‘Ad-hocracies’ of Translation Activism in the Blogosphere  
A Genealogical Case Study

LUIS PÉREZ GONZÁLEZ  
University of Manchester, UK

Abstract. This paper sets out to explore how translation is increasingly being appropriated by politically engaged individuals without formal training to respond effectively to the socio-economic structures that sustain global capitalism. Drawing on a generative conceptualization of translation activism and insights from globalization studies and media sociology, the paper traces the genealogy of an activist community subtitling a televised interview with Spain’s former Prime Minister, José María Aznar López, originally broadcast by BBC News 24 against the background of the ongoing military conflict between Lebanon and Israel. The analysis suggests that these communities of ‘non-translators’ emerge through dynamic processes of contextualization, involving complex negotiations of narrative affinity among their members. It is argued that, in contrast to more traditional groupings of activist translators, these fluid networks of engaged mediators constitute ‘ad-hocracies’ that capitalize on the potential of networked communication to exploit their collective intelligence. The paper concludes by exploring the implications of the growing importance of such ad-hocracies for the future of activist translation and its theorization.

This paper sets out to explore the part that networks of politically engaged individuals without formal training in translation (‘non-translators’) are playing within the wider process of cultural resistance against global capitalist structures and institutions through interventionist forms of mediation, including translation. Ultimately, it aims to ensure that the idiosyncrasies of such collectivities are not overlooked by current scholarly initiatives to elaborate research programmes on and theorize the emergence and functioning of groupings of politically committed translators. Drawing on a generative conceptualization of activism pursued through translation, I argue that these communities of ‘non-translators’ emerge through dynamic processes of contextualization, involving complex negotiations of narrative affinity among their members. Their structural instability, their reliance on ‘collective intelligence’ (Levy 2000) to oppose capitalist institutions and their...
preference for engaging in the mediation of audiovisual contents, vis-à-vis written texts, are found to be some of the reasons why these ‘ad-hocracies’ (Jenkins et al. 2006) differ from typical activist networks.

The study of such ad hoc activist mediators requires a robust conceptual framework that draws on translation studies, globalization theory and media sociology – as outlined and critiqued in sections 1, 2 and 3, respectively. Section 4 focuses on the genealogy of a specific community of engaged individuals, some of whose members assume an ad hoc interventionist role during a single episode of mediation – in what constitutes a clear manifestation of the generative power of fluid activist identities. Presented with an audiovisual text which resonates strongly with their own ‘narrative location’ (Baker 2006), Spanish readers of a progressive blog appropriate, subtitle and circulate an audiovisual programme in an attempt to tamper with the dynamics of the global media marketplace and to promote their shared set of narratives vis-à-vis the ‘public narratives’ (ibid.) that circulate in their environment.

1. Structuralist and generative conceptualizations of activism through translation

Activist communities of translators and interpreters are becoming a recurrent object of scholarly enquiry in our discipline, as evidenced by the proliferation of recent international conferences and publications seeking to theorize the emergence and scope of this social phenomenon as well as to identify and scrutinize the different agendas that prompt the critical engagement of activist networks with mainstream public discourse in the communities in which they are embedded. The body of disciplinary discourse in circulation during the inception stages of this strand of scholarship attests, unsurprisingly, to the malleability of the very notion of activism. My own survey of conferences and publications purporting to serve as a platform for academic debate on activism in translation and interpreting reveals how these disparate understandings of activism by different scholarly groupings appear to have resulted in important foundational differences. The study of activist translation and interpretation would appear to gravitate around two poles that, for the purposes of systematic discussion, I propose to label as structuralist and generative conceptualizations of activism.

In Simon’s (2005) introduction to a collection of papers entitled Traduction engagée/Translation and Social Activism, the term ‘activism’ designates a range of interventionist approaches to interlingual and intercultural mediation whereby translators and interpreters seek to promote the agendas and redress the grievances of minorities and/or oppressed social groups, largely bound together by their affinity in terms of social class, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs or colonial status. These resistant, often entrenched constituencies which Simon presents as the would-be beneficiaries of activist
translation are well-established categories in translation and interpreting scholarship, having importantly informed the “cultural politics of translation in the 20th century” (ibid.:10) in their explorations of power struggles, both from a contemporary and a historical perspective. Against this background, the role of activist translation is one of ‘valorizing’, ‘reinforcing’ or ‘reanimating’ these social groupings, depending on whether the translator is dealing with ‘marginalized’, ‘dominated’ or ‘neglected’ communities, respectively. Simon’s conceptualization of activism relies heavily on a set of crystallized collective identities forged by power differentials and inflected by one or more of the affinities above. The central role of these stable and static categories in activist scholarship is underscored by Simon’s claim that “translation has become an ally in representing, reinscribing or reinforcing these identities” (ibid.) – which in turn shape the translators’ textual interventions. This set of discrete cultural categories reflects the prominence that Simon gives to social structures over individual agency, and it is on this basis that her stance on activism can be regarded as structuralist.1

In contrast to Simon’s conceptualization of socio-cultural resistant communities as discrete, static groupings of individuals clustered on the basis of mutual affinity and shared affiliations, Baker (2006a, 2006b, 2009) explores the generative potential of activism. For the purposes of this overview, I will argue that the starting point in the development of the generative strand of activism lies in its opposition to a number of widely held disciplinary narratives, including the portrayal of translators as inhabitants of interstitial spaces between discrete cultural communities and as mediators entrusted with bridging resulting intercultural gaps (Pym 1998). Baker (2009), whose critical appraisal of the interculturality narrative builds on previous critiques of the metaphor of interstitial mediation by Tymoczko (2003) and Krebs (2007), challenges the idealization of translators as agents who conduct their mediation work without regard to their own positioning in the socio-political order and the ideological, ethical or religious alignments that the latter brings about; the assumption that translators are located within spaces in-between cultural groupings, Baker argues, allows proponents of the interculturality narrative “to downplay commitment to real people caught up in real contemporary conflicts, and to avoid the responsibility of using language and translation as a tool for political change” (2009:223).

It may be argued that Baker’s acknowledgement of the inevitability, even desirability, of the translator’s political engagement with the power imbalances

1 The role of static categories in Simon’s understanding of activism is in line with her conceptualization of other constructs, such as national cultures (Simon 1996). As Tymoczko (2003:200) notes, Simon’s “monolithic, homogeneous” characterization of national cultures “contrast[s] markedly with contemporary ideas about culture that stress the heterogeneity of culture and that assert that any culture is composed of varied and diverse – even contradictory and inconsistent – competing viewpoints, discourses, and textures”.
and ideological conflicts inherent to most episodes of social interaction is not, essentially, very dissimilar to Simon’s call for the translator’s intervention in “situations of discourse where there are discrepancies of power, knowledge or status” (2005:16). A major difference between these two approaches to activism can be found, however, in their conflicting theorization of the collective identities that determine the forms of intervention chosen by translators. While Simon draws on static groupings delimited on the basis of stable socio-cultural and political affiliations, Baker (2009:223) argues that “translators, like other human beings … negotiate their identities, beliefs and loyalties as we do on the basis of various aspects of the context and their own developing judgement of the issues involved in any given interaction”. Drawing on the social strand of narrative theory, Baker describes social life as the product of a constant interaction between individual narratives and publicly constructed attempts to make sense of reality. Identities, forged at the interface between the shifting ways in which individuals narrate themselves and the changing collective narratives circulating around them, are thus best described as transient narrative locations. According to this stance, activists could be defined as highly critical individuals whose personal narratives fail to align, totally or partially, with public narratives at a given point in time and space and who, consequently, set out to bring one or more aspects of their personal narrative to bear on the collective ones. Activism networks would thus consist of individuals sharing one or more aspects of their identity – and hence aiming to renegotiate their position in relation to public narratives in similar ways – that may cut across traditional constituencies. In that collective affiliations are increasingly subject to inflection and redefinition, as are the agendas of activist translator networks (Baker 2006b:463), collective identities are to be understood as temporary and hence dynamic constructs.2

