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# Exploring new forms of audiovisual translation in the age of digital media: cybersubtitling and cyberdubbing

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## ABSTRACT

The prevalence and popularity of audiovisual content in the current times has resulted in a wide range of practices which have been categorised within audiovisual translation (AVT) research as examples of fan translation, amateur translation, crowdsourcing or collaborative translation, among others. While some practices can be included under these categories, other forms of AVT that have recently emerged are not as clear-cut. Against this backdrop, this article explores the conceptual uncertainties surrounding these new AVT practices, with a focus on dubbing and subtitling, by revisiting the work carried out by the authors, who have previously suggested the use of the umbrella terms ‘cybersubtitling’ and ‘cyberdubbing’. In addition to providing a revised classification, the paper emphasises the need to explore the wider social and ethical consequences of these innovative translational activities. As regards ethical implications, altruist and fan practices are the ones most exposed to malpractice, often because some organisations emulate corporate behaviour but rely on free labour, without any financial retribution or credit towards those involved in these activities. The article also concludes that more critical research should be conducted to unravel the impact of these practices on the role of translation as a socio-professional activity.

## ARTICLE HISTORY



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translation; fakesubs; parodic  
dubbing

## 1. Introduction

No one can deny the profound influence that audiovisual content exerts on audiences all over the world, nor the fact that many individuals, companies and organisations have chosen video as their preferred method to communicate globally. Most of these exchanges take place online, not only through streaming platforms such as Netflix, Disney+ or iQiyi, but also through video sharing websites like YouTube and Bilibili, social media platforms like TikTok or Instagram and, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, video conferencing platforms such as Skype or Zoom. A significant amount of this online content is translated and/or transcribed, either following traditional workflows and processes, i.e. professionally and commercially, or in less conventional manners, often on an unremunerated basis. The latter have resulted in a wide range of practices which have

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lately been categorised within audiovisual translation (AVT) research as examples of fan translation (Díaz-Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006), amateur translation (Bogucki 2009), crowdsourcing (O'Hagan 2012), collaborative translation (Fan 2020) or non-professional translation (Antonini and Bucaria 2016), among others.

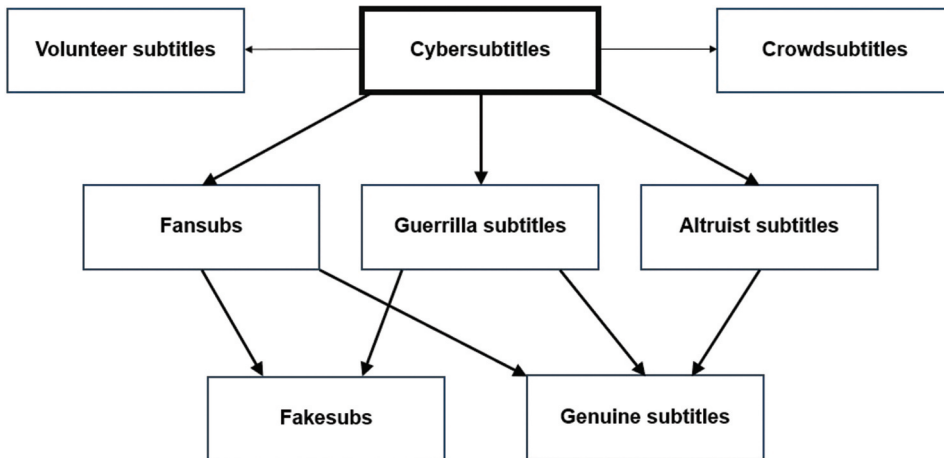
While we can easily identify examples of AVT practices that can be categorised as instances of crowdsourcing (as is the case with the subtitles created for TED talks, ted.com) or fan translation (i.e. the translation of anime series that have not been commercialised in specific countries), other online examples are not as clearly defined. For instance, some translation practices have been subsumed under the terms fansubbing or fandubbing even though they are no longer performed by 'fans' and they differ significantly from how these practices originated back in the 1980s. In a similar vein, these practices are not always amateur: AVT professionals might also translate on a voluntary basis or engage in the translation of audiovisual material to promote their services without receiving any direct pecuniary retribution. In addition, although both fan translations and crowdsourcing practices in AVT are usually considered examples of collaborative online translation, some instances of these practices can be rather individualistic at times, with producers working independently and looking for individual and not collective recognition. As a result, entries in recent handbooks and encyclopaedias on AVT have tried to clarify the use of terms such as fansubbing, fandubbing or collaborative AVT (Baños 2020; Dwyer 2018; Fan 2020; Massidda 2020) and some scholars working in this field have recently raised the need to coin new terms that can accommodate new practices and realities (Baños 2019; Díaz-Cintas 2018).

