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Reactive Communities and Affective Intensities. A Methodological Proposal to Seize the Formation and Circulation of “Anti-System” Assertions on a YouTube Channel

Abstract: Based on a research project on “reactions to Dieudonné” – named after a controversial comedian repeatedly condemned for antisemitic speech –, this chapter examines the constitutive dynamic of the collective phenomenon drawn by the comments of Dieudonné’s YouTube channel. It develops the idea of a reactive community, that takes shape in reaction to an “enemy” or the so-called “system”, and that is characterised by a propensity for internal conflicts. It shows how reactive community might offer a relevant analytical grid for understanding the proliferation of antisemitic, homophobic and sexist statements.

Keywords: YouTube channel, antisemitic, polemic, affects, reactions

Based on a research project on “affective intensities and reactions to Dieudonné” (Quemener 2022) – named after a controversial comedian coming from the world of “café-théâtre” (French theatre comedy), repeatedly accused of and condemned for antisemitic speech –, this chapter examines the constitutive dynamic of the collective phenomenon drawn from the comments of Dieudonné’s YouTube channel. dieudonné is a Black comedian, whose career as a stand-up performer started in the 1990s in a famous duet with a Jewish partner Elie Semoun, before they split at the end of the decade. Soon after he started a solo career, some of his public statements on Jews and the memory of Jewish genocide during the Second World War started to draw attention from the media. The wave of reactions Dieudonné provoked rapidly turned into repeated polemics and a strong public reprobation of his statements and persona, leading to his banishment from mainstream media in France. From the 2010s, parts of the controversies became displaced online. The series of websites and more blatantly the YouTube channel created by Dieudonné and his production company Les Éditions de la plume in 2014, thus became a privileged space for “counter-publics” (Fraser 2001) and for a self-identified “anti-system” phenomenon.

To better grasp the dynamics of discussion involving Dieudonné, our research has drawn an innovative approach from affect theories and, what we call in Cultural Studies, the “affective turn” (see Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Alloing

and Pierre 2020). Such an approach appears relevant considering both the historical depth of the polemics and controversies¹ that punctuate Dieudonné's career and the intensity of the online phenomenon that we analyse in this chapter. It allows us to emphasise not only on the signification processes but also the intensification dynamics constitutive of the different polemics. More specifically, considering the highly conflictual and oppositional dimensions of these exchanges, this chapter defends the idea of a reactive community. This community takes shape “against” or in reaction to what is labelled as an “enemy”, often described as the “system”. It is also characterised by a strong propensity for internal conflicts and by the valorisation of the fact of reacting to any kind of topic or intervention, that are known to be polemical and/or that are constituted as polemical by the reactions they engender. In this chapter, we argue that reactive communities offer a relevant analytical grid for understanding the ways in which disqualifying discourses, especially antisemitic, homophobic and sexist statements, and conspiracy-inspired ideas are collectively recognised and erected as a mark of an “anti-system” posture and as a token gesture to becoming a respectable “anti-system” subject.

1 A Polemical Context

Since the beginning of the 2000s in the public debate, the name Dieudonné has regularly been associated with antisemitic views and with polemics and controversies, nourished by expressions of indignation and vivid condemnation. In mainstream media, more specifically in the daily national press, these polemics have materialised into peaks of media coverage. They show a progressive involvement of several public personalities coming from the world of comedy and the arts, as well as from non-profit organisations fighting against anti-Semitism and racism. They expanded in 2003 after a controversial performance on 1st December on the TV show *On ne peut pas plaire à tout le monde* broadcast on the public channel France 3 in which Dieudonné ironically invited young people from suburban areas to “join the axis of good, the American-Zionist axis”. Perceived as an-

¹ Based on a discussion of the definitions given by Bruno Latour (2005), Michel Callon (1991), Ruth Amossy (2014) and Juliette Rennes (2016), we make a distinction – that does not exclude overlapping – between the two communicational phenomena, considering the emotional expressions and verbal violence of the polemic and the confrontation of arguments and points of view of the controversy. Later in this chapter, we substitute this rather reductive dichotomy with the term “phenomenon made of chain reactions”.

tisemitic, this performance marked a turning point in the mediatisation of the affairs concerning Dieudonné, with the implication and public condemnation of politicians and important government figures.