As Baker (2009) notes, this conceptualization of identity informed by narrative theory makes it possible to account for the emergence and consolidation

---

2 Baker’s account of social identities as dynamic and ongoingly negotiated narrative locations should be assessed against the gradual shift from ‘context’ to ‘contextualization’ that has become increasingly prominent in our disciplinary discourses. Recent studies have shown, for example, how translators and interpreters mediating in institutional settings, traditionally described in terms of the asymmetrical distribution of power between professional and lay interactants, are able to engage in and bring about processes of ‘recontextualization’ and renegotiation of the initial powerful/powerless identities (Pérez-González 2006a). Even in institutional settings, “effects of power and dominance are always inscribed within processes of (re)contextualization and [hence] … closer engagement with these processes can provide us with better insight into the shifting agendas of participants and the dynamic goals of interaction than any static listing of contextual variables, however extensive” (Baker 2006c:318). The shift from a static context towards a dynamic process of contextualization problematizes “the notion of a source text as an entity with a stable, definable meaning”, highlighting instead the role that the actual mediation process plays in the process of negotiation of meaning among participants (Mason 2006:359).
of communities of activists on the basis of narrative affinity, even when the affinity among the members of the network is partial, i.e. when activists subscribe to a broad narrative which gives cohesion to the group but disagree on other intersecting narratives. Baker’s approach to activism is thus able to account for the formation of collective affiliations, and their potential shifts over time, “and still accommodate endless variation at the individual level” (*ibid.*). It is on the basis of the emphasis on agency over social structure and the individuals’ constant need to negotiate their identity around traditional socio-cultural categories that I propose to label Baker’s account of activism as generative.

The generative conceptualization of activism goes a long way towards recognizing and harnessing the complexity of this interventionist form of mediation at a time when the clustering of narrative affinities is increasingly reliant on fluid identities. As discussed in section 2 below, the dynamics of globalization and the proliferation of new and more sophisticated platforms for social interaction have enhanced the permeability of hard-core and hitherto stable social groupings. Irrespective of their positioning in the political and socio-cultural order, individuals are increasingly engaging in activism on the basis of partial affinity with other network members. The ‘mobilization’ of only some aspects of one’s identity (Baker 2009) – a process which unfolds dynamically on the basis of an individual’s political engagement in social interaction – has thus become the linchpin of contemporary activist networking.

The blog-based site of activism constructed by those individuals involved in the subtitling of the political interview under scrutiny in section 4, for instance, revolves mainly around their opposition to American, Israeli and European foreign policies in relation to the Arab World. But while it may be possible to account for this instance of blog-centred clustering in terms of collective opposition to the ‘War on Terror’ narrative (and the commitment of its members to a progressive political discourse), this community of *ad hoc* activist translators is best defined in terms of its gravitational core, rather than discrete external boundaries. As we move away from the core, 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. Narrative entropy inflects members’ identities and affiliations, thus detracting from the cohesion of any given community.

---

1 In her study of activist networks as narrative communities, Baker proposes to “refrain from using categories which pre-exist the research or analysis and instead allow … (temporary) categories to emerge from the analysis itself” (2009:224). Her study of activism prioritizes agency to the detriment of structure, thus acknowledging the potential for individual variation. Gambier (2007) takes a diametrically opposed perspective on this matter: the starting point for his study on networks of ‘traducteurs/interprètes bénévoles’ (voluntary translators/interpreters) is, precisely, a close analysis of the structural underpinning of this phenomenon in ‘sociotechnique’ (sociotechnical), ‘processuel’ (processual) and ‘militant’ terms.
This paper acknowledges the strengths of the generative approach and its theoretical apparatus but sets out to explore issues which have so far received relatively little scholarly attention at this foundational stage of research on activism. The aim of this piece of work is not to advance the study of activism, as mapped so far, from a narrative theoretic standpoint; instead, it seeks to chart new ground and draw attention to sites and manifestations of activism that feature less visibly in the research programme of this scholarly strand – as illustrated by a set of research questions proposed by Baker (2009) in the second half of her paper.

Despite expressing her intention to gain a deeper insight into the formation of activist collective identities, Baker has so far concentrated on the outcome, rather than on the unfolding of the actual formation process. In this sense, only one of the set of research questions listed by Baker as part of her research programme pertains to the reasons why individuals are attracted to activist groups. The remaining research questions cover different aspects of the activities and practices of already formed groups of activists, including the way in which they choose to narrate themselves and their use of the Internet as a symbolic space “to elaborate and practise a moral order in tune with their own narratives of the world” (2006b:481). This paper looks at the dynamic construction of a narrative community, placing particular emphasis on the role played by the Internet in that spontaneous process of network formation and, hence, paying less attention to the use of the Internet as a medium for the circulation of activist-mediated messages. Ultimately, this essay investigates an extreme manifestation of dynamic identity generation, where individuals take on an activist role during a single episode of mediation.

Secondly, although generative activism envisages the engagement of both “professional and non-professional” (Baker 2006b:463) translators in activist networks, the formulation of Baker’s research questions gives particular prominence to the role of professionals in activist communities. In her occasional references to non-professionals, Baker tacitly assumes that this group will consist of translation/interpreting students and academics. This paper looks at an instance of mediation undertaken by individuals who do not hold any qualifications in translation, a category which would seem to have been largely overlooked in Baker’s research programme. This essay intends to examine the reasons why non-translators engage in activist translation on an ‘ad hoc’ basis, in relation to the subtitling of the political interview under

---

4 Even if one or more individuals happened to be formally trained translators, this information may not necessarily be available to other community members. Networks of ad hoc activist translators thus differ from most of the narrative communities studied by Baker, in that the former (i) are not initially bound together by their members’ shared skills or professional/academic interests; (ii) do not regard translation as the only or main form of social intervention; (iii) may be more likely to disband after the completion of an individual translation project.
scrutiny. Attempts will also be made to gauge the relative stability of these communities vis-à-vis other activist groupings formed by professional and/or trainee translators/interpreters and academics; and to establish whether the emergence of communities of \textit{ad hoc} activists translators is circumscribed to specific textual genres or formats.

Finally, as has been the case throughout the history of translation studies, the body of scholarship on activist translation available to date has focused exclusively on the mediation of written texts. This paper deals with an instance of mediation ultimately resulting in the subtitling of the chosen audiovisual text, thus aiming to make this form of engaged translation more central to the agenda of generative activism.

2. Translation in the era of global ‘simulacra’

The audiovisual text mediated by the \textit{ad hoc} activist community under scrutiny in section 4 is a televised interview conducted in English and broadcast by \textit{BBC News 24} – a channel which is available digitally as well as on cable and satellite networks around the world and, therefore, forms part of the transnational media establishment that has so decisively contributed to widening the geopolitical reach of capitalist economic structures in recent decades. According to Venuti (2008:19),

\begin{quote}
The global capitalist economy is maintained by what Jean Baudrillard has called the “precession of simulacra”, an effect of mass print and electronic media which do not so much reflect as construct reality through encoded forms and images that are determined by various ideologies and elicit, in Baudrillard’s words, “a fascination for the medium” over “the critical exigencies of the message”.
\end{quote}

In turn, the global distribution of simulacra has been facilitated, to a large extent, by the ‘time-space compression’ which Harvey (1989) regards as a distinctive feature of postmodernity (Venuti 2008). Technological developments and, in particular, the digitization of audiovisual content, have allowed media to overcome spatial barriers and speed up the circulation of information and knowledge. This ‘de-materialization of space’, in Cronin’s (2003) terms, is responsible for the creation of supraterritorial and interconnected audiences and accounts for the centrality of ‘transworld simultaneity’ and ‘instantaneity’ (Scholte 2005) in the contemporary media landscape.

