Understanding affective labor online: a depth-hermeneutic reading of the My 22nd of July webpage

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abstract

The article contributes to the theory and study of affective labor with a reading of the Norwegian online memorial page *min 22. juli* (*My 22nd of July*) from a depth-hermeneutic perspective. The *min 22. juli* platform was introduced in July 2012, in the run-up to the first anniversary of the mass-murderous attacks in south-eastern Norway on July 22, 2011, the deadliest in Norwegian history since World War II. In an effort of public commemoration, the platform asked participants to recall and report on their spontaneous personal reactions to the news of the attacks. The article will focus on the emerging forms of interaction between users and platform. Reading both published and censored posts to the platform as symptomatic of the conflicts in user-platform relations, I will locate the main conflict between platform and users in the theme of affectedness itself. Since *min 22. juli* gave participants the double task of *reporting affectively* about their *having been affected*, affect itself became a constitutive, a-priori requirement for participating on the platform; consequently, a lack of affectedness in user responses became the platform's central taboo.

Introduction

On July 22 2011, Anders Behring Breivik, a right-extremist single perpetrator, detonated a car bomb in the Norwegian administrative district in Oslo, killing eight people and injuring over 200. Next, he drove to the youth summer camp of the labor/social-democratic party (Arbeiderpartiet, AP) on the island of Utøya and opened fire on the organizers and participants, killing 69 people and injuring another 110, mostly teenagers, before police forces were able to detain him.

In a country as small as Norway (ca. 5 million), the attacks felt very close to many. A survey conducted by the newspaper *Klassekampen* in August 2011 found 'one out of four people' knew somebody who was 'affected by the terror of the 22nd of July' (Skjeseth, 2011). As the then-prime minister Jens Stoltenberg rightly commented on the findings, 'affected' in this case took on a range of meanings: 'It is those who have lost their closest ones, those who were injured, those who survived horrible things, and all their next of kin and friends across the country. A great many were also affected in a more indirect way.' (Stoltenberg in Skjeseth, 2011)

One year later, in early July 2012 and in the run up to the first anniversary of the attacks, *VG Nett*, the online platform of the biggest Norwegian tabloid daily, *Verdens Gang* (VG), launched the *min 22. juli* (*My 22nd of July*)[1] internet page (www.min22juli.no). Conceived as part of the public commemorations of the tragic events, the page was to give Norwegians a platform for individually articulating the ways in which they had been affected. With this function it positioned itself within the tradition of online commemoration and memorial pages (see Refslund Christensen and Gotved, 2015; Walter, 2015, for an overview and historical contextualization). However, while I acknowledge the page's potential for healing and support inherent in the possibility to share one's experiences with others online (see e.g. Neubaum et al., 2014; Döveling, 2015), my interest here is in the limitations and conflicts that result from the transposition of public mourning into a corporate frame (for the case at hand: VG Nett as platform host), threatening to turn affective work into affective labor. Furthermore, while commodification of mourning (e.g. Engle, 2007), as well as shifts in self-other relations in online mourning (Hjorth and Kim, 2011; Lagerkvist, 2014; Gibbs et al., 2015) have already been taken up in academic research, I will pay specific attention to the emerging forms of interaction (Lorenzer, 1986) that symptomatically point to these shifts and their effects.

Approaching the study of online interaction with a focus on (the distribution of) affect in user-platform relations has implications for the ways in which the field has predominantly been theorized. While research inspired by Erving Goffmann's (1959) dramaturgical approach has often taken a strongly cognitive view on online identity work (e.g. Liu, 2007; Hogan, 2010), giving prevalence to aspects of interest, taste and prestige and to acts such as selecting, curating and exhibiting (Hogan, 2010), this article makes a case for a more relational and conflict-oriented way of understanding that which Goffman calls 'performances'.

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1   In this paper I will use the original title, *min 22. juli*, as well as the English translation *My 22nd of July* indiscriminately. All quotations from posts and other platform-related sources are translated by the author.

The min 22. juli page

The platform's layout already hints at the direction VG Nett wished the affectedness of the platform's users to take. A banner in black, white, and red – in keeping with a modernist-propagandistic color convention, signaling utmost contrast, immediate relevance, and impending action – with a red rose[2] as icon advertised the site, which invited users to contribute an account of their own experience of this fateful day.

Figure 1: Banner, min 22. juli, VG Nett 2012

Users were asked to answer three interrelated, matter-of-fact questions: *Where were you? What did you do? How did you react?* The website suggested logging on via one's Facebook account; in this way, it advised, participants would become instantly enabled to share their story with friends and would in turn be referred to friends' stories. Thus it was not on the *min 22. juli* page itself that one could comment on each other's stories, but on the related Facebook pages. Furthermore, every contributor was requested to indicate the place where the news of the attacks reached them on an embedded Google world map, where the respective account would henceforth be retrievable.
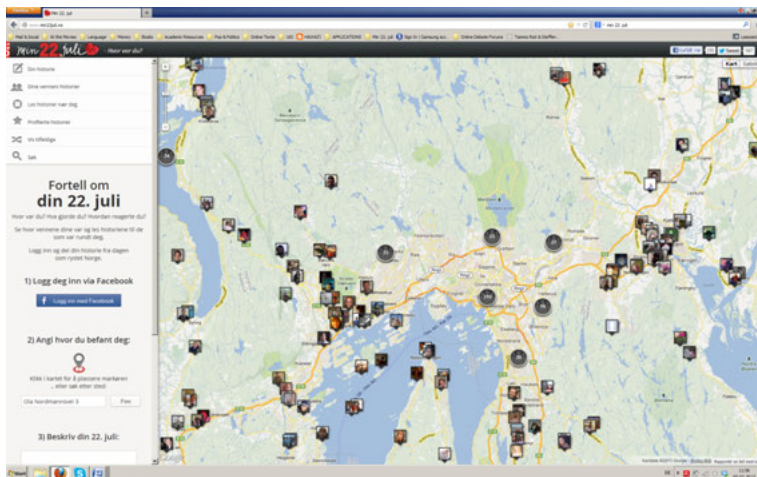

Figure 2: screenshot www.min22juli.no

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2   The red rose is the icon of *Arbeiderpartiet*, the labor party in power which was the main target of Breivik's attacks. Furthermore, flowers had also become the symbol of national unity and peaceful mourning in the wake of the attacks.

