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# **Online video translation and subtitling: examining emerging practices and their implications for media activism in South East Asia**

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This article examines the ways in which one organisation and a number of citizens have begun to make use of new video translation and subtitling/captioning technologies to address local and regional social and environmental justice issues in the South East Asia region. We conceptualise these emerging practices as instances of ‘citizen translation’ by connecting them with earlier work carried out around citizens’ media. In order to examine and analyse the practices of, motivations for, and (potential) impact of citizen translation, we carried out an online survey and a number of interviews with people who are doing or supporting citizen translation. We found that citizen translators see their practices as enacting their own political sensibilities and addressing a number of barriers to social and political participation; we also found that citizen translators have important contributions to make regarding how citizen translation might further develop.

## **Introduction**

With broadband internet quality and uptake continuing to increase globally, opportunities for the online streaming and sharing of video content online have expanded and diversified. However, the relevance of online content and communication is often undermined when taking

into consideration that internet users who may not be fluent in major global languages continue to face significant and multiple barriers in terms of their ability to produce, share and consume video content online (Kralisch & Thomas, 2006).

Nevertheless, video and voice technologies do present a number of advantages over text-based communication. Today, video plays an increasingly important role in broadening the relevance of the internet to people with differing literacy skills and to those who speak minority languages (Downing, 2001). Video content can also now be easily translated and subtitled online using popular video sharing platforms, such as YouTube, as well as a wide range of specialist platforms.

Online video subtitling is an emerging practice, originating around 2009 with the introduction of a commercial but free-to-use browser-based platform developed by the US software company dotSUB (<http://dotsub.com/>). The first internationally well-known subtitling project to use the dotSUB platform was the not-for-profit organisation, TED (<http://www.ted.com/>). In the case of dotSUB a user had to first translate and subtitle the video content into English; from here it could then be translated and subtitled into hundreds of other languages. In this way, the dotSUB system supported video content to move across languages via an online environment. Since then, emerging practices of online video subtitling/translation have continued to expand in a range of varying contexts from popular culture to activist and social movement media.

This article aims to provide a conceptual framework to develop an account of online video subtitling and translation practices as examples of citizens' media in the context of media activism for social and environmental justice in South East Asia. In doing so, we examine how these practices may serve to broaden the potential for online communication and collaboration to include those not fluent in internationally dominant languages.

The article is structured in four parts: first, we start by offering a brief overview of the notion of citizens' media within a resurgence of scholarly and academic interest in experiences of participatory media. Second, we propose that online video translation, subtitling and captioning can be conceptualised as citizens' media practices and argue that there are benefits for this framing. In the third part we discuss preliminary results of an ongoing qualitative research project that seeks to investigate the role of translation in supporting social and environmental activism in South East Asia. In this section we introduce a small-scale online survey that we implemented in 2012 with our research project partner EngageMedia, an Australian non-profit media, technology and culture organisation. Here we discuss key findings that may help illuminate the motivations, perspectives and experiences of activists across South East Asia who are subtitling/translating video content. To conclude, we offer some general remarks on the need to pay attention to the emerging practices of participatory translation as a distinctive social change practice that has new implications for activists and organisations seeking to enable transnational collaboration on social and environmental justice issues.

## Defining 'citizens' media'

Towards the end of the 1990s, communication and media scholars in many parts of the world began voicing serious critiques of mass communications and mass media models, focusing their attention on media 'from the margins', rather than 'from the mainstream'. Reflecting on this time, Dorothy Kidd and Clemencia Rodriguez (2010), both pioneering researchers in this field, stated that they regard the wealth of academic research and interest in alternative media practices that materialised at this time as being very much "spurred by a critical mass of projects around the world and the recognition of their role in processes of social change" (Kidd & Rodriguez, 2010: 8).

Alternative and community media experiences and initiatives can be traced back to the 1940s and 1950s – pioneering community radio initiatives in Latin America are a significant and well-documented example of this. However, the widespread interest in alternative media that

emerged in academia during the 1990s was relatively new. Whilst this conjuncture represented a diversity of interests and approaches, these were often rooted in a shared belief in the importance of media plurality and access. The scholarly interest in alternative and grassroots communication was also often embedded within determinations that had emerged from the 1980 United Nations Education Science and Cultural Fund (UNESCO) *MacBride Report*, that set out to open up alternative and global media initiatives to ensure a more democratic public sphere and to create new horizontal and participatory communication spaces for the voluntary or non-profit sector of the economy. As Kidd and Rodriguez assert, this was “a strategic shift in which civil society took the leading role in developing alternative media projects and models of communications” (2010: 4). Within this strategic shift, communication became a question of rights.

