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Chapter 4

VIRGINIA TECH MASSACRE: WHEN A DISRUPTIVE MEDIA EVENT TRIGGERS AN ONLINE COCOON COMMUNITY

Nathalie E. Paton

Abstract

This study examines the integrative nature of a disruptive media event, the Virginia Tech massacre, in relationship to the way it is experienced by 124 YouTubers from the day of the shooting to six weeks later in order to question communal association in the new media setting. The analysis of the narrative structure of tribute videos highlights the public expression of emotion that materializes through a digital spontaneous shrine. A cocoon community is forged through performative acts of language, material practices and self-recognition, and is underpinned by a common narrative whose terms aim at demonstrating social unity. By means of this new ritual of participation, those affected by the social ordeal, yet unbound by pre-existing ties or previously engaged in YouTube, come together online. The participants engage in a transformative process as a state of individual grief and sadness evolves towards one entity, uniting against the perpetrator. By engaging in this community, one can answer a need for togetherness, take support offered by others, and leave this experience behind under the impression they have united with society as a whole. In this sense, participation in cocoon communities reinforces autonomy by gathering strength from the community but without the constraints and responsibilities attached to pre-existing or lasting ties.

Key words: school shooting – disruptive media event – cocoon community – Virginia Tech massacre – online participation– digital spontaneous shrine – YouTube

Introduction

In this chapter, I give an account of the formation of an online Cocoon Community that emerged on YouTube in the midst of a highly publicized media event. On 16 April 2007, Seung-Hui Cho, a student from the university of Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia, USA, slaughtered 32 people on campus before killing himself. Related to previous school shootings such as Columbine, this episode of violence was immediately characterised as the Virginia Tech massacre and made headlines worldwide. The aim of the chapter is to demonstrate how Cocoon Communities materialize in the wake of adversity and lead towards a transformative process where online participants, yet unbounded by preexistent ties, overcome the social ordeal of this global media event by momentarily uniting. Cocoon communities are defined in this chapter as a formation of aggregated individuals that merge into one entity, in a temporary manner, when faced with a social ordeal, namely adversity. This allows the participants to overcome the hardships encountered and reinforce autonomy by gaining strength from the collective entity thanks to the empowering nature of the anonymity of this type of gathering. One of the particularities of this type of Cocoon Community is the demonstration of the power of the collective entity backed up by the belief that society is coming together as a whole. Therefore, I will show

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that participants engaged in such gatherings can answer a need for togetherness, take support offered by others, and leave this experience behind under the impression they have united with a society as a whole. In this sense, participation in Cocoon Communities reinforces autonomy by gathering strength from a secondary community but without the constraints and responsibilities attached to pre-existing or lasting ties. In order to demonstrate the formation of an online Cocoon Community, I focus on YouTubers' media participation, namely commemorative videos, in the days and weeks that follow the disruptive media event, given the integrative nature of media events, and thus the potential of such situations to produce sociation anew. I observe how, performative acts of language, material practices and self-recognition lead to the formation of an online community. Then, I highlight how a common narrative, whose terms aim at demonstrating social unity, underpins the gathering. Finally, the analysis emphasizes the specificities of this gathering and the unique form of sociation that took place on the occasion of this disruptive event on YouTube, that is a Cocoon Community. When speaking of sociation, I draw directly upon Georg Simmel's conceptualization of association that links a specific content to its shape, each being respectively constituted by the interaction of elements (1972). For Simmel, individuals are the root basis of any historical reality, and nothing is social in itself. Interaction allows the formation of social materializations as sociation transforms aggregation of individuals into forms of being with and for one another (Ibid.).

First, it is necessary to set the stage of this research. Presenting the case at hand will allow me to stress the integrative nature of media events, and discuss how new media interplay into this dynamic, notably by means of media participation. This leads me to highlight the formation of online spontaneous sanctuary, further to which this research will begin.

The integrative nature of media events

Within an hour of the Virginia Tech massacre, broadcasters, the perpetrator, and citizen journalists coproduced this massacre as a global media event. Such media events can be interpreted as collective rituals provoking a rupture in daily life, maintaining (Durkheim 2001 [1969]) or restoring social solidarity (Turner 2008 [1969]). Understood as such, media events are first determined by their ability to trigger social integration, thus constituting one of the most important institutions regarding the dispersion of individuals within a society (Hepp & Couldry 2010). Indeed, they allow a shared sense of community (Shils & Young 1956; Dayan & Katz 1992) while creating collective sentiments and specific meanings (Cottle 2006). Their study is therefore central in that they allow one to examine concerns expressed about the growing atomisation of society, the dissolution of social links, if not the disappearance of social structures altogether, leading to the introduction of a "liquid society" (Bauman 2000).

