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## **'Subtitling's a carnival': New practices in cyberspace** **Jorge Díaz Cintas, University College London**

### **ABSTRACT**

In recent years, scholarly research in audiovisual translation in general, and subtitling in particular, has moved beyond the analysis of linguistic minutiae to embrace wider socio-cultural concerns, thus highlighting its societal significance and establishing closer links with film and media studies. In this article I set to explore the social significance of some of the new forms of subtitling that have surged in the age of digital media, thanks to the opportunities offered by the affordabilities and democratisation of technology. Drawing primarily on Bakhtin's theory of carnival, the discussion centres on how participatory subtitling activities warrant the pursuit of individual freedom and contribute to the breakdown of hegemony. The way in which these novel subtitling practices give voice to certain collectives whilst also challenging traditional information dissemination mechanisms is also probed.

### **KEYWORDS**

Subtitling, cybersubtitling, fansubbing, guerrilla subtitles, fakesubs, Bakhtin's theory of carnival.

### **1. Introduction**

The rapid development of communication technologies together with the pervasiveness of the internet and the ease with which audiovisual materials circulate in the ether have catapulted the practice of subtitling, both interlingual and intralingual, to the centre stage of the digital world. The increasing global appetite for the linguistic and cultural exchange of multimodal and multimedia texts has transformed subtitling into a familiar and recurrent event for the masses, starring frequently in television series, films, reality shows, political broadcasts, documentaries and the like. As the global demand for audiovisual content skyrockets, so does the requirement for video localisation so that the material can travel across linguistic divides. From a commercial perspective, as highlighted by Estopace (2017: online), "the language services industry has found a market sweet spot in audiovisual translation following two years of unprecedented growth in digital video consumption," and now that subtitling and dubbing have shifted up a gear, the perception is that the industry is facing a real 'talent crunch' as not enough professionals are available to do the work, especially in some languages. It is this unremitting presence of subtitling on screens that has gained it a reputation among the audiences and the various stakeholders in the industry as a critical component of audiovisual media distribution and popular culture, and has also granted it greater visibility and importance in scholarship.

In addition to its commercial value as a smooth operator that allows large media conglomerates to function successfully on a global scale, subtitling

is also being appropriated by a growing number of collectives that are using it as a key tool both for recreational purposes as well as for their campaigns of cultural and political resistance against the establishment and in favour of militant causes. In an epoch of convergence culture (Jenkins 2006), in which old and new media patterns collide and the role of producers, distributors and consumers interact in unpredictable ways, blending on occasions in the figure of the prosumer, the flow and repurposing of audiovisual content across different media platforms, social networks and national borders has become common currency.

The affordabilities of information and communications technologies and their alleged democratising power have been heralded as the main triggers for the revolution experienced in the traditional media status quo. At the base of these changes is the arrival of the dynamic Web 2.0 and the conspicuousness of online environments, with their emphasis on users by promoting interoperability, easing usability, and facilitating the production of user-generated content thanks to the availability of open source software. In the particular case of audiovisual translation (AVT), and especially subtitling, this umbilical relationship with technology has had a considerable impact on the professional practice and the development and adaptation of existing forms of AVT (Díaz Cintas 2015). With the augmented power of computers and the advent of digital technology, not only is it much simpler to work with images and sound, but cheap and free video editing suites along with specialist subtitling programs and subtitling/dubbing cloud-based platforms have now become readily available to anyone.

Yet, such developments also hinge on individuals' active participation, which contrasts sharply with the more traditional notion of passive spectatorship prevalent before the digital revolution. This paradigm shift was already being predicted in the mid-1990s, when Negroponte (1995) offered a visionary insight into the way in which the rise of technology was helping to draw a sharp contrast between passive old media and interactive new media; a trend that has been concretised in the coinage of concepts like 'produsage' (Bruns 2006), a portmanteau of the words 'production' and 'usage' to refer to the type of user-led content creation that takes place primarily in online environments.

In parallel to the traditional circulation of audiovisual media dependent on corporate strategies, technology has also facilitated decentralisation and the activation of new ways of distribution that rely primarily on tactics of grassroots appropriation and raise numerous issues on the controversial relationship between (mis)appropriation of intellectual property and freedom of expression (Katyal 2006). The dramatic improvement of high-speed broadband has contributed significantly to the free flow over the internet of material that previously was too heavy to travel, such as audiovisual productions. The once predominantly linear, one-to-many

distribution model has now been superseded by the interactive, many-to-many communication approach. In these new mediated practices, audiovisual material that was originally created with a particular purpose in mind is adopting different reincarnations at the point of reception after being remediated—oftentimes also manipulated in the process—and circulated through the many different channels and platforms available on the net. The intrinsic semiotic richness of audiovisual programmes, which allows for the conveying of information in complex ways through their composite audio and visual layers, makes them very attractive to consumers and a prime object for this type of media bricolage; a practice understood as “the creation of objects with materials to hand, re-using existing artefacts and incorporating bits and pieces” (Hartley 2002: 22).

The incorporation of intralingual or interlingual subtitles or the substitution of the original dialogue contained in the soundtrack with new linguistic exchanges, in the same or a different language, are some of the strategies that permit this kind of transfiguration. As it will be too ambitious to fully document all of the challenges that are taking place these days, for the purposes of this article the discussion will be limited to the specific case of subtitling on the web, i.e. cybersubtitling, its many instantiations, the way in which it is impacting the distribution of popular culture and some of the traits that define the new relationship between audiovisual producers, content and audiences. Particular emphasis is placed on the increasingly prominent role played by subtitling in popular culture and the myriad of new subtitling types emerging in the mediascape. To shed light on the topic, the Bakhtinian theory of carnival is used as the main theoretical framework.

