CHAPTER TWO

INVESTIGATING DIGITALLY BORN AMATEUR SUBTITLING AGENCIES IN THE CONTEXT OF POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstract

In recent years, digital media scholars have begun to acknowledge and reveal the extent to which the production and consumption of popular culture are driven by participatory practices, including amateur subtitling. A growing body of literature has drawn attention to the ways in which ordinary people are ever more often taking on the role of language brokers and adopting subtitling as a means to facilitate the absorption of some (hitherto) marginal content into the fabric of the mainstream cultural industries. This chapter addresses the theoretical and methodological challenges presented by the emergence and consolidation of digitally born subtitling amateur agencies—whether they are constituted by a single individual or by virtual communities subject to varying forms of internal governance. After exploring the ecology of such agencies and the differences in the social and material aspects of their respective subtitling practices, the chapter moves on to examine the relevance of netnography and genetic criticism to the study of subtitled popular culture in the digital context—an area of enquiry that continues to move towards the core
research remit of translation studies. It is argued that these methodological frameworks can yield valuable insights into the non-professional subtitling of texts connected and concerned with quotidian and ordinary experiences. Ultimately, amateur subtitling is conceptualised as a form of self-mediation that steers us away from the translator as an individual or subject position and towards collective discursive spaces of translatorship involving complex negotiations of cultural identity and citizenship.

The changing face of amateur subtitling research

Recent research on amateur subtitling communities has exposed a range of limitations in previous work on this form of audiovisual translation (Pérez-González 2013a, 2014). Early attempts to articulate the idiosyncrasy of non-professional subtitling practices (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006, Pérez-González 2006) tended to focus on the differences between professional and amateur mediation—the scope of the latter being confined almost exclusively to the subtitling of Japanese anime. Commercial subtitling standards and conventions were thus often posited as the benchmark against which deviant non-professional practices, often less concerned with textual accuracy and fidelity than formal experimentation (Pérez-González 2007) could be catalogued. The postulation, whether tacit or explicit, of such practices as “the seed of a new type of subtitling for the digital era” (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006: 51) reveals the extent to which “anime-centrism has tended to produce a somewhat lopsided view” of the amateur subtitling landscape, “emphasizing its formal and textual difference to mainstream, commercial A[udio]V[isual]T[ranslation] while downplaying its heterogeneity and geopolitical complexity” (Dwyer 2012: 219).

In keeping with theoretical developments in the wider domain of digital media scholarship, however, recent studies on the involvement of ordinary people in amateur subtitling are re-directing the focus of their research agenda towards the social substratum and participatory dimension that underpin non-professional subtitling agencies—whether they are constituted by a single individual or virtual communities subject to varying forms of internal governance. In exploring and conceptualising such themes, this emerging body of literature is showing the important role that amateur subtitlers play in other areas of popular culture pertaining to the negotiation of political and engaged agendas in public spaces.

Baker (2016), for example, investigates the use of subtitling by members of Mosireen and Words of Women from the Egyptian Revolution—two collectives “providing an alternative record of events
and giv[ing] voice to a broad spectrum of participants engaged in this momentous period of Egyptian history” (Baker 2016: 1–2). Conducted through the analytical lens of “prefiguration”, a notion that designates “the attempted construction of alternative or utopian social relations in the present” (Yates 2015: 1) by experimenting with currently available means, Baker’s study aims to ascertain whether members of her chosen Egyptian collectivities favour idiosyncratic subtitling practices that reflect the non-hierarchical, non-representational society they ultimately aspire to forge.

The translational output of activist communities seeking to effect socio-political change has also been the object of study in Pérez-González’s work, which postulates the centrality of affectivity as a mobilising force around which radical subtitling agencies coalesce. Affectivity is conceptualised here from the disciplinary standpoint of non-representational theory (2012, 2014) and biopolitics (2016). Under these frameworks, texts subtitled by amateurs are regarded as sites of emotional investment, although the emphasis is not on how such agents encode subjectively felt states of emotion. Instead, the analytical lens is reoriented to foreground the production of affect through the practices surrounding the production and reception of subtitled output, and the ways in which the circulation flows of subtitled content through digital communication systems contribute to assembling an audience or population of affective receptivity.