Against this backdrop, this article sets out to disentangle the conceptual uncertainties surrounding new forms of AVT that have emerged in the age of digital media, with a focus on dubbing and subtitling. To this end, the article revisits some of the work carried out by the authors, who have previously suggested the use of the umbrella terms 'cybersubtitling' (Díaz-Cintas 2018) and 'cyberdubbing' (Baños 2019) to reflect in a more encompassing way the many varieties of subtitles and dubs that can be encountered online nowadays, and that usually occur in non-professional and non-commercial settings. These publications also propose detailed classifications branching out from these two top-level concepts, which will be further explored in an attempt to revisit the nomenclature used initially, as well as to relate them with widely used meta-concepts in the existing literature. The taxonomies are supported with examples extracted from the internet in order to not only provide a detailed overview of the myriad practices available currently, but also to establish links with similar activities from other translation domains. To conclude, the article brings to the fore the need to explore the wider social and ethical consequences that these innovative practices unleash, such as whether they can be seen as exploitative, as Zwischenberger (2022; 2023) argues in the case of translation crowdsourcing for profit-oriented organisations.

## 2 Conceptualising and classifying cybersubtitling and cyberdubbing practices

The term 'cybersubtitling' (Díaz-Cintas 2018) was coined in an attempt to classify and categorise the myriad new subtitling types that have emerged in the mediascape in the

past decades in a more encompassing way, paying particular attention to their impact on the dissemination of popular culture as well as on the intrinsic relationships that get formed between audiovisual producers, content, distributors and audiences. Cybersubtitles can be purposely requested by some collectives, i.e. crowdsourced, or generated on a voluntary basis, and those involved in their production can be either amateurs or professionals. As illustrated in [Figure 1](#), taken from [Díaz-Cintas \(2018, 133\)](#), the following three main types of subtitles can be identified within the core category of cybersubtitles: (1) ‘fansubs’, (2) ‘guerrilla subtitles’ and (3) ‘altruist subtitles’.



**Figure 1.** Original classification of cybersubtitles (Díaz-Cintas 2018, 133).

Fansubs are usually undertaken by fan communities that voluntarily produce and freely distribute subtitles online as opposed to official and commercial subtitles done by professionals. This phenomenon, which originally involved the translation of anime (O’Hagan 2009) when it started in the 1980s and was instigated ‘by fans for fans’, has metamorphosed in recent years and can be better defined as ‘by fans for all’. Regarding the latter, in the Italian ecosystem, Massidda (2020) refers to a second wave of fansubbing, which flourished in the new millennium in conjunction with the so-called golden age of TV shows, mostly of US origin, characterised by media conglomerates ‘investing large amounts of cash in ambitious projects created by famous producers and directors’ (Massidda 2015, 114). Fansubbing communities decide the texts they will work on, frequently favouring the translation of a wide range of entertainment programmes for recreational purposes. Emulating commercial workflows, they take it upon themselves to carry out all the technical and linguistic activities proper of the subtitling process, being also involved in the subsequent distribution of the material. In addition, fansubbing ‘can also manifest in the form of web aggregators or conglomerates’ (Massidda 2020, 190) such as Addic7ed.com or OpenSubtitles.com, which distribute the subtitle files produced by different fansubbing communities to be associated with the video files that circulate illegally on the internet.

As a synonym to that of ‘activist subtitles’, the term ‘guerrilla subtitles’ was borrowed from Dwyer (2017, 110) to refer to subtitles that are produced by individuals or collectives highly engaged in socio-political causes to further their own agendas while contesting and challenging hegemonic practices in society. Groups like AJ+ ([global.ajplus.net](http://global.ajplus.net)), J’ai un doute ([jaiundoute.com](http://jaiundoute.com)) and Hartos.org ([hartos.org](http://hartos.org)) are exemplary of these practices aimed at combating censorship and mainstream conformity by spreading certain narratives that counter-argue the truth reported by the powerful mass media. As for the third category, ‘altruist subtitles’ are a less belligerent version of these initiatives. Usually commissioned, they are undertaken by individuals with a close affinity to the project at hand as in the case of Khan Academy ([khanacademy.org](http://khanacademy.org)) and the above-mentioned TED platform, with both sharing a similar educational ethos.

All three categories can be portrayed as either genuine subtitles, when they adhere closely to the creative intent and linguistic formulation of the original text, or fakesubs. The latter reflects a recent trend where the subtitles that accompany the video flagrantly depart from the message being conveyed in the original dialogue, usually in search of humorous impact. Iconic examples of fakesubs are the numerous parodies of the German film *Der Untergang* [Downfall], directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel in 2004, or the ‘honest subtitles’ created by the BBC for the popular show *The Apprentice* ([bbc.co.uk/programmes/p034244d](http://bbc.co.uk/programmes/p034244d)), where viewers are encouraged to turn them on to find out not what the contestants are saying but, rather, what they are really thinking.

