

Approaching Participatory documentary networks and networking

From Actor Network Theory to Interventionist Networking Methodology

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< ABSTRACT >

This contribution conceives of interactive documentaries as relational configurations – as a nexus of discourses and practices. By building theory from practice (i.e. two case studies of interactive documentaries), the axioms of Actor Network Theory will be related to actually '*doing* documentary' like e.g. interventionist media making (e.g. as delineated by Cizek in her *Manifesto for Interventionist Media*) or Zimmerman and DeMichiel's reflections on open space documentary. We suggest moving from Actor Network *Theory* to an *Interventionist Networking Methodology* and thinking of emerging documentary assemblages not only in terms of hybrid transdisciplinary, transprofessional *networks* but pragmatic *worknets*. This can lead to a better understanding of how to deal with unpredicted developments in participatory interactive documentary making in which networking, different agendas and active intervention are foregrounding.en partant

< RESUME >

Cette contribution considère les documentaires interactifs comme des configurations relationnelles, c'est-à-dire comme un «nœud» de discours et de pratiques. En construisant l'approche théorique à partir de la pratique (avec deux études de cas de documentaires interactifs), les axiomes de la théorie de l'acteur-réseau sont reliés aux pratiques concrètes d'auteurs comme le définit par exemple Cizek dans son «*Manifesto for Interventionist Media*» ou Zimmerman et DeMichiel dans «*Open space documentary*». Nous proposons de passer d'une théorie de l'acteur-réseau vers une méthodologie d'inventions en réseau. Ainsi, nous considérons les documentaires interactifs pas uniquement

comme des artefacts médiatiques mais également comme des assemblages vivants et des réseaux de collaborations pragmatiques. Cette démarche permet de mieux appréhender comment gérer des développements imprévus au cours de processus collaboratif et participatif.

< **KEYWORDS** >

interactive documentary, web documentary, remix, Actor Network Theory, communication, new media, remediation, network, participation, open space documentary, media practice, configuration

< **MOTS-CLES** >

documentaire interactive, web documentaire, théorie de l'acteur réseau, remix, nouveaux médias, participation, méthodologie, remédiation, participation, interaction

1. Introduction

This contribution sets out conceiving of the emerging documentary nexus as a relational field – a network of dynamic socio-technological configurations resulting *from* and resulting *in* cultural techniques. In this nexus, discourses, actual practices – in both the realm of the digital and the physical world –, technological development and artefacts are interdependently linked to one another and actively inform each other. Starting point is the premise that interactive documentary taken as *assemblages* (which is not to be confused with documentary as once finished medial *artefacts*, i.e. a documentary film, a closed web documentary or a documentary site) are networks in the sense that they are not given facts but need to be established and are in constant flux. As we will come to see in the course of two case studies, the network as an analytic metaphor certainly presents inspiring points for departure; as a practical tool for analysis of work and as to establishing networks respectively worknets, however, it requires thorough reconsideration.

One solution here can consist in building theory from practice – i.e. by taking a close look at two case studies and then relating the *theoretical* axioms of network theories to practice-orientated, strategic reflection like e.g. DeMichiel and Zimmermann's concept of open space documentary (DeMichiel and Zimmermann, 2013), as well as Cizek's ideas in *Manifesto for Interventionist Media Making – Because Art is a Hammer* (s.a.) which are both toolkits setting off with the impetus that

through *practices* of documentary making and providing contexts for participation it is possible "to help subjects, participants and audiences take action" (Cizeck, *s.a.*). Thus, this contribution aims at moving from Actor Network *Theory* to a sort of *Interventionist Networking Methodology* and to think of emerging documentary assemblages not only in terms of media products or hybrid transdisciplinary, transprofessional *networks* but of pragmatic, dynamic *worknets*.