However, if media events are perceived as a means of integration, their conceptualisation is largely based upon the live broadcast of pre-planned events such as the Olympic games (e.g. Roche 2006) or Diana and Charles's wedding (e.g. Dayan & Katz 1992), whereas the Virginia massacre media event is not pre-planned but "disruptive" (Liebes and Katz 2007: 32). It corresponds to what Liebes calls a "disaster marathon", that is "a communal public forum where tragedy is the emotional motor which sizzles with conflict, emphasizing anxiety, argument and disagreement" (Liebes 1998: 76). Moreover, the integrative character of the media ritual has been questioned since its first conceptualisations (Rothenbuhler 1988; Zelizer 1993; Weimann & Winn 1994), in such a way that it becomes necessary to examine their appropriation by audiences case by case (Hepp & Couldry 2010).

The integrative nature of media events and the underlying social ordeal of a disruptive event represent an excellent opportunity to conduct research on the type of sociation that emerges in such instances. Such situations indeed potentially lead to the formation of a Cocoon Community, as the context possesses one of the qualities specific to Cocoon Communities: adversity calling for solidarity and unity.

Experiencing media events through media participation

In the present instance, the media effervescence engendered is tangible: media coverage leads to the interruption of the usual programs, continues over several days and morphs into a media spectacle (Kellner 2007). Only a few rare events, such as September 11th 2001, have ever benefitted from such extensive coverage (Tyndall 2007). However, people do not remain passive in regards to this spectacle; their experience of the media event is constructed through media participation in an era where convergence culture has become the norm (Jenkins 2006). With the substantial increase in the public's use of new technologies to keep informed and to communicate following the Virginia Tech event (Palen, Vieweg, Sutton, Liu&Hughes 2007), this experience is notably constructed through participation of Internet users in various digital platforms. The reconfiguration of the media scene, with the introduction of new technologies and actors quick to adopt such devices in every day uses, has indeed been accompanied by a technological as well as a relational shift, so much so that it is now misleading to speak of media reception (e.g. Livingstone & Das 2009). Instead, media participation determines users' relationship to media events. It therefore seems essential to examine this new way of experiencing the event constructed at a distance from the local event, exclusively mediatised by technological devices such as smartphones or computers, and grouped together in a potential observation point, Internet. If the media events had a communal character, what happens when secondary reception takes place in digital platforms?

To reply to this question, I have observed an online distribution platform, in this case YouTube. When I first turned to the self-produced videos published on YouTube, a "spontaneous shrine" (Santino 2006), also known as a "virtual memorial" (Foote 1999), was noticeable. In lieu of souvenirs brought to the site of the event, the Internet users materialise a deathscape (Hartig & Dunn 1998; Kong 1999; Maddrell & Sidaway 2010) online, via commemorative videos. Spontaneous sanctuaries are part of the cultural repertoire of emotional expressions of public mourning in Western culture, sparked by the traumatic loss of "bad deaths" (Bradbury 1993: 59), that is to say, innocent people who have died in violent circumstances. This format of participation thus prolongs existing practices that, in the case of Virginia Tech, are present on the very site of the event (Jones 2009). The creation of a spontaneous online shrine embodies a new collective ritual associated with mourning and death. Spontaneous shrines also translate an evolution in social dynamics in regards to the extension of mortuary practices in the public sphere (Hallam & Hockey 2001). By subscribing to an online platform, the private action of crying for the dead thereby becomes accessible to a worldwide audience.

Focusing on community

The formation of a spontaneous shrine via these media participations does not tell us much about its communal dimension, nor whether the media event constitutes a means of social integration. Such productions can very well be perceived as a collective gathering in

which one remains alone (Dobler 2009). This leads me to try and see if these individual practices go beyond individual performances in producing social ties between individuals. If so, what type of sociation is at stake? What are its particularities? In other words, do global media events, and more precisely Virginia Tech, still form a means of social integration, via the formation of a community, in particular when individuals shape the event online?

When referring to community in an online setting, the terms of virtual and online communities immediately pop up as they were amongst the first terms introduced to capture social connections online (e.g. Hiltz 1984; Rheingold 1993; Oldenburg 1989; Jones 1995; Smith 1992). They draw directly upon conceptual frameworks that characterize structures of social organizations before the advent of the Internet. Such a transfer implies the legacy of some of the qualities linked to the idea of community. After examining the various understandings of the term community used in the sociological literature between 1918 and 2003, Schrecker demonstrates that the concept of community conveys values linked to emotional and social solidarity, warmth, intimacy and autonomy, subordinating its use to an emotional scope (2006). In the discussion of online communities, "the main difference seems to be redirection of emphasis from geographic place to a feeling or sense of collectivity" (Jankowski 2002: 37). If the concept of community is "central to present-day studies of the Internet", strong controversy amongst scholars has nonetheless muddled the possibility to assume communities online a priori/ de facto, whether due to the inaccuracy of the concept of community in itself (e.g. Stacey 1974; Fernback & Thompson 1995) or linked to the Internet setting (e.g. Stoll 1995; Calhoun1991). In my opinion, Bruckman (2006) was right when he stated that community is a concept that has fuzzy boundaries, best defined by its membership. Accordingly time is better spent focusing on how communities are created, evolve and cease to exist. I will therefore not only determine the strength of integration of the media event in this chapter, and the sociation engendered, but first and foremost, I will establish the communal dimension of the association under study.