Following a similar approach, cyberdubs are classified by Baños (2019) into ‘promotional’, ‘political or activist’, and ‘altruist’. Promotional dubbing is undertaken to promote the material being dubbed and/or the very act of dubbing. Fandubbing, understood as a term ‘encompassing collaborative and co-creational dubbing practices performed by Internet users who exhibit a positive emotional engagement with popular audiovisual culture’ (Baños 2020, 223) would fall into this category. Thus, it includes examples of anime series that have been dubbed by fans as they are either unavailable or cannot be accessed easily in dubbed form, as well as more recent examples of amateur dubbing of videos uploaded to popular YouTube channels. This category also caters for practices undertaken by professionals, as is the case with the example of the *Grand Theft Auto* footage edited and dubbed by a group of professional Spanish dubbing actors, discussed in Baños (2019).

Activist ‘cyberdubbers’ make use of these practices to ultimately instigate some kind of social or political change, by exploiting rhetorical devices such as critique, satire and parody, which some have come to know as ‘laughtivism’ (Popovic and McClennen 2020). Finally, while altruist dubbing may not be as widespread as altruist subtitling, platforms like Khan Academy also benefit from these practices, with educational videos translated and revoiced by volunteers from English into Spanish or French, for example. Aimed at children and teenagers, and with videos frequently including graphics and text on screen, the use of dubbing could be deemed to be more effective than subtitling as it enables viewers to receive linguistic information simultaneously through more than one channel, i.e. the acoustic and the visual channels, and is particularly suitable for younger children. Cyberdubbing not only encompasses lip sync dubbing, whereby the original dialogue track is replaced with a new track including a translation of the original dialogue, but also instances involving the use of other revoicing modes such as voiceover, lector dubbing and free commentary, where the original dialogue track might still be audible in the background.

As shown in Figure 2, taken from Baños (2019, 155), in addition to these three main categories, further subclassifications are defined depending on factors such as who the commissioner is (commissioned vs. non-commissioned practices), who the producers are (amateur vs. non-amateur), or the relationship with the source text (parodic vs. serious).

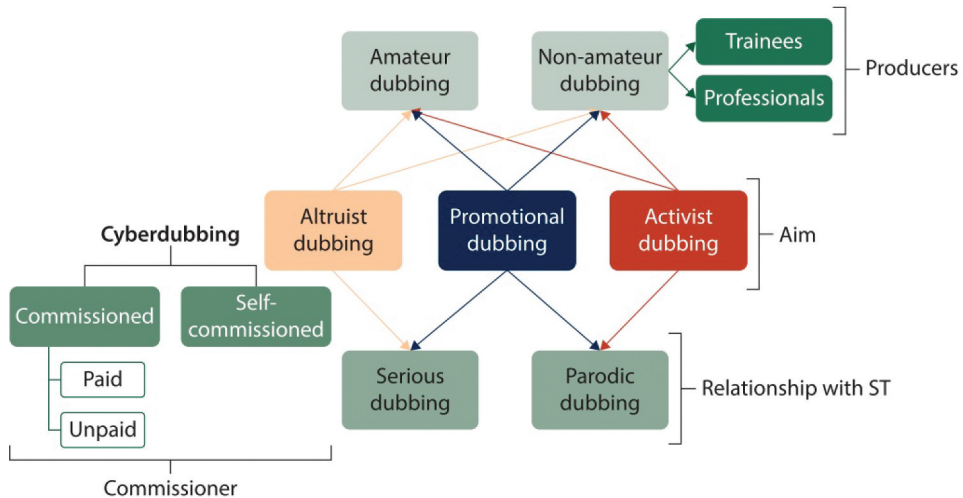


Figure 2. Original classification of cyberdubs (Baños 2019, 155).

The above denominations and classifications were firstly conceptualised in an attempt to categorise and further our understanding of some of the new online practices that had emerged and were questioning standard and official AVT practices. Cybersubtitling and cyberdubbing run in parallel to the traditional circulation of audiovisual media dependent on corporate strategies, and are often deregulated and free from commercial imperatives. They epitomise what Jenkins (2006, 259–60) terms ‘convergence culture’, ‘where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways’. As envisaged by the scholar, while many corporate media resist these practices – e.g. by suing fansubbing communities or websites providing fansubbed material, or by reporting the use of cyberdubs or cybersubs on YouTube as illegal –, others have embraced them. The virality and success of parodic dubbing and fakesubs have propelled these practices to centre stage in more traditional broadcasting environments, having been resorted to by the likes of BBC and Netflix, among others. The former launched in 2020 their comedy series *Raiders of the Lost Archives*, which ran until 2022 and was advertised along these lines: ‘Some of Scotland’s funniest minds delve deep into BBC Scotland’s archives to bring us a unique reimagining of Scottish history and culture in this series of spoof documentaries using old footage with new comedy voice-overs’ ([comedy.co.uk/tv/raiders-of-the-lost-archive](http://comedy.co.uk/tv/raiders-of-the-lost-archive)). The latter used a parodic dubbed video of their series *Narcos*, undertaken by a Spanish dubbing actor and YouTuber who frequently publishes

parodic dubbings on his channel, El canal de Korah (@ElcanaldeKorah), for its promotion in Spain.