In this context, I would like to introduce the idea of networked|networking as the two sides of one and the same phenomenon of interactive *and* participatory documentary. The specific notation of networkedness and networking implies our conceptualization of these two sides as interdependent concepts, one allowing reflections upon the other – thus the 'mirroring' straight dash. Though the two sides are inseparably interconnected in our understanding, they have slightly different focuses: 'networked' rather addresses the general interrelated character of these configurations and their ontological nature (i.e. structure, interface and interaction design etc.) whereas *networking* underlines the dynamic, generative creative *processes* that bring such configurations 'alive' – which again then links to Gaudenzi's notion of 'living documentaries' which she describes as emerging documentary practices in terms of configurations – as "possible fields of relations, rather than a fixed aggregation of their parts" (Gaudenzi, 2013, 87).

2. Two case studies – An outline of *The Shore Line* and *Palestine Remix*

2.1. *The Shoreline*

The Shoreline (Miller *et al.*, 2015) thematises our relationship to the ecosystems of the coastal lines – the threat that the growth of tourism, the increase of the dumping of industrial waste and development projects pose for vulnerable biomes – and the repercussion the destruction of ecospheres has on our future if one thinks of climate change, the surge of floods and the intensification of devastating storms.

To outline the urgency to change our ways of life, *The Shore Line* presents several short videos in the form of an 'interactive storybook' in which people from nine countries address environmental, economic and social problems which arise in the course of the destruction of our coastal lines – and which also potentially inspire a change in the way we think of and deal with our environment. The transprofessional team of *The Shore Line* hopes to "contribute to a more just and sustainable future" (cf. Director's Note) as the users can see through short videos, data visualization and soundscapes how communities and the coastal ecosystems are interconnected and find out which networks exist – with the intent to extend the established network of documentary makers who are dealing with the theme to more 'densely knitted' collaborative worknets of activists, environmental scholars and media makers. The impetus is to encourage projects that are inspired by the ventures presented in the interactive documentary.

Figure 1: Screenshot from the menu page of *The Shore Line*



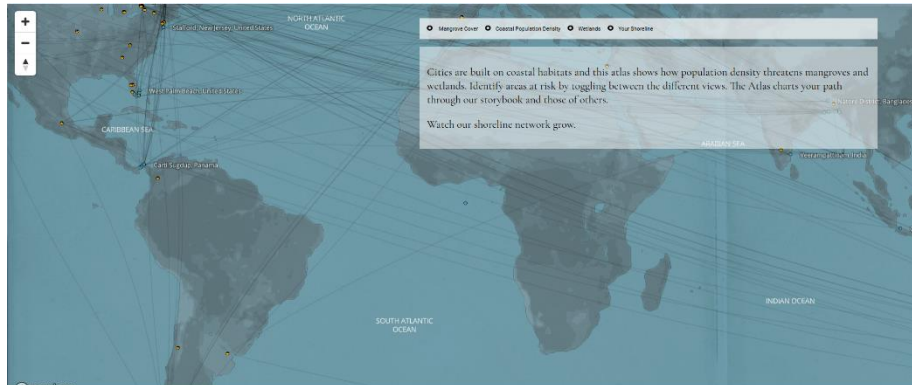
The project offers three modes of navigation to explore the material whereby each mode features creative approaches to visualize the interdependencies or 'networkedness' of causes and effects as well as global ecological implications and the impact of environmental projects. The first mode presents content thematically structured in chapters; each chapter consists of a collection of short videos, a simulation of what happens if the sea level rises. The second mode – the 'Atlas' and the 'Paths' mode – remediate the geographical map. Through a global atlas, the user can explore the 43 videos by location and visualize threats to ecosystems. The third mode – the navigation by database – presents

topical arrays of videos, structured by keywords, e.g. 'people', 'country', etc.