As noted by Bielsa and Bassnett (2009), there has been a tendency for theorists of cultural globalization to put a positive spin on the instantaneity

\footnote{In making this point, the term ‘translation’ is used to refer exclusively to the mediation of written texts; interpreting is therefore not to be subsumed into what is often used as a generic term encompassing both forms of mediation.}
of global flows within the media industry, on the grounds that it facilitates
“the rapid and extensive juxtaposition of, and comparison between, differ-
ent cultures and spaces” (Lash and Urry 1994:243). Indeed, this view seems
to enjoy wide acceptance, not least because it underpins the monolingual
strategy adopted by the powerful Anglophone media corporations, whereby
they assume that viewers of global broadcasts are equipped with a tool kit of
cultural and linguistic resources – notably their familiarity with English as the
lingua franca of global communication – to be smoothly deployed when
juxtaposing and drawing comparisons between the abovementioned cultures
and spaces. Some globalization theorists, like Castells (2000), have gone so
far as to suggest that viewers inhabiting the deterritorialized space of global
flows speak a ‘universal digital language’ which spans and underpins both
the encoding and decoding of global audiovisual broadcasts. In this digitally
‘monolingual’ sphere of the global flows, whose instantaneity sets it apart from
the linguistically diverse, physical spaces of everyday life, translation plays
a secondary role. From a translation studies perspective, Bielsa and Bassnett
(2009:18) argue that the prioritization of instantaneity by globalization theorists
“has obscured the complexities involved in overcoming cultural and linguistic
barriers, and made the role of translation in global communications invisible”.
In downplaying the role of translation in the context of global information
flows, globalization theorists would appear to be raising the expectation that
translation must “approximate more and more to the ideal of instantaneous
transparency” (ibid.: 29). According to Venuti (2008:18-19), this perception
of translation is largely informed by the ‘simulacral quality’ of postmodern
culture, understood as the capacity to perfectly replicate reality on a screen by
subordinating the message to the medium and generating the illusion of total
identity between the original and its virtual reproduction.6
In the deterritorialized (digitally monolingual) sphere of the global media
marketplace, the simulacral quality of the audiovisual content in circulation is
particularly consequential. The technical feasibility of instant distribution and
perfect replication of audiovisual programmes on a global scale contributes
to the perception of production and consumption as two seamlessly joined
processes and, by extension, to the “illusory effect of transparency whereby
the translation” may be, under some circumstances, “taken as the foreign text
regardless of the translating language” (Venuti 2008:20). The impact that the
combination of instantaneity and serial reproduction has on the degree of
political engagement of individuals embedded in capitalist social structures
has been articulated in conflicting terms by different scholars. For Baudrillard,
as critiqued by Venuti (ibid.), the mechanical replication of simulacra erodes

6 Venuti’s critique of the simulacral quality of postmodernity is not restricted to audiovisual
messages and the media industry; in fact, his paper explores that key concept in relation to
the translation of a number of written texts.
ideological idiosyncrasies and fosters standardization, which often results in the minoritization of critical social groups. Other theorists, such as Lash and Urry (1994), contend that our society’s constant exposure to simulacra fosters the emergence of aesthetic variation across individuals which, in turn, serves as a basis for the diversification of the social agents’ subjectivity and their perceptions of social events. For Lash and Urry, the fragmentation of subjectivity is highly conducive to the proliferation of critical reflexivity in the form of resistant communities, as it reinforces “individuation in the sense of the atomization of normalized, ‘niche-marketed’ consumers” (1994:113; quoted in Venuti 2008:21).

Unsurprisingly, Venuti’s alignment with Lash and Urry’s stance regarding the place of social critique and political engagement in the era of postmodern simulacra has implications for his conceptualization of translation as a “cultural means of resistance that challenges multinational capitalism and the political institutions to which the economy is allied” (2008:18). In his attempt to articulate the interventionist quality of translation, Venuti challenges previous approaches to this issue (e.g. Tymoczko 2000), that are often based on the assumption that politically engaged translation can only be effective when it (i) addresses large constituencies clustered around static socio-cultural categories, which makes it easier to control the reception and consumption of the simulacra; and (ii) serves to promote or undermine “metanarratives that build totalizing explanations of social forces” but, in Venuti’s view, “have lost their epistemological power” in the postmodern context (2008:22). In line with Lash and Urry’s contention that the quick circulation of postmodern simulacra ultimately engenders reflexivity through the fragmentation of traditional audiences and constituencies, Venuti claims in no uncertain terms that the use of translation for the purposes of political intervention is only conceivable through the discursive practices of ‘small-scale’ resistant communities. According to Venuti (2008:21),

> [t]ranslation, then, might intervene into the postmodern situation by tampering with the simulacra that drive the global economy. A translator might use the images on which capital relies to short-circuit or jam its circulation by translating so as to question those images and the practices of consumption that they solicit. This sort of intervention is distinctly postmodern because it contends with the globalized flow of simulacra that is a hallmark of multinational capitalism and that permeates cultural and social institutions.

Although Venuti does not use the terms ‘activist’ or ‘activism’ in his paper, the tampering with simulacra that he places at the heart of resistant translation clearly has similarities with activist practices, as examined in section 1. In particular, I submit that the importance that Venuti accords to the subversive role of small-scale resistant communities – arising from the redefinition and
atomization of traditional socio-cultural groupings – is tantamount to prioritizing individual agency (temporary narrative locations) over social structures and, by extension, acknowledging the generative potential of socio-political engagement through translation, irrespective of whether the latter is labelled as ‘activism’ or ‘resistance’. Similarities can also be found between the formulation of the narrative theoretic framework in terms of the interaction between personal and public narratives and Venuti’s definition of postmodernity as a site of interplay between socio-economic and cultural practices. Just as personal narratives may be in line with or in opposition to public ones, Venuti envisages a “disjunctive or contradictory relation” between the socio-economic and cultural practices underpinning global capitalism, such that “capital can be variously reproduced or frustrated by the cultural products to which it gives rise” (2008:22), depending on how translators choose to engage with the simulacra in circulation, whether by reinforcing or tampering with them.

In the concluding paragraphs of section 1, it was argued that the narrative theoretic framework which informs generative approaches to the study of activism through translation contributes to the present study with its dynamic conceptualization of social identities as temporary narrative locations. As noted then, this is particularly relevant to the data discussed in section 4, where individuals interact within a temporary network to carry out a single episode of mediation. This section has argued that Venuti’s account of resistant translation as the product of the engagement of small communities in disjunctive cultural practices to challenge socio-economic structures shares with the narrative theoretic model a dynamic understanding of identity which foregrounds the generative power of agency.

3. **Activist intervention in non-linear communication structures**

*Ad hoc* activist translators mediating audiovisual political programmes engage critically with the monolingual strategy favoured by global media corporations and challenge their assumption that global broadcasts fall into two categories: contents which are readily intelligible to digitally savvy viewers all over the world and programmes requiring translation, conceived as a “transparent medium of fluid exchange” (Cronin 2000:111). This section aims to explore how *ad hoc* activist translators go about tampering with the simulacra circulated by global media corporations, thus enhancing the disjunctive potential of their mediated texts, understood as instances of resistant cultural practices, vis-à-vis their respective socio-political context.