## **2. Popular culture and subtitling**

Given the difficulty of defining ‘popular culture,’ as it “is an indistinct term whose edges blur into imprecision” (Browne 2006: 15), it is not surprising that definitions abound from different perspectives. According to Storey (2015: 5), one obvious starting point to define popular culture is to state that it “is simply culture that is widely favoured or well liked by many people [and] is left over after we have decided what is high culture”. At this point, it should be noted that folk culture, one of the critical components of Bakhtin’s theory of carnival, shares strong similarities with popular culture. Based on Storey’s definition, it can be said that both of them are participated in and favoured by the majority of people. Therefore, like folk culture, popular culture is also “a culture of the people for the people” (2006: 9). Browne (2006) divides culture into four categories—elite, popular, mass and folk—and argues that rigid distinctions between them are impossible, thus arriving at the conclusion that popular culture embraces all types except elite culture. Furthermore, he defines it as encapsulating “all those elements of life which are not narrowly intellectual or creatively elitist and which are generally though

not necessarily disseminated through the mass media" (2006: 21). From an audiovisual perspective, it is generally this type of popular culture production (anime, television series, films, documentaries, etc.) that tends to make the rounds on the internet accompanied by subtitles.

As already mentioned, the core definition of popular culture is 'of and for the people', which, according to Hermes (2005), equips it with citizenship qualities. While formerly,

the nation might have been thought to have primarily organized our sense of belonging, our rights, and our duties (civic and political citizenship, and—at a more practical level—social citizenship), it is now facing serious competition from international media conglomerates as well as from fan cultures [...] that invite us into new types of collectivities that stretch far beyond national borders and produce small self-enclosed enclaves within the nation (2005: 1).

In today's internet-mediated society, thanks to the omnipresence and omnipotence of audiovisual programmes, viewers' allegiances and feelings of belonging often relate more easily and directly to (global) popular culture than to issues of national or local domain. As argued by Hermes (2005: 3), "[e]ven if conditions are set for entrance—a fee, purchase price, authentic interest, or the right subcultural credentials—they often make participation all the more attractive." In the case of the unregulated world wide web, participation is actually bolstered as such financial 'conditions for entrance' are usually circumvented and many of the audiovisual programmes are freely available on the net. In countries where coercive official rules and regulations hinder the commercial importation of foreign audiovisual materials, thus increasing the difficulty of gaining access to overseas films or television series, the government's intent may inadvertently have the opposite effect by whetting people's appetite for consuming those very same programmes and pushing viewers to find alternative ways to watch them.

An attractive feature of popular culture is that it provides a sense of belonging through becoming involved either in a passive way, by simply consuming some of the programmes readily available (e.g. watching a television series with free subtitles), or in an active manner, by engaging with some of the virtual communities and producing some of the material, like the subtitles for the said television series or a new soundtrack with different dialogue exchanges. In this respect, fansub groups generate and inculcate a sense of community by allowing fans to voluntarily work together to produce subtitles for foreign audiovisual productions with the aim of sharing and spreading those materials among like-minded people through the cyberspace. Though the ultimate motive is hard to ascertain, most members participate in these activities for purely emotional reasons, such as personal interest or the need to feel appreciated.

## **2.1 Popular culture and information dissemination mechanisms**

Digital media has greatly influenced, and changed, the way in which information and entertainment are disseminated, converting mass media—press, television, and internet—into the key tool in the spread of popular culture. In this respect, and according to McQuail (1987: 16), mass communication “can be seen as one of several society-wide communication processes, at the apex of a pyramidal distribution of other communication networks” and as “a network that connects very many receivers to one source, while new media technologies usually provide interactive connections.” In recent decades, technological development has enlarged the scope of mass media from printing to digital systems, lowering the threshold for accessing information and entertainment. In the past, understanding printed information required a high literacy level, which was normally the privilege of the elite classes, whereas these days people can easily and quickly understand information transmitted through digital audiovisual productions. In addition, digital media also allows almost everyone to access and produce content at a very low cost and eliminates elite gatekeepers such as agents, editors, distributors and exhibitors.

The development of digital technology has empowered mass media by making it a more interactive experience, thus giving individuals the opportunity of being not only information receivers, but also information sources. The rise of fandom culture and activists collectives further promotes such interactive models for fans and activists to enjoy a sense of fulfilment and achievement by sharing and spreading their knowledge and socio-political agendas.

In the specific case of subtitling, traditional roles and tasks have changed quite dramatically as technical advances have had an immediate impact both on the subtitling practice from the practitioner’s perspective, and also on the perception of subtitling that we have as spectators and consumers. In particular, the low threshold for creating subtitles, thanks to the prompt availability of subtitling software programs, has contributed to the birth of a new breed of practitioners, the so called fansubbers or amateur subtitlers, who voluntarily translate the audiovisual programmes in which they are interested. In this mercurial mediascape, the timespan between the production and release of audiovisual footage has been greatly shortened and the options for accessing these productions have been greatly diversified. Traditional commercial media vehicles like cinema and television now share the media space with DVDs, Blu-rays and, first and foremost, the internet, where services like video on demand (VoD), streaming and over-the-top (OTT) distribution are the new consumer trends.