This chapter addresses the theoretical and methodological challenges presented by the emergence and consolidation of digitally born amateur subtitling agencies—with particular emphasis on the generative power of such agencies (Pérez-González 2012, 2013b) in the context of popular culture. The premise underpinning this study is that the empowering potential of subtitling as both a community-building device and a unique platform for self-expression in the digital culture is not dependent on the specific agenda driving the subtitlers’ immaterial work. Although fandom and politics may appear to be almost at antithetical removes from each other, the engagement of ordinary people in both forms of self-mediation (Chouliaraki 2010, 2012) brings into sharp relief how, in the digital media landscape, popular culture is being reconfigured to accommodate shifting participatory practices of resistance and intervention—thus foregrounding the fringe of cultural production to the detriment of the mainstream. In the context of research of amateur subtitling, therefore,

[the term ‘popular’ […] refers to [the] alliance of classes and forces which constitute the ‘popular classes’. The culture of the oppressed, the excluded classes: this is the area to which the term ‘popular’ refers us. And the opposite side to that—the side with the cultural power to decide what
belongs and what does not—is, by definition, not another ‘whole’ class, but that other alliance of classes, strata, and social forces which constitute what is not ‘the people’ and not the ‘popular classes’: the culture of the power bloc […] Popular culture […] is the arena of consent and resistance. (Hall 1998: 452–453, quoted in El Hamamsy and Soliman 2013: 8–9)

From a translation scholar’s perspective, Hall’s conceptualisation of popular culture as a platform enabling new forms of interplay between high and low cultures, as well as between playful and ethical forms of participation in public life is particularly productive. As communication and information technologies continue to increase their foothold in the digital media landscape where voices and experiences are negotiated, a constellation of new and heterogeneous audiovisual textualities is emerging. Unconstrained by commercial or financial interests, these new forms of subtitled audiovisual content, including their subtitled versions produced by amateur agencies, are contributing to foreground the visibility of the “people” vis-à-vis the “power blocs”. The subtitling of audiovisual texts by ordinary citizens in the context of popular culture, therefore, falls under the definition of the wider phenomenon of “citizen media”, which encompasses

[the physical artefacts, digital content, practices, performative interventions and discursive formations of affective sociality produced by unaffiliated citizens as they act in public space(s) to effect aesthetic or socio-political change or express personal desires and aspirations, without the involvement of a third party or benefactor. It also comprises the sets of values and agendas that influence and drive the practices and discourses through which individuals and collectivities position themselves within and in relation to society and participate in the creation of diverse publics. (Baker and Blaagaard 2016: 16)

As will be elaborated in the next section, amateur subtitling is a particular form of citizen media that steers us away from the translator as an individual or subject position, and towards collective discursive spaces of translatorship involving complex negotiations of cultural identity and citizenship. Studying amateur subtitling in the digital culture, I will argue, requires a fundamental rethinking of the grammar of subtitling agency.

**Amateur subtitling agencies: Social and material aspects**

The prominence of agency, understood here as the increased engagement of ordinary people in mediated self-expression practices, is inextricably intertwined with the reconfiguration of the digital media industries into
participatory spheres. Empowered by the relatively low barriers to civic involvement in the production and distribution of media content and experiences, digitally born agencies feel that their contribution to the flow of media content circulating in their environment matters. Significantly, as Kelty (2013: 24) notes, participation in this context “is no longer an opening up, an expansion, a liberation, it is now a principle of improvement, an instrument of change, a creative force. It no longer threatens, but has become a resource: participation has been made valuable.”

As is also the case with their non-translational counterparts, participatory amateur subtitling agencies are “constituted through the use of knowledge and resources, themselves embedded within structural contexts” (Kaun et al. 2016: 4). Insofar as their media practices and experiences are influenced by structural constraints, non-professional subtitling agencies are bound to differ in terms of the social organisation processes that underpin their respective practices. But, as Kaun et al. (2016: 4) also note, “at the same time, agency is transformative of the structures within which it is embedded by making use of knowledge and resources in creative and often radical ways”. From their perspective, the constraining effects of structural embeddedness, as realised on a case-by-case basis, are bound to provide digital agencies with varying resources and critical capacities to challenge mainstream practices—thus bringing about an increased interest in their material practices. The productive interplay between the social and material aspects of media practices is therefore adopted as the structuring principle of the overview of amateur subtitling agencies delivered in the remainder of this section.

### Social aspects

In terms of the social aspects referred to above, amateur subtitling agencies may be classified into three main categories: organisational collectivities, ad-hocracies and individual activists.