In comparison to other types of text, audiovisual simulacra have been, until very recently, difficult for individuals outside media organizations to tamper with. With the advent of the Internet and, more specifically, the widespread digitization of audiovisual footage, the technological tools required to manipulate audiovisual texts have become ubiquitous and affordable. Indeed,
the key for activist communities to articulate their disjunctive approach to audiovisual mediation has been the feasibility of appropriating audiovisual simulacra whose circulation had so far been restricted to the supraterritorial monolingual sphere of global flows. In the era of digitization, the copies of those audiovisual programmes that activist communities choose to mediate have become virtually indistinguishable from the originals which were first distributed by the broadcaster. The appropriation of audiovisual footage is the first of a series of steps, which include the subtitling of the spoken dialogue or any written text featured in the programme and culminate in the superimposition of subtitles on the visuals. Once the mediation is completed, programmes are released by activist networks into the spatio-temporally and linguistically constrained space(s) that their target audience inhabits. Unsurprisingly, the appropriation of audiovisual content is highly ‘selective’. Out of the limitless pool of simulacra that are constantly circulating in the space of global flows, ad hoc activists choose their objects or sites of intervention strategically. As is also the case with activist networks mediating written political texts (Baker 2006b, 2009), ad hoc activists mediating audiovisual texts show a preference for messages that either reinforce their temporary narrative location or, alternatively, contribute to undermining one or more of the collective narratives that their communities oppose.

The interventionist engagement of activist communities with the circuitry of the global audiovisual marketplace represents a challenge to the control that media corporations have traditionally exerted over the distribution and consumption of their products. This challenge manifests itself in two ways. The first manifestation pertains to the role of self-appointed translation commissioners that activist communities assume when selectively appropriating the simulacra they intend to tamper with. The very selection of audiovisual simulacra represents an act of resistance against the dynamics of global audiovisual flows, in that the chosen messages would not have otherwise reached the activists’ target constituencies. The second manifestation is inextricably linked to the first. As a result of the politically motivated transfer of audiovisual simulacra from the deterritorialized global sphere to linguistically diverse geographies, the global capitalist structures responsible for the production of the original message lose control of the receiving situation. In this respect, audiovisual programmes often take on new resonances, in terms of narrative

---

7 For an extended discussion and illustration of the notion of selective appropriation, see Baker (2006a:71-76).
8 Activist mediators of political television programmes are not alone in favouring an ‘appropriation-based’ approach to intervention in the media landscape. A case in point is that of fan communities intervening in the global circulation of their favourite products and genres (Pérez-González 2006b).
9 Venuti notes that “[t]he selection of foreign texts for translation and the development of discursive strategies to translate them inevitably involve taking sides to a certain extent, aligning with some constituencies and institutions more than others” (2008:32).
reinforcement or clash, when displaced from the dematerialized global circuits they were originally intended for and brought to intersect with the here and now of the audience’s space. But this loss of control not only affects the spatial dimension of the receiving situation, but also its temporal counterpart. Along with the ease of retrieval and storage of mediated simulacra, digitization has created the conditions for the asynchronous and ‘iterative consumption’ (Crewe et al. 2005) of audiovisual messages.

These two challenges mounted by activist communities can be explored further in relation to two major socio-cultural developments which are increasingly receiving attention from media sociologists, i.e. the shift from a ‘linear’ to a ‘non-linear model of communication’ and the consolidation of ‘participatory cultures’ in the media industry; each of these developments is considered in turn in the remainder of this section.

The now superseded linear model of communication (McNair 2006) – that is, the organization of the media industry in the form of top-down, elite-controlled structures – was offer-driven; editors and chief executives, as the embodiment of traditional power structures, were able to mobilize public opinion and exercise a certain degree of political and ideological control over their readership and audiences. The dynamics of activist mediation in audiovisual contexts, however, are to be interpreted as non-linear. The emerging non-linear model of communication is demand-driven, as the new generation of media consumers demands that ever more content be delivered when, how and as they want it. According to McNair (2006), this scenario of unprecedented diversity and unpredictability, both in terms of the variety of content available to audiences and the increasingly atomized receiving communities, is best understood as

a movement from a control to a chaos paradigm; a departure from the sociologist’s traditional stress on the media’s functionality for an unjust and unequal social order, towards greater recognition of their capacity for the disruption and interruption, even subversion of established authority structures. … The chaos paradigm acknowledges the desire for control on the part of elites, while suggesting that the performance, or exercise of control, is increasingly interrupted and disrupted by unpredictable eruptions and bifurcations arising from the impact of economic, political, ideological and technological factors on communication processes. (ibid.:3)

The generative potential of individual agency is central to McNair’s account of the political disruptions that have upset the foundations of traditional linear models. Against this background of growing structural volatility in the media marketplace, it is easier to theorize the role of translator activists as agents of chaos – in the sense that this term is used in media sociology. Activists’ interventions represent ‘unpredictable eruptions’ of resistance, in McNair’s
terms, against the increasingly deterritorialized media and their ‘habitualized discursive practices’ (Mason 1994/2010). In their struggle to oppose narratives circulated by the media elites and the socio-political structures they represent (i.e. ‘control culture’), activist communities (i.e. ‘agents of chaos’) clustered around fluid social identities resort to disjunctive practices of cultural media which have disruptive ramifications for the circulation of simulacra outside the erstwhile uncontested global broadcasting highways.

The consolidation of the non-linear model of communication as a platform for the expression of participatory cultures – in the form of grassroots movements of civic engagement and political empowerment – relies heavily on the ubiquity of media technologies. Recent studies on the role of participatory culture in contemporary media (e.g. Jenkins et al. 2006) highlight the crucial role of information technologies in the articulation of ‘affinitiy spaces’, defined as “highly generative environments, from which new aesthetic experiments and innovations emerge” (ibid.:9), as the building blocks of participatory cultures. As a form of highly generative environment, audiovisual activism perfectly illustrates the contribution of technologies to the dynamics of participatory cultures, i.e. empowering their members to “archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content” (ibid.:8) along the lines suggested earlier in this section.

Interestingly, the opportunities to subvert established authority structures through the use of technologies are so embedded in the non-linear model of communication that it is possible to envisage a short-term scenario in which resistant mediation practices might lose their radical edge to other non-politically motivated forms of engagement with audiovisual simulacra. This perception is shared by recent studies on participatory culture in the media, in their appraisal of ‘grassroots creativity’ as an important engine of cultural transformation:

The media landscape will be reshaped by the bottom-up energy of media created by amateurs and hobbyists as a matter of course. This bottom-up energy will generate enormous creativity, but it will also tear apart some of the categories that organize the lives and work of media makers ... A new generation of media makers and viewers are emerging which could lead to a sea change in how media is made and consumed. (Blau 2005:3-5)

The place that activism occupies within the broader movement of grassroots participatory culture, in terms of the ease with which individuals take on and step out of a politically interventionist role while interacting online, will be explored in more depth in the following section. It is envisaged that the discussion of the selected data will provide the basis from which a more probing statement can be made as to whether, and if so to what extent, the concept of activism needs to be reconsidered.
4. The genealogy of sites of activism in the blogosphere

The conceptual framework outlined in preceding sections enables the study of activist mediation in postmodern non-linear communication structures. Against this background, the second part of this paper focuses on fortuitously generated affinity sites, some of whose members assume an activist identity during a single episode of mediation, in what constitutes a clear manifestation of the generative power of fluid activist identities. In this section, the discussion focuses on the genealogy of a specific grouping of *ad hoc* activist mediators, rather than on the actual mediation practices deployed by those engaged individuals. Following an account of the context leading to the emergence of the narrative community under analysis, I will then examine the negotiation of narrative affinity between members of the community and the role that intersecting narratives play in relation to the sustainability of the network.