The coinage of these terms responded to the perception that existing nomenclatures could not cater fully for the complexity of the multitude of practices found on the internet. Concepts emphasising the amateur nature of some practices (i.e. fan, amateur or non-professional translation) could be sufficiently wide to encapsulate all the various kinds of subtitles and dubs in existence, were it not for the fact that some are also produced by professionals or trainees. In a similar vein, translation crowdsourcing (Jiménez-Crespo 2017) could be applied to cyberdubs and cybersubtitles in some contexts, but not in all. Subtitles commissioned by platforms like TED and dubs commissioned by Khan Academy are clear examples of crowdsubtitling and crowddubbing respectively. These practices are also common in other audiovisual contexts, with content creators like YouTubers asking followers and fans to contribute their subtitles and to provide feedback on the existing dubbed material, as in the case of the YouTube channel *The Amoeba Sisters* (Baños 2023). Nevertheless, many cybersubtitles and cyberdubs are self-commissioned and unsolicited, especially in the case of fandubbing and fansubbing, with some groups allowing the community to decide on the content they would like to see subtitled or dubbed next. Some practices even merge these two approaches, as Dwyer (2017; 2018) explains in the case of Viki Global TV (now Rakuten Viki, viki.com), a profit-oriented platform where a continual open call for crowd participation is made, yet content and 'channels are mostly managed by contributors [...] and the entire project is underpinned by the fannish appreciation of particular media titles and genres' (Dwyer 2018, 445).

The affordances of digital technology, the so-called technology democratisation, and the transition from the static to the dynamic internet have triggered new changes in the production and distribution of subtitles and dubs, which are created by users to convey their likes and dislikes, to promote certain audiovisual content, or to (mis)inform. Many of these outputs are instantiations of user-generated translation defined by O'Hagan (2009, 97) as 'a wide range of Translation, carried out based on free user participation in digital media spaces where Translation is undertaken by unspecified self-selected individuals'. The term 'user-generated content' (Wyrwoll 2014), as well as other related denominations such as 'pro-am' (Leadbeater and Miller 2004) or 'prosumer' (Tapscott and Williams 2006), emphasise the role of audiences as active participants, socially networked and deeply engaged in digital media consumption, production and distribution, which may involve translation. As discussed in Zwischenberger (2022), insofar as it derives from the concept of user generated content, user generated translation should exclude content created with commercial intent, which is not always the case of cybersubs and cyberdubs. Furthermore, while some instances of cybersubs and cyberdubs can be deemed to be examples of online collaborative translation (Jiménez-Crespo 2017; Zwischenberger 2022), users might also produce their own subtitles and dubs in an individualistic and rather unorganised manner, therefore not engaging in collaboration.

The discussion so far has revealed the need for a revamped classification that can accommodate the riches of AVT found on the internet. With the benefit of hindsight, the next section will reflect on the usefulness of a revised classification, drawing on how the previous ones have been used by other scholars as well as on its ability to accommodate the new practices and trends mushrooming in the ever-evolving mediascape.



### 3. Cybersubtitling and cyberdubbing practices: a revised classification

Drawing on the information provided by Google Scholar, as of January 2023, on citations for the publications where the above-mentioned classifications were presented (Baños 2019; Díaz-Cintas 2018), the terms cybersubtitling and cyberdubbing, as well as their subcategories, have been welcomed by researchers, in particular to contextualise practices such as fansubbing and fandubbing. Vazquez-Calvo (2022, 230) considers Díaz-Cintas's classification of cybersubtitles to be clarifying and inspiring as 'it can be extrapolated onto amateur translation in digital spaces'. However, he disagrees with the use of the prefix 'cyber' arguing that 'it may lead to thinking there is a [sic] unambiguous distinction between the online and the offline [...] or to erroneously overlooking the existence of fan labour in pre-digital times' (Vazquez-Calvo 2022, 230) In a similar vein, when discussing fandubbing, Zhang and Vazquez-Calvo (2022, 197–98) contend that while:

the choice of the prefix 'cyber-' might seem slightly obsolete to represent the embeddedness of the digital in mundane activity and the growing hybridization of spaces and practices, what stands out is the connection of fandubbing with pop culture [...] and fan communities.