The notion of ‘citizens’ media’ developed during this period by Rodriguez (2001), presupposed in many ways a significant break from past work in this field. One of its major contributions was in developing a critique from within three of the field’s foundational terms: ‘development communication’, ‘community media’, and ‘alternative media’, and suggesting new formulations in the context of the experiences and practices of citizens. Rodriguez’s account of citizens’ media (2001; 2009; 2011) is rooted in a Latin American cultural studies tradition and is also grounded on Chantal Mouffe’s formulations of media democracy and citizenship. In this instance, the media is not defined from a binary perspective of an ‘alternative’ to a ‘mainstream’, or for an emphasis on antagonistic perspectives to existing concentrations of media power, nor for being necessarily linked to broader social movements seeking radical change, but instead for possessing certain attributes and qualities that make it different from commercial mass media. In this conceptualisation, subjects are defined as citizens by their daily political actions and engagements rather than their legal status as nationals of a given state. In conceiving of citizenship “as a form of identification, a type of political identity [and] something to be constructed, not empirically given” (Mouffe, 1992: 231), Rodriguez demonstrated that citizens’ media could be defined by communicative practice rather than status where people enact their political subjectivities by producing and enacting communication spaces. Within this perspective, citizens must enact their citizenship on a day-to-day basis through their participation in everyday political practices, including learning how to appropriate media spaces:

“ to manipulate their own languages, codes, signs, and symbols, empowering them to name the world in their own terms [triggering] processes that allow citizens to re-codify their contexts and selves [and giving] citizens the opportunity to restructure their identities into empowered subjectivities strongly connected to local cultures and driven by well-defined, achievable, utopias. ”

(Rodriguez, 2011: 38-40)

Other relevant aspects of citizens’ media, as articulated by Rodriguez, are that it is a term that renders significant the concept of cultural citizenship (Downing, 2007) and it opens up the opportunity to understand media not only as texts or structures of production, but as practice (Couldry, 2006). In other words, as Couldry has argued, these perspectives put forward by Rodriguez significantly shift the focus of media research from text analysis to examining “what people are doing, saying and thinking in relation to media” (2012: 40). However, as Downing acknowledges, “in the era of mass refugee movements and undocumented labour migration, the word ‘citizen’ as applied to media has to be explicitly stripped of its legal connotation” (Downing, 2010: 52). This, we acknowledge, is no simple feat and the term’s legal connotations can problematise its interpretation and use, particularly in the areas of social justice and transnational activism. At the same time we also acknowledge the numerous scholarship in recent decades which have come to call into question the core aspects of how we define and understand citizenship given that the very forms through which “subjects act to become citizens and claim citizenship has substantially changed” (Isin, 2009: 367).

In this way, in applying the term citizens' media to this context, we hope to move beyond conventional generalisations that presume it is a useful concept because it allows people to 'have a voice'. We argue that everyone has a voice, and while amplifying less heard voices is important, we want to focus here instead on questions regarding how citizens are able to put their citizenship into practice through media. In examining practices of online video translation/subtitling we want to investigate how these practices can be seen to define, claim, and give meaning to people's political voices, and re-create the social and political spaces where translating others' voices might actively broaden and open up participation in social and political spaces in ways that can shift the very nature of public dialogue and debate.

## Citizen translation

It is important to acknowledge the profound changes in the critical appraisal of alternative and participatory communication that has taken place in the past decade alongside massive transformations in terms of the development of communication networks and technologies. These changes determine not only how social change happens and how we might understand social change, but also how individuals access, share and participate in peer-to-peer online and networked environments. This is emphasised by Yochai Benkler (2006: 272) when he writes that, "we are witnessing a fundamental change in how individuals interact with their democracy and experience their role as citizens." For Benkler, new tools for communication and the networks they sustain offer citizens the ability to move beyond the consumption of information and instead become "participants in a conversation" (ibid.).

Networked collaborative technologies are having a profound impact not only on content production and distribution, but also on translation practices that take place between the local and global (Désilets, 2007). In this regard, Neilson observes the case of a "new participatory ecology of translation emerging on the internet" where practitioners of what he calls "open translation" "operate in peer production networks, utilising free and open source software tools to produce translations that are freely available to as many people as possible" (2009: 1).

