not only did these video responses comment on the actual news event itself (the flotilla), but they also aimed at framing the event before and after the attack. This extends the time-space of YouTube news as it brings different events into interplay around the actual news event. One of the videos contained material from a briefing of the Israel Defence Forces before the interception. In this subtitled video (subtitles in English), a military leader gave the soldiers guidelines on how to proceed when confronting the flotilla. As a response and commentary to the original news video from Russia Today, this video highlighted the good intentions of the Israeli Defence Forces and took the viewpoint of the Israeli Navy. Another type of a video response, again uploaded by Russia Today, was an onboard video filmed by the passengers and surveillance cameras. The video showed soldiers with guns, a navy helicopter and chaotic footage from the ship with people running and wounded people lying on the ground. One of the voices speaking on this video was a reporter of Al Jazeera English who was a passenger on the Mavi Marmara. This Russia Today video served as an eyewitness account of the reality on board at the time of the interception. Out of all the material, this video element, with its strong reality effect, came to mark "the truth" of the event. Its key function was only underlined by the fact that the material was used in the opening news video of Russia Today, but many other news channels also broadcast the same material repeatedly. A very different kind of response was a video from the user SaudiSpirit. This video showed pictures of the flotilla's cargo, toys, and wheelchairs, with text commentaries and sentimental music. The video questioned the IDF's claim that there were weapons in the cargo and that the

activists had hostile intentions. The last video of this category was from *Aramramtv*, showing a view from a Jordanian street when people first heard about the attack.

All in all, the videos of the third category offered a time dimension beyond the actual events and thus contributed to contextualising the flotilla news on YouTube. Characteristically, these videos concerned the conflict between Israel and Palestine on a larger scale and told stories about the reality in Gaza and Israel. These videos mixed and remixed film, picture, text and sound to construct effective narratives that invited more users to participate.

Rituals of participation

Video responses as a form of YouTube news, whether we are talking about the material or the uploaders, comprise a very heterogeneous ensemble. Moreover, we can find certain structures and patterns in the ways in which this news event was organised on YouTube. The key element here is the ritual of participation. The first level of participation is structured around the opening video and its responses. One of the most peculiar actors here is *Russia Today* itself in its self-circularity. The fact that *Russia Today* published the opening video, but also sent two video responses to it, invites, two potential interpretations, at a minimum. A negative reading would be that of self-inclusiveness or self-sufficiency. In this line of thinking, the rituals of participation on YouTube can be interpreted to enforce media power. The news medium (*Russia Today*) begins to talk more and more to itself, of which Umberto Eco (1986) accused TV decades ago. There is no reference point outside the medium. This type of self-ritualisation coincides well with Nick Couldry's (2003) idea of media rituals as constitutive elements of "the myth of the centre". In Couldry's interpretation, different ritualised practices in media are harnessed to serve the enforcement of the media's own power as the centre of society/community. A positive reading would be the following: by playing with different positions (e.g. sending opening news videos and responding to them itself, a professional news agency such as *Russia Today* "steps down" from the transmission position) that is a sender-oriented mode of news communication, and adapts a role as one player among many others in the complex enterprise of news making (see also Coonfield & Huxford 2009). In this frame of interpretation, it is not only *Russia Today* that tells the truth about the event; instead, multiple stories are also needed to construe the full picture of the conflict. The fact that *Russia Today* uses different types of communication strategies, traditional newscasts, and commentaries to the actual news event, also supports, in our view, the positive reading.

The second level of participation is structured around the interaction between the video responses. The category of "reports" simulates the traditional TV news mode and thus provides a familiar message of pattern and predictability that helps the audience to bridge the gap between the chaos of the events and the order of dealing with these events. From the participation perspective, the video responses in this category did not invite, as such, much interaction or call for active interaction. Instead, they seemed to enforce the ideals of conventional and professional news making, which were only brought to a new environment and context. As a news ritual, these video responses resemble Tuchman's

(1972) rituals of objectivity the most. These video responses created a strong contrast with the category of “commentaries” – in this case vlogs.

