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# Hostile remixes on YouTube:

## A new constraint on pro-FARC counterpublics in Colombia

**ABSTRACT**

Online video streaming marks a participatory turn in Colombia's propaganda war. To understand this shift, I analyze a video the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) produced of its kidnapping of 12 provincial parliamentarians in 2002, tracing fragments of that video as they "recombine" online in two other videos that antagonistically resignify the original. I conduct the same exercise with footage of the Colombian military's rescue of Íngrid Betancourt and 14 other hostages in 2008 and contrast its celebratory recombinations with those of the FARC video. Building on Michael Warner's theory of publics and counterpublics and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "re-accentuation," I argue that "recombinatory circulation" reproduces the biases of Colombia's mass media, constraining pro-FARC counterpublics. I contextualize the circulation analysis with ethnography focused on former hostages, demobilized rebels, and military intelligence officials. Beyond Colombia, I argue for converting interactive circulation into an empirical and analytical prism to illuminate the politics of online publics. [*media politics, Colombia violence, video streaming, online circulation, media events, FARC kidnapping, Michael Warner, Mikhail Bakhtin*]

*Scene One*: On April 11, 2002, members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) enter a government building in downtown Cali disguised as military officers and warn of a bomb attack. They kidnap 12 provincial parliamentarians. Five years later, 11 of the hostages are killed in an accidental massacre. The only survivor, Sigifredo López, is released on February 5, 2009.

*Scene Two*: On July 2, 2008, Colombian military officers impersonating humanitarian aid workers, journalists, and FARC rebels execute "Operation Check" (as in *checkmate*), rescuing Íngrid Betancourt and 14 other hostages of the FARC who have been languishing in the jungle for years.

The FARC and the Colombian military both released videos of their respective duplicitous operations in an effort to put their stamp on the events. In this article, I analyze those two videos, tracing their circulation and examining the events and structures in which they are embedded. Central to the analysis is what I call "recombinatory circulation," a form of circulation marked by reconfigurations of an earlier text. Akin to the remix as a form of audio bricolage (Maira 1999), recombination involves the reappearance of audiovisual fragments in new, derivative videos that stream online (Shifman 2011). More broadly, the term *recombination* highlights the centrality of interactivity in the circulation of digital and digitized media as a means of advancing or constraining publics.

In this article, I make two interconnected interventions. First, I argue that recombinatory circulation reproduces the FARC's long-standing media marginalization, highlighting the limits of YouTube as an open and level media space in Colombia.[1] The online propaganda battle, then, mirrors the country's asymmetrical military struggle, in which 445,000 government troops overwhelm the FARC's 10,000 (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2013:179).[2] Online, the Colombian conflict plays out through likes, favorites, shares, comments, and reedited videos (I focus on the latter), and here too the government outmatches the rebels. The patterns of recombinatory circulation of the two videos I trace reinscribe online the

anti-FARC biases of corporate television and radio in Colombia. In short, online publics recombine the FARC's video into new videos that are thinly veiled calls for vengeance, and they recombine the government's video into derivative, celebratory videos. This contrast illuminates the limits of "digital democracy" in the Colombian context. YouTube, rather than eroding the FARC's long-standing media marginalization, re-creates severe media constraints on the FARC.

At the heart of that argument lies the partial displacement of censorship by drowning out pro-FARC voices and amplifying calls for violence against the rebels.[3] My second intervention urges greater anthropological scrutiny of how such silencing works through the interactive circulation of online media. Rehashing, remixing, and refashioning are commonly cited practices in the distribution of online content (Burgess and Green 2009; Jenkins 2006; Karaganis 2007; Uricchio 2009; van Dijck 2009). But how are we to understand the political significance of such interactive circulation within a given context? The anthropology of online media, a still-nascent subfield, has yet to address this question, even as kindred issues, such as piracy, receive rich ethnographic treatment (e.g., Thomas 2012; Larkin 2008). Like piracy, participatory modes of circulation online have an often-obscured political charge that an ethnography combining online and offline sociopolitical worlds can elucidate.

The mere fact that 100 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute (YouTube 2013b) is compelling reason to focus anthropological attention on the politics of the intertextual world of online video. Of that 100 hours of footage, very few videos will "go viral" (Burgess 2008), while many will become "memetic," generative of derivatives (Shifman 2011). When CNN integrates footage into its newscasts that Syrian activists have risked their lives to upload (Khamis et al. 2012) or when pro-Palestine activists and the Israeli state visually argue their cases on YouTube in the wake of the Gaza flotilla tragedy (Stein 2012) by recombining the same footage differently, to cite two glaring examples, recombinatory circulation is politically charged. In examining the role of recombinatory circulation in Colombia's propaganda war, my larger goal is to provide a framework for ethnographically advancing renewed anthropological interest in "cultures of circulation" (Lee and LiPuma 2002) and the "circulatory matrix" (Gaonkar and Povinelli 2003) by foregrounding interactive circulation in the political analysis of online publics.

I develop my central argument about recombinatory circulation on YouTube as a new constraint on pro-FARC publics in four parts. Following a brief discussion of publics and methods, Part 1 provides a close reading of the FARC's video and its recombinations. Part 2 places the media event in the context of its antecedents and in the historical moment of the turn of the millennium. Part 3 scrutinizes

Operation Check, including the footage the military released immediately afterward and the recombinations of that footage. Part 4 contrasts the two patterns of recombinatory circulation and reflects on the implications of their divergence for the prospect of a negotiated solution to Colombia's armed conflict.

## Setting the stage: Interactivity and a stymied counterpublic

In his seminal book *Publics and Counterpublics,* Michael Warner defines publics as infinite, expanding, interrelated text-based communities that engage in struggles within and among themselves through the process of circulation. He writes, "Publics are essentially intertextual, frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts, all interwoven" (Warner 2002:16). When a public is radically opposed to a dominant ideology and defined by others through that opposition, Warner characterizes that public as a "counterpublic" (2002:56; see also Hirschkind 2001). By vying for popular attention, counterpublics function similarly to publics in all but their hostile reception (Warner 2002:119). For Warner, publics and counterpublics are produced and reproduced "only in relation to texts and their circulation" (2002:66).

Interactivity has been a source of critique for Warner's theorization of publics. Guobin Yang and Craig Calhoun (2007) argue, contra Warner, that interactivity can constitute a public. In online streaming communities, it becomes a facet of circulation itself, as videos mash up audiovisual fragments, while comments, likes, dislikes, favorites, and flags invite audience participation. I shift the discussion of publics and counterpublics toward the linkages between interactivity and circulation online while embracing the underlying dynamics of counterpublics as articulated by Warner. As the media scholar Henry Jenkins (2006) has observed, media production, circulation, and reception have been radically compressed online, and interactivity is both a cause and consequence. Certain forms of interactivity, such as video recombination, render the paths of circulation less predictable and more contingent. Warner's conception of interactivity as subordinate to circulation (2002:67–74), however, limits the applicability of his theory to online publics. Yet when YouTube users recombine existing videos and recirculate them, interactivity and circulation are tightly interwoven. In line with Yang and Calhoun's (2007) critique, I argue that watching, downloading, and editing a video and then posting a recombined version constitutes not only a public but also, often, a locus of its politics.