Two other episodes punctuated media coverage and signalled an intensification of media attention towards Dieudonné. The first one concerns the 2009 meeting of Dieudonné with the leader of the alt right party *Le Front National*, Jean-Marie Le Pen, who notoriously became the godfather of one of his daughters. This meeting took place soon after the invitation on stage of Robert Faurrison, a historian known for his negationist theories. Staged as acts of provocation, intended to catch public attention, this new proximity changed the way media looked at the so-called “slippages” (“dérapages”) of Dieudonné and introduced the potentiality of an ideological conviction and project, serving the alt right, consisting of anti-Semitism and negationist views. Later, even though Dieudonné never clearly asserted his support for the alt right, he did not remove the doubt surrounding his potential ideological acquaintances (see Charaudeau 2015). Following those events, his name has been associated with a potential for polemics and extreme right ideas.

The second moment of intensification lies in the “Valls/Dieudonné affair”, that in 2013 to 2014 saw the former minister of Domestic Affairs and former Prime minister Manuel Valls opposing Dieudonné. After the broadcast of an explicit antisemitic excerpt from Dieudonné’s show *Le Mur*, Manuel Valls, who was at the time in charge of Domestic Affairs, decided to ban the show using the legal argument of preventing the risk of “troubles to public order”. The mediatisation of the affair reached unprecedented heights, with almost 700 articles in a month in the national daily press and, at its peak, ten articles a day in some major newspapers. It drew upon two dynamics of intensification, one made of a polemical string, nourished by expressions of indignation and rejection, depicting Dieudonné as a repulsive person, the other made of a controversial string, with the exchange of legal arguments and a debate about the legitimacy of banning the show *Le Mur* in the name of “troubles to public order”.

In these successive incidents of intense public attention, the media played a driving role. Yet, it would be presumptuous not to consider the essential implication of Dieudonné himself who built his notoriety on a discourse of victimisation and a denunciation of what he never stopped describing as unfounded accusations of anti-Semitism. This assertive image of victimhood, both on stage and in his online productions, relies on a posture of counterattack and systematic responses to public statements about his persona. It legitimises and nourishes a presumption of racism in the media, among the public and political elites, as well as, more generally, a paranoid representation of media and politics from the perspective of which the consensus about his banishment is considered dubious. It is also an economical force for Dieudonné’s production company, which takes ad-

vantage of the adoption of an “anti-system” position. In this logic, the stage has first established itself as the most important space for the development of this distrustful discourse and of responses to accusations of anti-Semitism. In his shows, Dieudonné clearly promotes a discourse of competing memories, opposing the treatment of the Holocaust and that of colonialism in France, and a stereotypical representation of the so-called “Jewish lobby”, which presumes domination by “Israel”².

The other major space of expression for Dieudonné is the web. Since the 2000s, Dieudonné has developed multiple websites. The early ones presented themselves as being animated by fans – the mobilisation of fans appearing as a strategy to mediate the voice of Dieudonné without assuming responsibility for the consequences of it. Despite some suggestions of anti-Semitism, they mainly deployed an Afrocentric discourse and created an impression of networking, staging their support to supposed allies – whether those were, or not, willing, or indeed real allies. Afterwards, Dieudonné and his production company, *les Éditions de la plume*, built a real online ecosystem made of: 1) an official, commercial site, *dieudosphere.com*, that sells DVDs of Dieudonné as well as tickets for his shows and that appears as the respectable showcase of his productions; 2) a more controversial website, *Quenel+*, presented by a convicted murderer, Germain Gaiffe-Cohen, and supplied with conspiracist and negationist articles from “reinformation” websites; 3) a YouTube channel, banned twice by the platform for “non-compliance with YouTube community rules”.

The YouTube channel which caught most of our attention for this research creates a space “in-between”, as proven by the editorial line of the videos, that hails the “dissidence” (a specific branch of the alt right movement), supporters of both alt right and alt left parties, fans or former fans of Dieudonné, as well as ordinary YouTube users, who might stumble by accident – thanks to the algorithm used by YouTube – upon a video of Dieudonné. Considering these different interpellations, videos of news and political comments mostly contain potentialities for polemics and the perspective of vivid debates – a perspective that the exploration of the comments confirms. The exchanges on YouTube appear as very conflictual and draw a strong opposition between supporters and detractors of Dieudonné. In this sense, the activity of the YouTube channel can be considered a pole of reactivity, co-constitutive of a triangle dynamic with the two other poles – the mediatisation and Dieudonné’s productions. The whole question is how users appropriate and inhabit this space that is deemed, by mainstream media and by

² We use quotes to insist on the fantasised and repulsive images of Israel in Dieudonné’s productions.