We regard vlogs in the form of video responses as rituals of subjectivity: new rituals of participation in other words (cf. Rauch 2007). The interaction between the viewer and the performance in the vlogs was highly encouraged and played out on many levels, pointing to many directions. First, vloggers sought interaction with professional news producers, such as Russia Today. One key element in these rituals of subjectivity was the possibility to comment on the original news, from a subjective point of view. Second, these video responses sought interaction between other vloggers, users, non-professional newsmakers and occasional viewers. This brings about a horizontal level to participation and multiple voices of interpretation. This point is also made explicit by Liesbet van Zoonen, Farida Vis, and Sabina Mihelj (2010) when they discuss the performance of citizenship on YouTube. By vlogging, anyone can perform their interpretation on, for example, the flotilla news. In many cases participation is indeed motivated by emotional/ideological and/or political involvement. This holds true also in our third category. The video responses in the category of frames tackled the conflict between Israel and Palestine and told stories about the reality in Gaza and Israel, much beyond the flotilla event. These video responses typically contained elements of mixing and remixing film, picture, text and sound as they construct effective narratives potentially inviting more users to participate. In short, the video responses in the categories of frames and commentaries also shaped the very idea of news as they stretch the line between *the expected* and *the unexpected* in terms of news making: what we are used to perceiving as news, how news should be performed in order for us to recognise it as news and, consequently, regard it as newsworthy (cf. Fry 2008).

Re-negotiating the temporalities, categories, and hierarchies of news-making

In the first part of the article, we argued that ritual work on the news is twofold: on the one hand, news rituals highlight the creation, maintenance, and sense of continuity of community and culture; on the other hand, they help us to balance and structure the chaos around us. Our virtual ethnography points to a direction that the news rituals on YouTube offer a way to create and reinforce a sense of community on two levels; certain virtual communities and culture(s) of news are created and maintained through the news rituals of participation (cf. Coonfield & Huxford 2009). We argue that the very visual nature of those video responses plays a significant role enabling people to take part in the event. By following Oliver Hahn’s (2008) insight, we think of video responses as a form of polysemic communication and iconic ambivalence. This is to say that video responses as a means of communication are highly open to a multiplicity of interpretations. This may also explain their popularity as a practice of ritual participation.

In the video responses, the users participated in a meaning-making of the news event (the flotilla attack) but also in a wider historical and political conflict between Israel and Palestine in the Middle East. Only in this conflicted issue, did the ritual work of

participation consolidate and construct collectivities that were in many cases very much in contradiction with each other. James Carey (1989: 21) writes that the ‘news portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action’ which a reader joins ‘as an observer at a play.’ Instead of passive spectatorship, users on YouTube have a potential to negotiate and contribute actively to the creation of the *truth*. In line with Chouliaraki (2010), we thus argue that the video responses as a form of participation offer the possibility not only to “witness” the flotilla news but also to step into the middle of it.

To conclude with, studying YouTube news from a ritual point of view has led us to give more emphasis to the practices of news making. We argue that YouTube news is first and foremost about the collective making and sharing of information through participation embedded in on-going negotiation on potential interpretations of the truth-value of that information. The news on YouTube, thus, challenges us to determine those who are eligible to make news, how this news work is structured on YouTube, and the crucial role of participation in this news making. It seems that YouTube news rituals of participation may well constitute communality between vloggers and other non-professional newsmakers as YouTube news offers new forms of interaction between amateurs as well as professional and non-professional actors and new ways of constituting dispersed communities among those who are “affected by a principle”, to use the vocabulary of van Zoonen, Vis and Mihelj (2010: 258). However, they may also well increase conflict, as different poles are established and communities are set against each other, some being pro-Palestine, some pro-Israel, some locating themselves somewhere between these two poles.

