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## The Politics of Affect in Activist Amateur Subtitling

### *A Biopolitical Perspective*

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Self-mediated audiovisual content produced by ordinary citizens on digital media platforms reveals interesting aspects of the negotiation of affinity and antagonism among members of virtual transnational constituencies. Based on Pratt's (1987) conceptualization of contact zones, this chapter examines the role played by communities of activist subtitlers – characterized here as emerging agents of political intervention in public life – in facilitating the transnational flow of self-mediated textualities. I argue that by contesting the harmonizing pressure of corporate media structures and maximizing the visibility of non-hegemonic voices within mainstream-oriented audiovisual cultures, activist subtitling collectivities typify the ongoing shift from representative to deliberative models of public participation in post-industrial societies. The chapter also engages with the centrality of affect – conceptualized from the disciplinary standpoint of biopolitics (Foucault 2007, 2008) – as a mobilizing force that fosters intersubjectivity within and across radical subtitling collectivities. Drawing on an example of how emotions reverberate within a virtual community of amateurs subtitling the controversial BBC documentary *The Power of Nightmares* into Spanish, I examine how affect is generated by the practices surrounding the production and reception of subtitled material, and how the circulation flows of content through digital communication systems contributes to assembling an audience of affective receptivity.

Self-mediation, understood as the participation of ordinary people in public culture and politics by means of assembling and distributing digital media representations of their experiences (Chouliaraki 2010), is foregrounding new forms of citizen engagement with public communication as a site of negotiation between the individual and the social. The production and consumption practices that have gained traction as new forms of citizenship have continued to become enmeshed with digital media platforms in different and transformative ways have been theorized from different, yet intimately intertwined disciplinary perspectives. Journalism scholars have examined the extent to which the (often counter-hegemonic) truth claims in self-mediated narratives are influenced by the various community and civil society structures, including radical and activist movements, in which citizen media are embedded (Downing et al. 2001, Rodríguez 2001, Atton 2002, Howley 2005, Beckett and Mansell 2008). Media sociologists, on the other hand, have been preoccupied with the consequences of the shift from an electronic to a digital networked culture. Grounded in the cultural logic enabled by media convergence (Jenkins 2004, 2006), the smudging of the line between producers and creative citizen consumers, as well as the

impact of participatory co-creational practices on the socio-economic status and social recognition of media professionals (Banks and Deuze 2009), have both garnered considerable scholarly interest within this research strand. A third angle onto the theorization of self-mediation can be seen in a number of studies such as Burgess (2006) and Zelizer (2007) that focus on the deliberative and performative processes through which ordinary people articulate and express their public or mediated selves “with a new emphasis on the affective and playful dimensions of public communication, including satire and parody, but also on the ethics of witnessing and the politics of care” (Chouliaraki 2010:228). Irrespective of disciplinary divides, it is widely recognized that the emancipatory potential of self-mediation practices in the digital culture has been enabled by the ubiquity of information and communication technologies.

This chapter focuses on practices of self-mediation driven by a desire to effect social change, locating itself within a growing body of literature that explores how politically engaged individuals build and maintain ties within virtual networks of like-minded citizens, often through social media, to manipulate and circulate media content. The cartographies that emerge from the mapping exercises conducted so far – informed primarily by “resource mobilization theories, identity paradigms in social movement theory or network analysis” (Karatzogianni 2012:68) – foreground the role that digital assemblages of media activists play in disrupting the cultural logic of neoliberalism and contesting the commodification of media-based means of social and political critique (Trottier and Fuchs 2014, Fuchs and Sandoval 2014). On a related note, the insight that negotiating online sociality and mobilizing collective identities through self-mediated textualities entails the “combination of intense local and extensive global interaction” (Wellman 2002:11) highlights the transnational reach of most activist collectivities. Indeed, the impact of the growing instantaneity of global media flows in today’s networked mediascapes and the ensuing “dematerialization of space” (Cronin 2003:42) on the proliferation of geographically dispersed communities of interest represents a recurrent theme in studies on the interplay between self-mediation practices and resistance (Benkler 2006, Castells 2007). And yet, most existing theorizations of these “deterritorialized social imaginaries” (Li 2009:9) proceed from the assumption that self-mediated textualities reverberate across virtual spaces of contestation and resistance in the same language in which they were originally released.

