

Hacktivism and Alternative Journalism: The Case of the French YouTube Channel Thinkerview

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INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2012, a new YouTube channel named *Thinkerview* was created in France. This channel only contains interviews, between guests and a journalist who does not appear in front of the camera. The frequency of these interviews notably increased between 2013 and 2018. As of 30 November 2018, 126 interviews had been recorded and posted, with durations of between 16 and 140 minutes. The existence of such channels was made possible because of the creation of the YouTube platform in February 2005 (Jarboe, 2011, p. 2), a platform that allowed people to create and edit videos, and make content available immediately, online (Burgess, Green, 2018). Furthermore, it is possible to archive and show old interviews on the platform, thus creating a historical background, which is necessary in order to show a long-term perspective¹. By means of self-generated YouTube channels, new media actors have emerged on the scene, regularly publishing content (Al Nashmi et al. 2017, p. 169 ; Bärthel, 2018, p. 30). *Thinkerview* describes itself as a web channel designed to establish a new model of interviewing. Thinkerview's self-description refers many times to the existence of a "community", as if there is an "anonymous collectivity" (Castoriadis, 1975, p. 433) that supports the programmes and proposes the questions addressed to the guests.

This chapter analyses the positioning and format of a channel that claims to have a close relationship with, and to represent, hacktivists. Here, hacktivism is not seen as a form of criminal manipulation, but rather as referring to the hacker culture, within which people share information and promote full transparency. At the same time, hackers are people who have strong computer skills, and understand the script sources of the Internet (Frichot et al., 2014, p. 8). The interviews are conducted with people who were engaged in sensitive matters, such as the intelligence services, security, hacktivism, investigative journalism, criminal justice, and geopolitics. Lawyers, journalists, and former French Senior Defence staff have been interviewed, and they've provided details about their fields of experience.

What are the characteristics of the YouTube channel *Thinkerview* that distinguish it from classical media in France? In order to describe the work of that channel, it is important to use the concept of Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA), that focuses on the interactions between the *medium*, the actors, and the scenography. In other words, CDA does not limit itself to the words pronounced by the actors, but analyses the context and social position of the actors. The scenography is also very important, as it creates a specific atmosphere. Scenography is a word borrowed from the theatre, that focuses on performance: "Exploiting the physical power of the performer in the space can illuminate the text, especially if the performers feel confident that they are the primary storytellers" (Howard, 2009, p. 33).

In analysing scenography, it is important to focus on the concrete details, such as the construction of the interview, its announcement, and the preparation of the guest. The guests have up to two hours to answer all kinds of questions regarding their jobs, salaries, activism, and political and philosophical backgrounds. Our hypothesis here is that this channel institutionalizes a new critical medium, offering another perspective on the current situation. Thus, these channels can be seen as a form of alternative journalism (Atton, Hamilton, 2008, p. 123), with the aim of uncovering and exposing aspects of contemporary reality that are not covered by classical media. The channels give a voice to investigative journalism and critical thinking, in order to question the dominating discourses. This chapter analyses this “posture” (Panier, 2008, p. 73), in order to see whether the interactions between the guests and the journalist tend to develop a critical discourse on the methods of conducting journalism (Peters, Broersma, 2013). CDA is useful here, as it offers a critical approach to a discourse that pretends to be critical. Hence, it is important to question whether the characteristics of this channel fit its initial intentions.

BACKGROUND

Hactivism is often associated with a form of counterpower, where people get access to secret information. Hacktivists advocate for free access to information and data; they were behind the promotion of free software that does not depend on corporate interests (Krapp, 2011, p. 27). They sometimes denounce the manipulation of information, and propose a new process for evaluating facts and information (Coleman, 2014). A hacktivist is a person who does not accept the expansion of the surveillance society, and who fights for the truth even if this posture contradicts the principles of the State. From the point of view of the security forces, a hacktivist can be a spy, who tries to get access to hidden information while serving the interests of a political power (Guldikova, Santagati, 2000, p. 40). According to Taylor, there was an evolution from hacking activities to hactivism, “an activity that began in the mid-1990s and which refers to the combination of computer-hacking techniques with the real-world, political-activist ethos of new social movements, DIY [Do It Yourself] culture, and anti-globalization protests” (Taylor, 2004, p. 486). Numerous studies have also focused on the instability of cyberspace (Lucas, 2016, p. 17), and the possibilities of manipulating information (Bidgoli, 2009).

At the same time, a hacktivist is also someone who can troll and use non-conventional actions that are criminal (Goode, 2015: 76). The issue of hackers is innately related to cybersecurity issues; hackers are always anonymous, and the frontier between good and bad hackers depends on the context. “More particularly, the hacker community, which forms a strong part of the hacktivist community, is intrinsically linked to the resistance-facilitating potential of technology, challenging established operational and behavioural standards” (Karagiannopoulos, 2018, p. 7). In other words, hactivism is linked with a radical form of freedom of expression, and illustrates a form of electronic civil disobedience (Karagiannopoulos, 2018, p. 49; O’Malley, 2013, p. 140). There can then be a juridical difficulty in determining whether a hacktivist community is simply an outlaw group with illegal behaviours, or whether they are only trying to enlighten the people’s critical thinking. This ambiguity is challenging, as hackers can perceive themselves to be electronic secret agents (Webber, Yip, 2018).

CDA has an interesting perspective, as it focuses on the methodology, rather than on a set of methods. “Settling on a methodology for a particular research project is not just a matter of selecting from an existing repertoire of methods. It is a theoretical process which constructs an *object of research* (a researchable object, a set of researchable questions) for the research topic by bringing to bear on it relevant theoretical perspectives and frameworks” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 225).

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