Within the first few days after the forum's launch, VG Nett could report that more than 800 people had given their recollections of the experience (Bordvik, 2012a). With more and more vignettes accumulating on the page, the world map soon gave the overall impression of a social eruption with its epicenter in the south-east of Norway causing repercussions all over the globe. The easily available, everyday online tools with which the page facilitated public engagement with tragedy endowed the whole project with characteristics of grassroots 'maptivism' (see Reed, 2014, 133; Elwood and Leszczynski, 2013; Elwood, 2010; Kreutz, 2009). People were given the opportunity not only to engage in and contribute to a collective process of working through but to experience themselves as one such contribution amongst many – part of a movement and a community (see Baym, 2010: 75ff).

With this initiative, VG captured what had been *the* commonplace in Norwegians' private conversations ever since the attacks, transposing a private practice of 'emotional work' (Hochschild, 2012 [1983]) into a public and, to a decisive degree, a consumptive frame. As of today (autumn 2016), the site counts ca. 3.500 submissions – not an insubstantial number in view of *min 22. juli* addressing a Norwegian/ Scandinavian-speaking audience only.

The concept of 'affective labor'

In this paper I want to use the *min 22. juli* platform as an 'object to think with' (Turkle, 1996: 185); and I want to use this object to think about the concept of 'affective labor', as it was introduced by Hardt and Negri (Hardt, 1999; Hardt and Negri, 2000; 2004) and consecutively discussed and elaborated by others (e.g. Dyer-Witheford, 2001a, 2001b; Virno, 2004). In tracing affective labor and its implications for the individual and the sociocultural in the concrete case of an online platform, this paper follows Hesmondhalgh and Baker's (2008) critique of immaterial and affective labor in rendering concrete the concept 'with the specificity of culture' (2008: 99).

Hardt and Negri conceived affective labor as a subcategory of 'immaterial labor' – a concept which they had developed together with other autonomist Marxist thinkers, most importantly Maurizio Lazzarato and Paolo Virno throughout the 1990s (Lazzarato, 1996). As part of immaterial labor, which they defined as 'labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 209), affective labor was conceived to cover the aspects of 'human contact and interaction' (Hardt, 1999: 95), which appeared central to immaterial goods but were nowhere accounted for in the theory.

In setting out to delimit affective labor, Hardt and Negri state that it is 'embedded in the moments of human interaction and communication [...]: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion – even a sense of connectedness or community' (Hardt, 1999: 96; Hardt and Negri, 2000: 293; 2004: 108). The exact wording here is important for the article at hand, since it is indeed rather a 'sense of connectedness and community' that the *min 22. juli* produced and not a community in the full sense of the term. While the five categories that Nancy Baym (2010) lists for communities online, i.e. a shared space (or 'reference to geographical location' (2010: 76), shared practice, shared resources and support, shared identities and interpersonal relations (2010: 75–90), are all relevant in relation to the platform, its affordances make clear that it was to be an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2006 [1983]). Participants were not meant to enter into direct contact with each other on the platform itself; rather, the platform sought to accumulate individual recollections of 'moments of human interaction' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 293) and present these as stemming from and belonging to a shared identity – an ideal that would give the platform's discreet moments their mutual orientation and 'sense of community'. Ultimately, then, the moving experience intended for the user to have in relation to the platform was that of identifying with and showing oneself as a caring, virtuous and just citizen amongst other such citizens. The wish to belong to the national community and to prove this belonging could thus be indulged by participating on the platform. One can thus say with Jodi Dean (2015: 90) that *min 22. juli* sought to 'produce and circulate affect as a binding technique'. By the same token, however, the choice not to participate, or the possibility that one's contribution might not be 'good enough' – one's recollections not sufficiently or appropriately affective – became fraught with questions of belonging that extend beyond the limits of the platform. Paasonen, Hillis and Petit (2015) bring this aspect of affective labor to the fore when they state that 'it both produces and *manipulates* affects' (2015: 7, emphasis added).

Affective labor and its 'revolutionary potential' from a depth-hermeneutic perspective

The understanding of affective labor that I want to unfold in this paper is framed by depth hermeneutics and its method of 'scenic understanding' (Lorenzer, 1970, 1986). With an academic orientation rooted in Frankfurt School critical theory and Freudian psychoanalysis, the German sociologist and psychoanalyst Alfred Lorenzer developed the 'depth-hermeneutic approach to cultural analysis' (1986) throughout the 1970s and 80s. Its central theoretical precept is the co-constitution and mutual implication of the (individually) psychical and the social:

each sphere is *in-formed* by the other, without it being possible to reduce one to the other (Lorenzer, 1972; Bereswill et al., 2010).