Indeed, the boundaries between digital and non-digital spaces are rather blurred and the terms should not be seen as dichotomous. The prefix 'cyber' underscores that the affordances of digital technology and the internet's advancement of interconnectedness among its users, or netizens, in cyberspace have made cybersubtitling and cyberdubbing possible, resulting in the rise of new communities of practice and collective groups that share similar goals, rely largely on affinity and affection, operate mostly on a not-for-profit basis, beyond the imperatives of the industry, and, in our case, share a common interest in the translation of audiovisual content. In line with Zwischenberger's (2022, 7) views, the ultimate aim of this coinage was to suggest a meta-concept that would cover 'all forms of the new ways of doing [audiovisual] translation online', which often take place beyond commercial and professional environments. Considering the evolution of fandubbing and fansubbing since their beginnings in the 1980s, the contention is that although the influence of technology and the internet in these practices is undeniable, they cannot be reduced to a technological trend and, hence, the need to conceptualise them in a way that foregrounds the socio-cultural context in which they originated and were further developed. In this article, the prefix 'cyber' does not merely emphasise the connection between digital spaces and human interaction, highlighting the integration of technology in AVT, as this already characterises most AVT practices worldwide. More importantly, it helps to distinguish translation and distribution phenomena and processes that run in parallel to more conventional, commercial AVT practices, and that are uniquely nurtured by the affordances of cyberspace. Cybersubtitling and cyberdubbing practices therefore flourish on and are nourished by cyberspace, understood as a complex, electronic environment that allows interaction among computer users around the world, to communicate with each other or to access information for any purpose. In our opinion, the adjectives 'digital' and 'online', which could have been used to define these practices, are too overarching, in the sense that they also encompass commercial practices, especially since the advent of subscription-based streaming platforms and over-the-top media services. In its inception in the 1990s, as discussed by Bussell (2013: online), cyberspace was closely linked to popular culture and 'was taken to describe the "location" in which people interacted with



each other while using the Internet'. Giving the primary examples of online games and chat rooms, the author thus foregrounds playfulness and interaction as two of cyberspace's key attributes, which also define practices such as cybersubtitling and cyberdubbing. For Bussell (2013: online) another defining characteristic of cyberspace is the fact that it has become 'an important location for social and political discussion', thus closely aligning with the thrive of the type of altruist and activist practices that we observe in cyberdubbing and cybersubtitling.

Vazquez-Calvo (2022, 230) also argues that distinguishing between fansubs, guerrilla subtitles and altruist subtitles is not an easy task, as they may overlap in their scope, and proposes that the "'fan-guerrilla-altruist" triad should be understood as a continuum'. Such approach is most welcomed, as it adds fluidity to the taxonomy, which was also attempted in Baños's 2019 revision and further categorisation of practices according to the aim, producers, commissioners and relationship with the source text (Figure 2). Undeniably, categorising empirical activity is not a straightforward endeavour. For instance, in their study of the use of amateur dubbing by hospitalised children in Italy as a means of managing pain and suffering, Dore and Vagnoli (2021) argue that this practice can be subsumed under the category of altruist dubbing. However, given that children and teenagers use dubbing in this experiment as a form of entertainment, and not necessarily to contribute to a project altruistically, it could arguably be considered a form of promotional dubbing. Despite referring to Baños's (2019) classification and reflecting on its usefulness, the authors prefer to use the term 'amateur dubbing' throughout, thus highlighting the impossibility of coming up with a categorical classification that would fit all contexts and would be embraced by all scholars. In a similar vein, in a project aimed at assessing the benefits of cyberdubbing and cybersubtitling (parodic dubbing and fakesubs in particular) in the learning of foreign languages, Talaván (2019, 54) prefers using the terms 'creative dubbing' and 'creative subtitling', understood as 'the creative manipulation or adaptation of the original text into a fake translation [...] that produces some kind of humoristic effect on the audience'. While she acknowledges the usefulness of Díaz-Cintas's (2018) classification and the need of integrating cyberdubbing and cybersubtitling in the foreign language classroom, as they represent new online manifestations of producing and consuming audiovisual content with which students are familiar, she justifies her choice of different terms as an attempt 'to make the didactic proposal more neutral in pedagogical terms and more easily understandable for students new to AVT' (Talaván 2019, 54). Although the label 'creative' has been used in similar contexts, albeit not to refer to parodic dubs exclusively (Ávila-Cabrera 2022; McClarty 2014), the definitions provided in recent publications on creative audiovisual translation and media accessibility are broader, including commercial and official AVT and media accessibility practices (Romero-Fresco 2021; Romero-Fresco and Chaume 2022). The risk of using such terminology, however, lies in the detrimental impact that it may have on the rest of practices exploited in the AVT industry that can then be understood as being mundane, unimaginative, and non-creative.

The above-mentioned overlapping between promotional and altruist dubbing also questions the suitability of the label 'promotional' as it conjures up commercial interests. Following Díaz-Cintas's (2018) proposal, the term 'fandubbing' could have been used instead in Baños (2019), but was discarded due to the connotations of the word 'fan' and the frequent associations between fan and amateur practices. However, if fandubbing is understood in ampler terms, as a concept encompassing co-creational dubbing practices performed by netizens who exhibit a positive emotional engagement with popular audiovisual culture, as argued in Baños (2020), it could prove more appropriate and less problematic than that of

'promotional dubbing' in a cyberdubbing context. This new suggestion is incorporated in the revised classification, illustrated in Figure 3, which integrates the further categorisations included in Baños (2019), as well as a distinction between interlingual and intralingual subtitling/dubbing. This is done following the suggestions from Zhang and Vazquez-Calvo (2022, 201), who argue that:

[f]or the purposes of explicating fandubbing practices to a broader readership in applied linguistics and from a sociocultural perspective, we think it is interesting to complement Baños's variables with concepts such as (1) type of translation (interlinguistic or intralinguistic), (2) directionality (if interlinguistic, the dubbing can imply direct or reverse translation), or (3) transemiotic work (if there is any reinterpretation or remake of non-verbal aspects surrounding the text to dub).