To overcome this blind spot, I attempt to shift the analytical lens towards collectivities of amateur subtitlers, who are characterized here as agents of political intervention in public life. In what follows, these networks are conceptualized as virtual participatory sites where ordinary citizens engage in the remediation and recirculation of media content – as theorized in Deuze (2006, 2009) – to build a collective sense of affinity, as well as to explore and share aspects of their identities on the basis of shifting configurations of bonds and relationships across linguistic and cultural borders. The first part of my argument concerns the changing role of the dialectic between self-mediation and representation. I contend that, in post-industrial societies, self-mediation practices such as activist subtitling illustrate the ongoing shift from established models of representative democracy towards deliberative forms of governance. Inspired by the latter model, members of activist subtitling networks seek to escape confinement in essentialist categories of identity politics such as race or gender (Jarach 2004), develop the capacity to mobilize fluid radical constituencies and foster inter-subjectivity. But self-mediation is also undermining the role that representation has

traditionally played in the production and reception of media content. I will argue that the interface between the actual and the digital, where self-mediation practices thrive, can be best described in terms of the elusive affective potential traversing it – rather than the capacity of media content to represent reality through the deployment of conventional semiotic configurations and narrative structures (Massumi 2002). Consequently, the second half of this chapter focuses on the impact of the politics of affect on activist self-mediation practices, drawing on an example of how emotions reverberate within a virtual community of amateurs subtling the controversial BBC-produced documentary *The Power of Nightmares* into Spanish.

### **Politics of representation in activist subtling**

Subtling is a form of linguistic and intercultural mediation originally conceived during the 1920s in support of the classical cinematic apparatus developed by Western film industries to facilitate the global movement of motion pictures (Nornes 2007). Under this industrial regime, professional translators were expected to adopt a self-effacing presentational style which even today amounts to little more than composing snippets of written text to relay a condensed version of the diegetic speech. Mediating the viewers' access to the narrative by providing contextual information or clarifying aspects of the plot through subtitles, on the other hand, is not encouraged. By imposing this style, the traditional cinematic apparatus attempted to keep audience members absorbed in the fiction and “maintain an efficient, purposeful and uninterrupted flow of narrative information” (Berliner 1999:6) that would “reduce the margin for subjective spectatorial experiences” (Pérez-González 2013:5).

This strategy reveals two assumptions that are particularly relevant to the argument I seek to develop in this chapter. The first pertains to the mapping of audiovisual markets onto discreet national audiences, understood as homogeneous monolingual constituencies where the generative potential of ethnic, gender and class differences is diluted under the harmonizing pressure of institutional structures. The essentialism underpinning this conception of film audiences has allowed the industry to conceal “corporeal, cultural and political-economic differences” (Saldanha 2010: 290) within national constituencies of viewers, and hence enabled the commodification of films as sites of encounter between stable, idealized cultures, in their travels across multiple contexts of reception. The second assumption is that subtitlers are located in the interstices between such discrete *linguacultures*, and should only act as disinterested mediators between them.

Pratt's (1987) influential study of contact zones between linguistic communities is particularly helpful for understanding how this view of audiences and mediators has come to be so widely held – not least among subtling professionals and academics themselves. Pratt observes that the idealization of the modern nation-state is at the heart of traditional theorizations of the notion of community in language studies and the political science literature. The view that linguacultures map onto distinct national or “sovereign” collectivities assumes that the relationship between individuals and the communities they belong to is mediated by a “linguistics of community” (1987:55-57). This linguistic framework obscures social hierarchies and divisions within the community. Significantly, it also minimizes the visibility of strangers – that is, individuals from subordinated groups defined by shared affiliations in terms of class, religion, ethnicity and gender – outside their marginalized

constituencies, and curtails their participation in the wider, mainstream community. Extending Pratt's logic, it could be argued that sovereign communities, and the linguistic regime underpinning them, are at the heart of industrial subtitling. In this context of media production, subtitlers' practices contribute to perpetuating monetizable representations of essentialized cultures and obscuring social heterogeneity, submerging tensions between dominant and non-hegemonic voices under a veneer of linguistic uniformity. In doing so, professional subtitling tends to privilege the perspective of those in power, who can rule on what counts as 'legitimate' meaning.

Although industrial subtitling practices retain strong support among mainstream audiences, they are increasingly at odds with the needs and aspirations of an ever growing segment of contemporary informational societies. In the emerging context of digital media production and consumption, enabling idealized orderliness by adhering to a strategy of disinterested equidistance between cultures is no longer the default option for mediators, including translators. As part of the wider self-mediation phenomenon enabled by their immersion in the digital culture, engaged non-affiliated citizens have appropriated subtitling as a platform for the expression and promotion of radical concerns, including a range of activist agendas (Pérez-González 2010). Indeed, subtitling allows amateur translators to contest and resist capitalist and neoliberal discourses in a number of ways, whether as part of stable networks of like-minded individuals (some of which combine their online activity with on-the-ground activism) or *ad-hoc* *racies* formed to confront a specific challenge and dissolve upon completion of their task.<sup>1</sup> Activist subtitling networks typically proceed by translating their own audiovisual material or subtitling mainstream television content that was not meant to circulate outside the segment(s) of terrestrial or digital audiences that the broadcaster originally intended to reach. In both scenarios, this form of intervention in the commercial dynamics of the media marketplace concludes with the recirculation of the subtitled material through video-sharing platforms and social networking sites. Significantly, activist subtitling – which is occasionally combined with forms of “remediation” that involve the incorporation and reassembly of audiovisual material (Deuze 2006:148) – often contests the narrative(s) articulated in the original broadcast, which lends support to Baker's claim (2013:23-24) that