In the past few years, new research has begun to open up new conversations about online and networked translation practices and their significance, particularly in the field of translation studies. A key ongoing debate relates to the ways in which new translation tools may be in fact opening up translation

“ to lower the barriers to participation in cross-language knowledge exchange, and help to avoid replication of the 'expert culture' that permeates the professional translation industry ”

*(Open Translation Tools manual, cited in Neilson, 2009: 1)*

Anthony Pym (2010) has used the term 'volunteer translation' to group together a diverse range of practices whereby non-professionals translate software, websites or other online content. For Pym, volunteer translation groups together community, collaborative, crowd-sourcing, fan, user-based, lay and citizen translation. While we recognise that Pym's work is useful in that it is one of very few academic examinations that highlight the diversity of what we term citizens' translation practices, we also argue that his use of the term 'volunteer translation' neglects to pay attention to the nuances of each of the forms of practices he lists, particularly in contexts where social change objectives drive the translation practices. We question, therefore, whether lumping all of these practices under a non-descript and non-political term such as 'volunteer translation' and analysing these different kinds of translation as though they are the same or very similar can in any way advance our understanding of the significance of these activities, individually or collectively.

From a different perspective, Luis Pérez-González (2013) examines citizen translation and subtitling practices that takes place within fan-cultures, identifying them as co-creative, collaborative and ultimately "transformative". Pérez-González labels these practices as "fansubbing" and defines this as "forms of audio-visual translation undertaken by ordinary

people for the benefit of other members of their transnational communities of interest.” (2013: 6). Pérez-González contrasts ‘fansubbing’ practices with formal, professional film subtitling practices and identifies that fansubbing is unique from other forms of subtitling in a number of ways: by rendering the translator visible (through personality and by removing claims of neutral and ‘objective translation’), by choosing to sometimes have multiple layers of subtitles (rather than a single narrative-only driven layer); by including non-diegetic rather than only diegetic elements into the subtitles (such as explaining objects that appear); by acknowledging cultural and linguistic multiplicity (by at times recognising through subtitles the cultural context of both the content and the audience); and by directly engaging the audience through subtitles (by opening up a space between the story being told and the audience). In this way Pérez-González (2013) identifies that fan culture subtitling practices are challenging the dominant and conservative subtitling conventions that were first established by the Hollywood film industry in films in the late 1920s. Further, Pérez-González (2013) finds that fansubbing is an interventionist, rather than a representational, form of subtitling and as such it provides subtitlers with agency by allowing them to actively participate in the meaning-making process since they are encouraged to essentially re-author a film in a way they feel makes sense.

Another original contribution to understanding emerging online subtitling practices is made by Mona Baker, who focuses on online (text-based) translation in the context of social movements. Examining what she calls “activist groups of translators and interpreters” (2013: 40), Baker focuses particularly on the motivations, relationships, aspirations and dynamics of these translation groups in order to consider whether we can understand their translations as political and constituting a social movement practice. Baker examines the nature and practices of five online groups and finds that these actors very consciously choose what they will translate. In doing so, she finds they are helping to “create counter narratives that can ‘uncool’ dominant takes on a range of issues, including the siege of Gaza, continued poverty in Africa and drug trafficking in Latin America” (Baker, 2006: 32). Baker also finds that these translations (re)negotiate meaning since they are narratives that are (re)told by translators who determine not only by what they choose to translate but also how they frame this translation within their own larger projects.

In the analyses of both Baker (2006) and Pérez-González (2013), we can see that online translation is a social practice that negotiates and determines meaning. This is true not only for online translation, as is emphasised by Naoki Sakai when he writes, “translation articulates one text to another, but it does not mean that translation merely establishes equivalence between two texts, two languages or two groups of people” because it is a process both entwined and “complicit with the building, transforming or disrupting of power relations” (2013: 71-2). This connects back to Neilson’s ‘open translation’, a term he argues “implies the movement of translation beyond any closed or finite task”, thus providing “a platform from which to contest the status of translations as derivative works and the institution of individual authorship that underlies intellectual property rights” (2009: 1). Here Neilson raises a critical issue since translation is currently limited by copyright restrictions. Neilson argues that to translate is to create meaning since meaning is not simply derived from the source being translated, but is instead negotiated by the translator/s involved in the practice of translation. This kind of embedded agency implied in open translation practices as described by Neilson also connects with what Michaela Wolf has recently referred to as an “activist turn” (2012: 129) in the sociology of translation. These perspectives on the agency of the translator (whether they are a professional translator or not) are a critical aspect of a re-thinking the possibilities of creating “new codes of reference for translatorial activity” (Wolf, 2012: 129) through collective and distributed subtitling and translating practices such as, for instance, political involvement in social and environmental justice efforts.