The co-constitution of the psychical and the social suggests relationships between individuals and institutions that are based on ongoing negotiations and interactions. While in the majority of cases these relationships are characterized by a power imbalance in the institution's favor, the interactions of individuals nevertheless have the potential to shape the institution in return. This potential comes to the fore in situations in which conflicts between an individual and an institution arise. Should established interaction forms – i.e. the derivatives of an individual's history of interactions and the blueprints for her/his future actions (Lorenzer, 1986: 42ff) – come into conflict with the shaping forces of a given social institution, this conflict can result in contradictory, compromised interactions on part of the individual. True to his Frankfurt School orientation, Lorenzer's approach homes in on these conflicts and contradictions – conflicts in which the affective, relational dimension of a given form of interaction becomes perceivable. It is in these moments of dissonance that Lorenzer sees ingrained the possibilities for individuals to resist the institution's shaping powers and to shape this institution in return. The depth hermeneutic interpretation of the relations between individuals and institutions departs from these moments.

Interestingly, then, what Hardt and Negri call 'revolutionary potential', i.e. 'the potential of insubordination and revolt through the entire set of laboring practices' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 29), Lorenzer finds in conflicted forms of interaction resulting from contradictory laboring practices. To him, the 'revolutionary potential' does not so much reside in explicit, intentional insubordination, but shows in moments of failure and weakness – in failures to adapt to a situation, to perform adequately, to respond appropriately (Bereswill et al., 2010: 239). Such symptomatic articulations do not necessarily become consciously accessible to the subject (Lorenzer, 1972: 128ff). The individual does not necessarily gain insight into its conflictedness, but merely acts upon it.

Consequently, Lorenzer locates the existence of a 'revolutionary potential' in a *collective unconscious* – 'unconscious', because the potential is seen as an effect of a psychical conflict of which the individual is not fully aware; 'collective' because, despite subjective differences, individual symptomatic responses to the same institutional pressures often prove sufficiently similar so as to appear coherent at a cultural level. About the *collective unconscious* Lorenzer writes:

> It consists of praxis figures that demand to be taken into consciousness; it contains forms of life that were denied access to general consciousness and an open inspection of their 'worth'. These 'not-yet-conscious' praxis figures constitute a utopian potential, as one could call it in drawing upon [Ernst] Bloch. To uncover

these [praxis figures] is the task of a hermeneutic that takes a critical stand against the petrified social relations. (Lorenzer, 1986: 28)

Research objectives

Against this background, the direction of my analysis of affective labor on the *min 22. juli* platform becomes clear. I will approach user-platform relations from their points of conflict, i.e. from those scenes in which both the platform's shaping forces and the utopian potential in the users' interactions show. From this vantage point, I argue, it becomes possible to map and interpret the characteristic forms of interaction on the page. Put in concise form, my research is guided by the following questions:

- What forms of interaction did the *min 22. juli* platform render possible? Which impossible?

- How did these forms of interaction, read as symptomatic of user-platform relations, negotiate the affordances and limitations of the platform?

- And ultimately: What revolutionary/utopian potential can be found in the conflicts arising from users' interactions with the platform?

This approach is echoed by Hillis, Paasonen and Petit, who in the introduction to their edited volume of *Networked Affect* (2015) identify the inquiry into 'what kinds of networked and affect-inducing moves are available' in online settings, and 'what are their implications' (2015: 3) as a particularly fertile approach to the field.

The method of scenic understanding

For the task of tracing the points of conflict in a given cultural material, Lorenzer (1970) advises researchers to steer their attention towards those moments in which understanding becomes interrupted, in which the reader/interpreter is thrown off, taken aback, puzzled, stopped in her/his receptive flow (Bereswill et al., 2010). It is from these fundamentally affective moments – i.e. moments in which affect is experienced first and foremost because its usual flow is interrupted – that a more thorough hermeneutic inquiry departs. Practically, for the case of my work with the *min 22. juli* platform this meant going through the submissions to the platform as well as the articles that VG Nett produced from these submissions. (VG Nett supplied me with the full set of submissions, including the ones that its moderators denied publication on the platform.³) Reading and re-reading this material in an attitude of 'evenly hovering attention'

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3   These censored posts were rendered anonymous by VG's staff before they were handed to me. I want to thank VG Nett for their effort that made this article possible.

(Freud, 1912; König, 2008: 36), i.e. with an alertness to my own affective responses, I compared and categorized the material along the lines of these responses. In this way, I isolated significant *scenes* – i.e. reoccurring, typical situations (Lorenzer, 1970: 139 ff.) – that emerged as problematic in user-platform relations based on their affective, relational charge. Interpretation of the material followed a similarly relational procedure. In order to bring out the various possible aspects of meaning, including those lying outside established conventions and patterns of cultural thought and imagination, I approached the accumulated scenes in a mode of 'free association' (Freud, 1912). While both the accumulation and interpretation of the material were intentionally subjective (Lorenzer, 1986: 84ff), I followed Lorenzer's suggestion to use interpretation groups as inter-subjective correctives (*ibid.*: 87).[4] The interpretations I offer in this paper reflect the discussions of the material in these groups.

Scenic understanding and networked affect

For my reading of user-platform relations, the censored posts have been particularly instructive. It is here that conflicts have been most readily traceable and, consequently, these posts have become central to the article's argument. As regards the relation between the method of scenic understanding and the censored posts, one could say that the posts met the method half way. Whereas Lorenzer's original conception relies heavily on traditional Freudian notions of 'repression' (Freud, 1915) and psychic defense, I found the censored posts to the *min 22. juli* platform to display a markedly unrepressed, disinhibited attitude, in this way functioning as opposite poles to the often highly guarded and defensive accounts that were submitted to the platform and became published there. A wider debate about digital culture and the changes in the dynamics of psychic life looms behind these observations (e.g. Suler, 2004; Buckels et al., 2014; Dean, 2015). At this point, however, I will limit myself to pointing to the productive potential of online disinhibition (Suler, 2004) as found in the censored posts. Thus, what is enacted in them approximates the playful attitude that Lorenzer (1970, 1986) advised researchers to take on for the interpretative process: a freely associating, productively regressive stance by virtue of which tabooed forms of life can be brought to the fore and inspected. In other words, the *min 22. juli*

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platform was most poignantly characterized in the posts that it sought to suppress.