4.1 Setting the context: The HARDtalk interview

On Monday 24 July 2006, *BBC News 24* broadcast an exclusive *HARDtalk* interview with Spain’s former Prime Minister, José María Aznar López, against the background of the ongoing military conflict between Lebanon and Israel. The interview includes a discussion of Spanish internal politics but it is Aznar’s opinions on international affairs that receive particular attention. Given his firm support of the Bush administration’s foreign policy, his hard-line stance on the ‘War on Terror’ and his public alignment with Israel’s security policies, both during and after his period in office, it is hardly surprising that the BBC website chose to contextualize this interview for prospective viewers in the following terms:

**Excerpt 1 (Hardtalk Website, BBC News 24)**

Iraq, Afghanistan and now Lebanon. All of them are on the frontlines in the global war on terror according to the Bush administration. This view causes unease in some parts of Europe but not for former Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar. He is still a close ally of George W Bush. Is he out of step with his own continent? In an exclusive interview for HARDtalk he talks to Stephen Sackur.

During the interview, Stephen Sackur refers to Aznar’s lobbying campaign

---

10 At the time of writing, the interview can be accessed via the *BBC News Website* at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/hardtalk/5209566.stm (last accessed 15 May 2009).

11 For an English overview of Aznar’s views on Israel’s role in the Middle East, published shortly before the invasion of Lebanon, see Aznar (2006).
to redefine the objectives of NATO and make it more effective at combating what the former Prime Minister regards as the new global threat: Islamist terrorism. In his response, Aznar outlines his vision on this matter and advocates that future enlargements of NATO should prioritize those countries which can help to fight terror:

Excerpt 2 (Transcript of the HARDtalk interview; abridged)\textsuperscript{12}

SS: Which countries?
JMA: Israel.
SS: Israel?
JMA: Israel.
SS: You believe Israel should be in NATO?
JMA: Yeah, absolutely.
SS: Well, let’s stop there for a moment. Israel currently is bombard ing Lebanon.
JMA: Yeah.
SS: It says that its actions in Lebanon are a part of a war against terrorism. Do you believe that?
JMA: Yes. Hezbollah ... Hezbollah is a terrorist group ... it’s considered a terrorist group ... Hamas is a terrorist group ... it’s considered a terrorist group ... both are supported by Iranian regime, maybe by Syrian regime, but Hezbollah is a terrorist group, and Hezbollah entered in the Israel territory ... catch two soldiers ... kidnap the soldiers ... killing another people... and this is an attack, terrorist attack.
SS: So let’s be clear. You are saying you believe Israel should be in NATO.
JMA: Yeah.
SS: NATO, as you know, runs upon the idea of collective security and mutual self-defence, so you are now saying that NATO should be bombing Lebanon?
JMA: If it’s necessary, yes. Because I consider that Israel is a part essential of the Western World.

During his two final years in office, Aznar faced an unprecedented level of public anger for being one of the few European leaders who actively supported the Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq in 2003 on the basis of what would turn out to be faulty intelligence on Iraq’s alleged arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. His popularity suffered a devastating blow with the Madrid train bombings on 11 March 2004 (only three days before the General Election)

\textsuperscript{12} The transcription reflects Aznar’s command of and fluency in English at the time of the interview. The full transcription is available at http://piezas.bandaancha.st/aznar.html\textsubscript{trans_eng}/trans\_eng (last accessed 15 May 2009).
by Islamist terrorists, which much of the Spanish public regarded as “a direct result of Spain’s decision to send troops to the Middle Eastern country” (Govan 2009). Against this background, some of the views Aznar expressed in the interview – mainly those pertaining to his alleged ‘demonstrated capacity’ to defeat terrorism and his openly proclaimed lack of regrets on his handling of Iraq’s intelligence fiasco and the investigations of the Madrid bombings – had the potential to elicit more visceral reactions from large collectivities of the Spanish public. It will therefore come as no surprise that the Spanish leading (and left-leaning) newspaper *El País* published, on the very same day as the interview was being broadcast by the BBC, a news story entitled ‘Aznar, partidario de que la OTAN bombardeee Libano “si fuera necesario”’ (Aznar in favour of NATO’s bombardment of Lebanon “if necessary”), complete with an audio link to the relevant soundbite (*El País* 2006). The liberal daily *El Mundo* presented it in the following terms: ‘Aznar cree que la OTAN podría bombardear el Líbano si Israel fuera miembro de la Alianza’ (Aznar believes that NATO could bomb Lebanon if Israel was a member of the Alliance) (*El Mundo* 2006). Aznar’s views – which many interpreted as yet another refusal to accept responsibility for his alleged lapses in political judgement during his final years in power – received ample coverage by the Spanish media over the following days, attracting criticisms from a wide range of individuals and organizations positioned to the left of the political spectrum, including senior members of the governing Socialist Party (PSOE). On Tuesday 25, one day after the interview was broadcast, the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* reported attempts from Aznar’s own party to frame his words from a slightly different perspective:

**Excerpt 3** (Remírez de Ganuza (2006), writing for *El Mundo*)

[f]uentes próximas a Aznar aseguraron … que el PSOE «tergiversa» la entrevista. Precisaron que Aznar presentó en Londres el informe de FAES que aboga por la ampliación de la OTAN a Australia, Japón e Israel. A la pregunta de si, en ese futurible, la OTAN podría «intervenir» (no «bombardear») en el Líbano, Aznar dijo que sí, «si fuera necesario» y si así lo decidieran los estados miembros.

[sources close to Aznar claimed … that PSOE is ‘purposefully mis-interpreting’ the interview. They added that Aznar had travelled to London to present a report by FAES [a conservative think-tank directed by Aznar] advocating the enlargement of NATO to incorporate Australia, Japan and Israel. When asked whether, in a hypothetical future,

---

13 At the time of writing, “Spain’s Supreme Court is to rule whether the former prime minister, Jose Maria Aznar, can be prosecuted for the country’s involvement in the US-led invasion of Iraq” (Govan 2009).
NATO might ‘intervene’ in (not ‘bomb’) Lebanon, Aznar replied yes, ‘if it was necessary’ and member states decided so.\(^{14}\)

Despite the controversy surrounding Aznar’s words, the BBC interview was not broadcast by any public or private Spanish television channel. Short clips of the interview were shown in a number of news programmes by way of simulacra, i.e. visual back-up to the Spanish correspondents’ reports, with their voices superimposed on the original soundtrack. The lack of extended audiovisual coverage of the interview had implications which are worth spelling out in the context of this paper. English-speaking viewers situated within the space of global flows were presented with unmediated access to a televised event in which Aznar threw his weight behind the ‘War on Terror’ narrative and showcased his own achievements on the fight against terrorism, including on the domestic front. Moreover, members of the deterritorialized audience of *HARDtalk* also had an opportunity to see how Aznar repeatedly expressed his unreserved commitment to the neo-conservative doctrines circulating during the Bush years, despite being offered by the interviewer multiple (and not always subtle) prompts to qualify, tone down or reflect on the implications of his statements, as illustrated in Excerpt 2 above. Aznar’s decision not to distance himself from what, at the time, was already regarded as a widely contested narrative is so unambiguous that the BBC ended up ‘framing’ this televised event, noting that Aznar’s view “causes unease in some parts of Europe” and inviting viewers to consider whether he is “out of step with his own continent”.\(^{15}\)

As Excerpt 3 above demonstrates, even the former Prime Minister’s party (PP) found Aznar’s candour problematic.\(^{16}\) His views on both domestic and international matters could provide progressive collectivities in Spain with useful ammunition to continue fuelling the wider public narrative regarding the reasons which led to PP’s electoral defeat in March 2004. For Aznar’s detractors, however, the patchy journalistic coverage which the interview received in the Spanish printed media was insufficient to capitalize on this opportunity to lambast the former Prime Minister and, in so doing, reinforce their own narratives. The following subsection examines precisely how Aznar’s

---

\(^{14}\) Unless otherwise stated, the translations provided in these excerpts are my own.