While the other distinctions proposed by these authors are indeed interesting and show the complexities of these practices and the level of analysis that can be conducted, they have not been incorporated as they may only be relevant in some limited contexts. Nonetheless, researchers might want to consider them in their analyses of cyberdubs and cybersubtitles.

To conclude this section, we include a figure with a revision of the classifications originally proposed in Díaz-Cintas (2018) and Baños (2019), conflated into one taxonomy that encompasses both, dubbing and subtitling.

## Cybersubtitling & cyberdubbing practices

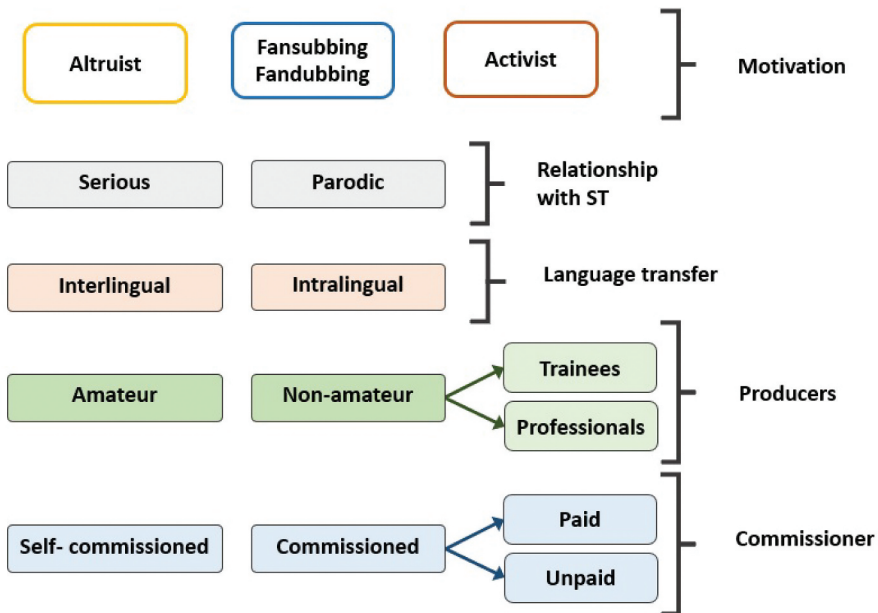


Figure 3. Revised classification of cybersubtitling and cyberdubbing.

As shown in [Figure 3](#), the motivation behind these practices sets them apart from other forms of dubbing and subtitling, which tend to respond largely to commercial imperatives. For the sake of clarity and uniformity, the previously used terminology has been standardised. For instance, although the term ‘fakesubs’ is widely used by netizens (in particular Korean pop fans) and by some scholars ([Jiang 2020](#)) to refer to subtitles that depart from the content of the original utterances, the term ‘parodic’ has been preferred on the basis that no deception is usually intended (i.e. what is fake or false is the information conveyed and not the subtitles or dubs as such) and to emphasise their comic nature. In addition, the term ‘fakedubbing’ risks confusing readers further, especially given the rise of practices such as deepfakes, which involve the use of artificial intelligence to manipulate the mouth movements of the characters on screen. Although this technology is available commercially (*Flawless*, [flawlessai.com](#)) and has also been used with parodic purposes (e.g. in the Spanish news satire TV programme *El Intermedio*), its future in the dubbing industry is still uncertain.

This classification is proposed within an academic context to contribute to the analysis, exploration and categorisation of the vast array of subtitles and dubs that can be encountered online nowadays. Although the terminology employed by other stakeholders may well differ from the above-mentioned denominations, thus complicating this terminological conundrum further, the parcellation of activities should remain reasonably constant. For example, some fandubbing groups avoid including the term ‘fan’ when advertising and presenting their work, perhaps due to the stigma attached to this term and to fan activities, or as an attempt to emphasise that some of their members are not ‘mere’ amateurs or fans. Their activity can then be referred to as independent or non-official dubbing ([Baños 2019](#), 153). Likewise, when analysing the work of the popular fandubber Miree, the authors [Zhang and Vazquez-Calvo \(2022, 207\)](#) explain that she prefers to use the term ‘Spanish cover’ instead of ‘Spanish fandub’ and argue that this could be interpreted as a strategy to reach a wider audience. Notwithstanding the appropriateness of such expressions, these examples highlight that, as in the case of the nomenclature chosen by researchers, the terminological alternatives propelled by netizens respond to different motivations and are also worthy of further investigation.