Moreover, rituals of participation on YouTube news invite us to rethink hierarchies of news making. Power relations whether we discuss news conventions or the relationship between professional and non-professional news actors are both questioned. Professional norms of news making conveyed by its rituals of objectivity are challenged to a large extent by emerging forms of non-professional news making and its rituals of subjectivity. Historian of news Terhi Rantanen (2009) argues in her book *When News was New?* that the time of “pure news” has passed. As well acknowledged, much of the contemporary debate on news centers on the shifting categories between professional production and amateur reception; from journalism-centered communication to user-centered communication, from monopoly to polyphony, from the journalism of facts to the journalism of attachment, from professional news organisations to grass-root journalism and participatory journalism (see also Meikle & Redden 2011; Allan 2009; Rantanen 2009; Boczkowski 2005; Chouliaraki 2010).

Drawing on our virtual ethnographic work on the flotilla news, we argue that news rituals of participation play a critical role in this process of re-negotiating hierarchies and practices of news making as they offer us novel ways of structuring the unexpected in this evolving culture of news. In line with Fry (2008) we, thus, argue that ritualised participation on YouTube news is changing not only those who are making news, what is news, but also the process of news making. This must have implications for our thinking at least on two levels. As news change, so does our perception of the reality that news is describing to us.

Concluding remarks

On the 12 September in 2013, the YouTube team announced in its Creator blog that it was to remove video response as a feature in the engagement toolkit. The blog had a headline: ‘So long, video responses... Next up: better ways to connect.’ Apparently, the number of people using this tool was not sufficient to meet the expectations of the video-sharing company, and more advanced technical engagement tools were to be developed for that purpose. In the same blog post, the users of the YouTube were strongly encouraged to participate in responding and commenting on videos published on YouTube by applying these new tools. The lesson for media anthropologists, and all those others who conduct fieldwork on YouTube and in other social networking sites, is the following: social media is, indeed, a platform that is constantly changing and on the move. It consists of technical features and tools that come and go as the platform and its creators attempt to follow the preferences, likings, and tastes of the users. However, certain underlining social and cultural dynamics such as *sharing* and *connecting* change much more slowly, if at all. Media anthropology as a scholarly framework maintains that ritual as an approach can persist in a range of different communicative eras and environments (cf. Coman & Rothenbuhler 2005). The underlining significance of media anthropology for the study of YouTube news may well be articulated in the words of communication theorist James Carey, who, in fact, formulated his ideas long before the time of YouTube:

My suggestion, briefly, is this. We must begin with the attempt to identify the most durable features of our temporal condition, features that are, for good, or ill, the least vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the modern age... This recuperation is not merely a means of going primitive, of seeing quasi-universal practice reinscribed in modern life, but a means of constituting the grounds of intersubjectivity: of seeing the experience in the light of others. To grasp hold of the popular arts with terms like ritual – is to see in a miraculously discontinuous world persistent practices by which that world is sedimented and held together. It is to enlarge the human conversation while deepening self-understanding (1988: 14–5).

We suggest that the media anthropological analysis of ritual aspects of news and the related participation plays a crucial role in this process of grasping those more and less persistent dynamics in the present day news making on YouTube.

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Povzetek

Članek v kontekstu antropologije medijev obravnava YouTube kot nastajajoč novičarski medij. S pomočjo virtualne etnografije na primeru novic o flotilji raziskuje produkcijo novic: 31. maja 2010 je izraelska mornarica prestregla flotiljo šestih ladij s pomočjo za Gazo. V napadu je bilo ubitih devet potnikov. Na dan napada je tiskovna agencija Russia Today objavila video novico na Youtubu, ta pa je prejela 13 video odgovorov tako od poklicnih ustvarjalcev novic kot od amaterskih uporabnikov Youtuba. Virtualna etnografija se osredotoča na ritualne vidike participacije v novicah na YouTubu. Avtorji ugotavljajo, da igrajo novičarski rituali participacije ključno vlogo v procesu premagovanja hierarhij in praks produkcije novic saj ponujajo nove načine strukturiranja nepričakovanega v tej razvijajoči se kulturi novic. Posledično ritualizirana participacija pri YouTube novicah ne spreminja le tega, kdo ustvarja novice in kaj so novice, ampak tudi proces proučevanja ustvarjanja novic v teh fluidnih kontekstih.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: antropologija medijev, YouTube, novice, ritual, participacija, video odziv, Gaza/Izraelska flotilja

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