**Organisational collectivities** often take the form of networked, geographically dispersed communities of engaged individuals clustered around institutions, companies, or other relatively stable fandom-driven structures. Take, for example, the case of Engagmedia, which was established in 2005 as “a not-for-profit media, technology and culture organisation” to open up opportunities for regional social and political dialogue and action around specific causes.¹ Targeting primarily an audience of 600-million people spread across Southeast Asia who share concerns over climate change, human rights, freedom of expression, and
corruption, Engagemedia’s activities revolve around the creation and distribution of activist video content online. In a region where “hundreds of regional languages” (Engagemedia) are spoken, however, the movement of video content across languages must be supported by a robust network of “human rights and environmental translators and subtitlers” (Engagemedia) using Amara, the free and open source online subtitling tool created by the Participatory Culture Foundation.²

As is also the case with other organisational collectivities discussed by Pérez-González (2014: 65–71), amateur subtitlers working for Engagemedia operate under relatively tight structural constraints. Indeed, this collectivity runs an outreach project through which subtitlers based in different countries are trained in online video distribution tactics and strategies, the use of the organisation’s online subtitling tool and, more importantly from our perspective as subtitling scholars, a range of organisationally sanctioned “best” subtitling practices.³ The homogenising impact of such training programmes and quality assurance mechanisms is reinforced by the constraints derived from the very use of Amara to manage the socialisation of amateur subtitlers within the collectivity. Their guided involvement in the promotion of the organisational agenda through their translations “reproduces, to some extent, the institutional power relations that participatory media practices seek to challenge, [and] instantiate[s] a context of production that Foucault (1982) has labelled as technologisation of democracy” (Pérez-González 2014: 69). For while the empowerment of ordinary citizens to take on the role of subtitlers is driven by a democratising agenda, Engagemedia’s imposition of Amara allows it to retain control over the dynamics of the interaction within its community of translators, the material to be translated, and the mediating conventions deployed by subtitlers.

Ad-hocracies constitute the second type of digitally born amateur subtitling agency included in this overview. The term “ad-hocracy”, as conceptualised by Pérez-González (2010) in the context of participatory subtitling, designates a fluid virtual network of individuals who become acquainted with each other in a somewhat random manner—e.g. as readers of the same online news outlet—and decide to embark on a joint subtitling project by capitalising on their collective intelligence. Members of such spontaneously formed networks—hence the choice of the label “ad-hocracy”—are often driven by a desire to collaborate with like-minded individuals to challenge mediated public narratives that they do not subscribe to. In other words, through their engagement in the production and circulation of subtitled media content, members of these transient networks bring aspects of their identities to bear on their translation of
texts that they themselves have identified as instrumental in the pursuit of their strategic goals.

Pérez-González (2010), for example, traces the genealogy of an ad hoc activist community that sets out to subtitle into Spanish a televised interview with Spain’s former Prime Minister, José Maria Aznar López—originally broadcast in English by BBC News 24. The analysis shows how this ad-hocracy emerges through complex negotiations of narrative affinity among its members. It also reveals how the circulation of Aznar’s interview among Spanish progressive constituencies contributes to vilifying the former Prime Minister and, at the same time, resisting both the neo-conservative policies of G. W. Bush’s administration (with which Aznar was closely associated) and their consequences—not least the invasion of Iraq in 2003:

Presented with an audiovisual text which resonates strongly with their own ‘narrative location’ (Baker 2006), Spanish readers of a progressive blog appropriate, subtitle and circulate an audiovisual programme in an attempt to tamper with the dynamics of the global media marketplace [which did not intend this broadcast to circulate among Spanish-speaking audiences] and to promote their shared set of narratives vis-à-vis the [conservative] ‘public narratives’ (ibid.) that circulate in their environment. (Pérez-González 2010: 260)

Ad-hocracies—that tend to dissolve once the project has been completed—are more concerned with opening up a space for resistance and empathy than with advancing organisational agendas. Insofar as its members are “brought together because their diverse skills and knowledge are needed to confront a specific challenge” (Jenkins et al. 2006: 41), ad-hocracies are configured as horizontal networks. Although a certain degree of informal mentorship might take place within these groupings as members attempt to develop each other’s skills, ad-hocracies are not configured as hierarchical structures—with some members acting as supervisors of fellow subtitlers. This freedom from organisational constraints also means that ad-hocracies are more likely to rely on technologies of their own choosing, and make an experimental use of such tools as they collaboratively go about completing their subtitling projects. The fact that this type of subtitling agency prioritises the emancipatory role of digital technologies over its potential homogenising effects places ad-hocracies within the context of cultural production known as democratisation of technology (Foucault 1982).

The third and final type of amateur subtitling agency is the one constituted by a single individual. While the configuration of these one-
person agencies renders the study of the relationships between members unnecessary, it should not be overlooked that amateur subtitlers operating on their own work hard at nurturing close links with their respective communities of followers, as will be elaborated in the remainder of this sub-section.