The collective and distributed nature of translation and subtitling practices is a defining aspect of citizens’ translation. It allows us to observe how the collective subject of translatorial activity actually moves “from a position of neutral and transcendent arbitration” (Neilson, 2009: 7) to a way of enacting and performing citizenships. It is in the act of translating and subtitling of online video that we see an opening to perform one’s political subjectivity, understood as

those “creative, inventive and autonomous ways of becoming political through relating to oneself and others” (Isin, 2012: 108). In this framework, as we attempt to show in the following section, translating and subtitling may be understood as acts of citizenship.

## Motivations and political subjectivities in citizen translation

In his paper on ‘open translation’, Neilson (2009) provides an engaging, critical interrogation of how translation practitioners represent their practice through motivated, performative acts, ultimately querying whether “the collective subject constructed through such collaborative translation practices is a political figure adequate to the production of the common” (2009: 2). In this section of our paper we are interested in providing an overview of what motivates citizen translators as a way to frame and conceptualise the way citizen translators enact their political subjectivities through the act of translating, subtitling online video.

Our ongoing research into citizens’ translation in hetero-lingual social movement environments in South East Asia has been carried out in collaboration with EngageMedia and Participatory Culture Foundation, who have lead the development of *Amara*, a video subtitling technology being deployed in support of translation communities in the field of environmental and social justice. *Amara* is a free and open source software that allows for the organisation of groups of people to transcribe, then create and edit subtitles onto a video directly through a browser (no downloading of the software or the video file is required). At the time of writing, the total number of Amara users around the world was around 69,000 (Nicholas Reville, personal communication 2013).

EngageMedia integrated Amara into their video-sharing site ([engagemedia.org](http://engagemedia.org)) in early 2012 and implemented a training program across South East Asia to support its use, in order to address language barriers believed to be limiting activist participation and collaboration across the region. EngageMedia was motivated to integrate Amara into their platform as it had the potential to support new opportunities for collaboration on transnational issues such as migration and climate change (EngageMedia 2012).

Seelan Palay, a multilingual Singapore based activist, was employed to coordinate the ‘EngageMedia translation team’ [1] and to support and encourage participation in this community. Seelan is in constant communication with team members through email and the group’s Facebook page. He directs subtitlers to videos he judges as timely or important and trains people, both online and in face-to-face workshops, to use the Amara software independently. In terms of how the translation/subtitling process works, all videos that have been uploaded to the EngageMedia site are immediately available for translation. However, first they must be transcribed into their original language (this is often done by video makers themselves or members of their organisation); this transcription can then be translated into multiple (more than 200) languages to create subtitles. Audiences can then select these subtitle options as they view the video online, or they can download a language subtitle as a file that can be played with the video offline. At the time of writing, EngageMedia’s subtitling team (now 12 months old) consists of around 350 people (<http://www.amara.org/en/teams/engagemedia/>), of which an estimated 70 are regularly active as translators (Seelan Peelay, personal communication 2013).

In this paper we focus on the EngageMedia subtitling team, with the aim of developing richer understandings relating to the value and impact of the online translation and subtitling of activist video content. We ask: how and why do citizen translators collaborate and work together in groups?; what are the implications of citizen translation for activism?; and how might practices and technologies be best adapted, improved and further extended to better address and support activist communities and networks?

As part of our research around citizen translation, an internet-based survey questionnaire was administered for a two-week period in November 2012 with members of the EngageMedia translation team invited to respond. Members were invited by email and through the team’s Facebook group. In terms of survey design, questions addressed key motivations and

understandings of translation and subtitling in the context of video activism as well as addressing more practical questions relating to translation skills, experiences and practices. The design of the survey also took into consideration the geographical context of the work of EngageMedia. Since 2009, EngageMedia has had an office in Jakarta and it has worked closely with Indonesian partners and more frequently in the Indonesian language over other South East Asian languages. Therefore, we offered the survey in two languages: Indonesian and English. The survey included a number of significant opportunities for long, qualitative responses to questions.