\(^{15}\) The text presented in Excerpt 1 is both displayed on the page providing access to the streaming broadcast of the interview and also delivered by Stephen Sackur in the opening seconds of the programme (with the exception of the last sentence of the excerpt). Sackur is filmed in an unidentified outdoor location, with his gaze directed at the viewer; it is impossible to establish whether that segment was incorporated into the programme before or after the interview was conducted.

\(^{16}\) A number of former Cabinet members during Aznar’s presidency argued, for instance, that Aznar’s words had been ‘manipulated’ by the government. See, for instance, *20 Minutos* (2006).
interview was imported from the sphere of the global flow into the domain of geographical materiality by engaged individuals with a clear interventionist agenda. Given the unrivalled capacity of audiovisual media to resonate with public perceptions, this intervention sets out to disrupt the dynamics of global media circulation by turning the viewers’ attention away from the untranslated fragments of an audiovisual simulacrum onto a full translated message allowing for the audience’s critical engagement with its content.

4.2 Negotiating narrative affinity within spontaneous networks of engaged mediators

On 25 July 2006, amid the emerging political and media furore over Aznar’s interview, Spanish progressive journalist Ignacio Escolar posted an entry in his political blog escolar.net entitled ‘La Tercera Guerra Mundial de Aznar’ (Aznar’s Third World War).17 In this short entry, Escolar comments briefly on the HARDtalk interview broadcast the previous day, placing Aznar’s views on the future role of NATO in the broader context of his unequivocal alignment with Bush (as showcased by the picture chosen to illustrate the text). Between 25 July and 7 August 2006, a total of 182 comments would be posted by blog readers under this entry.

In the first 26 comments,18 posted in a period of approximately 6 hours after the publication of Escolar’s entry, Aznar is subjected to fierce criticism on a number of counts; some pertain to his record in office (including his unwavering support for Bush’s foreign policy), while others relate to his personal ‘flaws’ (e.g. megalomania, smugness and poor command of English). Overall, these posts are used by blog readers to (i) negotiate their narrative location relative to that of other members of this temporary online community;19 (ii) mutually reinforce their shared political affiliation against occasional challenges from Aznar’s supporters (e.g. comments #19, 25 and 26); and (iii) jointly construct the gravitational core of their emerging affinity space. In line with the principle of ‘mutual accountability’ that underpins interaction-based communicative encounters (Taylor and Cameron 1987), each contribution is

17 This entry is available at: http://www.escolar.net/MT/archives/2006/07/la_iii_guerra_m.html (last accessed 15 May 2009). Escolar is one of Spain’s most prominent and established bloggers, both in the fields of politics and independent music. Subjectivity and interactivity, as measured by the degree of user-generated content, are some of the key features that distinguish his (and most) blogs “from traditional media outlets” and provide the space “for driven, determined individuals [like Escolar] to establish a media presence of their own” (McNair 2006:122).

18 In referring to the readers’ comments, the discussion will use the numbering of entries as it appears online.

19 Although their transient narrative location is negotiated there and then, readers can also challenge or reinforce the narratives of future blog visitors, as comments remain accessible and searchable through the blog archives.
simultaneously context-shaped and context-renewing; interventions react to previous comments while determining the unfolding of the next ones.

In the initial stages of interaction under this blog entry, readers comment on the interview only on a ‘hear-say’ basis, that is as an item of information that they have only read about or heard in part (see, for instance, comment #12, where Nena shares the URL of the audio link to a soundbite of Aznar’s interview), and they focus almost exclusively on Aznar’s NATO-related responses. By the end of this initial stage, it is clear that an effective ‘architecture of intersubjectivity’ is in place within this blog-centred constituency; readers feel reassured that their collectively negotiated political affiliation is (almost) unanimously critical of Aznar and their contributions are designed accordingly. Comment #27, posted 7 hours after the publication of Escolar’s entry, is the first contribution by a blog reader showing evidence of actually having watched the interview – indeed, he even provides time cues for specific climatic moments. In contrast to most of the preceding posts, Valensiano (#27) chooses to draw the community’s attention to Aznar’s opinions on Spanish internal politics and opts to frame his account of the event in accordance with the prevalent narrative. Emphasis is thus placed on the interviewer’s ‘shocking disbelief’ at Aznar’s views and the former Primer Minister’s disingenuousness showing through his ‘body language’. Valensiano’s mocking summary, which resonates deeply with other readers, is swiftly followed by a request for information on how to access the interview (#28) and the circulation of the relevant URL (#29). More importantly, it succeeds in turning the domestic implications of Aznar’s responses into the object of discussion throughout the remainder of this communicative encounter.

Only 45 minutes after expressing an initial interest in the programme (#28), Gong Duruo appears to have watched the interview. His first comment (#31) draws on the same framing strategies as Valensiano’s earlier one. It delivers an overtly subjective assessment (‘the interview is hard to believe’), disambiguates the interviewer’s perception of Aznar’s words (‘the interviewer cannot believe his ears’) and articulates his constituency’s likely reaction (‘I would also find it difficult to believe it if this fellow had not been my Prime Minister for 8 years’). However, Gong Duruo is called to play a focal role in displacing the simulacrum out of the space of global flows into the ‘here and now’ of this politically engaged Spanish-speaking community. Five hours after posting his first comment, Gong Duruo is back online and ready to engage in a more detailed mediation of the interview. His first comment (#40), which concentrates on the first adjacency pair (question and answer) of the interview, is reproduced in Excerpt 4 as it offers a good illustration of his approach to mediation:

---

20 Taylor and Cameron (1987:103) define this term as “the means by which individuals participating in the same interaction can reach a shared interpretation of its constituent activities and of the rules to which they are designed to conform”.

---
Excerpt 4 (Gong Duruo’s comment #40) 21

#40. Publicado por gong duruo - Julio 25, 2006 10:13 PM.

la entrevista ésta es para enmarcarla y regalarla en bodas:
Primera pregunta:
PERIODISTA: “Jose María Aznar, welcome to Hard Talk. I would like to quote to you your own words from a big speach [sic] you made in march of this year, you said ‘we are at war, terrorists must be defeated, no other policy exists’ ... those words could have been spoken by George Bush, couldn’t they?

ANSAR: [traduzco tan literal como puedo]: “Ha Ha ... Well, George Bush is a very good friend for me, no? But I think that terrorists can be defeat, and that terrorists should be defeat, and during my life me fighting terrorists, at home, abroad, and errr I think err I have demostraid that terrorism can be defeat ... i don’t support the idea of contain?, apaseament, and errr surrender terrorism”.

Es decir, que el periodista abre la entrevista con una pulla no demasiado sutil (‘hablas como Bush, macho’), y el Ansar no lo pilla y además el muy lelo presume de ser muy buen amigo del Emperador ... después de algo así, ¿a quién puede sorprenderle que asegure que él ‘ha demostrado que el terrorismo puede ser derrotado’? ¿dónde? ¿cuándo? ¿cómo?

#40. Published by gong duruo - July 25, 2006 10:13 PM.

this interview should be framed and handed out at weddings:

First question:
JOURNALIST: “Jose María Aznar, welcome to Hard Talk. I would like to quote to you your own words from a big speach [sic] you made in march of this year, you said ‘we are at war, terrorists must be defeated, no other policy exists’ ... those words could have been spoken by George Bush, couldn’t they?

ANSAR: [I am translating as literally as I can]: “Ha Ha ... Well, George Bush is a very good friend for me, no? But I think that terrorists can be defeat, and that terrorists should be defeat, and during my life me fighting terrorists, at home, abroad, and errr I think err I have

21 Available at: http://www.escolar.net/MT/archives/2006/07/la_iii_guerra_m.html (last accessed 15 May 2009). This is a literal reproduction of the text available online, complete with spelling mistakes and other editing infelicities.
Luis Pérez González

demonstrated that terrorism can be defeated ... I don’t support the idea of contain?, apasement, and eerrr surrender terrorism”.