This complex situation has unavoidably led to new issues, such as the sharp discrepancy between official subtitling conventions and those applied by some internet communities, and an increased speed at which commercial subtitles are being generated. For instance, in a direct response to the appealing fast turnaround of subtitles created by fansubbers, large corporations like Netflix have experimented with their subtitling workflows and managed to release each episode of their talk show *Chelsea* translated into 20 languages to an audience in over 190 countries simultaneously, less than 34 hours after each taping (Roettgers 2016).

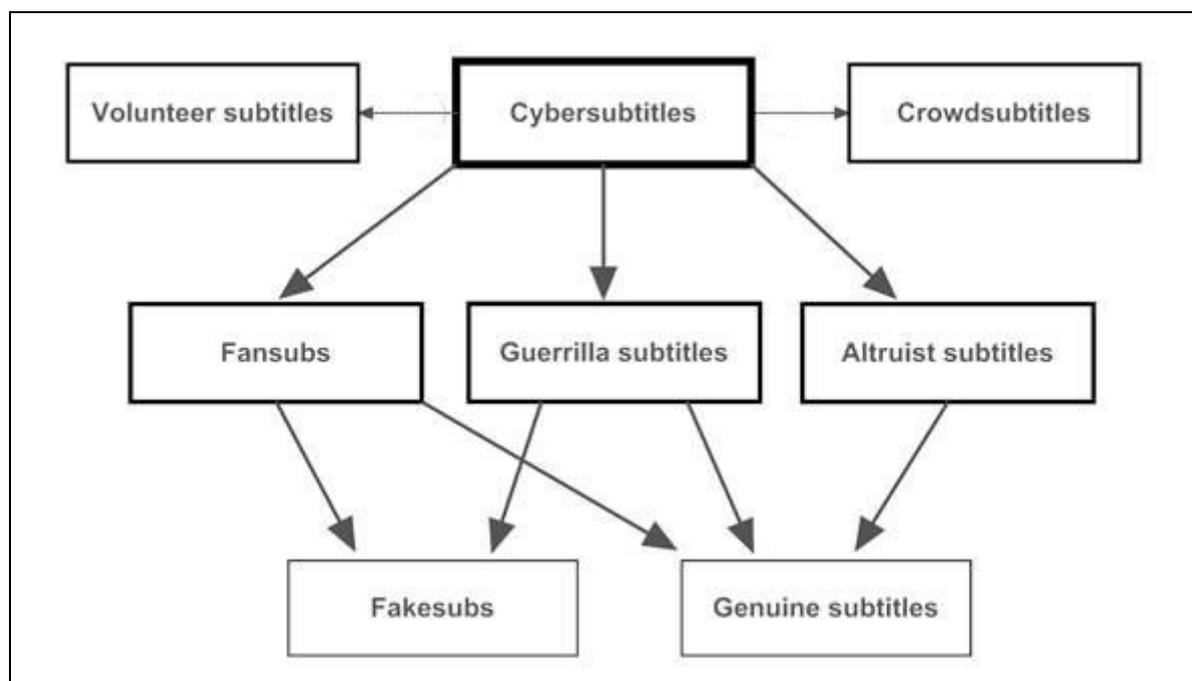
## 2.2. Myriad of subtitles

The transition from the static to the dynamic internet, the so-called web 2.0, allowed an influx in the production and distribution of material produced by users in attempts to create space for themselves in which to express their ideas, their likes and dislikes. Along with the multiplication of videos, the offer of subtitles on the net, whether solicited in the form of crowdsubtitling, or unsolicited, has also boomed in recent decades. The boundaries among the many types of subtitles are not always clear cut, making their classification a terminological conundrum.

From the point of view of the people participating in these practices, 'amateur subtitles' is a sufficiently wide concept that could encapsulate all the various kinds in existence, were it not for the fact that some of these subtitles are also produced by professional subtitlers. 'Volunteer subtitles' is a fit candidate to be used as an umbrella term to refer to this reality; yet, some of the subtitles circulating in cyberspace are actually commissioned by platforms like TED ([www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com)), Mosireen (<http://mosireen.org>) or Viki ([www.viki.com](http://www.viki.com)), thus becoming 'crowds subtitles.'

A productive concept floated by Dwyer (2017: 3) is that of *errancy* to refer to "improper instances of dubbing and subtitling [that] exemplify emerging, participatory modes of cultural engagement". In these pages, however, I would like to propose a term that, in my opinion, subsumes the many varieties of subtitles encountered on the net in a more transparent way: 'cybersubtitles.' These can be purposely requested by some collectives, i.e. crowdsourced, or generated on a voluntary basis, and the individuals behind their production can be either amateurs or professionals. In the case of 'crowds subtitles,' participants tend to work with templates containing the master subtitles, normally in the source language, and concentrate on the linguistic dimension. Within the core category of cybersubtitles, the following three main types of subtitles can be found: (1) 'fansubs,' (2) 'guerrilla subtitles' and (3) 'altruist subtitles.' All three categories can be portrayed as genuine subtitles or bogus subtitles, in which case they become 'fakesubs.' Figure 1 below offers a

synoptic view of the different subtitles:



**Figure 1. Subtitling activity on the cyberspace**

Of the various new types that have cropped up on the internet, ‘fansubs,’ short for fan-subtitles, are perhaps the ‘more traditional’ and best known, with a substantial body of scholarly work already written on this phenomenon (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006; Pérez González 2007; Massidda 2015). Deriving from the word ‘fanatic,’ the term ‘fan’ refers to someone with an interest in, or enthusiasm for, a particular activity (Costello and Moore 2007). In this sense, fans act outside the common expectations for a member of the audience and differentiate themselves from typical consumers by their excessive approach to consumption. As highlighted by Bielby *et al.* (1999: 35), to be a fan “is to participate in a range of activities that extend beyond the private act of viewing and reflects an enhanced emotional involvement with a television narrative.” In the case of subtitling, fansub groups refer to fan communities that voluntarily produce and freely distribute subtitles via the internet as opposed to an officially licensed translation done by professionals (Díaz Cintas 2005: 16), in a process originally instigated ‘by fans for fans,’ although in recent years it has metamorphosed and can be better defined as ‘by fans for all.’ Emulating commercial firms, these communities take it upon themselves to carry out all the technical and linguistic activities proper of the subtitling process and tend to concentrate on the translation of entertainment programmes for recreational purposes.

‘Guerrilla subtitles’ is a term coined by Dwyer (2017: 110) to refer to “both fan and non-fan modes of pirate translation,” understood as a “practice that rebels against or resists legal media and translation

frameworks" (2017: 123). In her conceptualisation, these are the type of subtitles that can be found in illegal DVDs, often highly dysfunctional and riddled with typos and mistakes, but they can also serve to subvert media regulation and to circumvent censorship in authoritarian political regimes. For the classification here proposed, I would like to borrow the term with the latter function, i.e. to refer to subtitles that are produced by individuals or collectives highly engaged in political causes, with the objective of combating censorship and conformity by spreading certain narratives that counter-argue the truth reported by the powerful mass media. As spaces of re-narration, as a form of interventionism and resistance, they are synonym to 'activist subtitles.' Groups like AJ+ ([www.ajplus.net](http://www.ajplus.net)), J'ai un doute (<https://jaiundoute.com>), Spanish (R)evolution (<https://spanishrevolution.wordpress.com>) and Hartos.org ([www.hartos.org](http://www.hartos.org)) are exemplary of what Fraser (1997: 81) knows as subaltern counterpublics, that is, "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs." The main objective of these guerrilla subtitles is to contest and challenge hegemonic practices in society.

Closely related, 'altruist subtitles' are a less militant, belligerent version of these initiatives. Usually commissioned, they are undertaken by individuals with a close affinity to the project on hand as in the case of Khan Academy ([www.khanacademy.org](http://www.khanacademy.org)), a platform containing hundreds of videos where, according to their homepage, "You can learn anything. For free. For everyone. Forever." Perhaps the best known of these projects is the abovementioned TED, which shares a similar educational ethos, as reflected in their logotype: "Ideas worth spreading." Launched in 2009, their subtitling project allows volunteers to subtitle TED Talks, thus enabling the inspiring ideas contained in them to crisscross languages and borders.

These three categories of subtitles are genuine when they adhere closely to the message and linguistic formulation of the original text. Yet, more recently, a new trend can be discerned particularly in fansubbing and guerrilla subtitling, where the subtitles that accompany the video unashamedly depart from the message being conveyed in the original dialogue. Technically well accomplished, the narrative presented in the subtitles is hyperbolically impossible, calling for the viewers' suspension of disbelief and engaging them affectively through the exploitation of humour. This practice is a clear instantiation of what in media and cultural studies is known as bricolage, i.e. "the remixing, reconstructing, and reusing of separate artifacts, actions, ideas, signs, symbols, and styles in order to create new insights or meanings" (Deuze 2006: 70). The numerous parodies of the German film *Der Untergang* [*Downfall*], directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel in 2004, are iconic of this type of practice

(Papadima and Kourdis 2015), or the video starring *El Risitas* [The Giggles], which has become a viral meme on the web (Parkinson 2015), thanks to its multiple subtitle reincarnations that indubitably betray the original message and frame the ensuing new narratives under a parodic light. These subtitles, that are usually distributed by social media and openly offer false information with the ultimate objective of entertaining the viewer, I would like to call 'fakesubs.' Their success in social media has propelled them to centre stage in more traditional broadcasting environments, as in the case of the BBC's *The Apprentice*, where viewers are encouraged to turn on the 'honest subtitles,' which bluntly jar with the dialogue heard in the soundtrack, "to find out what the finalists are really thinking" (BBC n.d.). In a similar vein, *Tu Cao* (see section 3.2.) is a popular Chinese subtitling practice that falls under this parodic category.

### **3. Bakhtin's theory of carnival and subtitling**

As discussed by Gardiner (1992: 28), the career of Soviet cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1885-1975) shows a significant shift "from an early interest in a purely textual form of dialogism [...] towards a preoccupation with the transgressive potentialities of a loosely-structured constellation of cultural practices, rituals and symbols designated as the 'carnavalesque'." In 1965, Bakhtin explored the concepts of 'carnival' and the 'carnavalesque' in a book later translated in English as *Rabelais and His World* in 1984, in which he deals with folk festivities of the carnival type, common throughout Europe as a central form of celebration. For Bakhtin (1984: 218), the carnivalesque is interpreted "not only as carnival per se in its limited form but also as the varied popular-festive life of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance." This carnivalesque sense of the world is structured around three main aspects: participants/collective, individual freedom and breakdown of hegemony. From these elements, Bakhtin's theory of carnival derives a universal spirit in which "all were considered equal during carnival" (Bakhtin 1984: 10) and are allowed to openly show their true selves without restriction or bias. Thanks to its universality, the theory of carnival has been applied to many arts and humanities subjects, such as linguistics, cultural studies, sociology and the like, without forgetting Translation Studies (Kumar 2015). In what follows, some of the main features of the theory of carnival are discussed in an attempt to provide insights into the practice of cybersubtitling.