Dieudonné himself, as “anti-system”, and how to qualify the phenomenon they constitute regarding its conflictual dimensions.

2 Theoretical Challenges

To seize the conflictual dynamic on the YouTube channel, this research had to face many theoretical and methodological challenges. Coming from representation and discourse analysis, we first tried to develop a discursive approach of the phenomenon with limited outcomes. A quick look at the online exchanges enlightens our theoretical dilemmas. Indeed, the collective phenomenon constituted by the YouTube comments appears to be very conflictual and highly “reactive”. It shows chains of reactions, especially in the threads, that accelerate or decelerate, intensify, or weaken, designing specific temporal and relational dynamics³. Second, the conflictual dynamic of the YouTube comments proves to be changeable. Far from drawing a single line of conflict, it translates into multiple discourses, points of view, opinions and into several threads of opposition, that intermingle, overlap and subsume one another. Articulated with the previous point, it appears that the dynamics of intensification rely on entangled and co-constitutive logics of opposition. Eventually, despite the apparent dispersion of comments and exchanges, the collective phenomenon seems to embrace a common “anti-system” positioning, that intertwines with antisemitic views, opening a pathway to explore the way this “anti-system” and “antisemitic” dynamic materialises.

Considering the characteristics of the phenomenon, we realised that it was better to draw on its contradictory, “reactive” and sometimes tortuous features than look for “rational” conflicts of arguments and ideological unity. In other words, instead of highlighting the signification systems of the online exchanges and searching for a clear ideological line, we focused on the propensity of the phenomenon for intensification and its dynamic of chain reactions. We thus developed an approach that we referred to, after Lawrence Grossberg’s work (1992a and b), as based on “affective intensities”, and privileged the understanding of the affective dimensions of the phenomenon. In this approach, affects are considered as a force of encounter between texts, images and people, drawing distinct arrangements on different scales (see Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Puar 2005, 2012; Pailler and Vörös 2017). The aim of the study is to make sense of the relational and agential dynamic designed by online exchanges and comments and reflect upon their ideological ef-

³ Suh affective dimensions of online practices are part of recent works: Marwick and boyd, 2010; Rogers, 2020.

fects and the power relationships they constitute and nourish. The focus is on comments as effects and on the effects of comments – that is to say, on comments as reactions and the reactions they create.

To make such an approach operational, we distinguished between two scales of analysis. The first scale is the macro-level that might correspond to, as we would call it, a macro assemblage (see Grossberg 2010; 2015). This level of analysis implies understanding the spatial distribution of comments on the YouTube channel by considering their specific timelines and chronologies or, at least, their (dis-)continuities. At this level, comments stand as traces of investments – they say something about the way the commentators get involved with the channel – but, more prominently, they participate in the importance and the value of the topics they are attached to. In other words, they take part in the valuation of certain topics by designating them as worthy of discussion and involvement as well as by shaping attention around them. Consequently, as Grossberg (1992a) suggests in his writings, looking at the macro-assemblage allows us to understand and design a “mattering map”, meaning the topics and fields that are constituted as mattering and worthy of attention. In this process and dynamic, things that matter come with sensitive expectations – pleasure, disgust, hatred, love – that legitimise the involvement and the valuations that constitute them.

The second level of analysis is the micro-scale. It comes with a strong consideration given to digital devices, as both permitting and constraining practices, as well as favouring, in some ways, the intensification of exchanges. This level of analysis requires specifying what we mean by considering comments not only as text or images that produce significations but as reactions responding and leading to other reactions. Despite the insistence on the dynamic dimension, the notion of reaction implies a focus on the semiotisation of emotions in digital devices (see Ahmed 2004a and b; Julliard 2018). Whether they refer to explicit or implicit expressions of emotions, comments as reactions interest us as indicators of the accepted and acceptable, authorised and valued forms of the expression of sensitive feeling at a given time and in a given context. They reveal the way feelings might be expressed and which expressions might have value in this specific context. They “perform” feelings and sensibility through an ethos, that is to say they produce behaviours, attitudes, ways of taking part in a conversation through writing, vocabulary and speed of response. They display what is permitted in this space as well as what is designated and imposes itself as respectable (see Skeggs 2015, 2010, 2018; Skeggs and Wood 2012). They thus draw the valorised behaviours of this specific community and constitute regimes of value and respectability.