The idea of networkedness and interdependencies between agents and the idea of networking becomes most obvious in the 'Atlas' mode of navigation and the 'Paths' – two modes that encourage users to discuss "how data and cartography can help us to plan for the future and connect communities or alternatively be used to reinforce power relations" (Miller, 2015). In this mode, two ways of interacting with the animated map are possible: through data *visualization*, the user can toggle between datasets which feature coastal density, wetland and mangrove coverage. This information stimulates discussion as to the impact of transformation of coastal ecosystems into building land. This stance illustrates what Miller describes as one of the aspects that is paramount in interventionist media making: the idea that local stories need to be related – or to express it metaphorically 'webbed into' – to a national or global context "to raise awareness, make relevance experiential" (Miller, 2016, 55). The idea hereby is to advance comparative learning by using the wide spectrum of stories and perspectives from all over the globe to experience interdependencies and connectivities.

The navigation mode titled 'Paths' allows users to follow the routes other users have taken through the material; it enables them to locate activist groups and to see how their own video path intersects with others from around the world. This again aims at fostering a feeling of community among user-interactors and encourages further discussion and action-taking – or in other terms: networking in worknets outside the web-documentary – merging "online and on-ground" actions (*ibid*).

Figure 2. Screenshot from the 'Atlas' mode of navigation of The Shore Line



This goes hand in hand with the 'Strategy Toolkit' – a sub-mode of navigation by chapter – which consists of a curated set of questions, activities and additional resources based on 13 interdisciplinary strategies of taking action; moreover, it invites the user-interactor to organize workshops together with scholars and experts. Here, networking practices go far beyond the production of interactive documentary and the interaction with the textual manifestation, i.e. the web project. *The Shore Line* tries to promote existing collaborations, to encourage new connectivities between major actors and to stimulate solution based learning taking the web-documentary as a "catalyst to identify local problems and to consider diverse strategies of getting involved through education, environmental law, art, ecology, policy, activism and more" (Miller, 2015).

With regard to active, interventionist networking, the "strategy tool kits" can certainly be seen as a device which expands the formerly mostly representational paradigm of documentary making to a performative, interventionist paradigm: *The Shore Line* does not only document the status quo; rather, the user-interactors are encouraged to getting involved in their own communities – which, as Miller's meta-studies show, is effectively realized.

This is mainly due to the fact that project is set up as a "composite of easily digestible micro-pieces" (Miller, *s.a.*) - both prefabricated micro-pieces, e.g. theoretical articles, video-vignettes, podcasts etc., as well as user-generated material documenting. These can be easily shared via

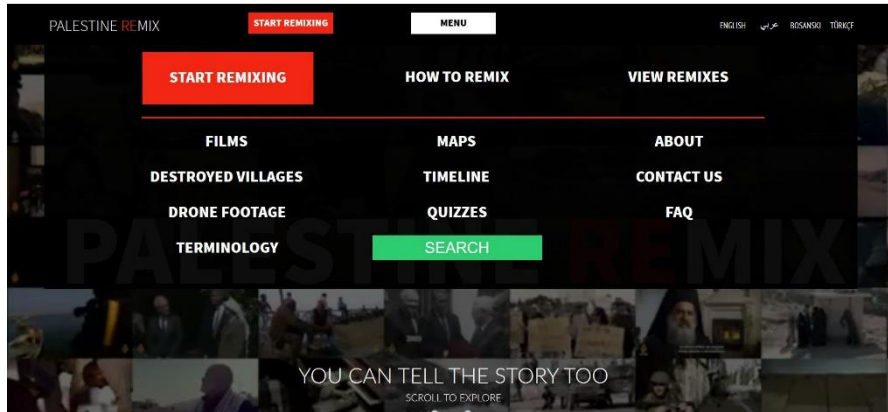
facebook and twitter, discussed and thus inspire further action in form of immediate as well as short term engagement. In fact, this feature fosters communication between participants and user-interactors, especially on the facebook site of *The Shoreline*. Here, the posts chronicling the newly realized follow-ups keep the project, which as a web-documentary is finished, open and alive. Although this exchange takes place on a different platform in form of peripheral interaction – namely between user-participants, individuals and organizations featuring in the web-documentary, as well as between different facebook communities which are concerned in the same or similar course and which form further alliances – this community is vital in order to carry the medial project into 'real life'.