As already mentioned, there are around 350 people who have joined EngageMedia's translation team but around 70 of these are active translators. There were 38 complete responses to all 23 survey questions (29 in English and nine in Indonesian). In terms of the socio-demographic context of the survey participants, the respondents were based in Australia, Philippines, Thailand, Taiwan, India, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. In terms of sex, 48% (17) were male and 44% (16) female (8% no response); most (68%) of respondents were aged between 21-29 years old and 30-39 years of age (26 respondents) but overall they were spread across all other ages group categories as well: 18-20 (5% or two respondents); 40-49 (3% or one respondent) 50-59 (5%); over 60 years (5%). Indicating the high levels of educational attainment, the respondents all indicated that they had completed formal education with their highest completed degree being high school (24% or nine respondents), university undergraduate degree (42% or 16 respondents) and university post-graduate degree (21% or eight respondents). In terms of the major languages they translated to and from, English and Indonesian was the most common combination (42%), followed by English and Filipino (8%), and English and Malay (8%). Further, 11% (4 respondents) translated into more than two languages. Interestingly only one respondent did not include English as one of the languages they translate to and from (perhaps not surprising given that the team mostly communicate in this language and the limitation of the survey language options). The main mother tongue languages of the respondents were Bahasa-Indonesian (37% or 13 respondents), followed by English (17% or 6 respondents), Tamil (11% or 4 respondents), Malay (8% or 3 respondents), Papuan (5% or two respondents) and Hiligayon (5%).

In terms of the numbers of videos each respondent had translated, a significant proportion had translated only 1-2 videos on the EngageMedia portal (50% or 19 respondents), 13% (5) had subtitled 3-5 videos while a small but significant number had subtitled more than 10 videos (18% of 7 respondents). These overall low levels of experience in translating videos on the EngageMedia portal were unexpected and in some ways make it difficult to develop a deeper analysis of user satisfaction, as the amount of subtitling they have done is still rather limited. Despite the low number of videos most respondents had translated, most (61% or 23 respondents) considered themselves to be extremely or moderately satisfied with their experience of translating/subtitling videos with EngageMedia with three respondents (8%) indicating they were unsatisfied. And despite the small sample we can see how the motivations of the respondents for translating videos are also varied (Figure 1).