According to this approach, the macro- and micro-levels are co-constitutive even though they have an autonomy, do not necessarily match with one another and might not intermingle. To make sense of intensification processes, we thus

mainly examined the sequences and chains of reactions and responses drawn by comments, especially in threads but also outside specific threads and the dynamic they contribute to that are created at the macro-level. This understanding of such a dynamic allows us to grab the “configuration of attention”, equivalent to the “mattering map” developed by Grossberg (1992a), constitutive of a specific space – here the YouTube Channel –, and the regime of values that come with it. Which topics, which issues, are given attention? How does this “configuration of attention” overlap ideological effects, by putting on the agenda certain questions instead of others? What does it tell us about the issues and topics that are instituted as worthy of attention and involvement?

In this perspective, this configuration/mattering map is also considered as a potential site of conflicts and resistances that might lead to re-assemblage. Such conflicts can lie in a relational positioning, sometimes opposition, to other spaces, such as the mainstream media (see Dalibert, Lamy and Quemener 2016). They can also happen at the micro-level and translate into negotiations and vivid discussions in comments and threads. The understanding of the micro-level thus gives us keys to identify how conflicts take shape as much in terms of views, opinions, definitions, as in terms of ethos, behaviours and value issues. It allows us to draw the line, in permanent actualisation, between “good” and “bad” subjects and seize emotional orientations to specific objects and identify figures of taste and disgust, love and hate (on Dieudonné’s channel such examples are “the Jews”, “Israel”, “the system”) which reflect the ideology of the community.

3 Methodological Challenges

The two levels of analysis we identified in theory have given birth to a distinguished “methodology tinkering” (Lécossais and Quemener 2018). To avoid strong bias in the selection of comments, we first decided to study the channel as a whole. Beside the analysis of a sample of the 343 videos published between August 2014 and December 2017 and of the editorial line they design, we collected all the comments associated with them, that is to say 150,504 comments corresponding to 39,395 accounts, and created a few quantitative indicators using a range of Excel functions: 1) the “conversational performance” of each video (see Pailler and Cervulle 2014, 2015); 2) the length of each comment in number of characters; 3) the place of the comment in the conversational dynamic (“single comments”, “triggering comments”, “comments in threads”); 4) the thread length, based on the number of replies; 5) the date and the distance between the publication of the video and comments. The main purpose of such a collection and codification was to map com-

ments using triangulations, pivots tables, correspondence of variables, and to grab peaks of activity and intensification of exchanges without ignoring the low activity spaces that condition them. It was also to create the conditions for zooms into the corpus and to understand the phenomenon at a local scale.

Despite the possible decontextualising effects of the Excel table, we paid attention to the mapping of comments as the effect of algorithms on the layout of practices (see Rieder, Matamoros-Fernandez and Coromina 2018) that materialise for instance in the circulation of videos or the highlighting of certain comments and threads. Moreover, we created an indicator that soon became structural allowing us to make sense of the distribution of comments and the intensification dynamics that we called “profiles of activity” based on the number of comments per account on the whole channel, weighted by the tendency to concentrate or spread comments out across different videos. These profiles of activity are a way of describing the activity and a kind of involvement on the channel considering that these are constituted and shaped by the comments in our corpus. They allowed us to make a correlation with the level of activity and length of the discussion threads and to examine the different assemblages of profiles that might lead to intensification dynamics.

Moreover, this last indicator seemed relevant in distancing oneself from a view of digital activity as expressions of identity (see Allard 2007; Allard and Blondeau 2007; Georges 2009) or designs of visibility (Cardon 2008). Even though comments refer to and produce identity marks, these appear so diverse and dispersed that they do not impose themselves as the most heuristic way to grasp the collective phenomenon on the channel. The indicator “profiles of activity” marks our refusal to fix accounts into specific identities or to think of digital activity as the inscription of pre-existing (offline) practices. Instead, it apprehends each account as being defined and constituted by a modality of intervention and the involvement that it makes and draws, and to examine the effect of such activity, in relation, in specific videos or threads, to opinions, ideas and predilection topics. Thus, one major issue was to identify the activity of these different profiles within the channel, the topics, expressions, vocabulary and opinions they may bring and initiate while they circulate across time and space – here across different videos – and their role in the intensification processes.