translation as such does not mediate cultural encounters that exist outside the act of translation but rather participates in producing these encounters. It does not reproduce texts but constructs cultural realities, and it does so by intervening in the processes of narration and renarration that constitute all encounters, and that essentially construct the world for us. It is not an innocent act of disinterested mediation but an important means of constructing identities and configuring the shape of any encounter.

Based on Baker's understanding of translation as an alternative space for political action and the social strand of narrative theory that informs her argument, activist networks might be thought of as sites where subtitlers and their audiences make publicly constructed attempts to engage with reality and negotiate a sense of collective identity. In these virtual assemblages, the dialectic between production and reception is not influenced by essentialist categories of identity politics and the compartmentalization of linguacultures that they entail.

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<sup>1</sup> An overview of different types of amateur translator communities (not restricted to subtitling networks), supported by a range of examples, is offered in Pérez-González (2014a, section 11.2).

Subtitlers, in their capacity as prosumers or consumers-turned-producers, focus instead on mobilizing aspects of their viewers' identities around which a community of interest may coalesce. Negotiation and interaction within the network thus have an important bearing on processes of digital prosumption. Each collective may consist of members with multiple, overlapping identities, with those located within the largest area of overlap more likely to operate at the centre of these activist assemblages, often taking on subtitling tasks. By contrast, individuals with more inflected individual identities tend to retain a more peripheral position as regular/occasional viewers, depending on the extent to which their views intersect with the core of the collective identity. Drawing on narrative theory, I accounted for this dynamic in earlier work in terms of "narrative entropy". As some individuals move away from the gravitational core of the assemblage, I argued, "entropy increases, with community members mobilizing other aspects of their identity and subscribing to intersecting narratives that may differ from those favoured by their fellow network members" (Pérez-González 2010:263). Pratt's (1987) characterization of communities allows us to develop an alternative theorization of activist subtitling networks as examples of contact zones that call for a "linguistics of contact" to bring into sharp relief "the operation of language across lines of social differentiation"; a linguistics that would "focus on modes and zones of contact between dominant and dominated groups, between persons of different and multiple identities"; a linguistics, moreover, that would "focus on how such speakers constituted each other relationally and in difference, how they enact differences in language" (1987:60)

The transformation in subtitling practices that digital communication technologies have brought about is opening up new avenues for research into the politics of representation in post-industrial societies. Adopting a constructivist epistemological approach, as illustrated by the concept of 'linguistics of contact',<sup>2</sup> to study virtual subtitling communities can yield valuable insights into the function of this site of translation as a platform for self-expression in public mediascapes. However, there is no reason why the relevance of the findings that may emerge from this strand of research should be confined to scholarship on the interface between self-mediation and translation. Examining how ordinary citizens negotiate their identities and confer with other individuals within these fluid sociality assemblages should shed light on the generative power of agency in the digital culture and, more widely, the amount and quality of deliberation that takes place at the heart of democratic life.

As outlined earlier in this section, industrial subtitling practices align themselves with what Mouffe (2005) has labelled as competitive 'representation models' of democracy. In mediating the relationship between the producers and consumers of media content, professional subtitlers privilege structures such as the nation-state and other essentialist categorizations of identity – complete with their respective dynamics of social hierarchization along 'dominant vs. subordinated' lines. Ultimately, by embracing industrial conventions and the values they encapsulate, commercial subtitling exposes the extent to which power-based bargaining under the cloak of consensus decision-making and collective interest aggregation is affected by the "'differential capacities" (Cohen and Fung 2004:26) of social groups to access power and control public discourses – including their media-based representations. From this perspective, it can be argued that representative systems of governance can be

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of presentational clarity, I use this label to designate any strand of scholarly work that focuses its analytical lens on those borderlands on the margins of communities in which it is the negotiation of differences that binds and, in some cases, mobilizes individuals.