A decade before Warner conceived of publics as oriented around texts in circulation, a related discussion emerged among sociolinguistic anthropologists on "entextualization," the ripping of texts from their social contexts

and—in a process termed "reentextualization" (Silverstein and Urban 1996:13) or "recontextualization" (Bauman and Briggs 1990:74–75)—their placement in new circuits of performance and circulation (Parmentier 1994; Silverstein 1988). While my examination of recombinatory circulation carries traces of reentextualization or recontextualization, it diverges from that discussion on the question of interactivity. As I do in my engagement with Warner, I extend the work of sociolinguistic anthropologists to address the heightened interactivity of online circulation.[4]

I theorize the politics of interactivity through a recombinatory-circulation analysis that is at once an iteration of textual analysis for the digital age and an extension of George Marcus's injunction for ethnographers to engage in "tracking strategies" (1995:95). However, the tracking is not of a stable text but, rather, one continually undergoing what Mikhail Bakhtin has called "re-accentuation" (2004:419–422), a stylized copying that transforms the original through dialogic engagement with related texts in circulation at the time and with the voices they contain. In adapting re-accentuation to online video circulation, I use the term *recombination* to capture how this interactivity generates new video texts.[5]

In Colombia, the proliferation of derivative videos, algorithmically juxtaposed, becomes a dense but uneven field of political ideology in which right-wing publics viscerally opposed to the FARC conduct the vast majority of the recombination. Any effort to produce and perform a pro-FARC counterpublic encounters participatory opposition in YouTube forums. In the analysis that follows, the difficulty of finding common discursive ground between the Colombian government and the FARC comes into sharp relief. If the FARC, in part because of its media marginalization, continues to be systematically denied political space, the prospects for its transition to unarmed politics—a scenario on the horizon with the current negotiations—will remain dim. In the list of anticipated challenges to the current peace process—land redistribution, income inequality, drug trafficking, legal inefficiency, and victims' rights—media access is absent. However, as I highlight here, lopsided media access is a seldom-discussed structural challenge to building popular support for a future peace accord, which is likely to be signed by late 2014.[6] A peace agreement will require a referendum or other participatory mechanism to endow it with popular legitimacy. In that crucial moment, the visceral opposition from right-wing publics, if not tempered, could act as another tripwire on the path to a political solution to Colombia's war. Beyond Colombia, I draw attention to the recombinatory logic of online video streaming and its increasing significance for propaganda struggles around the globe. I hope to encourage more ethnographic work that illuminates the oft-obscured political charge of participatory circulation by combining online and offline methods.

## Setting the stage: Methods

To track the propaganda battle between the FARC and the Colombian government, I move beyond the intertextual web of online video and draw on two years of ethnographic research on the Colombian military's guerrilla marketing campaigns to demobilize FARC rebels as well as on five months of research on how political exiles in Sweden use the Internet to participate in Colombia's information war (Fattal 2014). In my conversations after soccer matches with demobilized rebels outside their transitional home, in discussions with military intelligence officers in cars with tinted windows, in interviews with former hostages in upscale Bogotá cafes, and in the semiclandestine world of radical left-wing Colombian radio in Stockholm, the events that define this article and the reflections on the media politics surrounding them were recurrent topics of conversation. Sometimes, discussions shifted unexpectedly to the media events in question, as happened, for instance in a life-history interview with Marta,[7] a rebel who was captured, offered the chance to demobilize, and plied for intelligence used to plan Operation Check. This ethnography and the three years I spent researching the recombinatory circulation of the two video texts online serve as productive foils.

My methodology balances online and offline worlds to give due weight to the emergent role of online forums while situating the YouTube contestation in a wider media environment and political arena. Because political terrain is fragmented but contiguous online and off, I argue against segregating the two. The research I conducted in video-streaming forums made me feel as though I was making my way through an audiovisual labyrinth of unknown proportions: YouTube's archive (Prelinger 2009). Conducting interviews with former hostages, demobilized rebels, and military intelligence officers grounded that experience in the wider psychological war these propagandistic video texts engage. I strive to weave the two together in creative and considered ways to represent the fluidity between online and offline worlds in Colombia's war.

## Part 1: The FARC's video and its antagonistic recombinations

### The FARC's video

I saw the 14-minute video for the first time in Bogotá, in 2006. A journalist slotted a CD given to her by FARC urban militias into his laptop. I noted a hint of amusement in his gaze, a look that placed him in the know and me almost there. In that first viewing, my mouth agape, I could only partially process what I was seeing. The cliché parroted to foreigners came to mind: "In Colombia, anything can happen" [*En Colombia, pasa de todo*]. The fact that I was exposed to the propaganda video on a CD circulating in

an underground network speaks to its necessarily restricted modes of circulation.[8]

In the opening shots, people scramble through the portico of a colonial building while an off-screen voice, amplified by a megaphone, directs the chaos. The FARC logo hangs in the upper-left corner of the screen as the slow gait and unsteady hand of the videographer guide the viewer onto a bus. "FARC-EP Productions" bisects the screen as the voice behind the megaphone announces, "For the parliamentarians, there's a special vehicle."[9] The title card, *For an Exchange (Por el canje)*—of hostages—sits over a still frame of suited parliamentarians seated on the bus, staring blankly at the camera. The video then flashes back to preparations for their kidnapping. The scenes toggle between boot-camp drills and rebels in formation responding to staccato orders. The videographer zooms in on a German shepherd that will serve as a "bomb-sniffing dog" during the operation, a shrewd symbol in the performance of authenticity on which it will hinge. In another scene, the FARC choreographs logistics, using black plastic sheeting to create a blueprint of the parliament building. A group of insurgents makes a mistake, and laughter follows. The rehearsal, in the rain, is crude.

The preparations draw to a close. Over a quiet nightscape, the videographer's female voice whispers to a colleague that the cluster of lights in the distance is a base from which the FARC fears a military response will come. Cut to the morning, good-luck handshakes, and a shaky recording of the bus's descent along a switchback. The date–time stamp counts, "April 11, 9:05:23 a.m." Walkie-talkie static interrupts birds' chirping. Then the scene shifts to a second camera looking through the windshield of the bus, commercial radio blaring. Motorcycles lead the bus into the outskirts of Cali, its wealthy suburbs, and finally the city center.

The scene suddenly cuts back to the pandemonium in the portico from the introduction. After a few moments of unsteadily recorded images, we are back on the bus, this time with the parliamentarians. Sigifredo López, the only hostage who would survive the event's tragic fate, responds to a question from the guerrilla videographer posing as a local journalist, a poignant example of how the media itself has become a tactical weapon in the armed conflict.[10] "The army says there's a gas cylinder [a crude bomb used by the FARC] and made us evacuate the building," López says. When I interviewed him in a trendy Bogotá café in 2012, he recalled that the videographer was wearing a T-shirt with the logo of TelePacífico, the regional state-sponsored television station. He reflected, "In that moment of the video, we didn't yet know we were kidnapped. I interpret the video as a joke the FARC made, not only at our expense but also making fun of the state's security apparatus because of the form of the kidnapping itself, the spectacle of it. To come

into downtown Cali, the third largest city in Colombia, and take us like sheep to slaughter."[11]

On-screen, as the bus revs up a hill, the parliamentarians clamor, "Where are we heading, boss?" The question is received in silence. Then, a belated reply: "Ladies and gentlemen, we are the FARC. We are taking you from downtown Cali."[12] The motor roars as the bus speeds off to the Farallones Mountains. As the insurgents, now wearing FARC armbands, move their hostages from the bus to a cattle truck, the captives recognize the gravity of their lot and look at one another in disbelief. When the truck pulls into a rebel-controlled area, a passenger in the cab gives a thumbs-up. A salsa ballad with the refrain "Listen up, generals" plays as the rebels embrace, and the video flashes back to previous scenes. The prankish braggadocio then shifts to an ideological key as the video ends with a series of leftist critiques denouncing an exclusive political elite, state terrorism, and gringo intervention. Finally, the credits:

- FARC-EP Productions, February 2004, Edited in the Mountains of Colombia *(Editado en las Montañas de Colombia)*
- All of the images in this video have been made by camerapeople of the FARC-EP *(camarógrafos de las FARC-EP)* during the preparation and execution phases of the operation that culminated in the detention of the 12 parliamentarians of the Assembly of Valle de Cauca.