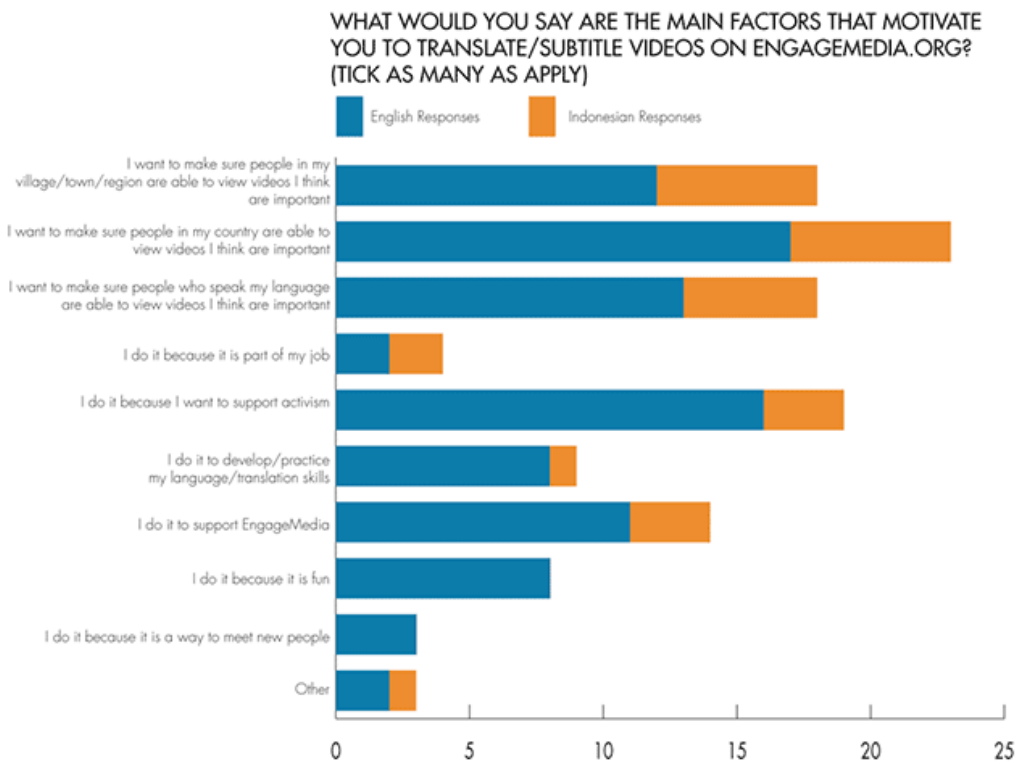


Figure 1: Graph showing responses to the author’s survey of EngageMedia Translation Team

What the diverse responses above suggest is that translators are motivated to subtitle videos because they want to support activism and because they feel they can contribute to opening up access to information and knowledge for people in their communities, countries and for people who speak the languages they are able to translate to/from.

To some degree it appears the respondents are also motivated by an affiliation with the organisation they are translating with (EngageMedia), indicating the role of organisations who mediate the translation/subtitling process. The main problems or impediments the respondents encountered while translating and subtitling videos were: slow internet connection (58% of respondents including eight of the nine respondents who completed the survey in Indonesian), unable to find enough time (55%) and lack language proficiency (26%).

Participants in the survey were also invited to respond to three open-ended questions. The first question asked respondents to express whether they felt they were contributing to addressing social issues in their country by translating/subtitling videos on Engagemedia.org. The second question asked the respondents for their opinion on whether they thought subtitling and translating videos was a way to have a positive impact in their local communities. The third question asked participants to explain whether they believed subtitling and translating videos was form of activism and/or a way to engage in everyday political action.

In response to the first question, a significant number of participants expressed that they did feel they were contributing to addressing social issues. For example, one respondent (A13) wrote:



“ ... by doing this I bring the issue into [the] broader community which means more attention and more solution[s] can be given for the problems ... less than 2 months ago I translated a video [for an American based NGO] about the deforestation in Borneo jungle by the palm oil industries and [how it is] affecting the native dayaks way of life ... This is a serious issue and the business itself involves not only the national and regional but also multinational interests ... [the] chances for [a] better and immediate solution for the[se] issues are more likely to be reach[ed] with wider public awareness and attention. ”

Another respondent (A7) similarly felt that beyond awareness, subtitling could ensure people get a more authentic, fair and objective representation of an issue or event:

“ [I have translated] Bersih 2.0, Bersih 3.0 videos [mass citizen protests in Malaysia that demanded free and fair elections]. These translations were extremely helpful especially for rural people to understand the content ... without any kind of manipulation. ”

Respondent (B1) also pointed out the importance of translation/subtitling in a regional and multi-lingual country context:

“ With a lot of subtitle languages available for each video, the people of one country can understand others living in other countries, especially neighboring countries. Understanding can then strengthen the ties among us. One video which I subtitled talks about money politics surrounding regional elections. I [hope] people from other regions in the country can learn from the video and be more critical in the context of elections in their region. ”

This was an issue for a number of respondents, particularly from Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia, who pointed out that multiple languages are spoken within their country and in this way translation/subtitling videos served to support communication among disparate and sometimes divided groups within the country. Respondent (A3) says:

“ Many communities here in the Philippines do not speak English or Filipino fluently. Translating videos to other languages will ease the delivery of our message to communities outside the National Capital Region and Tagalog-speaking regions. ”

A large proportion of respondents were also of the opinion that they benefited from translating/subtitling videos on EngageMedia.org through increased language proficiency, awareness of new issues and by being able to contribute to relevant social issues in their countries. In many, as with the above quote, respondents stated that they considered subtitling and translating videos a way to activate communication processes that may have a positive impact in their local communities.

For example, respondent (A8) explains that she believes subtitling allows her to directly contribute to human rights:

“ I ... benefited in translating/ subtitling videos on Engagemedia.org because [it has meant] our work [is] well accessed, shared and understood by other people in different countries around the world. In this way, we can [contribute] to peoples fight for human rights ... We commit for something not just for our own country but for others as well. ”

But some of the respondents were also very explicit about how their use of online subtitling allowed videos to be made differently, in ways that allowed for more authentic and local voices to be heard in local languages.