To tackle these questions, I begin by taking a closer look at what underlies the aggregation of media practises on YouTube concerning the Virginia Tech massacre. My focus then shifts towards the narrative structures of the videos selected in order to identify the common denominators of the different formats of participation. This will allow me to demonstrate the expression of a shared set of emotions through which a social ordeal is determined. The analysis of the ways in which this social ordeal leads to the surfacing of a common narrative will allow me to underline how a community emerges from performative acts of language, material practices and self-recognition. Finally, this chapter will present the unique form of communal association that took place on the occasion of this disruptive event on YouTube, that is a Cocoon Community.

Method

Specific difficulties emerge when working on disruptive media events as there is no way to predict beforehand when the event will take place, how long it will last in terms of media hype, or the relevance of the topic for the audience. In addition, it entails monitoring activity as the event unfolds. I had to determine what I was studying, how I was to study it, while I was studying it.

My work began within hours of the shooting on 16 April 2007. I decided that the study would be centred on amateurs' participation rather than professionals' publications, even though this distinction is fragile (Burgess & Green 2009), considering the object of my investigation was explore the integrative force of events on their audiences and the type of

sociation. An ethnographic study regarding participants' activity on YouTube was conducted. Online ethnography can be considered as a variant of ethnography, as it mobilizes qualitative methods to examine how meaning is constructed online. Its specificity mostly relies on the adaptation of methodological tools to the Internet environment in regard to the blurry boundaries of space, an evolving database, the textual nature of exchanges. Another way to frame this type of ethnography is to compare it to virtual ethnography (e.g. Hine 2000), even though the terms of cyber-ethnography (e.g. Teli, Pisanu & Hakken 2007; Keele-Browny 201), netnography (Kozinets 2002) or webnography could apply as they are all loosely related. I decided to observe without interacting, as supported by the adaptation of ethnographic methods in ethnomethodology, and thus comprehend the conversations in their "natural situation". Immersion was conducted until the observed phenomenon died out, the length of the investigation respecting the life span of the media event, in this case six weeks. During this phase of the investigation, time was spent journaling the participants' online activities, scrutinizing profiles, reading threads of discussion, watching videos, following connections between Internet users on the basis of visible exchanges. Data was mainly retrieved through snowball sampling and guided to gathering audiovisual productions, screenshots of profile pages and "natural conversations" (held about the videos, in discussion forums and within profiles surrounding videos).

This led me to spot different types of participation. Communal associations became clearly distinguishable according to two dominant forms of participation: public debate and commemoration. The public debate typically took the form of vlogs, on the basis of which amateurs deliver a monologue about a personal experience or a point of view in front of the camera. The conversations engaged by these means contribute towards the formation of a public opinion by provoking debates, staging viewpoints, taking standpoints against or for the school shooter's acts. As for the commemoration, usually named "tribute" or "memorial" by the audience, it either took the shape of subcategories such a remix or a musical performance. This second format had the distinctive feature of representing a new rite of participation specific to tragic events. It seemed as if dispersion and disruption were predominant amongst contributors to the first format whilst the second one called upon the community. Moreover, the commemorative videos converged on YouTube shaping this platform into a deathscape.

Within the frame of the current chapter, I center my attention on this second format of participation, which corresponds to the analysis of the audio-visual and discursive productions published by 124 users. The users were selected based upon their videos; the constitution of the video sample itself was intended to be representative of what I observed, that is to say different types of personal tributes addressing the tragedy of the Virginia Tech massacre. It also included the most popular and/or most viewed videos (according to the YouTube rating system in June 2007). The analyses were completed with preliminary statistics. My sampling is composed of men and women between 17 and 44 years old, who are not regular video producers on YouTube. A majority of Americans in the database stresses the fact that the topic under study is of national concern, undermining the global scope of the Virginia Tech media event. That being said, 23% of my sample is constituted of people coming from other countries, in particular English-speaking countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia (11%). My analysis does not highlight these statistic characteristics of the sampling since a small majority of the users do not register this type of information on their profiles, and even when they do, there is no way of knowing if the information is accurate or not (e.g. Turkle 1996, 1998).