#### **3.1. The participants and the collective**

Carnivals are typically held in public open areas such as town squares and marketplaces, thus permitting free and familiar contact among people who are usually divided by personal, physical and social barriers. According to Bakhtin (1984), as a gregarious event in which restrictions, inhibitions and rules which regulate everyday life are temporarily suspended, medieval carnivals managed to create alternative social

spaces, characterised by freedom, equality and the destabilisation of hierarchy in society. The celebration of carnival provides individuals with opportunities to get together in public spaces and act without restrictions imposed by authorities and official conventions. Bakhtin's suggestion that the festival creates a community is a very serviceable concept that easily finds its counterpart in the world of cybersubtitling and is reflected in the expansion of the participatory culture that enables people to work collaboratively.

The marketplace of the Bakhtinian carnival becomes today's internet, a space in the ether where netizens can act, mingle and socialise across the globe. The affordability of digital technology and the internet's promotion of interconnectedness among netizens has made possible the rise of new communities of practice and collective groups that share similar goals, rely largely on affinity and affection, and in our particular case share a common interest in the subtitling of audiovisual productions. The character of a festival, or the central features of the audiovisual programmes to be subtitled, define the nature of the community, who, as part of their civic engagement, decides to focus on anime, political documentaries or certain television series, to name but a few. This new virtual carnival exposit the celebration, spectacularisation and extravagance perpetrated through subtitling manoeuvring, made concrete in the instantiation of certain practices, norms and, on occasions, political agendas that ultimately seek the conditioning of the public mind.

In terms of participants, carnivals welcome everyone, regardless of their social status, age, gender, race or other characteristics and allow for the free and familiar interaction between all these individuals. In such environments, people who are normally separated in everyday life are given the opportunity to interact and freely express themselves as part of an affinity group. In the words of Robinson (2011: online): "The body is here figured not as the individual or 'bourgeois ego' but as a growing, constantly renewed collective which is exaggerated and immeasurable."

One of the defining traits of the numerous cybersubtitling groups is, indeed, the fact that they eliminate barriers among people, replacing them with a vision of mutual cooperation and equality as they are usually open to a mix of participants, irrespective of their socio-cultural and personal background, so long as they share common interests and work towards the same goals. As highlighted by Robinson (2011), carnival is not simply a deconstruction of the dominant culture, but an alternative way of living in its prefiguration of a future humanity constructed otherwise, as a utopia of freedom, which becomes a symbolic driving force in the particular case of the guerrilla subtitling.

Similarly to the masking that takes place in carnival, the majority of these individuals also hide their identities behind creative aliases, making

themselves untraceable in real life, no doubt because of the ethical issues derived from the infringement of copyrights, especially in the case of fansubbing. In the early years, foreign copyright holders gave tacit consent by turning a blind eye to fansub groups' violations because, at that time, their productions were unable to enter the foreign market and fansubbers could act as outriders and forerunners for large corporations. Now that fansub groups have whetted the audience's appetite for foreign programmes, the market is developing more feasible ways of achieving commercialisation and marketability, which in turn means that the social 'need' of fansub groups may not be viable for much longer in certain countries. The *laissez faire* attitude has changed quite radically and, in more recent years, fansubbers have been prosecuted for providing unauthorised subtitles for foreign movies and television shows in countries like Poland, Spain, the Netherlands and China, with some portals, like the Chinese YYeTs and Shooter (<http://assrt.net>), officially announcing the shutdown of their operations (Luo 2015). In 2017, a Swedish court found that the unauthorised distribution of subtitles, even if the audiovisual productions themselves are not made available, is a crime that infringes the copyright of the original creator and sentenced the founder of a fan-made subtitle site in Sweden, Undertexter ([www.undertexter.se](http://www.undertexter.se)), to probation and a fine. On appeal, the court found that the subtitles depended on the rights connected to the original work and, "while paraphrasing and parody might be allowed, pure translations are completely covered by the rights in the original and cannot be seen as new and independent works" (Andy 2018: online).

In this cyberworld, it is the community that takes precedence over the individual, who is frequently effaced and absorbed within the wider group. Such a development comes as no surprise in a translation practice characterised by the many people involved in the process: raw providers, translators, timers, typesetters, editors, proof-readers and encoders (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006). Nonetheless, despite individuals being subsumed into a collective body this is by no means a static collective order since it is continually in change and renewal, with most of these groups constantly searching for new recruits.

In the early years, anyone was welcome to join any of the numerous communities of fansubbers as long as they shared a common interest in subtitling and were willing to contribute their time for free, a custom still upheld by groups like the Portuguese Mundo do shoujo (<https://mundodoshoujo.fansubs.pt/recrutamento>) and the Romanian Anime4Fun ([www.anime4fun.ro](http://www.anime4fun.ro)). In today's savvier and more competitive cyberworld, the same prerequisites stand, although many groups have started to request would-be fansubbers to sit an entry test before they can be admitted into the group. The Italian Subsfactory ([www.subsfactory.it](http://www.subsfactory.it)) and Italiansubs ([www.italiansubs.net](http://www.italiansubs.net)), as well as the Chinese YYeTs (人人影视, [www.zimuzu.tv](http://www.zimuzu.tv)) and the French Dubu Fansub

(<https://dubufansub.fr>) are illustrative of this latest trend.