FARC rebels acting as members of the military is the most obvious form of doubling in the kidnapping video. Another is its style, which mimes and mixes genres. The logo, titles, and credits suggest a television documentary, and the tightly organized teleological narrative, preceded by a trailer, mimics a Hollywood film. But the unsteady camerawork, personal relationship between the videographers and protagonists, and lack of any pretense of neutrality mark the video as distinctive, at once more personal and more political than the formulism of established genres. The resonance with documentary television and Hollywood film implicitly mocks Colombian mass media (Martín-Barbero 2003). Similar to the stiob genre of parody in late-Soviet socialism (Yurchak 2005:249–250), the FARC video imitates the formulism of mass media to disrupt its ideological foundation. Whereas the creators of stiob relied on a strategic "over-identification" with state discourse to achieve a subtlety that might protect them (Boyer and Yurchak 2010:181–183), the FARC is openly at war with the Colombian state and so does not hide its authorship.

In splashing "Editado en las Montañas de Colombia" across the screen, as well as crediting the "camarógrafos de las FARC-EP," the video conjures a parallel, occult universe of media production capable of documenting and

promoting the spectacle of the FARC's operations and interpolating a sympathetic counterpublic. But the formalistic similarities to other genres are offset by the political rhetoric at the end. That ambivalence encapsulates a strategy of parody, the crafting of a video that is familiar but different; spiked with playfulness, as in the coy salsa song at the end, but extraordinarily serious. In her book about "the Billionaires," a satirical troupe of political activists, Angelique Haugerud reminds us that "parody is serious business" (2013:190–191). Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak underscore the point, noting that it is capable of "making that which is invisible and unthinkable, suddenly recognized and apprehended" (2010:212). The parody of the FARC's video does precisely that, exposing the spectral presence of the FARC—normally limited to clandestine militias—in Colombian cities and humiliating the state in a government building.

Recent scholarship has identified parody as a weapon increasingly wielded in formal politics (Boyer 2013) and online (Bernal 2013), especially on YouTube (Hess 2009; Shifman 2013; Tyron 2008). Parody on YouTube can take many forms: The video, with its invitation to laugh at the parliamentarians for having fallen into FARC's trap, is a particularly dark variety. Although the FARC's precise intentions in creating this video remain murky, the group directed it to a range of audiences, as I show below, within and outside its ranks.[13] At a discursive level, the video manages to blend into and disrupt Colombia's media environment by performing the "heteroglossia" of mass-media genres, to borrow a term from Bakhtin's analysis of the novel. For Bakhtin (2004:262), the novel combines multiple voices, creating a polysemic image of a language, prone to resignification through devices like parody: "In order to be authentic and productive, parody must be precisely a parodic *stylization,* that is it must re-create the parodied language as an authentic whole, giving it its due as a language possessing its own internal logic" (2004:364). The FARC's video parodies the audiovisual grammars of documentary television, Hollywood film, and home video and, in so doing, challenges them—but only to the extent it circulates unadulterated.

### Fragments recirculate online: Two recombinations

Ojo Digital, an obscure production house in Uruguay, made a 25-minute television documentary titled *Those Who Are Going To Die Send You Regards (Los que van a morir te saludan).*[14] The documentary reinscribes the FARC's original video in the familiar structure of documentary television, generating sympathy for the families of the captives (particular attention is paid to their children) and of a policeman who was killed. In one scene, another policeman who has just discovered his colleague's body runs out of the parliament building in tears, raging against those

"sons of bitches." The people who try to calm him then find the other officer, whose limp body is loaded into a police van and rushed to the hospital. The voice-over informs the viewer that the policeman had offered his antiexplosive expertise to the "military personnel" responding to the bomb threat in the building and that he did not survive. Rebels had strangled him in the bathroom.

The title of the video recurs in two hostages' on-screen testimonies. The first comes at the beginning of the documentary, as Jairo Javier Hoyos, in a nasal voice, proclaims, "Los que van a morir te saludan." The line, eerily mouthed by a vulnerable figure, was scripted by the FARC. It warns the state to tread carefully, not to attempt a rescue, and to release the rebels' imprisoned comrades. The segment illustrates a perverse genre—proof-of-life videos—in which threats are interspersed with emotional messages from hostages to their families. Broadcast teams angled to record the parliamentarians' families watching such videos, consummating the reinscription of the media event in an established narrative about the human toll of kidnapping.

The second recombination of the FARC's video is not so multilayered. "Zarcoman," the screen name of a Colombian military officer whose other uploads include combat scenes and a video titled simply "FARC TERRORISTAS," takes excerpts from the original and uses a textual overlay to define the FARC as "ENEMIES OF THE PEOPLE."[15] This crude resignification strips the original video of its uncanny qualities and converts it into visual testimony of the FARC's inhumanity. With over 133,000 views (as of July 2013), Zarcoman's video has struck a chord. The FARC's video, meanwhile, is periodically removed from YouTube, presumably for violating its community guidelines (YouTube 2013a), denying it such an impressive view count.[16]

The comments on Zarcoman's video provide the textual counterpart to the voices that come to the fore through the recombinatory circulation of the FARC's video. While occasional comments sympathize with the parliamentarians' plight, the vitriolic sample below is representative of most of the 399 comments (as of July 2013) on Zarcoman's video:

**A:** BITCH guerrillas TRIPLESONSOFBITCHES OF SHIT LET THEM ROT AS THE GLORIOUS MILITARY WILL FINISH THEM ONE BY ONE AND THEY'LL DIE LIKE THE DOG reyes [a FARC leader killed in an attack in Ecuador] WITH HIS LEGS UP SHITTING FROM FEAR

**T:** those who_ insult the guerrillas are the most ignorant in the country as the media have them blinded, if you all eat everything in the caption like this piece of shit video you're *IDIOTS*

**S:** farc and its mother are going to see if they like if t he same were done to their relatives

**T:** let the mothers of all of these fucking sb die . . .

**A:** Let the military offensive against the NARCOTER-RORISTS of the FARC and their accomplices continue, let it rain lead and bombs day and night, hard to their head, amen.[17]

The pro-FARC counterpublic is outshouted in this forum, its emergence in an occasional comment only enraging right-wing publics, which employ not only gendered expletives but also language codified by the military, such as "narcoterrorist" (Tate n.d.). As Warner writes, texts and their publics operate within a logic of competition: "Texts clamor at us. Images solicit our gaze. Look here! Listen! Hey! In doing so, they by no means render us passive. Quite the contrary" (2002:89). The commenters—or "haters" (Lange 2007)—who respond to the videos proclaim their position within a constellation of publics. Polemical commentary helps propagate Zarcoman's video, making it more locatable and moving it to the discursive center, a process enabled by YouTube's take-down policies.