Coming together online

This platform was selected based on the gathering that took place on 16 April 2007, the actual day of the Virginia Tech shooting. The most popular videos located on the site's homepage, in addition to the important quantity of self-produced videos published on the Virginia Tech massacre, indeed allowed a glimpse at a more or less organised gathering of individuals or groups. This aggregation of media practices forms a sort of sociation thanks to the functionalities of Web 2.0, and more specifically folksonomy. As stated by Vander Wal, "folksonomy is the result of personal free tagging of information and objects (…) for one's own retrieval"[i] (2007). In other terms, users collectively classify content by creating and managing tags, which in return allows the videos to be indexed and referenced by YouTube's research engine. Subsequently, the platform classifies videos so that it is possible to identify the most popular content relating to a precise subject (Smith 2004) among Internet users in a specific place and time. This social classification of content, remarks Vander Wal (2007: http://vanderwal.net/folksonomy.html), is not so much the object of categorisation as a way of connecting items to provide meaning in their own understanding. Thus, personal indexation of the contents engenders articulation between centres of interest, subjects of discussion, tastes, like connection nodes. Communal associations are thereby established, intentionally or unintentionally, from the editorial logic of social aggregation of user-produced content.

This aggregation of media practices on YouTube is constructed over time. The numbers presented hereinafter contain the flaw inherent to the YouTube search engine approximations on which my estimations were based. However, as of the first day of the Virginia Tech massacre, I identified almost two thousand videos published on the subject. The next day, on 17 April, two thousand additional videos were uploaded, yet the following day the production fell by half to reach only about one thousand videos. During these first three days, the media hype is tangible, even more so because other forms of participation take place at the same time, such as textual comments or viewings of a video. Even if there is an aggregation of media practices linked to Virginia Tech, the phenomenon decreases from day to day to completely fade out of the picture one month later. On 23 April 2007, a week after the massacre, roughly five hundred videos are uploaded onto YouTube. The number of publications then drops to two hundred to three hundred videos fifteen days later, and the phenomenon has run its course when one month later, the number published drops to under fifty videos a day. This coincides with the progressive decrease in mass media coverage (Tyndall), directly linking participation to a top down logic.

The aggregation of media practices centred around the event on the YouTube site, as short as it was, reveals one of the manners in which the audience experienced the massacre. This experience becomes a part of the participants' lived experiences. Beyond this, the coproduction of the Virginia Tech massacre as a global media event engenders a transformation of practices. This aggregation of practices has the double particularity of regrouping individuals who are not used to participating in YouTube through self-produced videos, nor communicating among themselves. Analysis of the number of videos produced and the date user accounts were created shows that almost half of those studied in the sampling used YouTube for the first time, 48% of them published less than 8 videos and 11% created an account specifically for this reason. It is therefore not the regular YouTube producers who constitute the core of the group observed. Likewise, observation of exchanges between users as well as account subscriptions leads to assert that these persons were not connected before the event. This modification in practices triggered by

the massacre leads to believe that people become involved online in order to come together.

At this stage, it is however impossible to determine links between people, nor the type of formation. It remains to be seen whether this participation led to a particular type of communal association between individuals, or if on the contrary, it is simply an aggregation of individual practices, the regrouping of which is only in appearance.

Commemorating through remixes or musical performances

There are different types of tributes within the realm of media practices. The analysis of the video narrative structures enabled me to discover several formats of participation. The narrative structures were determined by analysing the main thread that organized the different significant elements of the semiotic material. Hereafter, I will take a closer look at two sub-formats of participation directed towards the social consequences of the event. Their common denominator is that they constitute commemorations attempting to pay tribute to the victims as well as to those affected by the massacre.

In the first format of participation, the audience adopts the contents broadcast by news agencies and produced by cultural industries. Remix structures these self-produced contents. Amateurs reorganise, reassemble, and add sound to pre-existing contents. Close to "fan vidding", that is to say videos created on the basis of the material of one or more visual media sources, as described by Henry Jenkins. This type of remix creates a "communal art-form, one contrasting with the commercial culture from which it is derived" (1992, 249). The distinctive element of this format lies mainly in the fact that it is articulated around those affected by the massacre. This translates into videos composed of victims' images, slides personifying each victim, and/or images of those mourning on the campus, plus an evocative song choice. If I take the example of *deepkholi*'s video[ii], the narrative structure framework consists of three facets of the event placed side by side: several frames dedicated to the deceased with pictures of those killed during the shooting; the crisis represented by pictures of first aid workers, special units and police officers; then, the emotion aroused by the massacre, particularly among Virginia Tech students, and the materialisation of this emotion with images of the spontaneous on-site shrine. Music plays in the background; *Enya* interprets the song *Adiemus*. Other videos of this first format focus more on the deceased. One such example is the video entitled "Virginia Tech Tribute"[iii]. It clearly illustrates the homage paid to victims in taking time to characterise them: for each victim, a frame contains text (a short description of the person's biography) followed by another frame with the victim's picture.