Though the *Shore Line* community on facebook is rather small in *quantity* (600 followers), the *quality* engagement and the number of people who are regularly posting and are committed to the project is considerable. In this context in fact, Miller underlines that "social impact takes time and solid partnerships are essential" and that "impact should not be conflated with exposure since getting a project to the right audience can be more effective than trying to reach everyone" (Miller, *s.a.*).

2.2. Palestine Remix

The name of the project reflects the programme behind it: based on the concept of remix culture (as e.g. outlined by Lessig, 2008; Coppa and Russo, 2012), the participatory documentary offers a space for user-interactors to remix their take on the history of Palestine and the socio-cultural conflictual issues of settlement in the Near East. Accordingly, the motto of the project reads: "You can tell the story too." As Rawan Damen, producer of *Palestine Remix*, states, the idea which stood at the beginning of the project was "to transfer the documentaries from a closed box (as on YouTube) to a fully interactive content, open to thousands of stories that can come up" (Damen, 2018).

Figure 3: Screenshot from the menu page and opening screen of Palestine Remix



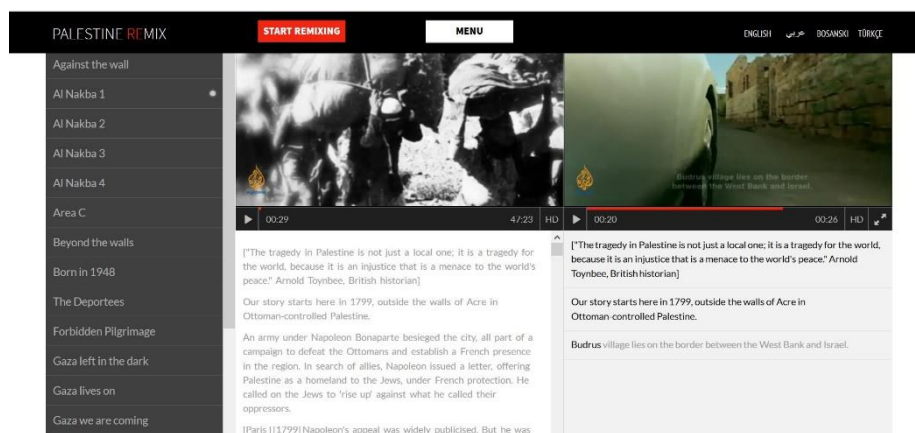
To set up a stock of audiovisual footage, ten years of documentary material from the archives of Al Jazeera including drone footage, aerial shots, interviews, reportage and news were digitalized, and timelines as well as animated graphics from Al Jazeera interactive were put at the free disposal of the user-interactors.

The opening screen of *Palestine Remix* presents the various forms of how user-interactors can engage with the material set at their disposal – whether through "starting to remix" themselves, whether in the form of watching the original documentaries, news reports or other participants' remixes or whether by learning about the conflict by scrolling through a glossary ("terminology"), by having a closer look at an interactive timeline and maps or by taking part in quizzes. As such, different forms of interactivity are afforded – ranging from interactivity in the narrow sense, regarding the clicking through material to creative participation in the form of making mash-ups and remixes to interaction in the form of entering into a dialogue with other 'remix-authors'.

The remix tool itself is based on an easy to handle editing tool (figure 4) which allows the user to cut, copy and pace audiovisual material by 'drag-and-drop'. The simplicity of the device is meant to set the psychological threshold as low as possible to encourage also inexperienced users. Additionally, *Palestine Remix* features a tool to record short audios to provide voice-overs which enables participants

to remix and to comment on their own documentary. In the remix tool, the left screen displays the original footage which has already been edited, the right one the material which is being worked on at the moment and which presents the material that has been remixed by the user-interactor. The row on the far left provides the titles which are in the bin and that can be edited.

