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MEMORY STUDIES

Memory Studies
6(4) 418–436

DOI: 10.1177/1750698012458309
mss.sagepub.com
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# Online war memorials: YouTube as a democratic space of commemoration exemplified through video tributes to fallen Danish soldiers

**Britta T Knudsen and Carsten Stage**
Aarhus University, Denmark

## Abstract

In this article, we analyze 28 YouTube video tributes to fallen Danish soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq with two analytical goals. The goals are to first understand how the soldier as an object of communal grief is affectively and discursively established, discussed, and challenged in the videos and comments, and second to investigate what type of commemorative practices the specific media space of YouTube enables. Our first observation is that the videos' attempts to construct the soldiers as national heroes and common objects of grief are repeatedly disputed and opposed by the people commenting on them. Our second point is that YouTube allows for a new type of commemorative practice, which, unlike the traditional war monuments of the nation-state, is marked by explicit differences of opinion concerning the status and legitimacy of the war. The analysis draws on theoretical insights from the fields of affect theory, participatory culture, DIY media, and memory studies.

## Keywords

Affect and discourse, DIY media, memory culture, war memorials, online democracy

## Introduction

When looking at the contemporary media culture, the transition from a media user paradigm to media produser paradigm is obvious. The interest in concepts like "Web 2.0" (O'Reilly, 2006), "participatory culture" (Burgess and Green, 2009; Jenkins, 2006), "pull media" (Lull, 2007), "produser"/"produsage" (Bruns, 2008; Lister et al., 2009), "DIY media/culture" (Knobel and Lankshear, 2010), "virality" (Penenberg, 2009), "social production" (Benkler, 2006), and "co-creation" (Boswijk et al., 2007; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004) underlines the urgent need to understand the role of user-generated meaning, content, and value as a prominent part of current

**Corresponding author:**
Britta T Knudsen, Aarhus University, Department of Aesthetics and Communication, Jens Chr. Skousvej 7, Aarhus 8000, Denmark.
Email: norbtk@hum.au.dk

cultural practices. The media users of today—which Jay Rosen famously termed "the people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen, 2006)—increasingly influence or even create the mediated environments and experiences they are involved in. The rise of the media produ*s*er also influences the way war experiences are being documented and disseminated because soldiers, civilians, and relatives are increasingly able to produce and disseminate accounts of their—more or less direct—experience of war.

Between 2003 and 2007, Danish troops took part in the war in Iraq and six soldiers were killed. The number of personnel involved in the war varied over the years, but approximately 450 soldiers left the country when the troops were withdrawn in 2007. Since then a smaller number of personnel have been involved in training and rebuilding activities. Alongside the military involvement in Iraq, Danish troops have also participated in the war in Afghanistan since 2002. In this conflict, which was initiated by the US government in 2001 as a response to the attack on The World Trade Center, Danish soldiers have primarily been involved in combat against Taliban soldiers, as well as in some rebuilding activities in the Helmand province in Southern Afghanistan. At the time of writing this article, there were around 750 Danish soldiers participating in the war in Afghanistan and 42 Danish soldiers had been killed over the last 9 years. At the end of 2010, the Danish Premier Minister at the time stated that Danish soldiers would no longer be involved directly in combat activities after 2014 but will be involved only in training local troops and police forces.[1]

For Denmark, the casualties of these two wars represent the largest number of national soldiers killed in war since the nineteenth century. In our article, we will consider the use of social media platforms to commemorate and create video tributes to some of these fallen Danish soldiers. This material, until now unexplored, makes it possible to analyze both the cultural negotiation of war activities (e.g. how they should be remembered) and the new types of commemorative practices made possible by social media platforms. The YouTube practice of private commemoration in public creates intersubjective relations around grief (Wahlberg, 2009). It could even be described as the virtual version of spontaneous social and ritual practices, such as the laying of flowers, lighting of candles, or writing of inscriptions that are often associated with accidents and murders. In both these instances, virtual and actual, the memorial becomes a *commemorative emergence* due to the fact that it is continuously reinvested with new meanings. Consideration of the cultural significance and democratic potential of such practice will form the focus of the last section of the analysis.