In the Colombian context, Zarcoman's resignification serves as evidence in the country's ongoing public argument over kidnapping. In the 1980s and early 1990s, when hostage taking was limited to the internecine battles between drug dealers, armed groups, and the nation's economic and political elite, it functioned as just another dirty tactic in a war that had been degenerating for decades (Uribe 2004). Kidnappers justified their acts in terms of territorial clashes and class resistance. But, by the late 1990s, even the middle class found itself vulnerable to the "miraculous catch" *(pesca milagrosa)*. On an intercity bus, even people of modest means became bait for the FARC (Rubio 2003). Carla, a Colombian leftist and political exile in Sweden who is increasingly critical of the FARC, half-jokingly speculated, "The miraculous catch must have been the idea of someone who infiltrated [the FARC]." Kidnapping, she concluded, has been devastating to the FARC's legitimacy, expanding the affliction of the upper classes to the wider public.[18] Zarcoman's resignification, meanwhile, produces and exploits the general public's disdain for kidnapping by linking it to other human rights abuses, such as recruiting children, that index moral bankruptcy.

Through the Ojo Digital and Zarcoman recombinations, new voices are brought into the media event—a kidnapped parliamentarian, a hysterical policeman who has just witnessed his friend's death, a bellowing omniscient narrator, relatives of the hostages, and a zealous soldier—voices that echo in the commentary. The recombinatory circulation intimates retaliation, not only for the cunning kidnapping but also its perpetrators' boastful video.

## Part 2: The media event in context

### *The media event in history: Mobilizing after an accidental massacre*

By producing the video described above, the FARC sought to interpolate a sympathetic counterpublic radically opposed to the Colombian state. However, in the aftermath of this media event, the videos derived from the FARC's revealed an abundance of anti-counterpublics. Media events disrupt preprogrammed cycles of news distribution: They are moments of rupture in which a collage of confused responses momentarily supplants existing narrative structures. What makes media events so polyvocal is not only their much-discussed fragmentary nature (Baudrillard 1995; White 1996) but also how they elicit personal reactions (Couldry 2003; Dayan and Katz 1992; Fiske 1996). As media scholar John Fiske notes, "A media event . . . is a point of maximum discursive visibility . . . a point of maximum turbulence . . . *It also invites intervention and motivates people to struggle to redirect some of the currents flowing through it to serve their interests; it is therefore a site of popular engagement and involvement*" (1996:8, emphasis added). Video-streaming sites such as YouTube attract users who "redirect some of the currents flowing through" the media event and claim a personal stake in the political by remixing or commenting on a video. William Mazzarella makes a similar, if more general, point when he writes, "With the Internet's interactivity, one can be both spectator and participant at the same time, because the political stage has itself become virtual, distributed" (2010:788). Despite the resounding importance of this shift, the virtual distribution of politics via online participation in video-streaming communities has received limited anthropological scrutiny.[19] While Michael Wesch (2008) has identified the resignification of videos as a central feature of their online circulation, few anthropologists have parsed the politics (though see Sumiala and Tikka 2011).

As other scholars have noted, a given media event is intimately linked to a chain of media events, past and future (Couldry 2003; Manning 1996). It is therefore important to note how the FARC's kidnapping of the parliamentarians falls within a history of past media events in Colombia. The M-19, a group that split from the FARC in the early 1970s and demobilized in 1989, staged a number of mediatic "armed propaganda" events—stealing Simón Bolívar's sword, holding 14 ambassadors hostage for 61 days in the Embassy of the Dominican Republic, printing and distributing its own newspaper through the infrastructure of a Cali daily—a set of antecedents for the FARC's dramatic act in downtown Cali (Villamizar Herrera 1995). The M-19 prided itself on media savvy, and its ex-combatants still do (Fattal n.d.). Elver, a former middle commander of the M-19, looked out on Stockholm's main square in 2009 as he proclaimed with nostalgia, "If we were around today, all of

our videos would be on YouTube." I bracket out this history to highlight the media event's future, suggesting that the future hailed by the recombinatory-circulation pattern of the FARC's video was ultimately instantiated in the rescue of Íngrid Betancourt and other high-value hostages on July 2, 2008, a contorted reflection of the "original" media event.

What set the abduction of the parliamentarians in Cali apart from other political kidnappings was its nerve: It happened in the middle of the day, in a government building, in a paramilitarized city (Taussig 2003:14–15). Alonso, a military intelligence officer who specializes in Cali's Valle de Cauca and nearby Cauca provinces, grudgingly acknowledged, in 2012, that the raid was well planned and executed, and he credited the FARC's urban militias in Cali. When I asked why he thought the FARC recorded the kidnapping, he responded quickly, "To use it as a recruiting tool, to demonstrate their military legitimacy *(estatus beligerante)*." Roberto, a demobilized rebel from the FARC's 6th Front, which operates in the region where the kidnapping took place, remembers watching the video in a rebel camp. "At the time, I thought it was the best thing the movement could do. It was well organized and strategic," he said. "They told us these were the kind of operations we needed to do, that we should take notes."

The FARC used the video not only to trumpet its political position and military strength but also, albeit fleetingly, to depict its fighters as more than the cutout representations of file footage, challenging the rote invocation of terrorism by government officials and Colombian corporate media. The momentary disruption of mass media formulism, however, would boomerang on the FARC when an accidental massacre validated its terrorist label.

On June 28, 2007, more than five years after the Cali kidnapping, a laconic *comunicado* announced the death of 11 of the 12 hostages (Anncol 2007). Their lives ended as abruptly as the abduction had occurred. While 6,723 people were kidnapped between 1996 and 2006 (personal communication, February 8, 2011), it was the tragedy of the parliamentarians' death that sparked a massive Facebook campaign, "A Million Voices Against the FARC," which culminated in a global mobilization—stoked by the Colombian government and mass media—denouncing the FARC in more than 200 cities: a consummate moment in its political isolation (Fattal 2012:946).[20]

Chained to a tree 80 meters from the main FARC camp—punishment for leaving a red shirt out to dry while the military was flying overhead—Sigifredo López (2011:178–179) heard barrages of gunfire and cries of "Don't let them go!" but did not see the massacre. After the incident, the 60th Front, custodian of the hostages, kept him isolated. He only sensed the import of the exchange days later, when one of the rebels confided to him, "Some idiots from the 29th Front came in without warning. We fucked it up" (López 2011:183). Over time, despite bursts of attention

in the national media, the story of the parliamentarians disappeared from headlines and blended into the generalized tragedy of kidnapping in Colombia, leaving video streaming as the battleground for framing the event and its tragic unfolding.

### *The wider media environment: Plan Colombia and FARCLANDIA, 1998–2002*

To understand why calls for violence against the FARC predominate in YouTube forums, a broader sketch of Colombia's media environment is useful. In a 2008 survey of nearly 4,000 Colombians, about 90 percent responded that, in the past month, they had seen the news programs of either RCN or Caracol, the two national television networks (owned by two of the largest corporate conglomerates in the country and heavily slanted toward the government; Comisión Nacional de la Televisión 2008:17). In rural areas, radio has greater penetration. In 2011, when the Ministry of Defense surveyed FARC deserters who had joined the government's demobilization program, asking how they learned of the program, they responded: radio, 42.5 percent; flier, 15 percent; television, 15 percent; loudspeaker (most often affixed to the bottom of a helicopter), 8.5 percent; printed press, 0.5 percent; and other (e.g., word of mouth), 18.5 percent. The Internet did not register. When asked on which radio station they had heard the message, 71 percent said the army's station, which reaches remote municipalities and with a clearer signal than private stations.