台灣卖那 ("Taiwan, Shina", meaning "Taiwan is not Shina") is the name of a YouTube channel hosting subtitled media content that presents a very critical view of mainland China and the Communist Party of China’s policies. Although the owner of the channel does not identify himself or herself, their responses to questions, criticisms and praise by channel viewers—written in the first person singular—indicate that s/he hails from the Republic of China, commonly referred to as Taiwan. The owner’s antagonistic stance towards the People’s Republic of China is signalled by their use of the term 支那 (Shina) to refer to the Asian superpower as well as by the text featured right under the banner of their YouTube channel.4

支那五毛共奴跟狗，禁止入内
[Back-translation from Chinese] No entry for the members of “Fifty Cents Army” and the blind followers of the Chinese Communist Party.5

The collection of videos posted online by 台灣卖那 includes 海綿寶寶~僞大的主席: 毛哥 ("SpongeBob SquarePants: Despicable Chairman") (YouTube 2008), a Chinese subtitled version of “SpongeBob SquarePants in China” (YouTube 2007), a viral video parody of China’s culture, society and political system produced by Amsterdam-based media collective Boom Chicago to raise awareness of the continuing democratic deficit in that Asian country.6 In this film, SpongeBob and Patrick—whose appearance and accents have been modified to make them look Chinese—meet outside the latter’s house on a Sunday morning on their way to work. Patrick announces that he plans to take the day off, as he has used Google to learn about “Western customs of leisure time, including toilet breaks and actually being paid”. Shocked by Patrick’s announcement (which conjures up in his friend’s mind the image of the Google browser interface returning “0 results” for the search term “Fair Labour”), SpongeBob advises him to “stop making humour”. SpongeBob then adds that “soul-crashing labour” is the only way for China to “provide the West with affordable products”. Patrick, however, insists on exercising his “freedom of speech” and expresses his wish to be able to afford one day the goods that he produces—which prompts SpongeBob to impart more cautionary
advice. At the end of this subversive conversation, the two friends find themselves being quickly surrounded by members of the “Thought Police”.

By choosing to subtitle and distribute a subtitled version of this parody, conceived by its original creators as a ruthless critique of China’s human rights record, 台灣支那 mobilises narratives that are bound to resonate with a range of groups—including, but not limited to, supporters of Taiwan’s independence from China and Chinese liberals hoping for more ambitious democratic reforms within their own country. 台灣支那’s channel therefore provides these various constituencies with a virtual platform to articulate a sense of collective identity, a process which, as illustrated by the comments below, often involves negotiating ways around the expression of disagreement and differences:

熾炎使者 | 2 years ago
喂！你們也太過頭了，我知道中共不好，可是又不是所有中國人都是狗，也有好的啊！不準他們罵我們，我們卻狂罵他們，哪門子的歪理啊！？還有不爽也不用人身攻擊吧？大家都是人，何必相爭，不如和平共處，雙方一起獲利。記住！沒人喜歡被罵！

ee | 6 months ago
就讓他們自嗨吧 反正他們在那罵也代表不了甚麼

[Back-translation from Chinese]

熾炎使者 | 2 years ago
Hey! This is too much. I understand that the Communist Party is our enemy, but not every Chinese is a slave of the Party. There are nice people [in the mainland] too. Isn’t it unreasonable to want to curb their criticisms of us, on the one hand, but to criticize them on the other? There is no need to attack others even if you have a different point of view. Let’s maintain a harmonious relationship instead of inciting hatred towards one another. Bear in mind that no one likes to be criticised.

ee | 6 months ago
Just leave them alone. Criticisms on this page won’t make any difference anyway.

In his or her capacity as prosumer or consumer-turned-producer, 台灣支那 provocatively promotes a dynamic of debate and discussion around which a community of interest can be formed. So while this amateur agency revolves exclusively around one subtitler, the processes of technology-driven empowerment and participation underpinning this assemblage of mutually unknown viewers are also subject to negotiation
among various individuals. From our perspective as audiovisual translation scholars with an interest in the non-professional subtitling phenomenon, the social aspects of media practices undertaken by one-person agencies therefore deserve as much scholarly attention as the well-oiled processes of socialisation in organisational collectivities and ad-hocracies.

**Material aspects**

As has been argued already in earlier sections, amateur subtitling agencies can be theorised as part of the wider phenomenon of self-mediation. In this context, digital communication technologies are reconfiguring the processes of media production, distribution and consumption, and hence gradually blurring former boundaries between the audiences of fandom-driven and political activist textualities. Indeed, popular culture is no longer made up of artefacts and practices aimed at mutually excluding playful and ethical sensibilities. As Kaun et al. note, “[t]he personalization of digital media and the rise of user-generated content have led to an increased interest in personal self-expression of citizens as a political act” (2016: 1), irrespective of the type of text that may be at the heart of that act of self-expression. As popular culture continues to evolve into a platform where ordinary individuals negotiate their identities by sharing media content and experiences, hybrid interventionist agendas are bound to continue to spread apace—as illustrated by Boom Chicago’s use of a fragment of *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* (2004) to advance a political cause. In light of these developments, exploring the material subtitling practices associated with each of the three amateur agency types presented in the previous sub-section is likely to be more productive than structuring our overview along the lines of fandom- versus politics-driven amateur subtitling.