Affective labor on the *min 22. juli* platform – central areas of conflict

In the case of *min 22. juli* platform there are three thematic areas that emerged as centrally important to an understanding of conflicts in user-platform relations. These are: (1) the spectacular (Debord, 1999), (2) conventions of remembrance and sympathy and (3) the idea of historiography. In the following, I will present these areas along with constellations of scenes in which their conflicts come to the fore.

Spectacular affects

'Where were you? What did you do? How did you react?' are the questions at the heart of the *min 22. Juli* platform. Step by step they guide the user towards an encounter with the affective core of her/his experience. While *'Where were you?'* serves to assign the individual experience's place, and *'What did you do?'* aims to determine the situation that was ongoing when the news of the attacks reached the individual, it is the question of *'How did you react?'* that aims to enter into the moment of *being moved* itself. This idea is highlighted by Torry Pedersen, VG Nett's editor-in-chief, who is quoted in an editorial comment accompanying the launch of the site, saying: 'With this [page; S.K.] VG wishes to create a snapshot [øyeblikksbildet] of where people were when they heard about what had happened in Oslo and on Utøya – and *what they thought there and then.*' (Pedersen quoted in Bordvik, 2012a; author's emphasis) By directing its focus to the very moment at which the news of the attacks 'hit', the platform aimed to make affect the *reason d'être* of the imagined community itself and extract dramatic, conflictual reports of scenes of suddenness, of experiences of crisis that VG Nett apparently hoped would be possible to put into words, or would at least somehow show in the used language of the submissions. When Jodi Dean writes with a view to blogging culture that Guy Debord's concept of the culture-industrial spectacle as the 'communication of the incommunicable' (Debord, 1999: 133, in Dean, 2013: 142) is exercised there to an inflationary degree, the *min 22. juli* platform is a clear case in point.

That this strategy was not without its risks can be seen from a group of comments, if but small in numbers, which the platform's moderators did not clear for publication on the platform. These censored comments are characterized by a considerably unguarded, undefended attitude – a form of interaction and emotional positioning in which people opened themselves entirely and appeared to 'say it all'. E.g., a woman writing in a strong southern

Norwegian dialect, describing how she was sitting in a south-western Norwegian town, far-away from the places of the attacks, in a pizza restaurant with her three kids, when she quickly checked the news on her mobile phone. Even a year after the experience itself her anxiety level is palpable when she reenacts the run of her thoughts then: 'What if a bomb goes off here... what do I do with my three kids?? I can hold two of them at the hand while I run...but what about the third??'

Another example comes from a young man who submitted a considerably raw and unguarded stream of consciousness, in which fragmented impressions of partying, a complicated relationship with the parents and an apparent lack of peers feed into a clearly troubling experience:

> The next two days were spent on the sofa at home at mum and dad's (did not go home for one reason or other, don't mremeber [sic] whether I had a good reason), they just came in in the morning and disappeared to the cabin later that day, was totally isolated that weekend. Put this out [on Facebook] Saturday. 'I have a big empty space in me right now, an empty space I have not managed to fill with food drink, sweet, salty or pc-gaming. I hope the first person I know that I meet after what happened will not get scared of the hug I will give them. That will be a big one. Not expecting that this hug will fix anything. But probably my heart feels less cold.'

Interestingly, these two comments seem to answer the task put forth by the three questions of the *min 22. juli* platform to the point. Here one finds a high degree of affectedness, a self-disclosing, intimate, in-the-moment, true-to-life confessional attitude, which, arguably, was exactly what the platform's operators had hoped to harvest. And yet, it seems the platform's moderators took these comments out because of those very qualities, i.e. because they literally returned to a moment of crisis so that their recollections took on an undigested, troubling charge – a charge that was the result of their attempt at communicating that which for them was apparently still incommunicable. In short, these posts seemed to directly reproduce the overwhelming charge of affect which their authors had experienced on the day of Behring Breivik's attacks.

The examples thus provoke a strained, conflicted relation between what was desired and expected from the platform and how these expectations could be met by users' posts. While, on the psychological level, the above comments clearly articulate what the commentators felt and 'thought there and then', as VG-Nett editor Pedersen put it (in Bordwick, 2012a, see above), what is relevant on a more relational level is an element of appeal in these articulations that works against their being understood as recollections. The posts do not *recall* a situation in which the commentators needed calming and comforting; rather, they *still* need to be calmed, comforted and be taken care of, and while such communal support

measures would have been the responsibility of the platform and its operators, this was obviously not part of the latter's calculations.

Ironically, then, one can say that the submissions that came closest in responding to the *min 22. juli* platform's request and truly gave a 'lively impression' of their experience were seen as unfit for publication by the website's monitors. When the Norwegian media researchers Karoline Ihlebæk and Espen Ytreberg (2009) state that one major consideration for the moderation of online discussion forums is to 'protect contributors from themselves', as for example in cases where people disclose 'extremely personal information about themselves' (2009: 59, author's translation) this reasoning might also be at the bottom of the censoring of the quoted posts. Yet, one can further suspect that this moderation practice also served to protect the digestibility – consumability – of the affective labor that the platform wanted to harvest.