My interviews with former rebels corroborated the survey's suggestion that the Internet is all but irrelevant to the FARC's rank and file and the organization's primary constituency, the peasantry. Many former combatants simply described Internet access from rebel camps and rural areas as "difficult," noting that Internet connectivity is the exclusive privilege of commanders of well-financed fronts. While the FARC's urban and international sympathizers use the Internet to delegitimize the state, they rightfully suspect that military intelligence officers monitor this activity. When I visited Café Estereo, an Internet radio station for the militant Left, in a cramped Stockholm basement, the group of friends running the operation—mostly former members of the Unión Patriótica, a FARC-aligned political party decimated by assassinations in the 1980s (Romero Ospina 2011)—joked about frequent denial-of-service attacks routing transmission to Colombian military radio. Passing plastic cups of whiskey around tables topped with audio mixers, the leaders of a principal media outlet for Colombia's radical Left were literally underground, 6,000 miles from Bogotá, a scene emblematic of the isolation of pro-FARC counterpublics.

This isolation is not surprising considering the uneven Internet access between urban and rural populations in Colombia, the looming and legitimate concerns about

surveillance and interference by military intelligence, and the antiterrorist terms of YouTube's community guidelines. While the FARC clearly embodies what may be called a "counterpublic," the precise definition of this term has been an issue of contention between Warner and another leading public-sphere theorist, Nancy Fraser. In differentiating his definition of counterpublic from that of Fraser's "subaltern counterpublic" (1990:67), Warner argues that counterpublics are more revolutionary and less reformist. He writes, "A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status" (2002:86). The FARC is acutely aware of its subordinate position. Timochenko, the FARC commander who assumed power in 2011 after three high-level commanders were killed in military operations, opens his letter to the renowned historian of the Colombian conflict, Medófilo Medina, by complaining, "There is an established media prism, and whoever thinks differently or is opposed to the declarations of the powerful is destined for the Picota," the country's infamous prison (Jiménez 2012).[21] The publics the FARC manages to affect—beyond the transnational radical Left—are primarily lower-tech publics, which it reaches by "working the masses" *(trabajo de masas)*: through personal engagement, civic meetings, sponsored concerts, and local radio programs. In Colombia, the FARC's ability to form counterpublics is subject to geographies of rebel and state influence and technologies of distribution. The consequence is a fragmented national arena in which publics and counterpublics engage only obliquely with each other.

The state of direct dialogue between the rebels and the government during the administration of Andrés Pastrana (1998–2002) is captured by the iconic image of the mustachioed president sitting alone on a dais, in front of the yellow, blue, and red horizontal stripes of the Colombian flag. The empty plastic chair to the president's right had been reserved for the FARC's cofounder, Manuel Marulanda Vélez, who never showed. His absence on this occasion, January 7, 1999, marked an inauspicious start to a "national dialogue" and was the source of irreparable damage to the president, a former newscaster who wagered all his political capital on negotiations with the FARC. Pastrana waited until 2002 to acknowledge what the photograph portended: The peace process, like many before it (Díaz Uribe 1995; Medina and Sánchez 2003), was doomed. Washington drew the same conclusion six months after Marulanda's symbolic snub. In the summer of 1999, President Clinton's national security advisor, Sandy Berger, called the undersecretary for political affairs at the State Department, Thomas Pickering, instructing him to assemble an interagency effort to address the fact that "things are getting worse in Colombia" (Pickering 2009).

That phone call, itself the product of intensive advocacy (Tate n.d.), sewed the seeds of the multibillion-dollar aid packages intended to upgrade Colombian military and law-enforcement agencies: Plan Colombia. Central to the foreign assistance was a revamping of military intelligence (Porch and Delgado 2010). The reforms would take nearly a decade to show results in counterinsurgency terms. While the Colombian military and the FARC were girding themselves for all-out confrontation, the demilitarized zone became a phantasmagoric space—"FARCLANDIA"—where cocaine served as currency and journalists and adventurers flocked to drink whiskey and take photographs of the last of a type: the Latin American jungle revolutionary. Though the origin of the name FARCLANDIA is unknown, foreign correspondents played an important role in spreading it. Sentences like "Farclandia is a country within a country" dot press coverage anxious but curious about the FARC's authority (*Guardian* 2000).[22] Outside FARCLANDIA, the war raged unabated. The faltering dialogue between the government and the rebels broke down on February 20, 2002, when the FARC kidnapped Senator Jorge Gechem Turbay. With satellite images as props, President Pastrana went on national television to highlight the FARC's hypocrisies, declare the peace process dead, and give the rebels 48 hours to flee the zone. To prove the sovereignty of his government, Pastrana traveled to FARCLANDIA's largest urban center, San Vicente de Caguán, on February 23, 2002, the same day Íngrid Betancourt, a senator and minor presidential candidate, planned to be there.

## Part 3: Operation Check and its celebratory recombinations

### Betancourt's third video proof of life

Kidnapped en route with other members of her campaign—less than two months before the parliamentarians' capture—Betancourt never made it to San Vicente. In her best-selling captivity memoir, she writes that, after arriving at a FARC camp, she "noticed a game of chess on the corner of what was meant to be a table. That such a thing could exist in the middle of this self-contained world was both unexpected and surprising. But once I sat in front of the chessboard, I was overcome with panic. We were the pawns" (2010:64). Betancourt's status as the FARC's highest-profile political hostage, a presidential candidate, and a French–Colombian dual citizen lent her case a diplomatic dimension others lacked. She was more than a captured pawn; she was a queen. The FARC demanded many pawns of their own, imprisoned in Colombian jails, for her return. Recall the title of the video of the parliamentarians' kidnapping, *For an Exchange (Por el canje)*. This inequality was not lost on Betancourt's fellow hostages.

I interviewed one of them, Captain William Pérez, a corporal when freed during Operation Check, in a Ministry of Defense office in 2012. Trained as a nurse, he had tended

to rebels and hostages alike. He spoke softly and without a trace of bitterness when describing the indignities of being chained to a fellow hostage (even during trips to the bathroom in the middle of the night) and of the difference in value between hostages: "If we were only soldiers, the military would bring in the troops. We might live, we could get killed, but the consequences would not be the same as if they killed the North Americans,[23] if they killed Íngrid."

In classic hostage-negotiation fashion, Betancourt and her fellow captives were periodically displayed to the public alive to maintain their exchange value. The FARC persuaded Betancourt to record proof-of-life videos as opportunities to send messages to her family on three occasions: weeks after the kidnapping, at the one-year mark, and after more than five years of captivity. In the second and third video missives, Betancourt contested the FARC's editorial manipulation. In a conversation with her campaign manager and fellow captive, Clara Rojas, Betancourt explained why she refused to cooperate with the second video: "I haven't forgotten the way they treated us last time. We recorded twenty minutes, and they sent ten, arbitrarily choosing whatever suited them. Raúl Reyes [of the FARC] makes declarations in my place, stealing my voice. That's unacceptable. I refuse to play along with their tricks" (2010:162). Betancourt remained vigilant about her image. She declined to watch a movie on a laptop for fear of being filmed doing so, and she ran from a dance floor after noticing a rebel recording from behind a tree (Betancourt 2010:357, 375).