Subtitlers operating under the umbrella of organisational collectivities are normally unable to select the materials that they mediate. Members of Engagemedia’s subtitling team, for example, must choose among the range of videos filmed by the organisation, as long as they can produce a language version which is not already available online. In order to assist amateur subtitlers with the selection of their source text, the partnership Engagemedia/Amara provides them with a useful interface featuring details of the different language versions in progress, their respective authors and the corresponding “last edit” dates.

In addition to the restrictions on what can be subtitled, the expectation that amateur translators will adhere to a set of recommended subtitling
conventions places additional constraints on the material dimension of this practice. Engagemedia’s subtitling stylesheet, for example, seeks to standardise various aspects of the mediation process including, but not limited to, the timing and segmentation of subtitles. The hierarchical configuration of this organisational collectivity, however, is also evident in other workflow arrangements. Online forums monitored by Engagemedia’s communications and outreach coordinator are used to harmonise individual decision-making processes around difficulties that are not explicitly addressed in the organisationally sanctioned code of subtitling practice, as seen in the following example:10

Dave says | November 21, 2013
One question: for a shot containing important writing, such as graffiti, does one use quotation marks in the subtitle, i.e. “Danger: High Voltage”? 

Seelan Palay says | November 22, 2013
Hi Dave, quotation marks are usually used for quoted text such as a voice-over reading of lines from a book. Writing such as graffiti are usually displayed with brackets, i.e. (Danger: High Voltage).

By contrast, the raison d’être of ad-hocracies and one-person agencies—the other two types of amateur subtitling agency considered in this chapter—is predicated on their capacity to subtitle audiovisual texts of their choice, as illustrated by the Chinese subtitled version of “SpongeBob SquarePants in China”. More importantly, the mobilisation of such texts often involves a certain degree of remediation (Deuze 2006: 66), understood as the remixing of their chosen content with previously existing material or footage of their own creation. Driven by ordinary people’s search for mediated vehicles of self-expression, these assemblages or montages result from what pop culture hacker and transformative storyteller Jonathan McIntosh (2008) describes as

a process of Do It Yourself (DIY) cultural creation [which involves] transforming mass media fragments through re-cutting, recycling and re-framing messages. [This] is an increasingly popular and relevant form of remix that can at its best challenge dominant power systems, media and myths in our society, our culture and ourselves. It has the potential to help us imagine a better more just society and help illuminate corruption, hypocrisy and injustice in our world. These video works also have the ability to help nurture a critical talk-back culture of resistance and liberation […] rather than one of acceptance, obedience and acquiescence, producing a healthy skepticism and a critical eye in regards to the mass media and powerful institutions.
The transformative nature of the texts that ad-hocracies and one-person agencies choose to subtitle may arise from the remediation work of subtitlers themselves, although it is more frequent for them to select remixed content that is already circulating in their environment.\footnote{11} This is the case with Boom Chicago’s “SpongeBob SquarePants in China” remix that 台灣支那 chose as the basis for his/her critique of China’s human rights record. Boom Chicago remediated the original footage in a three-fold way. As far as the soundtrack is concerned, SpongeBob and Patrick, the two central characters, were rendered even more comic by the sure-fire device of giving them a feigned Chinese accent. Second, vaguely Chinese-themed snippets of music were superimposed on the original track to underline specific moments in the development of the narrative. Finally, the lyrics of the opening tune were significantly altered, as shown below, in anticipation of the criticisms that would be raised against China throughout the montage:

Standard lyrics of *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* (2004) opening tune\footnote{12}

\begin{verbatim}
Captain: Are you ready, kids?
Kids: Aye aye, Captain!
Captain: I can’t hear you!
Kids: Aye aye, Captain!
Captain: Oh... Who lives in a pineapple under the sea?
Kids: Spongebob Squarepants!
Captain: Absorbent and yellow and porous is he?
Kids: Spongebob Squarepants!
Captain: If nautical nonsense be something you wish,
Kids: Spongebob Squarepants!
Captain: Then drop on the deck and flop like a fish!
\end{verbatim}