#### **4. Social and ethical consequences of cybersubtitling and cyberdubbing practices**

As [Zwischenberger \(2022, 11\)](#) suggests, ethical considerations should be explored not only from a deontological perspective, but also from the point of view of consequentialist ethics, with a focus on ‘the moral acceptability of (long-term) consequences of actions, including those that are not immediately apparent’. Cybersubtitling and cyberdubbing practices have had a great impact on different aspects of society, influencing and questioning commercial and official AVT practices. Fansubbing has brought to the fore a marked discrepancy between mainstream subtitling conventions, both in terms of content as well as layout, and those applied by online communities, which are at times ‘more attuned to the needs of digital audiences’ ([Massidda 2020](#), 191). In a direct response to the appealing fast turnaround of subtitles created by fansubbers, large corporations and distributors have shortened the timespan between the release of original audiovisual footage and its localised editions, which are now launched at the same time as the domestic product in a strategy called

simultaneous shipping (simship), as well as diversified the options for accessing this content, giving birth to the nowadays popular binge watching experience. Fandubbing has also played an important role, condemning censoring practices in some contexts (Nord, Khoshsaligheh, and Ameri 2015; Wang and Zhang 2016) and promoting the use of specific translation strategies (Wang and Zhang 2016).

When discussing fan translation practices in the case of China, Wang and Zhang (2016) state that fandubbing groups have collaborated with digital game companies on dubbing projects, given the lack of well-trained and dedicated professionals in the dubbing industry, and that fans have seen these opportunities as a way to enter the professional dubbing industry. In addition to revealing the complex dynamics of the current mediascape, these practices raise further social and ethical questions. Although, as argued above, cyberdubbing and cybersubtitling practices respond largely to non-commercial motivations, the question remains of whether the occasional intrusion of commercial interests in these participatory practices can be seen as exploitative. As suggested by Zwischenberger (2022, 2), the notion of 'playbor' (Scholz 2013) is pivotal to understand how this kind of digital labour may be directly related to exploitation as it 'represents the work and the traces left by internet users as digital work that helps enterprises to achieve immense profits without offering any compensation'. Drawing on Wertheimer (1999), Wright (1997) and Scholz (2013), and with a focus on the Marxist understanding of labour, work and exploitation, Zwischenberger (2022, 2023) illustrates that, not being at odds with workers taking pleasure in engaging in collaborative work voluntarily, online collaborative translation may be conducive to exploitative social relations, especially when undertaken for profit-oriented companies. For example, the loss of control over productive and creative processes, partly due to the fragmentation of the translation process into smaller tasks and texts can potentially lead to complaints about alienation (Zwischenberger 2022). Analysing this phenomenon under the prism of digital Taylorism, Moorkens (2020) contends that breaking audiovisual content down into smaller chunks for fast turnaround is common both in the media industry and in crowdsourcing scenarios. Alienation might also be caused by lack of compensation towards those involved in translation crowdsourcing. In cyberdubbing and cybersubtitling, fan and altruist practices are the most exposed as translators do not usually receive any of the profits generated by those practices, in which case such collaboration could be deemed exploitative and illustrative of a model of dependency. A case in point is Viki, whose subtitles, provided by fans, are "'monetised" as part of a for-profit commercial service', yet 'profits made do not flow back to the fansubbers themselves' (Dwyer 2018, 445). While the transactions established between Viki and volunteer subtitlers can be considered mutually beneficial, these practices may still 'be classified as exploitative and/or morally wrong' (Zwischenberger 2022, 11). Similar dynamics are at play in the functioning of the non-profit organisation Translators Without Borders (TWB, [translatorswithoutborders.org](http://translatorswithoutborders.org)), as discussed by Piróth and Baker (2021). Lack of credit is also problematic, especially in altruist practices where some translators might not be credited appropriately. In contrast, fan and activist communities often receive social recognition and make sure their members' work is duly acknowledged.

Activities not instigated by profit-oriented companies, such as the fandubbing and fansubbing of anime or videogames, will still help to promote and heighten the value of specific audiovisual content. Although new modes of distribution of digital material enable the use of dubbing and subtitling without direct earnings, this does not mean they are undertaken for free. Indeed, there is often some kind of compensation behind

these practices, be it in the form of social recognition or cultural capital (Bourdieu 1973/2018), or indirect financial benefits through advertising or sponsoring. Users involved in cyberdubbing and cybersubtitling promote their activities through different types of social media, thus portraying 'fan culture and fandom as not merely an on-and-off passion, but a sophisticated and commercial enterprise' (Zhang and Vazquez-Calvo 2022, 217). Platforms like YouTube (n.d.), for instance, allow users to turn on monetisation features that usually work on subscriber and view count. Nevertheless, as Basalamah (2021, 227) argues, volunteer translation practices can also 'foster an ethical sense of citizenship, especially when the service is provided to vulnerable members of a community', as is often the case in altruist practices. Such activities are often deemed to be motivated 'by the ethical understanding that the effective connection and communication between members of a collectivity would not otherwise be possible due to the costs and accessibility of professional translation' (Basalamah 2021, 228).