After more than five years of captivity, Betancourt decided on silence as the best approach to her circumstances. Her third proof-of-life video evokes, with disconcerting beauty, a saintly iconicity. Insects hum and birds chirp as she sits at a quarter-turn from the camera, eyes downcast and hands clasped. She is gaunt, ill with hepatitis, but dignified. The camera zooms in and out as if observing a rare zoological specimen. She recalls being objectified by the camera: "The red light came on for good. He had lied to me. The letter would never reach my mother. I sat stiffly on Consolacion's bench. *Lord, you know that this proof of life exists against my will. May your will be done,* I prayed in silence, and swallowed my tears and my pride. I did not want my children to see me like this" (2010:492). The video circulated widely, promoted by all of the major news outlets, and provided a compelling testament to the cruelty of kidnapping.

Eight months later, having recovered from hepatitis in Pérez's care, she would see her family in a dramatic homecoming. "That moment, the first hug with my mom, that's a moment that I've seen many times, and also when the plane arrived with my kids," Betancourt said in a 2013 telephone interview. She revisits the scenes of her release periodically, in images packaged in news segments that include even more dramatic footage of the rescue itself.

### Operation Check and the rescue footage

In 2008 another media event transpired, Operation Check, a military intervention that responded to the parliamentarians' kidnapping. Betancourt, three defense contractors from the United States, and 11 other long-term hostages were rescued in an operation more audacious and dramatic than the one carried out by the FARC in Cali. Pérez reflects on the morning of liberation: "We were writing letters. They said the commission would arrive at noon, and when it did we crossed a river. We were emotional because they were coming from civilization, but we didn't have any idea what was going to happen." Whereas the FARC had masqueraded as the military six years earlier, here military officers masqueraded as FARC rebels, international observers, journalists, and humanitarian aid workers. Headlines around the world celebrated Operation Check, which seemed out of character for a Colombian military known more for an egregious human rights record than for delicate intelligence operations.

With information gleaned from demobilized rebels and intercepted communications, the Colombian military rescued the hostages by relaying fake orders to relocate them to the *páramo* and introduce them to the FARC's new commander.[24] (Alfonso Cano, an anthropology student in his youth, had recently replaced FARC cofounder Manuel Marulanda, whose death by natural causes was confirmed on May 26, 2008.) A white helicopter—much like those used in hostage releases negotiated by President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela—arrived along the Apaporis River in the Department of Guaviare carrying military officers posing as FARC envoys (in Che Guevara T-shirts), international observers and aid workers (their foreign accents picked up in acting lessons), and a journalist and cameraman. When it took off again, it carried this cast of disguised operatives, the hostages, and two of their captors.

Once in the air and en route to their "new location," César and Gafas, the commander and second in command of the FARC's 1st Front, were overtaken, stripped, and handcuffed—a moment Betancourt described in my interview with her as "the most convincing detail of the operation." The hostages were then told their new captors were really their saviors: "We're from the National Army, and you're free!" Those words, nearly the inverse of the FARC's utterance while carting away the parliamentarians from Cali, exacted the revenge hailed by the recombination pattern of the FARC's video, surprisingly bloodlessly.

At a press conference two days later, Minister of Defense Juan Manuel Santos, who is now Colombia's president, released footage of the operation, including the jubilant moment the hostages learned they were free. News reports repeated Betancourt's comment upon arrival in Bogotá: "The operation was perfect." Perfect staging, perfect acting, a perfect heteroglossic "novel," to use Santos's word

(Associated Press 2008). The video of the rescue bears striking similarities to that of the parliamentarians' kidnapping. Both document elaborate ruses in enemy territory; both feature white transportation vehicles; both challenge the formulism of journalism. The video of the rescue, however, provided a flash of good news, one that pierced a national callousness developed by perpetually consuming representations of war.

The footage of the rescue circulated unabated online and off, its recombinations celebratory. Search for "Íngrid Betancourt rescue" on YouTube's website and find the video offered by the Colombian Ministry of Defense at a press conference on July 4, 2008, recombined in exuberant news broadcasts, documentaries feting the operation's artifice, and even a made-for-TV mini-series.[25] The footage was compelling, the news was excellent, and the political stakes were high. So it flowed, from a fake reporter's camera to the world, through all available channels with barely a trace of antagonistic recombination.

The segment of the rescue video shared at the July 4, 2008, press conference begins shortly after the helicopter lands. The camera surveys the scene, rows of FARC rebels standing at attention between coca bushes. The "journalist" and his "cameraman" approach the commanding officer, César, and attempt to distract him with an interview. Laughing uncomfortably, César denies the request. The cameraman then shifts his gaze to the hostages preparing to board the helicopter. One of them, Lieutenant Malagón, insists on telling his story to the camera:

> **Malagón:** (emotionally) Excuse me, I have only one thing to say. I've been chained for 10 years. I am Lieutenant Malagón of the glorious Colombian military, kidnapped—for many factors—by this guerrilla.
>
> **Journalist:** (interjecting) Words of Lieutenant Malagón. We can't transmit them live, we can't transmit them, but we know the suffering.
>
> **M:** They should be transmitted, because I have something very important to say.

Malagón's testimony is cut off as the scene shifts to Betancourt and the other hostages, their hands bound with white plastic ties. The audio drops out as they enter the helicopter, its blades swirling overhead. The camera pans back to the FARC unit standing at attention, unaware that their most valuable hostages are about to fly to freedom.[26] The footage cuts to the jubilant scene inside the helicopter, shaky images of tears streaming down Betancourt's cheeks, exuberant hugs, and cries of joy, ending on this emotional climax.

But even a careful release of video fragments in the most auspicious of conditions can tack back. On the tarmac in Bogotá, Betancourt shared her first impressions of the operation: "The helicopters arrived, and out came some characters, I mean absolutely surreal. Some men dressed with logos and certificates of being from I don't know what. I looked at all of this and said to myself: *These people, who are they? What international committee is this?*" (2008).

Betancourt had seen the logos of the Red Cross; the "International Humanitarian Mission," a fictitious NGO whose website was part of the ruse; and TeleSur, the cable news station largely underwritten by the Venezuelan government. The appropriation of those symbols, particularly the Red Cross logo, drew some criticism (BBC Mundo 2008). But cheers for the military and jeers for the FARC drowned out the ethical debate about the sanctity of the neutrality of the Red Cross and the press. The future hailed by the celebratory recombinations of "Operation Check" is one in which the Geneva conventions are breached and NGOs and journalists are politicized to the point of militarization: a classic dystopian vision, peace by total war.

## Part 4: Celebratory recombinations, documentaries, and newscasts

One month after Operation Check, the Colombian Ministry of Defense released a 33-minute behind-the-scenes documentary, *Soldiers without armor (Soldados sin coraza),* of the operation. It includes more-extensive footage from the rescue; planning sessions and motivational speeches; and interviews with former hostages, top military brass, and intelligence agents, their identities concealed. The documentary, initially aired by RCN, Colombia's largest television network,[27] circulates in three parts on YouTube, each accompanied by gushing comments. It showcases the operation's chicanery, from the process of selecting participants to the way fake messages were relayed from a jungle camp (with appropriate ambient noise) and the adornment of the helicopter with a no-guns logo.

*Soldados sin coraza* goes into detail about the pivotal role of the "journalist." Even more than in the case of the FARC's kidnapping of the parliamentarians, the camera here is a tactical weapon, not only reinforcing the story line the officers are performing but also actively manipulating the scene. In the video, the officer who played the role of cameraman explains, "[The journalist and I] had to be inseparable, and our objective was to completely distract César and Gafas." Upon landing in the rebel camp, the journalist, cameraman, and leader of the mission went straight to César and introduced themselves. Quickly, the journalist and mission leader started bickering about conducting an interview with César, while others corralled the hostages toward the helicopter. César "did not even have a second to think or look at the characters in the group," recalls the journalist. After the leader of the mission said goodbye to César, the journalist coaxed the latter into an interview, despite his initial refusal. Loading the hostages into the helicopter was

taking longer than anticipated, so the journalist stalled by trying to prolong the interview.