Tellingly, VG Nett, in a relatively late article based on the posts to the platform introduced the notion of 'stories full of contrast' as a label for the kinds of comments that it welcomed (Bordvik, 2012b). This label appears very much as a qualification of the measure of affect deemed adequate to the platform's frame. It delimited the intensity of the affective charge wished to be vented there to one that could easily be channeled into lightly consumable personal interest stories, such as: 'Sat in her wedding gown and cried all night' (Nilssen, 2012); 'Han Tore (34) was on duty in Afghanistan' (Bordvik, 2012b), 'Nils got embraced by a female cashier in the USA' (Bordvik, 2012a), 'Was in Oslo for the first time' (Jalil, 2012). Common to all is a distance to the events which mutes their affective charge by displacing it: in these instances, it is the wedding, the military service in Afghanistan, the passionate expressions of empathy in far-away countries and the first visit to Oslo that are to occupy the attention of readers and protect them from an unmitigated impact of the realities of the attacks.

Remembrance

In view of the events upon which the *min 22. juli* platform is based – the mass-killing of mostly young adults – it appears as a matter of course that conventions of mourning and remembrance are central to the rules of conduct on the site. Accordingly, the notion of the 'remembrance map' ('minnekart') was used early on as a characterization of the platform (Bordwik, 2012a). Frequently, however, remembering and condoling did not seem to be an obvious fit to the self-referentiality that the *min 22. juli* (My 22nd of July) site carried in its name. Since it catered for those who were not directly hit by the attacks, but more indirectly affected, the invitation to give testimony did not automatically and in every case correspond with unambiguous grieving for the victims. In a way, then, the

platform created conditions inverse to those that Whitney Phillips (2011) observed for the Facebook 'R.I.P. pages'. In the case of the latter, the problematic emotional attitude of the 'grief tourists', which Phillips captures in the paradoxical 'I didn't know you but I am very sorry you are dead' (*ibid.*), can be said to lie in the opportunities that these acts offer for promoting oneself.[5] The *min 22. juli* platform, by contrast, appears to have offered first and foremost this latter opportunity, but tied it to the condition that users also had to express grief. Accordingly, articulations of sympathy frequently appear as poorly integrated, artificially added appendices. Here two examples that amplify the difficulty of combining the interest in the self with the concern for others in the context of the platform:

> 'I was together with good friends. We played and had it nice. Thought a lot of those who lost somebody last year. Warm thoughts go to them.'

> 'I lay and slept, so I woke to full of statusses on facebook about bombing in Oslo and about what happens on Utøya.... Was absolutely unbelievably shocked that something like that happens in Norway of all places... R.I.P. all who died that day <3'

Regardless of the monitoring practices, which deemed the first post acceptable and censored the second, my point here is that also the apparent lack on the emotional plane was built into the very structure of the affective labor that was to be performed on the platform itself; this structure clearly facilitated self-promotional concerns. In other words, while, on the psychological level, I expect that the commentators *did* sympathize, this was sidelined by the contextual frame of the platform; my interpretation at the relational level is thus that, in the case of the second example, the platform practically censored a reflection of its own distractedness and preoccupation with itself.

Historiography

When Alison Hearn (2010a defines what she calls the 'branded self as an entity that works and, at the same time, points to itself working, striving to embody the values of its working environment' (2010a: 427), this definition points to the core of the platform's historiographical dimension. 'We hope this can become a *historical document* to which it will be *interesting* to return in a long time to come', Torry Pedersen, VG Nett editor in chief, is quoted in a related article on VG Nett (Pedersen quoted in Bordvik, 2012a, author's emphasis). Two aspects in this statement are puzzling and provocative. First of all, the notion of 'interest' proves incompatible with grief and mourning, since it affords a kind and degree of mental freedom unobtainable in mourning (see Freud, 1917). However, it is the

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5   See Marwick and Ellison (2012) for a weighed reassessment of RIP trolling.

fantasy of producing something lasting, historical, which is particularly relevant here, as it allows the self-promotional tendency to unfold by legitimizing it in a frame of sociocultural value.[6]

Probably one of the clearest manifestations of the historiographic-cum-self-promotional can be found in Torry Pedersen's own submission to the site. In communiqué style, Pedersen recalls how VG's head editor rang him at '15:29' and 'in a precise and sober way gave information about the situation as far as he had the overview of it', rounding off his report by writing: 'The rest of the evening and long into the night I was at Hotel Bristol [since the VG building had been damaged during the attacks; S.K.] and was witness to the formidable effort of the VG desk in reporting on the dramatic event' (Pedersen, 2012). Attempting to capture Pedersen's recollections at a relational level, I would like to present readers with an association. Reading Pedersen's story, I found that I was metaphorically handed pop-corn and a soft drink, while watching the drama of VG's 'formidable efforts' in averting a national crisis and bringing it to a happy end. However, whereas such mental closure was surely beneficial to participating on the platform, the ending on a positive note that made such closure possible here was nowhere near the realities of the attacks themselves. Indeed, in other, less subtle and elaborated instances, this self-promotional attitude, which the platform implicitly suggested, became censored by its moderators, e.g.:

> I was sitting in my apartment with the balcony door open, about 8-900 meters from the administrative district, when I heard a bang and the building shook a little. 23 seconds after that bang I tweeted what is seen as the first mentioning of the terrorist act in social media.

As in Pedersen's story, a homely scene is interrupted by the attack in the distance; also here the sense of pride in one's achievement is tied to a precise recollection of the events unfurling in time, and also here a sense of excitement and elevation in taking part in something of extraordinary, historic proportions becomes perceivable.