biased in favour of the political and economic elite. Although the elite's access to and exercise of political and economic power may comply with widely accepted democratic conventions, it is their economic and social status that grants powerful individuals the capacity to self-select themselves as potential representatives in the first place. By contrast, activist subtitling groups build on the "collective intelligence" (Lévy 2000:14) of networks to channel grievances, identify shared priorities, generate flows of inter-subjectivity and promote critical reflexivity. In these sites of deliberative democracy, individuals draw on the affordances of digital technologies to participate in radical politics in ever growing numbers, widening the basis of the socio-political imperative to effect change and shift media control away from the elite. As Karatzogianni notes, the "aims and desires" of these activists might still be "of the modernist variety". But in fighting for participation they are using a postmodern medium that empowers "the previously marginalized or repressed, causing shifts in our understanding of identity and community, accelerating feelings and political attachments to foster unprecedented social and political change" (2012:60).

### Politics of affect in activist subtitling

The collective pursuit of modernist political aims through postmodern media, as illustrated by the participation of engaged individuals in virtual activist assemblages, represents an important development that is currently being theorized from different perspectives. Fuchs (2001), for example, proposes the notion of 'self-organization' to explain how a multiplicity of partially shared identities can both thrive and be harnessed within networked communities of interest. Self-organizing communities, Fuchs argues, can be best characterized in terms of the dialectic or tension between downward processes of domination, through which socio-technological structures constrain individual actions and thinking, and upward processes of agency, whereby new individual voices and qualities gain visibility and emerge at the structural level of society (Fuchs 2002:38). From this perspective, it could be argued that activist subtitling groups – whether they take the form of stable networks or fluid and ephemeral ad-hocracies<sup>3</sup> – are self-organized communities shaped by the mutually constitutive relation between the structural dimension of technology and the generative potential of human cognition. Of particular relevance to the argument I am trying to build in this chapter is the knowledge generated through the interaction between bottom-up agency and top-down social pressure. As individuals from diverse backgrounds come together as part of a deliberation-driven community and engage in interaction through a common technological platform, their very engagement in shared communicative practices contributes to fostering inter-subjectivity, developing a sense of community and articulating a collective identity – potentially extending, for example, to the adoption of a preferred set of subtitling practices and conventions.

Self-organization theories go some way towards understanding activist attempts to resist and contest the pressures of normativizing power, but the insights they yield are often skewed towards the socio-technological side of the structure-agency dialectic (Karatzogianni 2012). Within this framework, the analysis of the systemic causes for the emergence of activist formations – ranging from extreme forms of political, social or religious oppression in certain

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<sup>3</sup> Wellman argues that although such ephemeral, virtual and fluid communities are "seen as less bounded social networks of relationships", they still "provide sociability support, information, and a sense of belonging" (2002:2031).

states to the more subtle impact of “precarity” and “crisis ordinariness” as ever more prominent features of the logic of global capitalism (Berlant 2011:101) – tends to take precedence over the study of the affective structures that individuals jointly build once they have joined a virtual community of deliberation. Overlooking these affective structures, where the dialectic between the actual and the digital is played out, may be detrimental to our understanding of the expressive dimension of postmodern activism, as articulated in “the lived and deeply felt everyday sociality of connections, ruptures, emotions, words, politics, and sensory energies, some of which can be pinned down to words or structures; others are intense yet ephemeral” (Kuntsman 2012:3).

Of particular importance for the topic of this chapter is the prominence that the interplay between “the aesthetic, the ethical, and the political as they play out across bodies (human and non-human)” has been given in recently published programmatic overviews of affect theory (Gregg and Seigworth 2010:406). In the case of activist subtitling networks, the theoretical frameworks I have critiqued in earlier sections have already articulated different angles onto the intersections between affect, the aesthetic, and the ethico-political. However, the disproportionately low interest that affect has garnered so far vis-à-vis the other two aspects suggests there is a need to redress the balance and explore its contribution in more depth. Consequently, the remainder of this section engages in a critique of key concepts that may assist with the study of how affect works in activist subtitling networks and the description of the affectivity flows that operate in these communities of digital self-mediation. Among the different conceptualizations of affect available in the literature, I adopt a biopolitical perspective to drive the next strand of my argument, in view of this framework’s capacity to refine the granularity of the insights it provides into the interface between humans and computers. In what follows, Clough’s (2012) account of the differences between the notions of ‘biopower’ and ‘biopolitics’, as articulated by Foucault (2007, 2008), serves as a springboard and blueprint for this theoretical exploration.