To complete this general understanding of the arrangements on a macro-level, we developed a micro-scale research through a targeted study of certain parts of the corpus. This study aimed to understand dynamics of discussion on the local scale by looking at the specific sequences of comments, repetition processes, use of emotional expressions and argumentation. Attention was given to the correspondence between “styles” of writing, topics, opinions and emotional display and the different profiles of activity and even, identified commentators.

On this scale, some evidence became significant, for instance the message form including length, internal organisation, punctuation, typography, or the use of emojis. Another interesting point was to earnestly consider the (sometimes tortuous) argumentative logics, the development of demonstrations and their tone. All these elements contribute to design-accepted behaviours, ways of interacting and relating to Dieudonné and to other commentators, and thus to create the ethos of the channel.

4 The Assemblage of Diverse Profiles

The indicator “profiles of activity” led us to distinguish between three major profiles. The “passers-by” include accounts with very low activity – fewer than five comments on the whole channel – that nevertheless nourish all kinds of comment spaces, whether they are characterised by low, average or intense activity. They cover the vast majority (88.3%) of the 39,385 accounts for 37.7 percent of the comments. Materialising the ordinary course of the channel, their activity consists in commenting on few videos – most of the time even a single video – and making do with short, ephemeral interventions. They form the highest proportion of comments in the hours following the broadcast of the video and a large proportion of the comments triggering discussion threads. They make up a significant part in medium and long discussion threads. The “regulars” refer to middle-range commentators – between six and 50 comments on the whole channel. They form 12.1 percent of the accounts for 40.9 percent of comments in our corpus. They take part in local processes of intensification, either by feeding the ordinary course of exchanges through practices of dissemination of single comments on the channel or, for a minority of profiles, by concentrating their comments on a limited number of videos and/or on one or more discussion threads, showing an involvement in specific topics.

Finally, the “very active profiles” refers to an important activity, in the long run or in a short period of time. They form a visible part of the channel’s population, despite their modest number – 0.6 percent of the accounts for 21.5 percent of the corpus. They distinguish themselves as major drivers of intensification dynamics in two different ways. Some “very active profiles” play a big part in disseminating topics, opinions and positions within a large number of videos (up to 50) and nourishing discussion threads on those topics. Some others tend to concentrate their comments on a limited range of videos. They may then get highly involved on a local scale, by producing up to 300 comments on a single video or even in a single thread. For most of those profiles, comments are generally long

and located in the discussion threads they feed into. They often assert opinions, positions and points of views, sometimes relying on conspiracy and alternative theories. Though they might appear very disparate and contradict one another, they share a common ethos, performing a refusal to give up and leave the last word to another commentator without a victory.

All these profiles form an unstable and living phenomenon. Identifying them provides tools to draw the dynamics of intensification in the different spaces corresponding to the videos of our corpus. The advent of spaces with little sustained activity and low-intensity phenomena is based on the assemblage of “passers-by” and, to a lesser extent, of “regulars”, especially those with a strong tendency to disseminate comments on several videos. These two categories of profiles are characterised by short and punctual interventions, with a limited propensity for long and extended exchanges. Mainly located in the single comments, they tend to bounce off the video itself through a set of critical or laudatory comments. The exchanges in which they are involved are similar to chatter, often ephemeral, without a strong guideline and above all without a driving force. The study of the spaces with little sustained activity does, however, make it possible to identify some of the drivers of the intensification phenomena. On the one hand, the interventions of “passers-by” and “regulars” with dispersed activity participate, by accumulation, in the activity of the whole channel and can even, in a few rare cases, constitute their own intensification dynamic. On the other hand, the presence of commentators with a more systematic response practice is necessary to trigger discussion threads. The exchanges that increase in intensity are by consequence proportionally limited.

The advent of spaces with moderately sustained activity and phenomena of medium intensity is based on the most balanced combination of profiles. Within the latter are “passers-by”, “regulars” and “very active profiles” with dispersed activity, who produce a set of one-off interventions and provide the basis for short or medium-sized discussion threads, particularly through their triggering comments. The presence of a reasonable proportion (over 20%) of “regulars” with average (meaning neither too dispersed nor too concentrated) and concentrated activity points to more sustained local investments, marked by a logic of insistence and replies within discussion threads that are consequently lengthened. Even though these logics are not intended to last forever, they give rise to a series of comments which may attract the attention of new commentators and lead to a diversification of profiles. Finally, within these spaces, a few “very active profiles” stand out in the longest threads and impose themselves as local sources of intensification alongside the “regulars” with average or concentrated activity.