Summing up this initial assessment of platform-user relations and their main areas of conflict, the kind of affective labor that was desirable for the forming of its imagined community resided in the task of relating to tragedy in a mildly spectacular, colorful mode of self-referentiality, the legitimacy of which had to be secured by adhering to conventional gestures of condolence as well as by appraising one's affective experience for its socio-historical relevance. Whereas all these contextual rules bore potential conflicts in relation to each other, failures

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6   Compare this to Derrida's definition of mourning as a 'work working at its own unproductivity' (Derrida, 1996, quoted in Engle, 2007: 62).

in any one or more of the categories due to under- or over-performance could lead to exclusion from the page as well as the community implied by it. Thus, while the above paragraphs already offered some of the symptomatic responses that point to a subjective potential to resist the platform's socialization, I want to bring in the censored posts in a more systematic way now in order to unfold this potential further.

Symptomatic acts of insubordination

Censored poses of unaffectedness

In view of the complex set of rules and the various pitfalls and conflicts these rules held for the participants, breaching all of them in a single, punchline-like response seems nearly impossible. However, in my reading of the platform's submissions I identified a group of comments – clearly the most coherent amongst the censored ones – that managed exactly that. This group of submissions, which I understand as symptomatic of the platform as a whole, can be categorized as the 'insensitive and unaffected ones'. Here are a number of examples:

> 'Sat at home and watched Tour de France';
>
> 'Was home, didn't think so much about it';
>
> 'My 22nd of July was really quite normal';
>
> 'suuuuunbathing , was on holiday';
>
> 'Watched TV and drank beer';
>
> 'Chillin in Mexico with the boys!!!';
>
> 'sat and gamed wa n't surprised no';
>
> 'best day in my whole life, celebrated the first anniversary with my [girl/boy]friend. I didn't let it get to me';
>
> 'Got up, watched tv, thought shitfuck! / went out, thought, sun's shining jo!?';
>
> 'Where was I? In Bodø! What did I do? Drank! How did I react? No reactions, the party continued, the evening/night went fine =)'

Against the shape of posts desired by the platform, it does not take a lot of effort to see why these comments were taken out. The irritations emanating from them were clearly intended, the exclusion from the community anticipated. While the platform aimed at displays of affectedness, the commentators responded with demonstrations of complete impassivity; the platform implicitly required respectfulness and decorum and the commentators responded with colloquialisms; the platform craved representative and lasting contributions, and

the commentators offered throw-away gestures it could not possibly want to associate itself with. Intuitively, these comments thus resisted the affective labor desired by the platform on every level and, moreover, they unambiguously placed this resistance within a consumptive frame, as the frequency of references to branded, standardized convenience goods makes clear:

> 'Sat on my couch and saow something on facebook about explosin in Oslo. , bomb in Oslo or something. So I drank Coke';

> 'Sat at home and ate a kebab, and rather watched discover[y] channel';

> 'I was sitting and watching TV, suddenly there was just news on all channels. So I switched to discovery';

> 'Hi was home a heard of the bomb in Oslo while eating pizza';

> 'on the computer gamed LOL';

> 'magnets n stuff. then pokemon on DS';

> 'enjoyed myself in Copenhagen then, I :) .... And the same I did after the bomb and shooting happened. Nothing should ruin this day ;)';

> 'came home from a Kiel trip'[7].

Associating themselves with the cheap and fast, the mindless and ridiculous, the unhealthy and unrefined – in short: with what is popularly marked as *trash* –, they first soiled themselves in order to so soil the platform with their attempt at joining it. In so doing, and as a parallel to Karppi's (2013: 280) observations of Facebook trolling, this group of censored comments brought to the fore in themselves what was integral to the platform, too, and what the latter could not rid itself of: specifically, that the platform and its users were first and foremost at home in a sphere of consumer choices. However, while this was so, the ambivalence in the comments' gesture of participating, i.e. joining the platform's community, yet with an act of utter opposition, made clear that, for these individuals, simple non-participation was not a viable option. Rather, they were driven to somehow inform the platform of its pretense, and the extreme irony in the comments seems to have facilitated a contribution which had otherwise been impossible.

At bottom, then, what seems to be expressed in the act of contributing with a doomed-to-be-censored comment was an opposition against the overly limited scope of what could truly be said on the platform. Following Whitney Phillips' assessment of R.I.P. trolling (2011), I thus argue that the comments that were identified as trolling on the *min 22. juli* page did *not* target the victim's and their

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7   Ferry trips to Kiel and Copenhagen are an established part of Norwegian folk culture; they are connoted with heavy drinking and the unmitigated consumption of tax-free goods.

families; rather, they rejected the overly sterile frame in which users were enabled to assess their reactions to the attacks. Even though their emotional attitude can be placed in extreme opposition to the group of comments which was censored because of its radically undigested affective charge (see above), both groups converge in what amounts to an act of, respectively, over- and underfeeding the platform's consumptive frame. Both were more symptomatic than controlled, more of a reflex than intentionally planned.

'It was too much' – permissible emotional work and affective labor

In order to tease out in more detail what exactly the unaffected comments were symptomatic of, I want to look at another commonplace characteristic of a central group of accepted posts (and in this way antithetical of the censored ones above). E.g.:

> 'A completely normal summer's day was transformed into an unreal and sad day that all remember' (extract);
>
> 'The whole thing was too inconceivable to understand there and then!!!' (extract);
>
> 'I did not know anybody who was on Utøya – but it was and is completely unfathomable that there was somebody who could do something so terrible' (extract);
>
> 'I said: no that's not Oslo, that's Afghanistan. But it said Oslo in the pictures so we remained standing there and watched. It was inconceivable, totally inconceivable'; (extract)
>
> 'Completely unfathomable. For a long time I thought about whether I should fly home earlier'(extract);
>
> 'Completely impossible to understand.' (extract)