The sartorial exuberance of carnival is reflected in the way in which fansubbing collectives strengthen their singularity and visibility with the embosoming of spiffy logos, the phrasing of some magniloquent slogans, as in *Subsfactory, sottotitoli per passione* [Subsfactory, subtitles as a passion], and the construction of frolicsome websites that netizens can visit and consult.

### **3.2. Individual freedom and the breakdown of hegemony**

One of the more distinctive elements of carnival is the initiative to break down hegemony and, in this respect, Bakhtin's interpretation of carnival rests on the confrontation between two concepts: the official culture, which is represented by the authorities and the existing hierarchy, and is controlled by repression and prohibitions; and the folklore culture, which is characterised by the common people, utopian equality, jocular enjoyment and freedom. In this social constellation, carnivals are an important component of folklore culture because they allow the common people, who are typically confined by hierarchy, to break the usual taboos and conventions through sartorial metamorphoses as well as the use of abusive language and reckless laughter, and the subversion of traditional norms. In this way, human consciousness can be liberated from the dictates of official truth in a manner that encourages a "broader, deeper, more aware, complex, and radical popular consciousness" (Gardiner 1992: 31).

From a macro-level, this aspect of carnival can be easily mapped onto the world of cybersubtitling. Authorised media conglomerates and their channels can be regarded as the gatekeepers of official culture, while non-official bodies such as cybersubtitling communities can be seen as belonging to a folklore/popular culture, the existence of which challenges and breaks down the current media hegemony by its very presence. In China, for instance, the official offer of foreign films and television series lags behind the audience's demand because of foreign film importation restrictions and fixed quotas, screening regulations, and censorship controls imposed by the government. Screening policies in the country appear to block official channels from broadcasting a meaningful number of foreign audiovisual programmes, whether in cinemas or at home. The imbalance between supply and demand has led to the emergence of non-official portals that distribute foreign programmes via the internet and in which Chinese fansub groups play a leading and critical role, offering translations in the form of subtitles for an audience that otherwise would not be able to understand the foreign programmes. In this way, vast quantities of foreign films and television series are chosen, translated and introduced into the country every year by fansub communities, thus breaking down the hegemony of official channels traditionally in full

control of the dissemination of information and entertainment. Because the media environment is shaped by restrictive government policies, subtitling is arguably far more than a mere component of popular culture. Instead, in countries like China it has social significance for it contributes to challenging, reflecting and changing those dissemination mechanisms by opening up new virtual outlets. Indeed, the reason why some fansub communities have managed to expand so rapidly is because the audiences are not satisfied with their disadvantaged position in the current hegemonic information dissemination system, which is primarily shaped by official bodies.

An added dimension is the fact that the development of fansub groups has served as a stepping-stone for the subsequent commercial distribution and subtitling of foreign audiovisual programmes, by cultivating a generation-wide audience that enjoys watching foreign programmes in a regular fashion. As a result, the appetite and market for these new productions, particularly the online market, has expanded. According to the cultivation theory, and in the case of the television, there are enduring consequences to watching audiovisual programmes frequently, namely “the cultivation of stable, resistant, and widely shared assumptions, images, and conceptions reflecting the institutional characteristics and interests of the medium itself” (Gerbner *et al.* 1986: 38). It is reasonable to argue that watching online programmes frequently can cultivate people’s habits, assumptions and perceptions, which can thus explain the important role played by fansub groups in promoting an interest in watching foreign programmes online. In this way, fansub groups can be said to have (un)consciously stimulated the market for commercial video on demand platforms in countries like China.

The development of fansub groups has also helped empower some audiences. In 2014, when the film *Guardians of the Galaxy* (James Gunn 2014) was first released in Chinese cinemas, the subtitles and the translator immediately became the target of a public outcry due to countless translation mistakes. The controversy was reported by several news agencies and, as a result, the translator and government agencies openly addressed the public’s questions and explained the process of subtitling through official channels (Jia 2016). Such an outcome can be seen as a reflection of the changing communication style between official bodies and the general public, as well as the audience’s increasing ability to voice their concerns and be heard. By promoting an interactive mode of consuming media, fansub groups have helped mould an audience that expects to engage in free and equal communications. In addition, these fansub groups have gradually enriched the audience’s understanding of and taste for foreign audiovisual programmes with subtitles, particularly in countries where the official main mode of translation is dubbing.

The popularisation of the internet makes challenging the hegemonic

status quo more feasible. Unlike traditional media channels, most of which are under official or corporate control, the internet is largely decentralised. In the typical media dissemination system, official bodies have definite power to fully decide what can be shown to the public. In cyberspace, on the other hand, decentralisation and deregulation offer individuals the potential to act as prosumers and to become a source of information. In this context, absolute control no longer exists and a need “to recompose such powers to resist” (Robinson 2011: online) becomes apparent, thus allowing unofficial fansubbing and activists communities to play an important role in challenging the power of official media by opening up new avenues for information dissemination and recreating new spaces for the propagation and proliferation of alternative narratives.