Figure 4: Screenshots from Palestine Remix – the remix tool



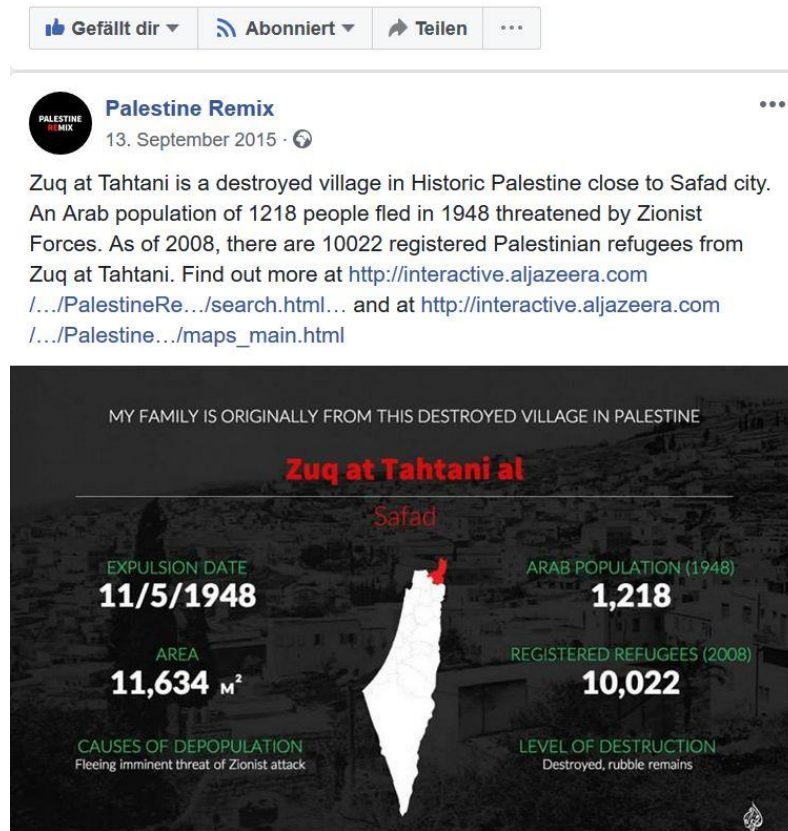
Apart from this, the participants are invited to share their material via social media such as facebook (13,802 followers), twitter (6,900 followers), google+ or email and hence contribute to webbing a network of engaged participants – a process that clearly features characteristics of what can be termed *networking*. And although user-interactors are not 'primary' authors in the sense that they shoot the material themselves, they implicitly become authoring instances by creating the remixes, allocating keywords to them and by sharing them. With regard to the distribution of authorship and the mirroring of roles, Damen, initiator of the project, explains: "My role in *Palestine Remix* was content-provider, context provider and author." (Damen, 2018) Yet, all these roles were shared with the community of temporarily and permanently cooperating agents. Hence, remixing as a specific form of media practice certainly qualifies as creative – as Lessig remarks when stating that "it takes extraordinary knowledge about a culture to remix it well" (Lessig, 2008, 117); and also Coppa is certainly right when she points out that remixes "comment on or analyze a set of preexisting

visuals, [...] stage a reading, or [...] use the footage to tell new stories" (Coppa, 2008, *s.p.*). Consequently, "we can understand remix culture as an intersection of technological developments and creative tendencies" (Coppa and Russo, 2012) – which supports our argument of the importance to consider both technological aspects, interface design and the creative power of user-participants which – as all three authors emphasize – is definitively given in the case of remix practices.