“ Let’s open up communication through subtitling, let’s use it as a tool for ... more broadly distributing independent media, let’s use it as a tool to be able to make more honest documentaries using local peoples voices rather than narrators/experts and do away with the foreign narrator/mediator/early childhood educator who ruins so many otherwise decent docos. ... let’s spend our efforts subtitling documentaries into local languages, rather than subtitling people speaking local versions of english into english. English is an international language people, don’t waste your time and belittle people by rewording their perfectly audible and understandable words into english (as the ABC and a lot of independent film-makers do) – if you want to do it for the sake of accessibility do it for the whole doco, or translate it back into the local language. ”

*(Respondent B2)*

Such comments point to an understanding of the way a subtitling space, like other media spaces, can be claimed by activists who, rather than accepting an impoverished position where minority languages are rendered marginal to English, define and create the relationships between languages. Citizens produce and enact translation spaces to produce more meaningful communication contexts. Such an expansion could, for instance, include a repositioning of verbal and visual communication as this comment from a respondent (A16) suggests:

“ I think subtitling is not only about translating from one language to another, it is more an effort to help peoplecomprehend the depicted situation. So even non-speaking video can be subtitled. ”

Respondent (A1) also felt that EngageMedia’s use of subtitling software supported content to flow not just from the local to the global but to and among local languages as well. Speaking here of the West Papuan and Timor Leste contexts (A1) says:

“ ... open subtitling is/can help provide news, history and politic[al] information to the people who its actually about... eg most full lengthdocumentaries on west papua and east timor have the local languagetranslated into english but not vice versa. I think independently produced news, history, and also advocacy should belong to the place where it is made, and is important for the sake of open and uncensored education and awareness that is translated back into the local language. ”

As to whether the respondents felt that their translation activities were a form of citizen activism, there was a resounding affirmative response:

“ Making information more accessible to many people, especially information about community issues and social concerns is a form of activism. By translating advocacy videos, you are inviting more people to take action for social change. That is activism. ”

*(Respondent B5)*

“ For me and many people I know, it is [a form of activism], because it makes the content of videos more easily reusable by all, and in particular usable by deaf people and people who don't know the original language. ”

*(Respondent A5)*

“ Yes it is a form of activism as you engage other[s] who are not able to speak other language[s] to contribute in the form of criticism and inspire them to think differently. ”

*(Respondent A17)*

“ I think it is a way to contribute. It may not be the strongest, but not everyone has the time, the willing, the strength, etc to do so. I think that the key to live in a better world is by the small of contribution of EVERYONE. And subtitling is for sure that small way that many people choose. ”

*(Respondent A25)*

We also know from our follow-up email questions to survey respondents and to the coordinator of the EngageMedia translation team that the EngageMedia subtitling community is made up of a diverse mix of people, some of whom consider themselves professional translators/subtitlers but most of whom consider themselves to be amateurs. Those who do consider themselves to be professionals we found tend to work as translators and/or subtitlers because they have acquired these skills and not because they have professional qualifications in this field. This suggests to us that framing the practice of online subtitling in the context of EngageMedia's translation team as 'amateur' is far less relevant than defining the activities of members as they have self-defined them, as an act of activism and citizenship, driven by a range of motivations, as already outlined in this article.

## Citizens' translation and social change

In a provocative opening keynote [2] to the 6th international OURMedia Conference (Sydney, April, 2007), John Downing anticipated what he regarded as the “seven problems social justice media activists face” (2007: 2). In this impromptu talk and call to action toward establishing grassroots and sustain grassroots media into the future, he made two specific remarks that are directly relevant to our argument in this article. First, is what he called the issue of the “radical imbalance” between access to media technologies and to basic literacy; the other what he called global connections and the problem of language, pointing out that what he sees as the simplest, most basic, yet in some ways the most intractable issue: that the dominance of the English language appears to be both the solution and the problem.

This issue of radical imbalance is precisely what citizen translation practices seek to overcome. In conceptualising online video translation/subtitling practices as citizens' media we want to acknowledge and underline the new possibilities that these activist practices open up to take one's own languages "out of their usual hiding places and throwing them out there, into the public sphere, and seeing how they do, how they defeat other languages, or how they are defeated by other languages" (Rodriguez, 2001: 3).