In this new mediascape, the interaction between subtitlers and viewers has gained in visibility and dynamism. In traditional media, subtitlers are rarely allowed to voice their individuality and, as one of the many links in the postproduction chain, they tend to remain anonymous. Unconventional or creative subtitling is not encouraged, as it risks alienating the viewers, and invisibility is favoured as a way to guarantee that audiences have a positive viewing experience and that commercial interests are protected. In contrast, since cybersubtitling occurs via decentralised communication modes on the internet, semi-direct or direct interaction between translators and viewers becomes feasible through some of the many social networks and platforms. Projects like TED ([www.ted.com/participate/translate/our-translators](http://www.ted.com/participate/translate/our-translators)) display a translators’ corner where, inter alia, information about some of their subtitlers is presented, including their photographs. In this manner, online communities are able to interact with their audience through relatively simple but direct channels that shorten the communicative distance between translators and viewers, i.e. forums, social media accounts or even directly thanks to practices like 弹幕/*danmu*, a Chinese word which means ‘bullet curtain/screen.’ Originally from Japan, *danmaku*, this practice refers to a commentary sharing system that allows viewers to comment or read other people’s comments while watching a video (Technode 2014). The messages fly across the screen, like a hail of bullets, as illustrated in Figure 2; hence, the name:



Figure 2. Example of *danmu*

At micro-level, subtitling is not merely about breaking down language and cultural barriers; instead, subtitlers, especially fansubbers and guerrilla subtitlers, promote strategies that often go against the grain to allow their personal thoughts and opinions to better resonate with the audience. In this respect, inventive or otherwise unconventional subtitling acts as a creative force which unfolds in difference and can serve as a tool for individual expression and personal interaction. Compared with traditional official subtitles, the subtitling generated by these communities is distinctive inasmuch as it challenges the notion of the invisible translators by boosting their visibility. In its long history of marginality and invisibility, translation has always been relegated to a secondary sphere. Nowadays, translators' invisibility is still commonly and widely favoured in profitmaking settings, whilst in the cyberspace translator's visibility has become a noticeable phenomenon, at odds with the commercial tradition dictating that "the viewer should not notice that they are reading subtitles, or have to exert much effort when viewing subtitled AV content" (Caffrey 2009: 16). In this sense, subtitling has become a means for netizens to assert their individuality by choosing the audiovisual material to be distributed as well as by freely expressing themselves in the narrative and formatting of their translations. As in carnival, behavioural patterns that are otherwise socially/commercially unacceptable become legitimate in cybersubtitling practices.

Fansubbers intentionally attract the audience's attention through their unconventional translations, which is achieved by subverting some of the standard subtitling conventions. Although many subtitling collectives have rules and guidelines in terms of working deadlines, technical requirements and formats, individual subtitlers normally need not follow many concrete standards and rules at the linguistic level. Their positioning outside the commercial imperatives that regulate professional practice, affords cybersubtitlers a great degree of freedom and autonomy when creating

their translations. Similarly to carnival, cybersubtitling escapes the official furrows and, in this sense, opens up the possibility of enacting a utopian freedom to some extent. Festivity and inventiveness become some of its defining features and being unique and creative is widely encouraged in an attempt to attract the audience's attention or to gain their empathy. In this respect, a carnival is a party in which everything is potentially permitted, as in cybersubtitling. In the words of Robinson:

It is usually marked by displays of excess and grotesqueness. It is a type of performance, but this performance is communal, with no boundary between performers and audience. It creates a situation in which diverse voices are heard and interact, breaking down conventions and enabling genuine dialogue. It creates the chance for a new perspective and a new order of things, by showing the relative nature of all that exist (2011: online).

For Bakhtin (1984: 17) the carnival is a site of ungodliness and sacrilege, characterised by "the familiar language of the marketplace [...] a reservoir in which various speech patterns excluded from official intercourse could freely accumulate." Because of their potentiality to break established norms, abusive language, blasphemy, profanity, oaths and parodies on things that are considered sacred become the defining linguistic features of such speech patterns. When it comes to cybersubtitling, participants also question and subvert traditional norms and conventions (Díaz Cintas 2005), opting for hybrid and creative solutions, in a sort of affirmation that the commercial subtitling norms and rules of the present are temporary, historically variable and relative, and one day may well come to an end and be superseded by new ones. This spirit of 'rebirth' is also an important signifier in Bakhtin's theory as "the deconstructive thrust of folk culture was not simply negative or dismissive, rather it held out the promise of a renewal of humankind on a more egalitarian and radically democratic basis" (Gardiner 1992: 30). During carnival, the uncrowning of the king and the crowning of the clown imply renewal and rebirth: crowning contains the potential for uncrowning, while uncrowning is the completion of crowning. Carnival, therefore, is a reminder that there is no definite and unchangeable truth in the world and everything is going through the process of death and rebirth, including subtitling norms and conventions.