Last but not least with regard to the liveliness of interactive, participatory, interventionist documentary assemblages, it is worth having a close look at a rather surprising turn *Palestine Remix* took, as Damen describes: "When we launched the website, we thought we were just providing visual, interactive content and we never expected it to be regarded as a resource for Palestine and Middle East history." However, when the team started setting up a virtual atlas of villages which have been totally destroyed and whipped out from the maps based on the material submitted by user-interactors and double-checked by the documentary makers and scholars, the site became more and more relevant for further academic research in the fields of peace studies, history, politics and adjacent disciplines. The data contains information such as a village's location, when it was devastated, how many people lost their homes – all visualised individually.

Due to the popularity of this feature, this atlas was also made available as an interactive storybook on facebook. Since this expansion of the project and the scope of dissemination, the *networking* aspect of *Palestine Remix* as an interactive, participatory assemblage has gained momentum: this part of the *Palestine Remix* project has not only been built with the communities of Palestinian refugees who submitted information and material, it also enables so far 'passive' user-interactors to choose their village, click on it and have all the information about it. This distinct section did not only kick off a discussion around those places, it also led to the reunion of former friends and neighbours and encouraged them to start off anew.

Figure 5: Screenshot from the facebook page of Palestine Remix – the atlas of vanished villages



These aspects show that the development of networks are never totally predictable neither in the control of what could be called 'documentary authors' – especially if they are long-term or even open-ended, participatory – and if they are comprising components such as social media and the expansion into originally unintended realms – in this case political, socio-cultural activism, neighbourhood building and reunification as well as historical scholarship.

3. From networkedness to networking – Considering interactive factuals as living relational assemblages in terms of nodes, connectivity and holes

Let's take these case studies as a grounding for a self-reflexive analysis of collaborative processes and reconsider the inspirational aspects of actor network *theory*: which lessons can be learnt for actual documentary practices? And which are then useful modifications with regard to the specific medial and 'real-world' based configuration of interactive documentary networks?

As both *The Shoreline* and *Palestine Remix* have proved, all three specific features and inherent characteristics of the web-documentary sites as medial artefacts, the ways they were produced and the development of manifold engagement which was stimulated by them relate to network theories. As the etymologic root of the 'net' suggests, networks consist of *nodes* (or in the terms of Actor Network Theory 'agents', respectively 'actants' or 'actors'), *connections* between these nodes and *holes* – i.e. spaces in between nodes.

Let us start with the most obvious aspect – the *nodes*. Most network theories aim at overcoming opposing binarisms such as the idea of 'the whole' vs. 'the part'. What in common terminology could be described as 'the part' is in itself a complex network – a multipart configuration of other networks. Consequently, nodes are not only even more complex than they might seem at first sight; they also bear the potential to develop dynamic *networking* processes out of their networkedness in themselves. In 'classic' ANT, nodes are not necessarily only human beings – in the case of interactive documentary e.g. documentary authors, producers, interaction designers; they comprise also technical and organisational 'agents'. As we have seen, they can be primary authors, film teams, interaction and interface designers, user-interactors, creative remixers, students and scholars working with the audiovisual archives as historical sources or visual evidence, NGOs, activist organizations, facebook communities etc. – and especially the latter are heterogeneous groups of individuals with different agendas which need to find a *modus vivendi* to fruitful collaboration.

The network of interconnected 'nodes' in *Palestine Remix* is particularly rich: it consists not only of the core team as authors respectively producers within the configuration, but also the user-interactors who creatively web new textual networks – their hypertextually linked perspective on the Palestine-Israeli conflict in their remixes; moreover, users can share their thoughts with others in virtual as well as 'on-the-ground' communities.

A similar thought of empowering the participating subjects to claim their agency can be found in *The Shore Line*. Miller underlines that in order to create a networked textual configuration which would then lead to further networking between agents was the core aim of *The Shore Line* – and that it needed a considerate balancing of networked documentary storytelling and the encouragement to actual networking.