The second format of participation is constituted of musical performances, most often personal compositions. Amateurs compose lyrics about the massacre before making a video. Then, the song is either, pre-recorded and accompanied by a remix of images showing the place where the massacre took place, or performed facing the camera in the same style as a video-blog, namely a vlog, that is to say face-to-face with the camera. This second format is different from the preceding due to the musical composition but also the importance of self-staging. Amateurs create these tributes through the representation of one's self, materialised by the use of the body. This second format can take on several forms. The videos can correspond to a sort of vlogging: with a webcam, the composer-songwriter records facing the camera[iv] or from a profile shot[v]. One of the most representative examples is the video uploaded by *tngregory*. He sings *Mad World* facing the camera, without adding any other shot to his video than his musical performance. Musical performances closer to a video clip are also found in this category. The person acts out a scene as if on-stage – via a specific position of the body, the use of a decor, the

addition of special effects, etc. –creating an image depicting himself. Thirdly, the composer-songwriter can propose a remix of images to which a soundtrack is added against the backdrop the person's musical composition. Some of the remixes are similar to those analysed in the preceding part: amateurs use the same images as those previously mentioned.

Differences are perceptible within and between the formats as these self-produced videos are first and foremost an expression of individuality, accounting for the "textualized self" (Silverman1994: 90). Each video may be a personal tribute, and thus autonomous from the other videos; however, their assemblage materialises a deathscape on YouTube. They are also signs of recognition, placed in the public sphere, whereby each person can be assured of people's presence and acknowledgement of this collective drama. We shall see that these self-produced videos converge with textual publications to define a social ordeal through which individualization admittedly occurs. Most importantly, the shape of an online Cocoon Community is outlined.

Collective emotion as a sign of social ordeal

Underlying the commemorative tributes is the expression of collective emotion, revealing how the Virginia Tech event is defined as a social ordeal, underpinned with pain engendered by the death of innocent people. To palliate this social ordeal, media participation serves as a form of empowerment, leading to individuation of participants.

Whether in the first or the second type of video, the commemorations are alike: a flood of images and/or music that focuses on sensation rather than a closed discourse. This recourse to sensation allows the expression of emotions where words are lacking, as *dnegel2006* remarks:

> A tribute to all of those lost at VT I didn't know what to say because I'm speachless (sic) so I thought I would make this tribute to let it say what words just can not manage (dnegel2006, 17, UK)

Likewise, the self-produced videos are oriented by the emotional energy invested in the Virginia Tech event, translated through qualifiers – such as pain, revolt, sadness, shock or trauma[vi]-visual representations–images of flags at half-mast, students crying, groups of students joined in prayer–or music. This emotional energy is attributed to the "bad death" of innocent people and the absence of meaning in such a death. This is what *willworkforwwe* illustrates in an extract from a news broadcast in his video[vii]

> I don't understand why they would do something like this. It seems really senseless and it's really hard to think about why all these people had to die for no reason (willworkforwwe, M, 19, USA)

The same feeling is expressed by *tombstonetom* in his comment. By putting his feelings into perspective, he leans towards the sense of togetherness that emerges from such a situation:

> It is times like these that we most vividly see the fragility of life, the strong bonds of love that unite us, the cost of apathy that endangers us, the heroics of many and the horrible pain of mental illness that drive a very few to do such horrendous acts. (tombstonetom USA)[viii]

These emotions do not concern only a handful of individuals, such as the victims' families. The emotion is collective. Even if these videos commemorate those directly implicated on the site of the tragic events, *dnegel6000's* video, for example, explicitly shows that the commemoration is addressed to all those affected by the shootings, including those who had no close-knit ties. The comments left in regards to commemorative videos stress this communal feeling more than the videos themselves. For example, amongst the first comments received on phoenixgenesis's video *Mad World: Virginia Tech Memorial*[ix], expression of communal sentiments is patent:

> Very moving tribute to the senseless tragedy at VT. although im (sic) not part of the VT community, we all are Hokies! my prayers in sincere sympathy to everyone associated with VT. Go Hokies.....! (tyler18, M, USA)

> Thank you. Choice of song very appropriate. God Bless Virginia Tech and the entire nation. (sunshinelikeslaughs, 45, USA)

> R.I.P to all the victims, and to the family and friends of them who need our prayers the most. (SirBlackhawk5, USA)