> **Journalist:** Commander, do you think this is the beginning of a future peace process?

> **César:** We could say that spaces are opening for that. The circumstances will determine the opportunities.

> **J**: What does the FARC want from the national government, friendly countries, the international community so that soon … [César walks away]. Cut cut.

Requests to the operation's "nurse" for medicine caused further delays. Finally, as the hostages boarded the helicopter, the journalist and cameraman circled behind the FARC troops, repeating, "Backlighting, backlighting," to distract their attention from the helicopter.

In addition to the celebratory footage after the cast of soldiers overpowered and handcuffed César and Gafas in the helicopter (the rescuers even sang the army's hymn), the documentary shows the reaction of military commanders who had been awaiting the news, the praise of U.S. ambassador William Brownfield, and César being dragged in his underwear across the lawn of the Tolemaida military base. Marta, the demobilized rebel I mention above, had been captured months before the operation and obligated ("me tocó") to collaborate with military intelligence officers preparing Operation Check. I interviewed her in a government reintegration center in 2012. Wearing urban camouflage—jeans, a faux leather jacket, and blue eyeliner—she reflected on the FARC's perspective on the operation with clinical distance: "César was seen as someone very committed to the organization … But what they say is that César wasn't captured, that it was a plan he had with his girlfriend. The guerrilla called him a traitor … [who] was later tricked by the government." The images of César blindfolded, being dragged across the lawn, visually refute the conspiracy theory, which may or may not be true.

Two made-for-TV documentaries also circulate online, *Operación jaque* by National Geographic (50 minutes) and *El rescate perfecto* by the Discovery Channel (43 minutes). They are of a similar ilk to, though less overtly propagandistic than, *Soldados sin coraza*. Online, the documentaries about Operation Check are outnumbered by newscasts reporting on the event. The most common and most viewed recombinations of the rescue footage are the television broadcasts of Defense Minister Santos and General Mario Montoya narrating the operation over the projection of the rescue footage to journalists at the July 4, 2008, press conference. The voices that come to the fore in the celebratory recombinations are those of the country's top military brass, intelligence officers, Lieutenant Malagón, and an emotional and appreciative Íngrid Betancourt.[28] The amplified voices align with those emerging from the recombinatory circulation of the FARC's video of its kidnapping in Cali, drowning out pro-FARC counterpublics in both instances.

## Conclusion

I have demonstrated above how recombinatory circulation of kidnapping-related videos on YouTube constrains pro-FARC counterpublics and reproduces old media biases in Colombia, highlighting the limits of "openness" on YouTube. The two videos at the heart of this article declare reductive visions for Colombia's political future: rid of the rebel scourge or liberated from oligarchic overlords (even if the enduring reality is of their violent coexistence, along with affiliated armed actors). While the FARC's video is resignified antagonistically, the recombinations of the military's video are celebratory, indexing dominant publics' ability to stymie and overwhelm pro-FARC counterpublics online.

Ethnographically, this article illuminates how that constraint works through the resignification of two video texts by derivative videos circulating online. The recombinations of the FARC's kidnapping video and of the military's rescue video evince a preponderance of anti-FARC publics, leaving the insurgents limited media space both online and off. Reflecting on this exclusion, Roberto, a former rebel from the region of the parliamentarians' kidnapping, says, "The government has RCN, Caracol, all those news programs, the radio. If the movement had one of those outlets it would get all of its videos into the public light."

As Roberto makes clear, the principal ground in the propaganda war between the FARC and the Colombian government continues to be television and radio airwaves. While YouTube provides a forum for pro-FARC counterpublics to circulate their videos, anti-FARC publics truculently reconfigure them. This dynamic—combined with structural exclusions, such as the relative lack of Internet in rural areas and YouTube's antiterrorist community guidelines—constrains pro-FARC publics and entrenches a default speaking position that favors military reprisals, creating an atomized mob clamoring for violence from behind their screens. When the FARC seeks to pierce, even if momentarily, the firewall reinforcing its political isolation with another act of spectacular violence, that attempt, in turn, mobilizes a violent response. This polarization punctuates and propels an armed conflict that spirals on.

Even as negotiations in Havana between the FARC and the Colombian government advance, the FARC struggles to maintain its online media platforms. Shortly after the peace process was publicly announced in October 2012, the blog the FARC used to distribute its comunicados— hosted by Blogger and owned by Google—was taken offline, only to be reactivated six months later (*El Espectador* 2013). Immediately afterward, the FARC's Facebook page disappeared, prompting the group to issue a statement

urging people to contact Facebook and "demand the page be re-established" (FARC 2013), appealing for the same participation that marginalizes it on YouTube. Those two incidents are consistent with the wider practice I have analyzed here of denying the FARC media space through any means possible. As this article highlights, the perpetual media dominance of the right wing in Colombia, online and off, poses a structural challenge to a negotiated solution to the country's war. While the two sides appear determined to sign a peace agreement, endowing it with popular legitimacy via referendum or other participatory means could run up against intensely anti-FARC publics. Easing the FARC's media marginalization is a necessary if insufficient condition to ensure its transition to unarmed politics does not founder—again (Romero Ospina 2011).[29]

Beyond Colombia, this article highlights the need for greater anthropological scrutiny of the politics of participatory circulation online. While the discipline has a strong tradition of analyzing resignification through circulation (going back to Bronislaw Malinowski's classic *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* [1922]), the emergent field of anthropology of online media rarely applies this rich history to Internet users' reconfiguration of media texts, which both resignifies them and transforms the circuits of media distribution. When an Israeli musician remixes Muammar Ghadaffi's "door to door" speech into a music video and uploads it to YouTube, mocking the leader and highlighting his genocidal intent or when thousands of users appropriate the global video meme "Gangnam Style" (Shifman 2013), participatory circulation has political effects anthropologists can unpack with empirical work combining online and offline worlds. This article is an initial attempt to do that by focusing on how interactivity on YouTube adds layers to Colombia's propaganda war. The politics of participatory circulation vary across political arenas, requiring detailed ethnographic research in each instance. Although anthropologists have paid sustained critical attention to how media texts move and mutate (e.g., Spyer and Steedly 2013), considering how circulation itself is being reconfigured through interactivity online can enable a political analysis befitting the digital age.

## Notes

1. Here my argument resonates with a tide of literature that critically confronts discourses of "digital democracy" (Boler 2008; Dean 2009, 2010; Galloway 2004; Hindman 2009; Morozov 2011). By showing the unevenness of YouTube as a political space and questioning its openness in Colombia, I support arguments against digital democracy even as I question the analytic purchase of the abstract concept. I prefer to contribute to a growing, contextually rich, case-based literature (Kendzior 2011; Stein 2012; Yang 2009).

2. This imbalance is further accentuated by the government's technological advantage and support from the United States (see Priest 2013). While the FARC has converted guerrilla warfare into a science of survival, the government's massive military buildup in the early 2000s has reduced the rebels' offensive capacity to hit-and-run guerrilla tactics.