Defined as the “explosion of numerous and diverse techniques [such as the introduction of vaccines to control the births/deaths ratio or contraceptives to manage fertility rates] for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault 1978:140), biopower is a system of governance that revolves around the moulding of subjectivity by demanding the collective compliance of individuals with the ideologies of the nation-state. Leaving aside the specific political technologies chosen to achieve power over bodies, scholars working on technology and affect have explored how the processes of subject-formation associated with biopower have affected the circulation of affective flows in society. Under this form of governance, Clough (2012:25) argues, affect is “expected to take the shape of a racialized, hetero/homo-normative unified body, bound to the subject of language and representation”. Through the “disciplining of the subject”, which curtails the circulation of affect across populations by confining it in the “organism” (Clough 2012:25), individuals become more malleable and can be easily assimilated by agents of governance such as the family and the nation, whose constraining role bears many a similarity with those played by essentialist categories of political identity and the nation state in Pratt’s conceptualization of the linguistics of contact.

Largely derived from his notion of biopower, Foucault’s concept of biopolitics (1997) can shed more, or different, light on the role that affect plays in activist subtitling communities. In



contrast to the fixation of biopower with the disciplining of subjects, biopolitical governance sets its sights on controlling the population as a whole by drawing, among other resources, on the power of computer technologies. Of particular relevance to the topic of this chapter is the importance that biopolitics attaches to big data and statistics, which are used for classificatory and regulative purposes – with “rates, averages, norms and deviations” (Clough 2012:27) serving as a platform to decide how best to extend state power to control both the physical and political bodies of a population. Although it focuses primarily on populations, biopolitics “comes to treat the *individual as itself a population*, complicating the individual in terms of his or her own propensities, his or her affective capacities” (Clough 2012:28, my emphasis). In terms of this chapter’s topic, the pluralization of every subject’s identity – or, to put it in Clough’s words, the fragmentation of the disciplined organism into “body parts” (ibid.) – brings into sharp relief the crisis of essentialist categories of identity politics and, more importantly, foregrounds the importance of (re)constituting one’s public self relationally in a number of ways, for example, by celebrating shared values and negotiating differences through affective exchanges within communities modelled along the lines of Pratt’s contact zones. According to Clough, the formations fostered by biopower and their capacity to restrict the transmission of affect “are being subjected to a reformulation as the disciplining of the organism into the unified body of the speaking subject is underdetermined by an anonymous circulation of body parts and affective intensities” (2012: 25). The next section attempts to illustrate precisely how such circulation of affective intensities takes place within communities of activist subtitling.

### Subtitling *The Power of Nightmares*

This section aims to explore further how affect plays out in the context of activist subtitling networks. Due to space limitations, I will not address the manifestations of affect in the semiotics (understood as the verbal and non-verbal dimensions) of the subtitles produced by these self-mediation practices. Rather than looking at the encoding of inter-subjectivity in the translations,<sup>4</sup> I intend to gauge the contribution of affect to the processes of deliberation that unfold within radical subtitling communities, including those conducive to the assembling of an audience of affective receptivity. For the purposes of illustration, I discuss how affective structures mediate the relationship between the actual and the virtual, where a collectivity of activist subtitlers and progressive citizens emerges during the prosumption of a Spanish language version of the 3-episode BBC documentary *The Power of Nightmares*.

Originally broadcast in October 2004, at a time when the US and its allies were positioned on the frontline of the global ‘War on Terror’ launched after the devastating attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, *The Power of Nightmares* aimed to expose how American neo-conservatives were narrating “the radical Islamists in the image of their [America’s] last evil enemy, the Soviet Union – a sinister web of terror run from the centre by Osama Bin Laden in his lair in Afghanistan”.<sup>5</sup> Writing in for *The Guardian* in 2004, feature writer Beckett argued that

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of how affect can be realized through the linguistics and aesthetics of subtitles produced by activist and professional translators, see Pérez-González (2014b, Chapter 7).

<sup>5</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/3970901.stm> (accessed 30 November 2014).

the central theme of *The Power of Nightmares* is riskily counter-intuitive and provocative. Much of the currently perceived threat from international terrorism, the series argues, “is a fantasy that has been exaggerated and distorted by politicians. It is a dark illusion that has spread unquestioned through governments around the world, the security services, and the international media.” The series’ explanation for this is even bolder: “In an age when all the grand ideas have lost credibility, fear of a phantom enemy is all the politicians have left to maintain their power”.

The documentary’s claim that the perceived threat of Islamist terrorism was (is) a politically driven narrative<sup>6</sup> proved very controversial – particularly, though not exclusively – among US viewers. Excerpts 1-3 illustrate the wide-ranging, often -emotionally heated, reactions of viewers posted on a dedicated page on the BBC website:<sup>7</sup>

### Excerpt 1

I have not seen the moronic film. As an American I am sick and tired of the DREAMING Liberals WORLDWIDE and that includes, you Euros. You had better wake up and quit your dreaming. Reality is, there is a World Wide Holy War going on. We, the Americans did not start it. The Terrorist did, but We, since you spineless others don’t have the guts to do so, WILL FINISH IT, just like all the other times we have had to save your butts.