The advent of spaces with very sustained activity and high intensity phenomena is based on a significant reversal in the composition of the profiles. The profiles

with dispersed activity, whether they are “regulars” or “very active”, gradually give way to profiles with average and concentrated activity. The mix that emerges is somewhat complex. First, the “passers-by” and the “regulars” with dispersed activity continue to feed the single comments and the short and medium-sized discussion threads, which they help to trigger. They are joined by “very active profiles” with dispersed activity that play a big role in triggering discussions in different spaces. All these profiles support the dynamics of intensification through occasional interventions in the longer threads that feed either rallying or oppositional practices. Second, the “regulars” with an average and concentrated activity pursue their intensification role on the local scale with targeted interventions and a logic of strong involvement on specific topics. Lastly, the “very active profiles” with average and concentrated activity play the main role in the intensification of exchanges. Their action is predominantly located within the discussion threads, imposing itself as the real driving force behind their lengthening. It consists of an insistent practice, made up of a set of bounces and relaunches, the effects of which can be felt several days after the video’s publication.

To summarise the general assemblage of the channel, we can say that it is partly inhabited by occasional contributors and their dotted presence, that feed exchanges on a local scale and guarantee the appearance of comments in the most discrete corners of the channel through the accumulation of small actions. It is also nourished by the sustained and intense involvement of the “very active profiles” and certain “regulars”, consisting of systematic reactive invective or the defence of a point of view or a cause that is identifiable because of its repetitive dimension.

5 A Reactive Community

Beside the understanding of the role of each profile, another way to make sense of the online phenomena around Dieudonné implies examining it at a more micro-scale. The latter allows us to argue for the advent of what we call a reactive community. As we will see in this part, the notion of reactive community is a way for us to describe a collective phenomenon that does not present a discursive unity or an obvious ideological coherence but is instead constituted by an aggregate of contradictory practices that come together in a dynamic of opposition. One major characteristic of the reactive community, as we could design it based on this specific research, is that it is formed “against” or in reaction to what is instituted as an enemy. Another characteristic is its propensity for internal conflict and heated exchanges in which the simple fact of reacting is valued as reaction and for reaction’s

sake. Displaying oneself, publicly taking part in the exchanges, interacting, even though it is violent, is held up by the collective dynamic as a condition for a respectable subject.

The “reactive” dimension of the examined collective phenomenon takes shape in, and is constitutive of, two dynamics of intensification. It first resides in the accumulation of single comments, affixed directly under the video, notably through the activity of “low active profiles” and “regulars” (especially with a tendency to disperse their comments). These single comments are mostly very short. They use a lot of emojis, punctuation marks and capital letters. They consist in expressive forms that materialise the relationship to Dieudonné or to the “system”, developing both logics of acclamation and of insults and invective. At first sight, they establish a climate of favourable inclinations towards Dieudonné and an impression of massive support. Yet, they are also the field of explicit oppositions to targeted personalities, among which is Dieudonné himself, mostly associated with the “system” and possibly with the so-called “Jewish lobby”. They then resort to expressions of disgust, revulsion and rejection, and to verbal violence as a way to disqualify targeted personalities or entities, to designate and produce them as “enemies”.

Such a use of invective and disqualifying procedures scattered in single comments has productive effects on the feature of this specific reactive community. It leads to a trivialisation of verbal violence, whether racist, antisemitic, homophobic or sexist, and institutes it as part of the ethos of the channel. If some commentators’ criticise and react to blatant racism or antisemitic speech for instance, they mainly do so by resorting to verbal violence themselves and feed a general dynamic of vivid reactions and offensiveness. Verbal violence, invective and insults, thus become a fully-fledged mode of intervention on the channel, a modality of exchange among others. They value “virile”, violent, fearless behaviour and contribute to the promotion of a defensive posture and a “manly” masculinity as a response to the “system”. They condition the advent of longer comments consisting of the articulation of antisemitism and conspiracy theories.