Online participants reach out to one another by stating their emotional implication and sharing words of comfort, reinforcing the sense of collective emotion:

> i'm freanch (sic) and i'm really sorry...i'm very sad for all of you and i would say that i'm with all of you...really sorry... (pierressssssssssssss, F, 24, France)[x]

The self-produced videos, the textual comments and the underlying descriptions use various qualifiers that illustrate the wide range of people affected. For example:

> all who are hurting, mourning and left lost (skyhost, M, 41, USA)[xi],

> those left standing (rddowni, M, 22, USA)[xii],

> everyone affected by the April 16, 2007 shootings (deepkholi, 22, USA)[xiii] ;

> the sons, the daughters, the spouses, the friends, all those we have loved and lost (djchuang, M, 41, USA)[xiv].

Given the absence of meaning in the death of so many innocent victims, and the underlying emotional energy, Virginia Tech is defined as a social ordeal. This ordeal is best characterised by Nikki Giovanni's poem "We Remember" (read during the commemoration ceremony held on site on 17 April 2007)[xv].

> We are Virginia Tech. We are sad today. And we will be sad for quite a while. (…) We do not understand this tragedy. (…) No one deserves a tragedy. We are Virginia Tech. The Hokie Nation embraces our own and reaches out with open heart and hands to those who offer their hearts and minds. We are strong, and brave, and innocent, and unafraid. We are better than we think and not quite what we want to be. We are alive to the imaginations and the possibilities. We will continue to invent the future through our blood and tears and through all our sadness. We are the Hokies. We will prevail.

We will prevail. We will prevail. We are Virginia Tech. –(Nikki Giovanni, University Professor, 64, USA)

This poem, quoted in numerous publications, labels the Virginia Tech massacre as an incomprehensible and unjust event to be faced, thus a social ordeal.

Media participation appears to be a way to face the collective emotion. For example, *wyattsmommy* specifies under her video[xvi] that:

This is the only way I know how to deal with my grief... (wyattsmommy, F, 37, USA)

Another Internet user expresses similar ideas:

This is the first time Ive (sic) ever uploaded a video on Youtube and I'm proud to have made this for all the lives lost on 4/16/07. It seems something small that I can do to help people always remember. (anakin2187, 20, USA)[xvii]

By sharing their emotion online, participants palliate the effects of the collective emotion felt due to the Virginia Tech media event. In this sense, media participation can be understood as a form of empowerment that facilitates individualization (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001). This positive reading of how new technologies aid the process of grief must not undermine the fact that this new ritual of participation is directly linked to the way news is coproduced by the mass media as a central focus of attention. The prerequisite to collective emotion remains the media framing of the Virginia Tech massacre. Furthermore, media participation is at this stage disconnected from an immediate form of communal association. It serves to palliate the collective emotion but does not eliminate the social ordeal. It is through the designation of this social ordeal that a community emerges.

Recognition of a community defined by solidarity and comfort

The definition of Virginia Tech as a social ordeal is the starting point from which a collective "us" is outlined; what stands out is that those involved will undergo this ordeal "together" demonstrating solidarity and seeking comfort. The media event is therefore a vector of social integration leading to the formation of a community. I will now examine how this online community emerges.

Within the self-produced videos, the use of different text, sound and visual signs, shows a sort of attachment. They recycle the various effigies of Virginia Tech University (emblems or colours of the university), certain slogans, especially "Today, we are all Hookies" or "We are Virginia Tech", and songs composed in commemoration of the massacre (for example *Forever Changed We are all Hokies Today*[xviii]). Each of these attachments materialises the fact of belonging to a community. Over and above attachment, media participation guarantees the existence of an imaginary community. Benedict Anderson introduces the notion of imaginary community to highlight the existence of the idea of a nation, amongst people who will never meet their fellow countrymen, by means of adhesion to a collective imaginary (1983). When speaking of an imaginary community, I insist on the fact, the community at stake is imagined, and grounded by emotional legitimacy. Such a projection becomes a reality for the participants. In this instance, the imagined community is established through enunciation of formulas such as: "the world mourns with you"[xix], "Hokie and Nation World"[xx], "VT, Australia is with you"[xxi] or "humanity is united behind you"[xxii]. Through the proclamation of these

imaginary communities, a collective entity takes shape and is defined. The collective entity is produced through performative acts of language and material practices.