Altered lyrics of “SpongeBob SquarePants in China” opening tune

\begin{verbatim}
Chairman: Are you ready, kids?
Kids: Aye aye, honourable Chairman!
Chairman: I can’t hear you!
Kids: Aye aye!
Chairman: Oh... Who lives in a take-out box on the seafloor?
Kids: Spongebob Squarepants!
Chairman: Who loves his brainwashing and always wants more?
Kids: Spongebob Squarepants!
Chairman: A strong Chinese army is something you wish,
Kids: Spongebob Squarepants!
Chairman: Then stop asking questions, and get back to work!
\end{verbatim}
Further examples of this transformative approach to the production of media content pertain to the modification or addition of visual material. In Boom Chicago’s parody, SpongeBob and Patrick have slanted eyes and wear typical Chinese peasant hats—as a result of a rough-around-the-edges redrawing. Likewise, the characters’ surroundings—both indoors and outdoors—feature various decorative elements of communist propaganda, Chinese iconic landmarks such as the Great Wall, or representations of war paraphernalia to emphasise the threatening rhetoric of the Chinese government, for which SpongeBob serves as a mouthpiece in this video.

In terms of material subtitling practices, 台灣支那’s subtitled version aims to amplify the remixer’s critical message, wrapping it in an accessible package for his/her Chinese-speaking audience to consume. Subtitles are thus presented in different colours to ensure that they can be read easily against the changing colourful background that viewers are exposed to in animation films. Likewise, subtitles are displayed in non-customary areas of the frame when, in 台灣支那’s opinion, it is necessary to translate written snippets of text embedded in the English version. An example of this can be seen in the opening fragment, where a freshly awoken SpongeBob gets up from bed and proceeds to tear the Saturday page (which reads “SAT DON’T HAVE BABY”) off his “mandatory government calendar” on the wall (0:34). The Sunday page then features the text “SUN WORK!” above a childlike drawing of four people queuing next to a factory, on which 台灣支那 has superimposed two Chinese subtitles meaning “Good day” and “I can go to work again!” (0:39). The wording of the subtitles, on the other hand, also panders to the personal narratives of 台灣支那’s presumed audience. The expectation that most viewers will align themselves with Boom Chicago’s criticisms of China account for a range of translation shifts in 台灣支那’s translation. “Aye, aye, honourable Chairman” (in the opening song) becomes 是的，偉大的主席 (“Aye, aye, despicable Chairman”). Similarly, the term (“fool”) chosen by SpongeBob to reprimand Patrick for announcing his intention to take the day off work because it is Sunday, becomes significantly more offensive in the subtitle (“傻 B”)—thus foregrounding the characterisation of SpongeBob as a pawn of the Communist Party of China (1:07).

The transformative potential of the text analysed in this sub-section has thus been enhanced through the deployment of translational strategies at two different levels. The first stage in the transformation of the text—involving Boom Chicago’s remediation of the acoustic and visual
semiotics of *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*—could be conceptualised as a translation of sorts, even though no interlingual transfer has taken place. As Baker (2013: 23–24) argues,

translation as such does not mediate cultural encounters that exist outside the act of translation but rather participates in producing these encounters. It does not reproduce texts but constructs cultural realities, and it does so by intervening in the processes of narration and renarration that constitute all encounters, and that essentially construct the world for us.

The renarrated text produced by Boom Chicago delivers a new version of the original and, at the same time, serves as the basis for yet another transformation of the text at the hands of 台灣支那. In the digital culture, amateur subtitling agencies play a central role in creating archives, understood as collections of various versions of a given audiovisual text. But while the involvement of organisational collectivities is almost exclusively restricted to the production of new language versions of the mother text, ad-hocracies and one-person agencies are part of a potentially much more complex mechanism of “prosumption” (Pérez-González 2014). In these transformative sites of media production and consumption, translation often encompasses elements of remixing and/or renarration, thus opening up unforeseen avenues for texts to realise their transformative potential. Ultimately, ad-hocracies and one-person agencies allow any text to grow and multiply in unpredictable ways, widening the range of versions held in its notional archive.

**New methodological directions in the study of amateur subtitling agencies**

The three types of amateur subtitling agency explored in this chapter can be placed on a cline of incremental autonomy. Organisational collectivities could be placed towards the extreme where structural embeddedness still exercises a constraining influence, while one-person agencies would be close to the opposite extreme, where consumers enjoy the latitude to generate and develop transformative media practices. With the digital media landscape continuing to evolve along these lines, audiovisual translation scholars could do with a new kit of conceptual and methodological tools. Admittedly, a number of theoretical frameworks and methodologies currently used in the field of translation studies may still assist analysts in understanding how knowledge and resources are deployed within the structures of organisational collectivities. However, the capacity of existing tools to yield insights into the complex dynamics
of collaborative environments such as ad-hocracies and one-person agencies is significantly more limited.