Zwischenberger (2022) also contends that professional translation is affected by the transactions between volunteer translators and profit-oriented organisations, in terms of remuneration and status, raising issues related to deprofessionalisation, demonetisation, ethics and quality, among others. As shown by the communique issued by the European federation of audiovisual translators (AVTE 2017) on the launch of a fansubbing project by the Franco-German TV channel ARTE, or the negative reactions triggered by a 2018 documentary celebrating the history of an underground fansubbing community in Italy (Massidda 2020), the use of fan, amateur or non-professional practices has led to much controversy and debate. AVTE's press release emphasises the illegal nature of fansubbing, well documented by authors like Phillips (2003), and warns about the serious repercussions of fostering the portrayal of AVT as a simple task that can be carried out by anyone and confusing a leisure activity with a profession with well-established workflows, code of practice and quality criteria. AVTE's (2017, online) communique is also highly critical of ARTE's lack of mechanisms for quality control, since the broadcaster is allegedly reported to accept 'the amateur nature of the resulting translations' and 'simply verify that they do not alter the meaning of the works concerned'. In the case of cyberdubs and cybersubs, new media has propelled the introduction of new quality assurance workflows for translated audiovisual content, characterised by decentralisation and devolution, and which risk diluting long-established assumptions about quality. In these digital ecosystems, Tik-Tokers and influencers might 'collaborate' with other internauts by criticising and providing their own (improved) translations through home-made videos (Groskop 2021) or through practices like danmu, aka danmaku (Wang 2022), whereby they can share their opinions on the translational solutions with the rest of viewers.

Unlike crowdsupsubtitling, the legality of practices such as fansubbing remains a controversial area, particularly when permission from the copyright holder has not been secured. Although the understanding of copyright might be contingent upon and open to consumers' own interpretation (Lee 2011), and despite potential divergent interpretations of the law, the general opinion is that fansubbing is illegal, as attested by the closing down of fansubbing communities and websites all over the world (Fan 2020; Justo 2017; Massidda 2020; Pedersen 2019). As Pedersen (2019, 55) reports, some of them have been taken to court by media conglomerates, where the verdict 'clearly stated that disseminating fansubs was illegal without the consent of the original copyright holder, as the dialogue in a film is protected by the Berne convention'. From a diachronic perspective, it is intriguing to attest how the leniency

observed in the early years, when these practices first started in the 1980s and the media industry seemed to turn a blind eye or even accepted them implicitly, because of the positive impact they were deemed to have in the promotion of a given anime series in other countries (Díaz-Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006), has given way to a more coercive and heavy-handed persecution of these fansubbing groups. On this front, fandubbing in particular, and cyberdubbing in general, seem to have been less affected by the powers that be. This may be due to the parodic nature of most of these productions, which, under some copyright laws, can be understood as instances of ‘fair use’. These issues are widely underexplored, with only some exceptions, such as the study undertaken by Spina Ali (2015, 756), who highlights the lack of a legislative regulation of parodies, and therefore of parodic dubbing and subtitling, in Italy, and the resulting ‘ambiguous position’ they occupy in the copyright panorama. Copyright law has not kept up with the co-creative revolution instigated by the Web 2.0 (Massidda 2020) and recent advances in the field of artificial intelligence and their intersection with AVT and media accessibility are set to compound this situation further.

## 5. Conclusion

In an attempt to disentangle some of the conceptual uncertainties and to explore ethical questions surrounding the new forms of AVT that have emerged in the age of digital media, this article provides an overview and revised classification of the various practices that we have grouped under the terms of cybersubtitling and cyberdubbing. Though the emphasis has been placed on dubbing and subtitling, the conceptual premises put forward can accommodate other translational practices in this field, such as audio description.

In the previous pages, we have reflected on how these notions have been used by other scholars, welcoming their suggestions and criticisms, and proposing a revised taxonomy that should be more encompassing and malleable enough to be adapted and probed by the academic community. Undertaken outside the commercial imperatives that regulate professional practice, these new forms of AVT have had, and continue to have, a profound impact in the way in which audiovisual content is produced, distributed, consumed and even assessed by audiences around the world.

We have also touched upon some of the ethical implications raised by these activities. Of the three main subcategories, altruist and fan practices are the ones most exposed to malpractice, especially because of some organisations’ emulation of corporate behaviour and reliance on free labour. Added to this is the fact that some translational output derived from these practices does enter monetisation mechanisms down the line, which do not reach the translators. The risk of exploitation is a real one and the strengths of these cyber practices should be leveraged in a transparent and ethical manner for those involved. As O’Donnell (2019, online) argues, the financial turnover of the volunteering sector is significant and, to avoid unfair exploitation, ‘it is the volunteer’s responsibility to learn about the ethical quandaries, issues, and attitudes within this industry’. Given the constant increase in the volume and genres of audiovisual productions that travel through the ether, it is fair to assume that crowdsourcing and volunteerism in AVT will continue to grow. More critical research should be conducted on the topic to unravel the impact that these activities may have not only on the transmission of culture but also on the translation industry and the general public’s perception of the value of translation as a socio-professional activity.



## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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