'Unreal' (uvirkelig), 'inconceivable' (ufattelig), or 'unfathomable' (ubegripelig) – these and similar words were to state the obvious, namely, that there simply were no thoughts or reactions that could somehow be adequate for, or capture what had happened. As different as these posts are from the unaffected, censored ones, one can perceive a parallel in the defensive moment captured in these extracts, with the choice of words such as 'ubegripelig', 'ufattelig' etc. indicating the *avoidance of personal experience* rather than its disclosing. However, the latter's escape into a commonplace proved to be all but out of line with the requested task.[8] While also these posts participated in the platform's labor exactly by *rejecting* its task as impossible, they did so in a way that was acceptable and

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8   In this respect, these positions within the safe discursive commonplaces have to be seen as much as results of mechanisms of defence as of mechanisms of adaptation. They contribute without making a substantive contribution, i.e. without risking to unclose the concrete quality of their involvement.

welcome. The *min 22. juli* platform asked for spectacle and their response of *'It was inconceivable/ unfathomable/ unimaginable etc.'* was in keeping with this request; it could be understood as *'I've tried, but I can't – it is too much.'* Therefore, even if this answer left the space of the spectacle vacant, it still gestured towards it and thus affirmed its rightfulness as cause.

The gesture towards *'It was too much'* was probably the response most adapted to the platform and the relation that users were enabled to have with it. Submitting this answer, participants were admitted into a community that, by this very process of admission, defined the sheer affirmation of affectedness as the central moment that qualified for community membership. Thus, in a tacit, largely unconscious agreement, this affirmation of *'Yes, I have been heavily affected'* gave participants the status of members of the platform's imagined community and, in turn, gave the platform access to the participants as followers and supporters. For the participants this status held the promise of social prestige which was implied in the platform's design and imagery – i.e. in the Google map, in which each individual user could locate her/himself as part of a social movement and inscribe him/herself in a historiography of the 'common people'. '[M]apping technology has matured into a tool for social justice', (*Economist*, 2009) the *Economist* claimed in trend-spotting mode in 2009, and the *min 22. juli* platform was conceived in full awareness of this trend. First and foremost, it gave participants a tool with which to define themselves as just and virtuous citizens. In return, and since the affirmation of affect as prerequisite for community membership implied a mode of *'I could not but participate'*, this gesturing towards an inner necessity to do good on part of the participants also promised to lift the platform and its brand out of the sphere of everyday consumption. Through this gesture, VG appeared as so intimately in touch with its community that it was able to cater for its inner virtuosity. If this virtuosity was not just a choice, but a *need* that VG could satisfy, the brand as community sponsor was surely more than a simple commodity, but rather a force for good in society. In this way, the social prestige that participants could gain by participating *phatically* (Miller, 2008) reflected back onto the platform and its brand.

The taboo of too-little affect

Against the above interpretation of the socio-affective logic of the *min 22. juli* platform and its community, it seems worth returning to the comments that applied the structure of *'It was too much'* once more and reassess what they defend against. Could it not be that, in a parallel to the unaffected poses in the censored comments, the frequent references to an inability and impossibility to 'imagine', 'conceive', 'fathom' etc. were a defense not against too much, but against too little affect – i.e. a defense against the possibility that they did not care

as much as they felt they should have? – It is the conception of the *min 22. juli* platform itself that suggests this. Since participants were made to understand that a correct and convincing presentation of their having-been-moved was decisive for their being permissible, a lack of affect effectively represented the platform's biggest taboo. As said, there were also those comments, small in number, which had to be taken out due to an excess of affective charge. However, the truly excessive affective charge in relation to the platform and its consumptive orientation was a simple absence of affect. As a taboo, this pose unfolded its own fascination – a point zero at which not only one's own inclusion was relinquished but also the whole sense of community. As psychoanalysis has shown: the stronger the taboo, the stronger the desire to break it, and vice versa (Freud, 1912-13).

Again it is the censored, unaffected comments that bring this taboo to the fore with astonishing clarity so that its existence can be expected to have had a shaping influence on other, uncensored groups of comments, too.[9] One can thus say that, on the *min 22. juli* platform, the presentation of one's self as affected had absolute precedence. It was to serve as proof of the sincerity of one's sympathy, as well as a warrant of the digestibility of one's response. And it was that which was non-debatable on the platform.

This precedence of the affective as proof of authentic and cooperative interaction makes the *min 22. juli* platform characteristic of the wider move towards corporate facilitation of user-generated content (e.g. Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2009; Krüger and Johanssen, 2014). And while corporations such as Facebook claim that the commercial use of these data is but a little price to pay for the self-knowledge and social gain that their services result in,[10] the exemplary case of the *min 22. juli* platform and its implicit requirement of affectedness proves this

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9   However, a question that needs answering with reference to the theory of affective labor is whether this taboo was specific of the platform and its consumer orientation or, rather, characteristic of a more general atmosphere of emotional responsibility in the public. My argument is as follows: there can be little doubt that the majority of people in socio-cultural, geographic proximity to the attacks were affected by them. Even those who might not have registered an impact on their mental lives will have felt an obligation to invest their *face-work* (Goffman, 1955) with a degree of sincerity and emotional consequence – i.e. a degree of what Hochschild calls 'emotional work' (2012 [1983]: 7) – which will not have been entirely containable within the affective labor frame.

10   E.g., *The Economist* (2011) quotes Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook, saying that 'the strength of social media is that it empowers individuals to amplify and broadcast their voices. The truer that voice, the louder it will sound and the farther it will reach.' See also Jose van Dijck (2013: 11ff) for an appreciation of the transition from 'sociability to salability'.

claim wrong. The consumptive frame in which self-reflection took place here did not facilitate deepened self-insight and attunement to the sensitivities of oneself and others – even if such insight might have been the outcome of contributing to it – but rendered taboo those sensitivities that were not compatible with it.