**Media sociology**

Advances in the field of digital media sociology deliver a more flexible and productive framework for the study of participatory subtitling networks. These “self-organising” systems (Fuchs 2001), scholars argue, ultimately originate from the interplay between the more or less entrenched stability of social structures and the fluid potential for radical innovation of human agents (Fuchs and Schlemm 2005). As has been illustrated earlier in this chapter, in these virtual communities the structural dimension of technology constrains and influences individual actions and ideas in what has been described as a downward process of domination (Fuchs 2002). For its part, the generative potential of human cognition paves the way for ever growing transformation, diversity and creativity—as part of an upward drive of agency. Notably, the concept of self-organisation—shaped by the mutually constitutive relationship between these downward and upward processes—explains how ad-hocracies and one-person amateur subtitling agencies manage to build “sociability support, information, and a sense of belonging” (Wellman 2002: 2031), despite exhibiting “less bounded social networks of relationships” (Wellman 2002: 2031). In the real world, a loose social fabric may not suffice to develop a sense of community. However, the collective knowledge generated by virtual networks of like-minded subtitlers sharing a set of collaborative technological resources contributes to forging a perceived shared identity among community members (in the case of ad-hocracies), or between an individual subtitler and his/her audience (in the case of one-person agencies).

**Netnography**

Understanding how fluid assemblages of ordinary people generate collective knowledge and ultimately develop a sense of mutual recognition, however, may not be possible if researchers confine themselves to scrutinising the subtitles produced by certain amateur agencies—particularly organisational collectivities. As Li (2015) shows, immersing themselves and participating in the subtitling work of these communities may be the most effective course of action for researchers to gain valuable insight into the collaborative dynamics at the heart of these networks. Adopting a “netnographic” approach (Kozinets 2010)—which boils down
to extending the principles of ethnographic research, originally formulated for the study of face-to-face encounters, to the study of computer-mediated interaction—allows the analyst to experience first-hand the constraining effects of structural embeddedness—whether in the form of editorial control, mandatory codes of subtitling standards, or simply peer feedback from fellow amateur subtitlers commenting on each other’s work. Apart from analysing episodes of contemporaneous computer-mediated interaction taking place within the collectivity, researchers may choose to deploy other complementary research methods; questionnaires, for example, can be used to elicit members’ views on their perceived roles within the collectivity or their motivations for joining the community in the first place. But netnographers investigating subtitling agencies may capitalise on the affordances of digital technologies in new and even more productive ways. Electronic archives, which in some cases may date back to the inception of the community, could potentially reveal invaluable information on the collective decision-making processes—either through records of past discussions pertaining to translation difficulties or priorities, or successive drafts of subtitles enabling analysts to trace the genealogy of the subitled text.

**Genetic criticism**

The insight that research on the work of translators may benefit from the analysis of archival data is by no means new. Proponents of “genetic criticism”, a method developed by French literary critics and scholars during the second half of the twentieth century (Falconer 1993), were the first to postulate that the final version of a given literary work is just one of the successive stages involved in the diachronic process of literary creation. From a genetic perspective therefore, the intermediate drafts or provisional versions are as worthy of research as the final product itself (Hay 1988, 2004). Indeed, this emphasis on the process of production also led genetic critics to attach great value to any complementary material that could shed light on the formation of the text under scrutiny. Extending the logic of genetic criticism to the study of subtitling agencies, I argue that the subitled media content produced by amateur agencies and held in electronic archives can also be conceptualised as palimpsestic material. Indeed, a genetic approach to the study of amateur subtitles could prove more suited to the study of unstable fluid data than more traditional methodologies concerned with the final translated work. As I have noted elsewhere (2014: 165), choosing a genetic approach to investigate “the abundant records of computer-mediated interaction available within
networked communities [could] assist researchers in unveiling original translations that may have been effaced to make room for later versions; establishing at which point modifications were incorporated; and articulating the rationale for the introduction of such changes”. The analysis of the compositional history of a subtitled text could be further enriched through a process of methodological triangulation—for example, by tracing back any changes in the subtitled text to specific discussion threads among community members or, more widely, to socio-political events that may have influenced their translation decisions in various ways.

This section has drawn on the premise that traditional theories and methodologies of translation studies—predicated on patronage models, under which new translations are commissioned from professionals, and held to be worthy of remuneration—are bound to find it ever more difficult to harness the changing dynamics of amateur translation in the informational society. Against this background, it has been argued that netnographic and genetic research methods are emerging as viable tools to investigate the collaborative, peer-production structures that lie at the heart of self-organising subtitling agencies in the digital culture.