The “reactive” dimension of the examined collective phenomenon also relies on the lengthening of the discussion threads, by means of practices of relaunching and bouncing, carried by profiles that are occasionally or permanently involved. These threads that can reach, at their highest, 500 comments, distinguish themselves by a succession of long, affirmative comments that design peremptory assertion logics. They are the privileged field for the assertion of strong opinions and points of view, expressed and repeated with a confident tone despite their potential conspiracist inspirations, until the conversation vanishes. Rather than a dialogue of contradictory arguments aiming to convince interlocutors, they institute a crystallisation of positions and contribute to the promotion of the defence, whatever the cost and the sources, of one’s own “truth”, whether the latter deals

with religion, gender relationships, colonial history, international politics or domestic affairs and scandals (for example, the one following anti-burkini local laws or the legal actions after the accusations of rape against the controversial academic specialist on Islam, Tariq Ramadan). Each opinion acquires legitimacy from opposition to other opinions as well as from the implicit valorisation of assertive behaviour and of the refusal to give up in the confrontation.

The discussion threads, through the promotion of assertiveness, appear as an extension of the practices and the ethos identified in the single comments. They tend to establish “vigorous” opinions as guarantees of an “anti-system” position and contribute to the “manly” dimension of the interactions and the whole phenomenon. This latter comes with, and translates into, the banalisation of a virulent and condescending tone in the exchanges, that may be used against the so-called “enemies” (especially the personalities targeted by the videos and the commentators) as much as against other commentators, who are often set up as ignorant adversaries. Combined with insults and invectives, it makes aggression and defensiveness a shared mode of reaction and interaction, which creates both distance through disqualification and complicity through common behaviour. Moreover, it becomes a mark of the refusal to adopt the dominant point of view and to be fooled by the “system”. It thus creates an environment favourable to the expression and spread of alarmist views of the world, using convoluted reasoning, and sharp opinions. In other words, the accumulation of comments through assertive repetition, the “vigour” and the strength of the intervention and the speech impose themselves as proof and modes of existence of regimes of counter-truthiness.

Both dynamics allow us to grab the spectrum of authorised and valued reactions of this reactive community. They draw an “anti-system” ethos: violent and aggressive behaviour, assertive ways of presenting oneself, vivid interactions that impose themselves as they challenge and refuse the propriety associated with the “system”. Such an ethos, that is inscribed in the writing itself and in the relations and effects such writing produce, is a way that the “reactive” dimension of the collective phenomenon materialises. By refusing the righteousness of what is institutes as mainstream behaviour, it forges this community in reaction to what is established as an external enemy, in this case the “system”. By allowing and implicitly encouraging aggression, defensiveness, by valorising the reaction whatever this reaction defends, it creates the conditions for the permanent actualisation of internal conflicts and for the legitimisation of any argument, opinion and point of view, as long as the latter fulfils a logic of refusal of the “system”.

Conclusion: An Ephemeral Phenomenon?

The approach based on “affective intensities” that we deployed and presented in this chapter stems from a reflection on the status of discursive material and the need to go beyond the analysis of definitional quarrels to understand this highly polemical material and field. The aim was to understand YouTube comments as reactions producing reactions, and to place them in a dynamic of practices with constitutive effects, marked by processes of intensification and deceleration of exchanges. The methodology was elaborated to observe the way in which comments affect each other, and how they are distributed on a temporal and spatial scale and play a part in the collective development of the value and importance attached to certain topics. It led us to suggest a new way of understanding the collective phenomenon appearing online, through the notion of reactive communities.

This latter enlightens the processes by which disqualifying discourses, particularly antisemitic, homophobic and sexist discourses, are collectively authorized as a mark and token of new forms of respectability, in this case the “anti-system”. It has thus proven in this research to be an interesting tool to describe collective phenomena without an apparent discursive unity. Yet it does not erase the relevance of looking at ideological processes. In our corpus, the “reactive” dimension of the community makes the antisemitic imaginary of a conspiracy, a Jewish “mafia” or the “lobby” possible, acceptable and even respectable. Antisemitism then appears as one of the shared elements of the community and as one of the preferred forms of the “anti-system”. Even though it is subjected to debates on the channel, it finds a privileged field for expansion and is established as a view worthy of debate.

This last remark leads us to open a new set of reflections on the contours of reactive communities and to examine their role and place in the ideological processes. The elusive, labile and conflictual characteristic of reactive communities does not forsake the possibility of political instrumentalisation. It even creates a fertile ground for political and ideological involvements, serving electoral purposes and concrete objectives. More generally, the notion of a reactive community sheds a light on ideological effects of a polemical mode of existence in public debate nowadays. By reducing, if not excluding complexity, by favouring doubts, questions but also opinions on expert topics, by erecting defensiveness as a token of the “respectable subject”, this polemical mode creates the conditions for the most extreme ideas to impose themselves and acquire legitimacy as part of an oppositional process.

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