The symptomatic and the revolutionary

With respect to the platform, then, what Hardt and Negri call the 'revolutionary potential' of affective labor (2000: 29) seems to lie in its censored performances of unaffectedness. By pointing to a lack of affectedness as the platform's taboo, the latter's entanglement with consumer interests and the threat of exclusion attached to it, these comments implicitly told the platform that a true assessment of *com-passion* on part of the general public would have needed to reckon also with those emotions that did not comply with a-priori affectedness. Indifference, ambivalence, frustration, aggression – these were not only threats to the platform's community but widely present emotional attitudes the containment of which posed serious challenges to the inclusive and non-violent self-conception of Norwegian society after the attacks. By incorporating and displaying these emotions, the censored comments implicitly challenged the platform to inspect them from inside the community it sought to imagine, instead of splitting them off and/or projecting them onto others.

However, what renders this revolutionary, utopian spark futile is the negative, uncontained form in which it was brought forth. 'Watched TV and drank beer' – this comment is paradigmatic of the inherent problem of resistance as symptomatic. While it brings out the exclusionary logic of the platform, it does so by enacting it itself. The associations it brought forth in the interpretation groups were concerned with a troubling asocial masculinity suggested by the comment, a provocative lack of self-regard that interpreters received from its loneliness, contempt and auto-aggression. In view of these associations, it appeared to us as though the commentator sought to remove himself (we were sure this was a man speaking) from what Charles Taylor calls the 'map of the good' (Taylor, 1989: 42). The platform, in turn, seals and completes the removal through its censoring act. Therefore, in the case of *min 22. juli*, the utopian potential, brought forth as a negative in the comments, was also *realized as a negative* by the platform. It was censored instead of contained. It was not met with dialogue, its rightfulness and critical potential was neither acknowledged nor made possible to discuss there.

Furthermore, the distributed placement of the comments, which was effected by participating on the platform via Facebook (see introduction), will have amplified the split in the social that the platform was complicit in producing. While the

simple censoring of posts to the platform denied these posts access to a wider public there, the appearance of these posts on Facebook might have led to their being celebrated as trophies by the commentator's friends. Therefore, what was created in the exchange of provocations and disciplinary action was not a triggering of the debate, but a splitting of the platform's imagined community into a legitimate and an illegitimate part that did not, however, offer itself to conscious reflection.

In this way, the platform's commercial frame risked exacerbating a more general problem of affect within Norwegian society – specifically, the problem of how to respond to the fact that the aggression of the attacks came from inside this society. Following through on the concept of affective labor and the shaping of the social here, one can suspect that the platform's 'outcasts' will have developed further those affinities and sympathies which the platform had rendered taboo, not least because the platform had done so.

Sitting at home, in front of the television and/or computer, isolating oneself, numbing oneself – these topoi, which are typical of the censored comments, seem to emulate the kind of repressed, aggressive masculinity that came to characterize the perpetrator, Anders Behring Breivik, in the media coverage (see Karlsen and Jørgensen, 2014). However, whereas these comments and troubling reminders of familiarity with Breivik did not make for an easy read, would it not have been the platform's responsibility to engage with them where it found them on site?

Conclusion

What forms of life are being produced, in what kind of community of affective labor, and with what overall effect on the users, the platform and, ultimately, the social? Since the contribution of this paper lies in giving as concrete answers as possible to these questions, I want to use the conclusion to restate the main points of my answers. Labor on the *min 22. juli* platform can be paraphrased thus: *'Present yourself as affected in an affective way, i.e. in a way that is moving and engaging to others.'* In order to get into view the relational dimension of this challenge and its socializing effects, the instructions can be continued as follows: *'By presenting yourself in this way, you make sure to belong to the community of 'good citizens', for: how can one be good and not affected – how can one be affected and not participate?'*

Affectedness thus turned into compulsion, and this compulsion, driven by commoditization, fed into a more general structure of feeling that rendered suspicious any attempt at taking issue with problematic emotions, such as

ambivalence, aggression and indifference. By avoiding these destructive impulses, they leaked into social interactions and were articulated in acts of exclusion and splitting. In this way, the platform's initiative, as part of a bigger social project of bringing people together in mutual care and compassion, was inherently tied to mechanisms of demarcation and expulsion.

In line with Hearn's observations (2010b: 65–66), the *min 22. juli* platform did not seem to have trouble dealing with excessive measures of creativity and/or affect – i.e. measures of which Hardt and Negri predicted that they would become a challenge to the commodifying agency (2004, p. 146). Instead of being overwhelmed, the platform simply censored what did not fit its frame. Nevertheless, there was a possibility for this excess to introduce a liberating potential. This possibility lay in the entanglement of the platform's labor with other corporate structures online, specifically, Facebook. Since the *min 22. juli* platform strongly suggested that submissions be made via users' Facebook accounts, comments that were banned from *min 22. juli* had the chance of an afterlife on Facebook. Potential for excess thus emerged *in-between* the corporate layers of digital affective labor.

Key to a realistic assessment of the revolutionary in such excess lies in the concept of the symptomatic. Bringing excess into view as subjective suffering from the institutional forming of life, the symptomatic implies that the revolutionary in excess is not readily accessible to the individual bringing it forth. As symptom, it is articulated in a way that effectively bars the individual from it. Therefore, in the comment of 'Chillin' in Mexico with the boys!!!' a utopian potential might be uncovered in an interpretation such as *'I was on holiday in Mexico; I had a good time, while at home people were killed. Does that make me a bad guy? Does it make me complicit in the killings?'* In the form that the comment took, however – with its colloquialisms, its evocation of a boys-only club and the triple exclamation mark – this question of *'does this make me complicit?'* had been answered with a 'yes' even before the platform censored the comment.

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