This collective entity is defined by two characteristics: comfort and solidarity. *Rsschi* highlights the fact that people unite in the face of social ordeal, and by doing so bring comfort to those affected:

> My intent for this video was to capture how people can come together in time of tragedy and hoepfully (sic) bring some comfort to those who are suffering through such a horrific loss of loved ones lost in this tragedy. (rsschi, F, 40, USA)[xxiii]

This point of view is enhanced by many messages such as these:

> Please know that America's Heart and Soul are with you all on this most tragic day, You are not alone, and we will always keep you in our hearts. May God Bless all of you angels RIP[xxiv] (antman, M, 21, USA)

> My heart goes out to everyone hurting becaue (sic) of the tragedy at Virginia Tech. Please know that humanity is united behind you. May angels lead you in.[xxv](Quin1984, M, 22, USA)

> May this video comfort you in your darkest hours[xxvi] (BigKahunaSnake, 19, USA)

Messages of solidarity and comfort are often visible in the choice of music accompanying the tributes. Songs such as *Lean on Me* or *Never Alone* evoke the way in which the video producers place themselves as potential providers of support in regards to this ordeal. There are not only messages, but also acts of solidarity. The fact of producing these sorts of videos shows numerous signs of commitment on the part of the participants: they materialise the solidarity and comfort provided by the community. In an even more tangible manner, certain Internet users organise events to show their support. *Evanmusik* suggests making a contribution to a victim support committee, by offering to donate the fees earned from his musical composition[xxvii].

This collective aspect is not simply produced through performative acts of language and material practices or defined through acts. Internet users follow through with self-recognition. One of the videos from the sampling constitutes a collective entity by regrouping different emblems of solidarity posted on YouTube. This video is not so much addressed to victims as to the audience; as the user states, the video aims at reflecting the "solidarity that has been shown and continues to be shown to this fine university"[xxviii].

As heterogeneous as the types of envisioned collective entities may be, their enunciation and materialisation, as well as their self-recognition, converge towards a common narrative, whose terms aim at demonstrating social unity. Through these testimonies, we clearly see how the event, defined as a social ordeal, is a vector for strengthening social integration. The event allows people to gather together to draw on collective strength, to find the warmth and comfort needed to make it through the ordeal. Underpinning this form, the gathering online possesses some of the characteristics usually affected to a community, such as fusion and togetherness. This gathering becomes the synonym of "the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships" (Williams 1983 [1976] 76). With the Virginia Tech event, a community thus appears. The benefits of the community as evoked by Edith Turner (2004), joy and healing, clairvoyance and mutual assistance are rediscovered. This community garners resemblance with what Bauman

(2000: 200) describes as “cloakroom communities”: disparate individuals who put aside any signs of division to associate through attention to the same spectacle for a very limited amount of time. The life span of such a gathering is indeed limited to the timeframe of participation, which does not exceed a single or a few publications, as the observation of user accounts in the sampling establishes. This is one of the characteristics defining this community. Likewise, they unite in the face of a spectacle of violence, showing no tangible signs of division in their publications, only claims of unity. Their relationship to a common experience of the media spectacle of violence marks the second characteristic of this gathering. However, the observed community differs from the one described by Bauman, in that this community is constructed in response to adversity, implying more than the mere disappearance of division. In this latter respect, and in many others as I will show, the online gathering appears to be a Cocoon Community. I use the term Cocoon Community in accordance to Fred Dervin and Mari Korpela’s conceptualisation of the term, understood as a secondary predominantly short-term community linked to a specific purpose that is voluntary and can be emotionally rewarding. However, in my work I insist upon what allows such a community to emerge, namely adversity – shaped as a social ordeal in this instance – and give a particular spin to such communities, since I perceive them as transformative processes, as I will now explain.

Experiencing an online Cocoon Community

In opting for the use of the expression Cocoon Community, I focus upon certain distinctive features of this type of gathering.

The first feature is related to what creates this gathering: a social ordeal underpinned by adversity, which in turn calls for comfort and reassurance. One of the main aspects of this community is that it offers a shield against painful ideas when faced with reality difficult to process. The return of repressed ideas – such as death, the fragility of life, the lack of control over what happens – is overthrown by reassurance and protection. If in this case, adversity takes on a negative spin, in my opinion, Cocoon Communities do not only emerge when faced with a social ordeal or situations perceived as bad ones. Adversity is encountered throughout life and can take upon different forms. It simply implies a dilemma or a struggle to cope with the advent of a new situation one is confronted with. This type of Cocoon Community appears when faced with situations that require strength and call for support, as sociation will allow to alleviate some of the ordeal, given the shielding character of such gatherings. As if participants were within a cocoon, engaging in this community offers a safe environment in which one can be protected as those who inhabit it metamorphose into one being, a collective entity.

The second aspect of this community proceeds from the previous characteristic. Community entails mutation: partaking in online communication implies a process, one of transformation into a single entity. The participants progressively depart from a state of individual grief and sadness to evolve towards collectivity. This is directly related to the gathering’s anonymity and the strength of the event.