In sum, the journalist begins with a not very subtle jibe (‘you speak like Bush, mate’), and Ánsar does not get it; he is so thick that he boasts being a very good friend of the Emperor ... after this, who can be surprised to hear him [Aznar] claim that ‘he has demonstrated that terrorism can be defeated’? where? when? how?

In this first mediating move, Gong Duruo opts to leave the question and answer untranslated. His understanding of what ‘translation’ involves becomes apparent in the transcription of Aznar’s reply (‘I am translating as literally as I can’): ensuring that Aznar’s lack of fluency in English becomes evident, mainly through conspicuously wrong spellings, even to readers with a basic knowledge of English. Framing devices are present throughout, whether in the form of subtle winks to anti-aznaristas22 or a suggested interpretation of what, in Gong Duruo’s mind, was the illocutionary force behind Sackur’s question.

From this point onwards, Gong Duruo’s mediation becomes more selective, focusing only on key (and increasingly shorter) contributions, by combining either (i) personal narration and translation of individual sentences (e.g. #40); or (ii) personal narration and transcription of English sentences (e.g. #46). Other instances of mediation on Gong Duruo’s part include comments #47, 54, 56, 59, 61 and 63. However, it is comments #48-49 that convey the climatic moment of the interview. Perhaps assuming that his mediation of this exchange will be subjected to close scrutiny, Gong Duruo opts for a more ‘transparent’ approach involving the juxtaposition of English transcriptions and Spanish translations as well as the use of square brackets to identify other elements of intervention on his part (e.g. the description of Aznar’s facial expression as angry and body language as nervous or fidgety):

Excerpt 5 (Gong Duruo’s comment #49)

ANSAR: [cara de cabreo, moviéndose en la silla]:

“No. This isn’t true. The circumstances of march 11th attack in Madrid, that’s created special circumstances in my country, and the opposition,

22 Take, for instance, the spelling of the former Spanish Prime Minister’s surname as ‘Ánsar’, a parody on Bush’s pronunciation when referring to Aznar during their joint press-conferences over the years. Opting for ‘Ansar’ is thus an affiliation-enhancing strategy; it indirectly lends support to attempts by Aznar’s detractors to present the relationship between both leaders in terms of dominance-submission rather than equality.
the current government, take advantage in this moment to declare guilty of this attack the government, not the terrorists. It’s the first time in history that it ‘occurs’?"

[No, eso no es verdad. Las circunstancias del 11M en Madrid, han creado circunstancias especiales en mi país, y la oposición, el actual gobierno, se ha aprovechado para declarar culpable del ataque al gobierno, no a los terroristas. Es la primera vez en la historia que pasa esto (?)]

As suggested earlier, Gong Duruo recognizes the need to articulate some of what is being communicated by Aznar and Sackur through non-verbal meaning-making modes – notably paralinguistic features and body language. As illustrated above, he often takes advantage of these opportunities for intersemiotic mediation to boost narrative affinity among members of the blog-based community by accentuating the domestic resonance of the message circulating in the sphere of global flows (e.g. #46: ‘Ánsar le contesta en un tono ridiculamente condescendiente, con esa falsa risita suya que tan bien conocemos por aquí’ – Ánsar replies in a stupidly patronizing tone, with that forced laugh of his that we know so well over here). Weaving the different strands of meaning into his posts proves difficult, however, and Gong Duruo becomes increasingly aware that his text-restricted mediation detracts from the potential impact that the audiovisual text may have on progressive collectivities in Spain – a point which is also made by other readers in #77 and 81. Regretting not having the technical expertise required to appropriate the audiovisual simulacrum and make it available to the target collectivities in Spain – a point which is also made by other readers in #77 and 81. Regretting not having the technical expertise required to appropriate the audiovisual simulacrum and make it available to the target collectivities in Spain – a point which is also made by other readers in #77 and 81. Regretting not having the technical expertise required to appropriate the audiovisual simulacrum and make it available to the target collectivities in Spain – a point which is also made by other readers in #77 and 81. Regretting not having the technical expertise required to appropriate the audiovisual simulacrum and make it available to the target collectivities in Spain – a point which is also made by other readers in #77 and 81. Regretting not having the technical expertise required to appropriate the audiovisual simulacrum and make it available to the target collectivities in Spain – a point which is also made by other readers in #77 and 81. Regretting not having the technical expertise required to appropriate the audiovisual simulacrum and make it available to the target collectivities in Spain – a point which is also made by other readers in #77 and 81. Regretting not having the technical expertise required to appropriate the audiovisual simulacrum and make it available to the target collectivities in Spain – a point which is also made by other readers in #77 and 81. Regretting not having the technical expertise required to appropriate the audiovisual simulacrum and make it available to the target collectivities in Spain – a point which is also made by other readers in #77 and 81. Regretting not having the technical expertise required to appropriate the audiovisual simulacrum and make it available to the target collectivities in Spain – a point which is also made by other readers in #77 and 81. Regretting not having the technical expertise required to appropriate the audiovisual simulacrum and make it available to the target collectivities in Spain – a point which is also made by other readers in #77 and 81. Regretting not having the technical expertise required to appropriate the audiovisual simulacrum and make it available to the target collectivities in Spain – a point which is also made by other readers in #77 and 81. Regretting not having the technical expertise required to appropriate the audiovisual simulacrum and make it available to the target collectivities in Spain – a point which is also made by other readers in #77 and 81. Regretting not having the technical expertise required to appropriate the audiovisual simulacrum and make it available to the target collectivities in Spain – a point which is also made by other readers in #77 and 81. Regretting not having the technical expertise required to appropriate the audiovisual simulacrum and make it available to the target collectivities in Spain – a point which is also made by other readers in #77 and 81. Regretting not having the technical expertise required to appropriate the audiovisual simulacrum and make it available to the target collectivities in Spain – a point which is also made by other readers in #77 and 81. Regretting not having the technical expertise required to appropriate the audiovisual simulacrum and make it available to the target collectivities in Spain – a point which is also made by other readers in #77 and 81. As their conversation unfolds, decisions are made on how to share the video files to undertake the subtitling work, as well as on the most suitable format and platform for the distribution of the subtitled version. On 27 July, Piezas draws Gong Duruo’s attention to a well-known subtitling freeware application (#155) and announces the availability of the

23 It is worth noting that, while carrying out the translation/narration of the interview, Gong Duruo refuses to confront the two blog readers who occasionally publish posts in support of Aznar. It is not until his mediation is completed that he acknowledges these occasional challenges and responds to them a number of times before signing off (11.15 pm, #90).

24 Although this is not explicitly signalled in the blog posts, their messages suggest that they have interacted in the past.
‘raw’ files on a popular video website (#156). On 7 August, Piezas announces the availability of the Spanish subtitled version of the HARDtalk interview online (#176), together with the list of 3 participants in the project and the nature of their contribution. In their follow-up posts, Andaqueno (credited as the translator) confesses his lack of translation experience (#177), while Gong Duruo expresses his interest in undertaking further subtitling projects, preferably based on other ‘Ánsar shows’.

On the same day of Piezas’ announcement, Escolar published a new entry on his blog entitled ‘Bombas de la OTAN contra Hizbollá’ (NATO bombs against Hezbollah). Escolar’s entry showcases the subtitled version of the interview produced by his blog readers, whose work is duly acknowledged, complete with an embedded, ready-to-play screenshot of the version available online. Cross-links to previous entries of his blog on this same topic as well as to the website of one of the mediator-readers illustrate the interconnectivity which characterizes blog-based online journalism (McNair 2006:119-25).