*Paul Herrmann, Kinsport, Ten, USA*

### Excerpt 2

It’s hard for me to say the threat isn’t there. My friend’s brother died in the South Tower and my husband and I found ourselves running for our lives on 9/11 caught in that terrifying cloud as the first tower went down. Are New Yorkers scared it could happen again? Of course we are. But most of us are far more horrified at the cynical use of that day’s events to undermine our civil rights, to stoke the fires of fear and xenophobia, and to wage war. Most New Yorkers feel completely alienated from the rest of this country while also being hated by the rest of the world. It’s a lonely anxious place to be – caught between two fundamentalist agendas, Bin Laden’s and Bush’s and subscribing to neither.

*Anna, NYC*

### Excerpt 3

There’s not much I could add here without echoing others’ comments, but to say that this programme should’ve been shown in the US for educational

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of the ‘War on Terror’ campaign as both a ‘public narrative’ and a ‘meta-narrative’, see Baker (2006:45, 47).

<sup>7</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/4016713.stm> (accessed 30 November 2014).

purposes. I'm astounded by its [sic] depth – this is the most detailed exposé on Straussian utopians' intrigues in American politics I have yet seen. The American public failed to pay any attention to it and happily lets these nihilists draw their own grim future. An atavistic instinct of fear usurped the one to question the authority, which – very much like in the 1930's – can be easily dismissed as “unpatriotic”.

*Rod, Chicago, II*

But apart from generating immediate affective reactions from English-speaking viewers all over the world, the documentary also fuelled a sustained, tenacious investment of individual and institutional actors in the (counter-)hegemonic potential of the narrative that underpinned it. For example, the occurrence of new terrorist attacks around the world months after the 9/11 events, and even after the documentary was first broadcast in the UK, provided further opportunities for conservative viewers to level criticisms against the main argument developed in *The Power of Nightmares* – which for some “confirm[ed] the BBC as an anti-Bush, anti-Israel, anti-democracy pressure group for which [...] the licence-payers are forced to pay” (Andrew, Bournemouth). Indeed, having denounced the series for its “self-indulgent narcissism”, some viewers felt vindicated when four suicide bombers struck in central London on 7 July 2005 (Wallace Brockhoff, Lawrence, Kansas, USA). *The Power of Nightmares*, on the other hand, was also instrumentalized to support collective sites of affective investment at the opposite end of the political spectrum, sites that existed prior to the filming of the documentary. For example, the *Information Clearing House* – an American website founded on the belief that there is an ongoing war “to control the American people by taking possession of [their] minds and by controlling [their] sources of information”<sup>8</sup> – was quick to grasp the affective potential of *The Power of Nightmares*. Today, it continues to showcase it as a “must see documentary” and provides direct links to the three episodes, complete with transcripts for the last two parts.<sup>9</sup>

As I have suggested elsewhere (Pérez-González 2010), Spain's involvement in some of the policies and actions driven by the US-led 'War on Terror' has acted and continues to serve as a powerful catalyst for political protest within Spanish progressive constituencies. Members of the collective blogging site *Cuaderno de Campo* – which covers a wide range of matters, from environmental and open software developments to non-mainstream reportage on foreign and domestic policy issues – first became aware of the significant political resonance of the 'War on Terror' with the “affective fabric” (Kuntsman 2012:1) that binds their readership in the summer of 2006. Against the background of an ongoing episode of Israeli aggression on Lebanon, a group of regular bloggers took on the task of subtitling into Spanish a Sky News interview where British MP George Galloway vehemently defended his stance against the 'War on Terror' narrative and Israel's foreign and security policies vis-à-vis neighbouring Arab countries. Encouraged by the enthusiastic response to the posting of two blog entries that drew their readers' attention to the availability of the interview on the Sky News website and provided them with a written translation in Spanish, the group proceeded to identify a suitable freeware subtitling application and acquire the technical skills to produce and circulate a subtitled Spanish version (Pérez-González 2014:64). In light of the

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/intent.htm> (accessed 30 November 2014).

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/video1037.htm> (accessed 30 November 2014).

vigorous and divisive debate that ensued within the virtual assemblage, the bloggers' decision to subtitle *The Power of Nightmares* for members of their online community a couple of months after completing the Galloway project is hardly surprising. As Li (2009:9) argues in reference to similar groupings,

[t]hese newly visible media users are themselves circulating and engaging with media across political borders, market segments, and language barriers, creating deterritorialized social imaginaries that not only transcend national boundaries, but signal the emergence of new discursive spaces of audienceship that cannot be adequately described by the established models of global media culture.