The Shore Line is based on the model of using media to activate existing networks and imagine new emergent networks. As we selected individuals to feature in our short films we thought carefully about the solutions that each individual or group represented but also what kinds of networks they were part of. (Miller, 2018)

However, as Miller observes – the building of networks and the promotion of further networking processes requires a careful balance of engagement and media activism on the one hand and the production of an actual medial sedimentation of these networking processes on the other hand – i.e. the creation of a web-documentary:

In a linear documentary, a director understands the necessity of cutting scenes or even characters to create a strong and cohesive story. But when establishing a network is part of the process and thus evolves as part of the story, this logic is challenged. How do you negotiate the tension between a cohesive story and an emergent network? We know that in general online users have limited attention and that too much content can be overwhelming. At the same time each individual represented a potential network to tap into. (Miller, 2018)

The outcome of this challenge actually manifests itself in the web-documentary as well as the adjacent content created and – most importantly – the environments created for further dissemination via

tool-kits how to become engaged as well as teachers' manuals how to employ *The Shore Line* as a point of departure for teaching issues around coastal ecosystems.

This brings us to a second element of ANT: the *connectivities*. My argument hereby is that it is the connections between complex entities that promote actual *networking* – a perspective that – if it is adapted to the specificities of interactive, collaborative media making and community building – can contribute to a better understanding and management of distributed authorship and agency – or in short: *networking*.

Damen underlines that the interaction between users, the co-creative transdisciplinary and transprofessional cooperation of individuals as well as the close collaboration of organisations (e.g. Al Jazeera and the team of coders, but also social networks and groups on facebook, NGOs, refugee unions and universities) calls "for a considerate negotiation of flows of 'energy' within a project" (Damen, 2018) to maintain its performance. This does not only concern the networking during the production phase but also the networking when the actual web-documentary and the interactive remixing tool has been launched. With regard to *Palestine Remix*, one aspect in this context was to provide not only the option to remix networked, internally linked material (i.e. creative interactivity) but to encourage what can be called 'peripheral interaction' among users – i.e. user engagement on a different platform – i.e. to exchange views and engage on social media, on both facebook and twitter. However, the over-all embrace of emerging fluxes of collaboration requires some kind of governance or management – especially when the networks start expanding: in most cases, flows of communication need to be moderated, otherwise they risk getting usurped by interest groups that were not intended within the network. In this regard, the team of *Palestine Remix* found an elegant solution to the key issue of how peripheral communication between the engaged user-participants could be channelled: "We did not allow comments within the platform [i.e. the *Palestine Remix* page itself], as this needs a full time team, and therefore, being on social media where people can comment and share, was a decision early taken in the design." (Damen, 2018). Still, what is significant here is the fact that comments are not

filtered or censored by any political institution (which is remarkable given the socio-political context and the implication of engagement) but only moderated by the *Palestine Remix* team. This fosters the liveliness of networking activities and encourages people to form new networks which are related to the cause.

This observation brings us to the third essential element of ANT and to another specificity of dynamic networks: the fact that networks also consist of *holes* and that these holes bear the potential to become the origin of new networking interactions, new connectivities, where even new nodes may evolve; holes, in this sense are 'open spaces' – an aspect which so far has only insufficiently been analysed, though such 'holes' can promote further transformational processes – whether within the user-interactors as intrapersonal transformation of e.g. attitudes and beliefs but also feelings; whether with regard to the textual documentary manifestation in the form of user-generated content; or whether within the documentary network on a more extended, e.g. socio-political scale as is potentially the case in co-creative processes. In this regard, the notion of *networking* relates to the concept of open space documentary as proposed by Zimmermann and DeMichiel: "From the static, fixed objects of analogue film and video, documentary is now redefining itself as a fluid, collaborative, shape-shifting, responsive environment for encounters [...]." (DeMichiel et Zimmermann, 2013, 355). And they continue that

if the documentary triangle of subject, film-maker and audience formed a central image for documentary studies, open space documentary conceptualisations shift towards the documentary circle, where vectors are no longer straight lines of contact but endless circular engagements that change and open up discourse and spaces for action.