Among the strategies activated by the grassroots, the incorporation of headnotes/topnotes and glosses to explicate certain concepts and the manipulation of orthotypographic resources are perhaps the most attention-grabbing ones. In Figure 3, the subtitler has deemed it appropriate to keep the Japanese word "keikaku" transliterated in the subtitle, while a translator note explaining its meaning has been added at the top of the screen:



**Figure 3. Use of topnotes by fansubbers**

Figure 4, on the other hand, illustrates how the subtitler resorts to orthotypographic resources uncommon in interlingual subtitling, such as the use of capital letters to reflect emphasis, and makes use of multiple exclamation marks at the end of the sentence to show their engagement and empathy with the message being conveyed in the original. Most problematic in this example is the fact that this practice is grammatically erroneous in Spanish as opening exclamation marks, i.e. */i/*, are always compulsory at the beginning of an exclamatory sentence:



**Figure 4. Use of unorthodox orthotypographic resources**

Laughter is another distinctive feature of Bakhtin's theory of carnival, whose main function is internal, as it defends freedom of thought by erupting from the collective body (Elliot 1999). As foregrounded by Lachmann *et al.* (1988: 130), "[i]n the carnival, dogma, hegemony, and

authority are dispersed through ridicule and laughter.” During carnival, common people can express their dissatisfaction and disdain towards the official cultural dictates, as well as their pursuit of enjoyment and freedom, through laughter. In this sense, carnival laughter promotes individual self-expression and shows an appreciation for mankind as individuals, because laughter is a universal, personal reaction (Bakhtin 1984). Individuals generate carnival laughter to show and reflect their own desires and thoughts, allowing each other to be free of the requirements imposed by collective groups. Through carnival laughter, individualism can gain more presence against collectivism.

In the case of cybersubtitling, translators do on occasions intentionally joke with the audience rather than accurately translating the source text, in a kind of subtitler’s performance. The Chinese practice of 珍瓏/*Tu Cao* is exemplary of this approach. Unlike the generally faithful translation contained in the standard subtitles, the *Tu Cao* version “is inclined to depart from the original text, and the translator’s notes and glosses have been utilized to express the translator’s comments or feelings other than explaining difficult cultural references points” (Zhang 2013: 33). One way of doing this is when subtitlers embed aleatory comments on certain phenomena or current events in China in their subtitles. The other tactic is to insert comments that express their feelings while translating or describe their translating experience, as if to remind the viewers that the subtitler is accompanying them while watching the television drama or film. In Figure 5, no dialogue can be heard in the scene, yet a tongue-in-cheek subtitle appears on top of the screen that is meant to depict the subtitler’s nervousness at the sight of the naked male protagonist: ‘The little mouse is half-naked. I am not calm now.’:



Figure 5. Example of *Tu Cao*

Carnival has also become an underpinning for activist initiatives in a society where much of the state's power is based on anxiety. Bakhtin's hypothesis is that "anxiety can be neutralised through joyous experiences of collective festivity" (Robinson 2011: online), which in the case of cybersubtitling is reflected in the bolt to prominence of the already mentioned fake subtitles, or fakesubs. Though satire and jokes have been used from time immemorial to attack the powers that be, the internet has brought about new types of protest like 'laughtivism,' in which humour is exploited to pursue political change at a time in which political parody has become complexly intertwined with serious political dialogue. Championed by activists like the Serbian Srđja Popović, who discusses the topic in a TED talk ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgaDUcttL2s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgaDUcttL2s)), this practice reflects "a global shift in protest tactics away from anger, resentment, and rage towards a new, more incisive form of activism rooted in fun" (in Hiruta 2013: online). By exploiting parody and satire, fakesubs' ultimate goal is to elicit a smile in the viewers at the same time as campaigning for certain causes by raising awareness and visibility among the audiences. The same practice is also very popular in the field of dubbing, where 'gag dubbing' has come to be a participatory practice where video footage is subject to a process of redubbing, in the same language as the original or in a different one, with rewritten or adlibbed dialogue, usually for comedic purposes.

Another instantiation of this trend can be seen in the upsurge of satire as a tool of political instigation since the coming to office of Donald Trump, with numerous political satirists lampooning the US president on screen and having their videos subtitled into other languages by activists in the net, though in these cases of guerrilla subtitling the translation can be considered genuine as it closely follows the original. As acknowledged by Robinson (2011), these satirical activities do not so much confront state power as try to render it irrelevant and ineffectual, highlighting how the carnivalesque remains a potential counter-power in everyday life and activism.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

With the increasing demand for entertainment and the growing political awareness of certain sectors of the population, non-official channels have been developed to facilitate the circulation of foreign programmes through the internet, which irremediably need the support of subtitles to successfully get across borders and languages. In the era of multimedia productions, the potential offered by digital technology has opened up plentiful opportunities for individuals to engage with communities of interest and affinity groups that focus on the distribution of (videos with) subtitles, whether for altruist, activist or entertainment reasons, thus giving rise to new cybersubtitling practices that clearly distinguish themselves from the more traditional, commercial approaches to

subtitling.

Despite the years that have passed since its initial development, Bakhtin's theory of carnival continues to be a rich and complex conceptual apparatus that allows for a cogent explanation of these participatory activities. As a general framework, Bakhtin's theory provides insight into the socio-cultural phenomena associated with cybersubtitling, showing how these activities warrant the pursuit of individual freedom and contribute to the breakdown of hegemony. The sometimes unconventional and creative translation strategies adopted by some of these cybercommunities contribute to a new kind of translator visibility that diverges from more traditional translation practices. Even though Bakhtin (1984) himself suggests that carnival and folk culture have been in decline since the eighteenth century, turning thereafter into state-controlled events instead, he also believes that the carnival principle is indestructible. To prove him right, the new decentralised virtual spaces opened up by the internet together with the participatory potential offered by the democratisation of technology serve to guarantee that the spirit of carnival continues to be alive and kicking in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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