After appropriating the raw footage in English, core members of *Cuaderno de Campo* moved on to annotate – in this case, in the form of subtitles – their copy of *The Power of Nightmares* before recirculating the subtitled episodes of the documentary within their online community. On 18 November 2006, a blogger writing under the pseudonym Trebol-A posted an entry (Post 1) containing an embedded, ready-to-play screenshot of the Spanish subtitled version of episode 1, complete with links to the original version hosted on two different video-sharing platforms.<sup>10</sup> Another post (Post 2) published on 24 November provided members with access to the subtitled versions of episodes 2 and 3.<sup>11</sup> Two more posts published on 26 and 27 November reported on the re-location of the subtitled video files, following the filing of copyright infringement reports against the group (Post 3).<sup>12</sup> They also provided a link to a webpage where community members could access a number of files (original and subtitled episodes of the documentary and the subtitle) for direct download (Post 4).<sup>13</sup>

Following the completion of this subtitling project, which gave an airing to issues that resonated strongly with their own personal locations, in narrative theory terms (Baker 2006), readers-turned-viewers engaged in interaction with the core members of the blogging site as well as with fellow viewers, delineating a shared site of emotional investment as they went along. Eurogaroto's comment (Excerpt 4) captures the reaction of most readers to the Spanish subtitled version of the documentary:

**Excerpt 4** (Post 1 | abridged comment #6)  
Eurogaroto, 25 November 2006 @ 12:31:15

Mis más sinceras felicitaciones por el trabajo que te has tomado [...] creo que el documental no tiene desperdicio a pesar de sus omisiones y que es muy importante que lo vean las muchas personas que ahora temen tomar un avión debido al "terrorismo" ignorando la distorsión y manipulación que los gobiernos hacen de ese temor.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.trebol-a.com/2006/11/18/el-poder-de-las-pesadillas/> (accessed 30 November 2014).

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.trebol-a.com/2006/11/24/el-poder-de-las-pesadillas-ii-y-iii/> (accessed 30 November 2014).

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.trebol-a.com/2006/11/26/el-poder-de-las-pesadillas-y-iii/> (accessed 30 November 2014).

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.trebol-a.com/2006/11/27/el-poder-de-las-pesadillas-y-iv/> (accessed 30 November 2014).

Yo he visto el documental hace uno [sic] mes aproximadamente y lo había publicado en Menéame con la esperanza de que alguien lo subtitulase ya [...] Enhorabuena Trebol-A!

My most sincere congratulations for taking on this job [...] I believe this documentary is excellent, despite its omissions, and that it is important that it is watched by many people who are now scared to take a plane because of "terrorism", oblivious to the extent to which governments misrepresent and manipulate that fear.

I had seen the documentary about a month ago and had posted it in Menéame<sup>14</sup> hoping somebody would subtitle it [...] Congratulations Trebol-A!<sup>15</sup>

In the four posts included in the data set, multiple offers of assistance to circulate the Spanish subtitled version of *The Power of Nightmares* alternate with attempts to identify other documentaries worth subtitling, as well as calls for volunteers to assist in specific subtitling projects. From a quantitative perspective, a collective interest in the generative potential of subtitling as a form of political intervention emerges as the largest area of overlap between the emotions expressed in the comments of *Cuaderno de Campo* readers/viewers, as Mifune notes in Excerpt 5.

**Excerpt 5** (Post 1 | abridged comment #3)  
Mifune, 19 November 2006 @ 15:39:03

SPANISH TEXT

[M]e gusta que en Europa haya posibilidad de ver en la tele (sobre todo en un país como Inglaterra) un esbozo de lo que pasa con la sempiterna demonización del "otro". Y que de vez en cuando se recuerde que los hijos de puta desde ambos lados arrasan y manipulan son en realidad los mismos pijos de "familias bien" de Texas, Arabia Saudí, Egipto, Nueva Inglaterra y... La Moraleja.

En España costaría mucho incluso que la televisión pública tratara en un documental el tema de la religión y su intervencionismo político al servicio de la derecha de siempre, tal y como se trata en este documental.

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<sup>14</sup> Meneame.net is a Spanish platform that publishes news stories proposed by users. Once a story is submitted, users can promote it by voting and commenting on it until, if it becomes popular enough, it is published in Meneame's front page. This free-access platform combines social bookmarking, participatory blogging and web syndication, and is not subject to editorial filtering.