3. Jodi Dean is unsparing in her assessment of the voluminous commentary on social media. In analyzing the activism that preceded the Iraq war in 2003 and its inability to derail the U.S. invasion, she dismisses the "terabytes of commentary and information" as "the cultural effluvia" of "communicative capitalism" (2009:20): token engagement that performs and reinforces chimerical notions of democracy. In her view, the "cultural effluvia" is mere noise, of no consequence to decision makers. However, my ethnography of the Colombian Ministry of Defense, similar to Rebecca Stein's (2012) of the Israeli Defense Force, reveals that militaries are quite interested in managing and controlling this effluvia. In other words, the stream of information and opinions on social media is anything but inconsequential and, in fact, can determine who drowns out whom. My focus on the effectiveness of social media is not intended to downplay censorship, which remains an important if opaque aspect of this story. See endnote 16.

4. Lev Manovich provocatively critiques interactivity as a form of false consciousness. His piece "On Totalitarian Interactivity" (n.d.) ironically provides a totalizing view of interactivity that collapses this vast category into the adherence to preprogrammed options, eclipsing possibilities for agency in the process.

5. "Recombination" echoes Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's concept of "remediation" (1999) that recent ethnographies of media circulation have mobilized (Novak 2010; Silvio 2007; Strassler 2009). Here I engage obliquely with Grusin's subsequent interest in "premediation," which "focuses chiefly on future media events" (2004:37), by demonstrating how recombinations of the FARC's video hailed Betancourt's rescue.

6. Peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC have focused specifically on five topics. The second, "political participation," involved a discussion of the FARC's access to media in the event that the parties reach a comprehensive accord. At the time of writing (December 2013), a provisional agreement had been reached on this point. The joint communiqué released by the negotiators includes a passing reference to increasing media access for social movements and community programming.

7. The names of interlocutors who are not public figures are pseudonyms, and, in a few instances, I have changed changed locations to protect the interviewees.

8. In Colombian Spanish, the word *propaganda* connotes advertising as well as the instrumentalization of media by armed actors. I analyze this double meaning elsewhere (Fattal 2014), but here I take the term to mean media messages intentionally crafted and disseminated by armed actors on any side of the conflict to support their military and political goals.

9. At its seventh conference in 1982, the FARC added "Army of the People" *(Ejército del Pueblo)* to its name, therefore the *–EP* in the credit.

10. Government prosecutors arrested López in 2012, charging him with plotting his own kidnapping and that of his colleagues, holding him partially responsible for their deaths. Specifically, they accused him of providing intelligence to the FARC. He was released three months later in a false-witness scandal.

11. All translations are by the author.

12. Two of the five staffers loaded onto the bus but freed the same day were women, therefore the "*Ladies* and gentlemen."

13. I was unable to interview the FARC videographers, editors, and commanders involved in the kidnapping operation and its video recording. According to former rebels and intelligence officials, many were killed in military operations in the mid-2000s in the Naya, a highland region of the western Andes.

14. Roman gladiators' supposed declaration to the emperor before battle.

15. According to military officers I have interviewed, Zarcoman is a member of the air force.

16. Correspondence with a senior official at Google did not illuminate the mechanics of removing a video. Rather, he directed me to the "Dangerous Acts" clause of YouTube's community guidelines in which "inciting violence," including "videos that train terrorists," is the underlying criterion. However, my research on a military intelligence unit reveals that officers travel to Internet cafes and pose as "citizen journalists," using CNN's iReport to circulate its videos. I suspect the military floods YouTube with requests to block a user or flag FARC content, triggering the system's internal (nonhuman) censors. Cybercensorship is a critical area of future research.

17. The translations are intended to mirror the broken syntax of the Spanish.

18. In 2011, bowing to public pressure, the FARC declared it would no longer kidnap for economic purposes.

19. E. Gabriella Coleman's 2010 review article "Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media" is the most comprehensive survey of the emergent field. While a review of the literature is beyond the scope of this article, I would note that methodological questions have dominated the nascent field, leaving areas such as interactive circulation understudied. How to bound the object of study, specifically in terms of conjugating online and offline worlds, has created a profuse literature. In the future I suspect that literature will be read through a lens of disciplinary anxiety ("What does this mean for fieldwork?"), rather than as an engagement with the evolving online world on its own terms.

20. The mobilization, the apogee of the "No More FARC" movement (linking the Colombian government, mass media, and many civil-society groups), grew even as paramilitary massacres became more frequent and macabre. That disjuncture is partly attributable to paramilitaries' multifaceted public-relations campaigns involving interactive websites, some of which included video games in which players hunted down and killed "farcistas" and "elenos" (i.e., members of the FARC and of the National Liberation Army [Ejército de Liberación Nacional, or ELN]). The paramilitaries' websites rendered the FARC's rudimentary in comparison (Sandoval Forero 2006; Tate 2007).

21. The majority of the FARC's comunicados include an element of media criticism. When the FARC captured Roméo Langlois, a

French reporter (and my roommate at the time), it conditioned his release on a "national and international debate about freedom of the press."

22. The term *FARCLANDIA* warrants its own article; the following reflections are preliminary thoughts for a future piece. I interpret the term's usage in Colombia as a form of dark humor. *FARCLANDIA* operates in a register of what Australian sociologist Jeff Browitt (2007) has called Colombian "tragic realism," a surreal form of tragedy, which novelist Gabriel García Márquez so eloquently captures in his prose. *FARCLANDIA*, with its bilingual suffix, also indexes a complex imaginary of the U.S.–Colombian relationship. I might suggest that the unmarked "land" the term denotes stands in contrast to *Disneylandia*, a term that has long existed in the Colombian vernacular. Given Colombia's class-based engagement with the United States (the wealthy go there on vacation, to shop, and to see family, while the poor go there to escape economic hardship), was FARCLANDIA not Disneylandia's other? FARCLANDIA was where the FARC held wealthy hostages (and also less wealthy prisoners of war) while extorting their families. It also became a space where poor peasants experienced upward mobility through the cocaine economy. Finally, another "land" that would be an interesting counterpoint to FARCLANDIA is Fordlandia, the experimental U.S. suburb in Amazonian Brazil that Henry Ford created to expand his company's supply of natural rubber (see Grandin 2009).

23. The North Americans he refers to were contractors for Northrup Grumman working for U.S. Southern Command who were captured when their surveillance plane crashed in FARC territory in 2003.

24. The páramo is an ecosystem in the northern Andes above the forest line but below the snow line.

25. Occasionally, a recombined video will raise questions in a conspiratorial register about U.S. or Israeli involvement in Operation Check, or a French-brokered ransom deal.

26. This image of the FARC not yet aware they have been duped parallels the image of the parliamentarians staring blankly from inside the bus. Both images wink to the audience, mocking the enemy.

27. RCN's largest shareholder is the Colombian billionaire Carlos Ardila Lülle. His holding company, Organización Ardila Lülle, also owns Colombia's largest soft-drink company and Medellín's soccer club. RCN's editorial position is vehemently anti-FARC and closely aligned with the government.

28. The cozy relationship Betancourt affected with the military upon her release changed radically in the summer of 2010 when she filed a lawsuit against the Colombian government for not providing sufficient security the day of her capture. She fell out of public favor after the botched lawsuit and is now subjected to widespread ridicule within Colombia, even as she is honored abroad.

29. In the mid-1980s the FARC launched a political movement, the Unión Patriótica (UP), as part of an attempt to participate in electoral politics. Paramilitaries closely aligned with the government systematically assassinated 1,598 of its members, including its leaders. Romero Ospina's book *Unión patriótica: Expedientes contra el olvido* (2011) provides the most thorough treatment of the tragedy to date.

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