They are not individuals bound by preexisting ties. As the members of the community point out, they are not from VT, they did not witness the tragedy first hand, they are mere distant spectators who are affected by what happened, uniting around the media spectacle of violence. Their presence online in the realm of YouTube can be interpreted as geographical proximity, but this place is unrelated to a shared proximity on the site of the disaster or even prior engagement on YouTube. They are not tied together by face-to-face interaction. Interaction and community are mediatized by individual performances at a distance that converge in an online place. The fact that they communicate via this digital

platform implies that the members of this community have little knowledge of the person with whom they are uniting. In this anonymous setting, interaction is solely constructed around what is expressed through participants' visual and discursive representations. This anonymity may be one of the inspiring factors and attractive features to partake in online activity: it not only sets users free of prior representations of one another, it strengthens the belief that such an ordeal unites people above and beyond the physical presence of beings. It concerns everyone.

One of the main particularities of this Cocoon Community, and the third aspect I would like to emphasize, is the belief that they are living a unique experience in a small window of time, linked together by the power of the event. This experience can take on a more positive spin, the central aspect remaining is that it is perceived as an extraordinary moment in the midst of which fusion is experienced. In this case, not only people who knew members from VT are concerned: society as a whole is implied. As Couldry points out, the media event celebrates "the myth of the mediated center" of society (2003). The boundaries are set by the voice of media who assert that society as a whole is concerned. The excluded person against whom they unite is the perpetrator. Inclusiveness knows no boundaries, as they become one entity and not a reunion of individuals. The feeling of inclusiveness is very close to what is captured in the expression "we the people". This impression dispenses the idea of a sentiment associated to the strength of collective entity. In this sense, the number of participants does not shape the size of the gathering; it transcends the apparent members, the few members with which they interact.

Because the participants are absorbed by the effervescence of the event and the media hype, they are under the impression that an extraordinary fusion is taking place. Yet, media participation rapidly declines and no long-term ties take shape. The extent of the transformation has to do with the level of engagement; in the present case, we can imagine it to be rather minor. The process of transformation is nonetheless exemplified through this empirical study.

The last aspect that must be stressed is the positive benefits from reuniting in such a way. Through the temporary experience of an online community, people benefit from the positive effects of community through a virtual co-presence, without the attachments and constraints that can be perceived in the local community or in face-to-face relationships. This seems even more conclusive since the resorting to an online platform allows entrance and exiting of the community at will. Due to the public aspect of YouTube, any Internet user can express private feelings in public on the basis of which a community can be invoked. In the same manner, people can easily withdraw from this community, ending participation by stopping the exchanges, or completely depart, by deleting the publication itself. Such a community comes about in a setting of individualization in which one answers a need for togetherness, takes support offered by others, and leaves this experience behind with the feeling they have united with the epicenter of society. In this sense participation reinforces autonomy by gathering strength from the community but without the constraints attached to pre-existing or lasting ties.

Conclusion

The public expression of emotion linked to the disruptive media event of the Virginia Tech massacre materialized a deathscape on YouTube where commemoration was established through tribute videos. By means of this new ritual of participation, those affected by the social ordeal could come together online. This gathering allowed the observation of an online Cocoon Community, forged through performative acts of

language, material practices and self-recognition, and underpinned by a common narrative whose terms aimed at demonstrating social unity.

The gathering is circumstantial. Media framing sets the stage for participation to take place as the event is portrayed as unique and altering. This disruptive event can be interpreted as a cry for togetherness linked to the evocation of death that speaks to our humanity in a very different way than other media events. In response, Internet users, unbound by pre-existing ties or previously engaged in YouTube, converge online to forge a Cocoon Community. In this regard, individuals voluntarily stepped into a stage disconnected from their usual habits and set out the possibility of uniting around a secondary community. Such media practices demonstrate a momentary but high level of social integration: participation becomes a way to face adversity together, in the midst of a social ordeal.

Online participation in spontaneous shrines is not a gathering in which one remains alone, as portrayed by Dobler (2009). Such a perception, as accurate as it may be to describe the level of interaction and communication between online participants, misses the point of the feeling engendered when taking part in such gatherings. This feeling is directly linked to the type of sociation at stake. Cocoon Communities provide shelter, comfort, and relief through a sense of togetherness. This directly draws upon a second aspect tied to Cocoon Communities as participants engage in a transformative process. They leave a state of individual grief and sadness to unite and gather strength from collectivity. Such a sociation demonstrates the power of unity where federation results in a display of strength. Inclusiveness is all mighty, as they become one entity against the perpetrator against whom they unite.

All in all, through the temporary experience of an online Cocoon Community, one can just as well answer a need for togetherness, take the support offered by others when faced with adversity, and leave this experience behind while feeling empowered as the participants have united with a collective entity in the face of adversity.

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