<sup>15</sup> All translations of Spanish comment are my own. No attempt has been made to embellish or iron out the register and/or occasional grammatical and editing infelicities of the original Spanish texts, except when it has been necessary to do so in order to facilitate basic presentational clarity.

I love the fact that, in Europe, it is still possible to discuss on TV (particularly in a country like England) the effects of the constant demonization of the 'other'. And that one is reminded every now and then that the bastards on both sides who are responsible for all this destruction and manipulation are, in fact, members of privileged families from Texas, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, New England and ... La Moraleja.<sup>16</sup>

In Spain, it would be very difficult for the public broadcaster to produce a documentary exploring the extent to which religion intervenes in politics, always promoting right-wing agendas, as this film does.

More widely, while remaining near the core of this community, the 'War on Terror' narrative intersects with a restricted set of issues – including references to political developments in the Middle East, comparisons between Islamist and Christian 'fundamentalists', and the use of fear to introduce legislation that enables the curtailment of personal freedoms.

Located at the periphery of the virtual assemblage are those readers/viewers who, while generally in agreement with the need to facilitate access to this documentary and its message for Spanish-speaking constituencies, choose to express objections to one or more aspects of the narrative presented in *The Power of Nightmares*. These include the documentary's alleged claim that the CIA plays a positive role in tempering and taming neo-con policies (Post 1 | comment #2), as well as the film's failure to expose different sets of connections – for example, between neo-con and Zionist agendas (Post 3 | comment #31), or between anti-Muslim propaganda, racism and nazism (Post 4 | comment #11). The emergence of signs of narrative entropy in the form of clashing emotions – for example, comments posted by some readers/viewers to register disapproval with the kind of illogical thinking that resulted in this documentary (Post 1 | comment #8); to express their dismay at the fawning praise that the community showed for it (Post 1 | comments #13-14); or simply to launch scathing attacks against what they regard as fictitious spin, lies and nonsense (Post 4 | comment #1) – pave the way for episodes of affective rupture and confrontation between readers/viewers (as in Post 1 | comments #8-10; Post 4, comments #1-4), and hence mark the gradual transition towards the periphery of the assemblage.

Lying in the outer regions of this constellation of affect, individuals with inflected identities (compared to that shared by core members) chose to dwell on various disparate aspects. These pertained, for example, to the liberating potential of networked communication as a means to escape the brainwashing effect of mainstream news consumption, or the effective use of images to accentuate parts of the argument developed in the documentary. Considered as a whole, this episode of self-mediation by members of the *Cuaderno de Campo* community revealed the existence of different, often clashing, affective intensities circulating within this undisciplined organism.

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<sup>16</sup> Mifune seems to mention La Moraleja, an affluent residential district in Greater Madrid, to hint at the involvement of the Spanish economic and political elites in the demonization of the 'other'.

## Coda

This chapter has drawn on insights from affect theory to examine the intersections between emotion and the ethico-political in self-mediated textualities – instantiated here as the work of activist subtitling networks. Significantly, both citizen media and translation studies, the two disciplinary areas I have sought to bring together in this essay, are yet to begin engaging with this theoretical framework, whose logic and conceptual apparatus has tended to be confined so far to the domain of cultural studies. By focusing on the collective presumption of media content and its recirculation across *linguacultures*, I have attempted to gauge the potential relevance of affect theory to studying the practices and connectivities at the centre of emerging transnational communities of media co-creators, and the increasingly complex negotiations of cultural identity and citizenship that they foster.

My discussion of *The Power of Nightmares* further suggests that conceptualizing citizen media assemblages as contact zones or undisciplined organisms which enable the inter-subjective construction of states of emotion, rather than as communities built around stable subjects of emotion, requires a robust understanding of the differences between ‘emotion’ and ‘affect’. The dynamics of the negotiation of differences outlined in the previous section indicates that citizen media scholars can profitably draw on existing definitions proposed by authors such as Clough (2012:23), who contends that “emotions are commensurate with a subject” while the term ‘affect’ can be used to designate “a bodily capacity, [...] a trigger to action, including the action of feeling an emotion” which would seem to escape confinement in an individual body. This conceptualization is consistent with Shaviro’s, for whom “subjects are overwhelmed and traversed by affect, but they *have* or *possess* their own emotions” (2010:3, emphasis in the original). From this perspective, we can argue that affect in *Cuaderno de Campo* is generated through the circulation and reverberation of emotions which “open up processes of change, resistance or reconciliation” (Kuntsman 2012:2). While both citizen media and translation scholars will need to devise sophisticated methods to study how affect takes shape through the movement of emotions around the digital sphere, the latter are faced with the additional task of grasping whether and how the trajectories of such movements are refracted by collectivities of translation that manage the flows of media content on a transnational scale.

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