As our survey found, while Amara allows people to translate to and from any language, coordination among many languages requires a common language; therefore it was not surprising to find that almost all respondents shared English as a common translation language among them. At the same time the respondents shared a desire to 'move' content to and from a diverse number of languages that are relevant particularly to the region of South East Asia. How users engage with online video translation platforms and user communities, how they localise the tools and content on offer, and how these practices can be considered as acts of citizenship are key concerns of our research and we believe worthy of further consideration.

As Baker's research suggests, activist translation groups appear to operate and narrate themselves in very similar ways to other movements of collective action and "they become a privileged space of political action in their own right." (2013: 36). Baker also finds that these groups tend to align well with our understandings of new social movements in that they have a multi-issue focus and a global perspective and orientation. However, Baker also finds that these groups are also not exclusively attached to or embedded within any specific social movements and so she suggests we may therefore see activist translators (or citizen translators as we call them) as constituting a social movement unto themselves. Baker finds that there are complications and tensions for activist translations since these actors are at times "caught between the world of activism and the politics of professional competition and ethos of the service economy" (Baker, 2013: 37). Baker does not identify significant differences between the translations created by activists and professionals in the way Pérez-González (2013) does in the case of fans and subtitling practices. While a textual analysis of translations is not the focus of this paper, it is also the case that text translation has less layers than does audio-visual content and this perhaps offers less opportunity for norms to be challenged that may typically render the translator (and their aspirations) invisible. Baker's argument does, however, resonate clearly with current conceptualisations of how translation is becoming a crucial aspect for social movement media to grow and flourish.

In researching this article we have identified that despite the original contributions being made by an 'activist turn' in translation studies, translation practices remain rather neglected in studies of social movement media and communication for social change. As proposed at the outset of this article, we see that translation and subtitling of online videos as a significant aspect of broader citizens' media practices. We think that just as contemporary social theory on citizenship now recognises and emphasises multiplicity and heterogeneity, we need to re-think the functions of media in terms of different communication and information needs in order to understand the complex and multidimensional roles citizens' media can play, especially when they emerge from and support diverse knowledges and languages.

Beyond our specific interest here in activist video content that aspires to address social and environmental justice issues, the fact remains that despite the ongoing obstacles and limitations, independent video content producers – whether they are film-makers, animators, illustrators, video bloggers, citizen reporters or community workers – now have ready access to video and translation technologies that (potentially) allow them to find and actively engage with niche audiences in multi-lingual, networked environments. However, there is still a lack of relevant models and practices available for video makers that would support them to make strategic decisions that advance their aspirations to innovate in terms of how they engage with communities and audiences to create, translate, localise and distribute content in ways that take advantage of translation technologies and mobile and networked media and communication practices.

## Conclusions

In his essay on open translation, Neilson (2009) provides an engaging critical interrogation of how translation practitioners represent their practice through motivated performative acts, ultimately querying whether “the collective subject constructed through such collaborative translation practices is a political figure adequate to the production of the common” (2009: 2). Along these lines, a key aim of this article has been to provide an overview of the motivations behind citizen translators who are using networked platforms and tools for online video subtitling. What we have learnt from this preliminary research is that citizen translators do see that by subtitling/translating videos in new languages they are helping to address social and political issues by allowing more people to become aware of issues and different (and more authentic) perspectives and by opening up who can become part of public dialogue and conversation.

Many citizen translators who participated in our study also intimated that their practices could help reconfigure video-making in ways that are more inclusive of people who do not speak majority languages and in ways that provide a space for translators to add context and meaning for specific audiences.

We think that further research into these specific media practices is necessary in order to better understand how we can contribute to the development of models and best practices for digital infrastructures that support multi-lingual translation efforts. In bringing together research from participatory translation studies and participatory communication studies we have highlighted that it is important to draw connections with past developments in socially-motivated collaborative media production. We have also highlighted that while online subtitling and translation remains a new and emerging practice, there are significant opportunities to learn from the experiences of people who are doing it and from existing multi-lingual networked digital media platforms and initiatives, such as Engagemedia.org. By understanding citizen translation as both social and political we believe we have been able to identify how these practices contribute to the affordances of citizens to mobilise and put into practice their demands for rights and justice and to take down barriers for moving evidence, ideas and stories across and between languages and people.

## Endnotes

1 ‘EngageMedia translation team’ is how the group is described on the EngageMedia Facebook group page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/293876624028530/members/> and it is the way EngageMedia staff describe it.

2 John Downing’s presentation was published in the inaugural issue of GMJ/AU as *Grassroots Media: Establishing priorities for the years ahead*

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