In the long list of comments published under this entry, there is extensive praise for the translators, as well as multiple requests for access to alternative formats of the subtitled programme. The community soon moves on to discuss the growing problems experienced by individual members in accessing the subtitled interview, as this is successively deleted from a number of video-broadcasting platforms due to copyright claims by the BBC. At the time of writing, this subtitled version of the HARDtalk interview can only be accessed through a lesser-known video hosting service website.

4.3 Intersecting narratives and the redefinition of collective identities

The process leading to the subtitling of the HARDtalk interview reflects the dynamics of the decentralized global ‘infosphere’ brought about by the shift

---

25 The organization of the workflow in this project adheres to standard practices among networks of audiovisual mediators. For a detailed account of the footage appropriation and role distribution processes operating within stable networks of anime fansubbers, see Pérez-González (2006b).


27 Within Piezas’ website, a dedicated page provided access to the English transcript, the Spanish translation, subtitles file, embedded screenshots of the subtitled interview and a portable version of the original video file. See http://piezas.bandaancha.st/aznar.html (last accessed 15 May 2009).

28 Gambier (2006) and Pérez-González (2006b) have drawn attention to the increasingly complex relationship between copyright holders and distributors in the era of digitization in the contexts of professional audiovisual translation and amateur audiovisual translation, respectively.

from linear models of communication (control paradigm) to non-linear ones (chaos paradigm). As McNair (2006:xviii) notes,

[i]n the context of globalised news culture, to talk about chaos is to argue that the journalistic environment, far from being an instrument or apparatus of social control by a dominant elite, has become more and more like the weather and the oceans in the age of global warning – turbulent, unpredictable, extreme. Like storm fronts, journalistic information flows around the world in globally connected streams of real-life data, forming stories which become news and then descend through the networked nodes of the world wide web to impact on national public spheres.

In the case of Aznar’s interview, the descent from the global to the national is the result of the interventionist agenda of a collectivity of progressive individuals who, instead of letting this message blow itself out in the sphere of the global flows, turn it into news for a specific target audience. The starting point in this process consists in the mobilization of certain aspects of their individual identities, whereby they join the community of readers of a progressive political blog. The publication of a news item that resonates strongly with their own personal narratives leads them to engage in interaction with fellow blog readers and, in doing so, establish the scope and depth of the collectivity as an affinity space. By ongoingly mobilizing additional aspects of their identity, not least their linguistic and technological mediation skills, a network of activists is spontaneously created. Working under a clearly interventionist agenda, this grouping appropriates an audiovisual simulacrum and circulates the mediated product in an attempt to promote their shared set of narratives vis-à-vis the public narratives that circulate in their environment.

To a large extent the gravitational core of this site of engaged mediation is defined by the interface between a global and a local narrative (‘War on Terror’ and ‘Aznar as a leader of international stature’, respectively), both of which have been highly contested in Spanish progressive circles over a number of years. The relative weighting of each of the constituencies interacting within this site of engagement is, however, difficult to establish. In contrast to organized networks of activist mediators, some of which have explicitly articulated their agenda and vision (Baker 2009), spontaneously generated networks of activist translators operate on the basis of ongoingly negotiated appraisals of mutual affinity spaces. As part of these constant negotiations to gauge the strength of collective affinity on other discursive practices and perceptions, it becomes possible for spontaneous networks of activists to differentiate between nuclear and intersecting narratives. In the case study at hand, the nuclear narratives gravitate near the narrative interface which defines the core of the site of mediation, in that they are subscribed to by a significant majority of members whose engagement with the socio-political order relies on
the mobilization of similar aspects of their identity. Intersecting narratives, on the other hand, are subscribed to by specific individuals or subgroups within the broader community whose social affiliations involve the mobilization of an additional set of aspects to their identities. Given the fluid nature of social identities, intersecting narratives enable individuals to step out of their current site of activism in search of other sites where they are positioned closer to the gravitational core.

A survey of the reactions to the subtitled version of the HARDtalk interview, as illustrated by readers’ comments on the second entry of Escolar’s blog, reveals signs of narrative entropy inflecting the readers’ identities and affiliations. Some members (e.g. #20) appear to be drawn to the community by purely instrumental considerations, i.e. the possibility of accessing and understanding an interview that would otherwise have been beyond their reach. For others (e.g. #30, 60, 64, 85) – convinced that “the Spanish still have reason to cower, as they did in the years of Franco, in the face of the superior civilisations of the north” (Carlin 2004) – when it comes to standards in political life and journalism, the subtitled interview offers the opportunity to appreciate the adversarial interviewing style that characterizes British and American media. Finally, other members opt to introduce ramifications of the core narrative interface into tangential issues like the need to marginalize Israel (e.g. #76) or the need to redefine the place of progressive political parties after the fall of communism. But while the arborization of core narratives through identity inflection can detract from the cohesion of any given community, it also contributes to the propagation of nuclear narratives to other areas of the blogosphere gravitating around similar narrative locations. Migeru, for instance, ‘exports’ the mediated interview onto a blog created to foster debate ‘on politics and public life from a left-of-centre and pro-European-integration perspective’, as a follow-up to a post he had sent earlier on the changing role of NATO.30

5. Concluding remarks

This paper has attempted to illustrate how translation is increasingly being appropriated by politically engaged individuals to respond effectively to the socio-economic structures that sustain global capitalism by intervening in the reception of its cultural manifestations. Unlike the networks of activist translators which are starting to come under scrutiny within translation studies, the members of the mediating collectivity studied in this article have no formal training in translation, lack a formal organizational structure or manifesto and rely heavily on information technologies for the purposes of constructing

30 Available at: http://www.eurotrib.com/comments/2006/8/7/161752/7603/5 (last accessed on 15 May 2009).
themselves as a narrative community. While strengthening the case for the investigation of collectivities of activist translators, the existence of fluid networks of mediation such as the one responsible for the subtitled version of the HARDtalk interview problematizes the very notion of activist translation. To what extent can such fluid groupings be characterized in structural terms? How can the term ‘translator’ be applied to designate individuals without training in translation, regardless of their status as professionals or amateurs at any given time?

Specialists on participatory culture propose the label ‘ad-hocracies’ for these configurations of individuals “brought together because their diverse skills and knowledge are needed to confront a specific challenge and then dispersed onto different clusters … when new needs arise” (Jenkins et al. 2006:41), and this appears to be a useful way to address the taxonomic issues at hand. Fluid networks of engaged mediators like the ones studied in this paper would thus constitute ad-hocracies of activist translators, i.e. groups of like-minded individuals gathering online and capitalizing on the potential of networked communication to exploit their ‘collective intelligence’ (Levy 2000) regardless of their professional affiliation. The notion of collective intelligence is particularly important in the study of ad-hocracies of activist translators, in view of the differences between the collectivities involved in the translation of written texts (Baker 2009) and those responsible for the mediation of audiovisual content. Whereas the former typically consist of members producing new language versions of written texts, the latter also comprise individuals who specialize in the appropriation and distribution stages of the mediation process.

Although I argued above that only a generative conceptualization of translation activism can help to theorize the genealogy of ad hoc activist networks, it should also be noted that the mediation of audiovisual texts – a recurrent object of mediation for such ad-hocracies – has not so far featured prominently in the agenda of this scholarly strand. If, as predicted by Tymoczko, the proliferation of audiovisual texts is bound to bring about “yet another expansion of the concept of translation, necessitating the retheorization of various aspects of the entire field of translation studies” (2005:1090), it is important to ensure that any potentially idiosyncratic feature of activist subtitling is adequately theorized at this incipient stage in the development of translation activism and of this new scholarly strand.

References