Elizabeth Miller describes the opening of spaces of communication and exchange as well as joint 'on-ground' activities with a metaphor:

The concept, method and story device of The Shore Line was our anchor but in the production process what shifted was who we profiled. We had initial ideas of where we would go and who we would profile but this changed as the project developed. It was like following water – we followed a path that we could not fully

imagine in the beginning but by trusting the source we ended up where we wanted to be. (Miller, 2018)

This remark coincides with the development that Damen describes with regard to the unforeseen research network that emerged from *Palestine Remix*: the use of footage at universities and scholars who draw on the medial archive as a source for further studies – which again promises to lead to peace fostering engagement and better intercultural understanding.

Last but not least, in terms of networking and an understanding of networkedness as to the stimulation of ongoing discussion, both Miller and Damen emphasize that not only networking during the production phase but also afterwards is essential for the documentary's transformative potential to unfold. Elizabeth Miller in this context emphasizes that with regard to *The Shore Line*,

if the production took us three years, the distribution stage also needs attention, care and time. [...] We often want an exit strategy after a long and exhausting production experience. But ironically if we can invest some of the creative energy that we pour into a production process into the outreach and distribution process there is so much potential for engagement and social change. So, I don't really believe in exit strategies for my own projects because they always seem to cycle back in new and unexpected ways. (Miller, 2018)

This openness certainly presents a challenge for documentary authors and producers. And still, the opportunities and an embrace of the unanticipated is not to be underestimated as a source of the formation of new connectivities and further networking.

4. Summing Things Up – Take-Aways from reconsidering networked|networking practices in *The Shore Line* and *Palestine Remix*

After this discussion of different aspects of networkedness and networking – what can be retrieved from the cases of *Palestine Remix* and *The Shore Line* – and what can be learnt for future collaborative, interventionist documentary endeavours?

First of all, what has turned out particularly important is the idea that collaboration beyond disciplinary and professional boundaries, the building of new partnerships as well as the fostering of existing networks and their expansion is key in emerging documentary practices which are more interested in encouraging interventions than only in observing current developments.

Moreover, the dissemination of the documentary 'text' and the measures taken to encourage *networking* in other spaces – e.g. political organizations, NGOs, legacy media, but above all in high schools and research institutions – seems to be key to achieve tangible impact: both Miller and Damen underline the potential of interactive documentary in the educational and academic sector – not only with regard to the content level (i.e. the political conflict in the Near East or the sensitivity to coastal environments) and the networkedness of issues, the complexity of aspects in this context; but also in terms of (new) media literacy and the encouragement to work in highly heterogeneous teams with flat hierarchies – a major 'soft skill' in our increasingly diverse society. This fact resonates with what Cizek describes as the 10%-90% rule in her *Manifesto for interventionist media making* – the idea that it is important to "support the community partner in distribution and outreach. Spend 10% of the time making it and 90% of the time getting it out into the world. [...] Work with the partners to harness the project's momentum to effect real participation and real political change." (Cizek, s.a.)

And thirdly, what seems to be paramount in order to have a lasting effect is the fact that not only the interactive documentary itself but also the adjacent initiatives are decisive and that the dissemination of the material is essential and requires well-designed strategies.

Hence – summarizing the findings of our discussion of networkedness and networking in *The Shore Line* and *Palestine Remix* as well as the value of Actor Network Theory and its expansion to *Interventionist Networking Methodology*, I would like to suggest that the concept of the network cannot only serve as an analytical metaphor to describe e.g. networkedness of interrelated content and interaction design in the narrow sense – i.e. interaction between the documentary

user and the documentary 'text' – but that it can also be taken as a methodology of actively building networks in all phases of the production circle and beyond if one thinks of interactive documentary as relational objects and complex configurations which are multi-dimensional and dynamic.

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