Concluding remarks

Amateur agencies are becoming increasingly popular platforms for the self-mediated expression of quotidian experiences and concerns through the production and distribution of subtitled media content. These self-organising assemblages, whose members come together to negotiate ethical and playful aspects of their identity, simultaneously empower ordinary citizens to claim a voice in public life and foreground the potential for exploitation of their work by commercial interests. Because digital media practices are in constant flux, any attempt to provide a systematic classification of the contexts in which amateur subtitling emerges is destined to suffer from a certain belatedness and come across as reductive. Leaving such inescapable belatedness aside, the theoretical and methodological challenges that amateur subtitling presents for audiovisual scholars are likely to continue to rank high in their research agendas in years to come.

Indeed, the impact of participatory translation practices—and the wider non-professional translation phenomenon—may have implications for the translation industry that we cannot yet foresee. Among other things, amateur subtitling is redefining the relationship that has traditionally existed between original texts and their translations. Easier access to digital technologies and virtual networks of collective intelligence is
enabling the production and circulation of several translations of the same original text—all of which become part of that text’s archive. In this context, some remixes—in their capacity as renarrations of the original content—and subtitled texts may become source texts for the production of newly translated texts, either into the same target language or a different one. In the fast expanding meme culture, where everybody is an author, distinguishing between the authoritative Ur-text and the growing range of versions circulating at any given time is bound to pose significant problems for scholars—particularly in the case of texts with a strong “field of gravity” and semiotic power (Sandvoss 2007: 22–24) like the ones fandom-driven communities are typically attracted to. Ultimately, non-professional audiovisual translation will serve to foreground the generative potential of the notion of “archontic text” which “allows, or even invites, writers to enter it, select specific items they find useful, make new artifacts using those found objects, and deposit the newly made work back into the source text’s archive” (Derecho 2006: 62). At a time when popular culture texts are constitutive of a global textual multiverse, the production of every new translation will bring about a realignment between previously existing translations, in terms of their relative authority or semiotic power, as well as between such translations and the original.

References


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**Notes**


“Shina (支那, pronounced [ɕiːna]) is a largely archaic Japanese name for China. The word was originally used neutrally in both Chinese and Japanese, but came to be perceived as derogatory by the Chinese during the course of the Sino-Japanese Wars. As a result, it fell into disuse following the Second World War, was replaced by chūgoku (中国), and is now viewed as an offensive label by most Chinese”. (Wikipedia’s entry on “Shina”. Available online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shina_(word). accessed on 13 August 2016.)

According to Hatton (2015), the “50 Cent Army” is made up of volunteer Internet commentators hired by the Chinese government “to plant comments on the internet in support of the Chinese government […] as part of their initial attempts to join the ranks of the Communist Party, a bureaucratic process that often takes years”. 50 cents is the fee that these volunteer commentators are paid for every comment they post online.

According to Boom Chicago’s own website, “SpongeBob SquarePants in China” represents their most successful post YouTube era viral creation, with over 80 million views (http://www.boomchicago.nl/history-new-page, accessed 13 August 2016). At the time of writing, the Chinese version subtitled by 台灣支那 had been viewed 736,433 times.

These comments are available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slq4uRVQwIo (accessed 13 August 2016).

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For more examples of the work of ad-hocracies and one-person agencies, see Pérez-González (2014: 245–250).

I have used italics to highlight the words which have been significantly modified in Boom Chicago’s adaptation.

The original footage begins with a static image of Captain Patchy, an intentionally stereotypical pirate character who features in live-action segments of various SpongeBob SquarePants specials and acts as host of real life fan events (http://spongebob.wikia.com/wiki/Patchy_the_Pirate, accessed 13 August 2016).

In Boom Chicago’s parody of The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie, the image of Captain Patchy has been replaced with the iconic portrait of Mao Zedong (sporting a pirate’s patch over his left eye) that hangs over Tiananmen Square. The mouth of the “honourable Chairman”, as he is referred to in the song, moves as he delivers the words of the tune.

This shift is based on the use of homophones. While 偉大 (wěi dà) means “great”, 偽大 (same pronunciation) means “despicable”.

Chinese Internet users often use the letter B in lieu of the final character 尿 (pronounced as “bi”) in a number of words, e.g. 傻 B (“stupid”), 裝 B (“poser” or
“B (‘cool’), on account of its semantic vulgarity (屄 literally means ‘vagina’ or, more crudely, ‘cunt’) (Moore 2016).