Our empirical point of departure will be 28 YouTube videos, which memorialize the death of Danish soldiers. The videos are amateurish in their style and in all likelihood are not produced by professionals. In other words, they are examples of the already mentioned "Do it yourself" culture based on citizens' ability to produce and disseminate media materials/objects, which were formerly closely linked to professional practices (e.g. movies, music videos, music recording, animation, etc.). The videos have been found through an extensive search on YouTube and are included in the study because they explicitly commemorate fallen Danish soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan. The information concerning the videos (e.g. number of views) is registered on 28 April 2011 with exception of two videos (marked *), which were registered on 31 May 2011 (see Appendix 1 for a complete list of the videos).

Our investigation of these 28 videos will proceed on two different analytical levels; one focusing on the videos and responses as communicative articulations and another dealing with the media arena or environment itself (Ashplant et al., 2004; Meyrowitz, 1997). By focusing on the levels of articulation, it is implied that we will do content analyses on how the videos encode grief and also on how the grievability of the fallen soldiers is clearly contested in the comments. When looking at the considerable number of comments on the videos, it becomes clear that the videos' attempt to

construct the soldiers as national heroes and common objects of grief is repeatedly disputed and opposed by the people commenting on them. Astonishingly, it is a topic of debate whether the fallen Danish soldiers are bodies suitable for grief or not and closely connected with this is a discussion (sometimes more obvious than others) about how the war should be interpreted and remembered. Our second point of interest—the social role of the media arena/environment itself—will focus on how the media space of YouTube allows for a new type of commemorative practice, which, unlike the official monuments of the nation-state, is marked by explicit difference of opinion concerning the status and legitimacy of the war.

Following this outline, our primary research interests are (1) how the relation between bodies, affectively and discursively, is established and discussed in the videos and comments, and (2) what type of commemorative practice the specific media space of YouTube enables. But before the analysis, we will clarify the most important concepts and theoretical preconditions of our analysis focusing on (1) the relation between affect and discourse in order to understand the different ways affect is at play in the empirical material and (2) on war commemoration in order to outline the developments in memory practices in which the videos play a part.

## Theoretical framework

### *Affect, discourse, and transformation*

The mourning in public of dead soldiers usually takes the form of commemorative monuments or ceremonies performed by official representatives of the army. When the memorials are turned into what we call "commemorative emergences"—works in process—their status as commemorations may change considerably. Looking at the video tributes, the traditional official monument is replaced by an interactive commemorative space whereby the memorial is constantly in a state of becoming, as citizens transform it interactively.

The communicative situation established by the videos links various bodies: the body of the deceased soldier, the body of the tribute produ*s*er that has been touched in order to produce the tribute, and the viewers' bodies. The implicit aim of the tribute videos is to communicate and produce communal grief, and looking at the comments below the videos the affectedness of the viewers' bodies is quite present and possible to detect linguistically, for instance in the form of supportive outbursts; offensive words; sexually invested meaning; and more indirectly in the use of capital letters, punctuation, and expressive signs. When investigating the affective dimension of the videos, we have to distinguish between the encoding of affect by the video producer, who after having felt something himself or herself has tried to generate new affective responses via the videos, and the more spontaneous inscriptions of affective reactions in the comments. In order to grasp this difference theoretically, we make use of both (critical) theories of discourse and theories that see bodily affectedness as a key factor in social change (Boltanski, 1999; Kristeva, 1974; Latour, 2004; Thrift, 2008). In other words, the first theories help us understand how the videos discursively try to motivate certain affective responses (primarily grief) in relation to certain bodies (cf. the soldiers), while the latter help us think about the transformative political potentials of public displays of affective disagreement (cf. the relation between the videos and the comments).

Judith Butler treats the discursive construction and distribution of grievable bodies in her book *Frames of War* from 2009. She introduces the concept of "precariousness" referring to bodily vulnerability as a shared human condition. In war, some lives are mourned and others are not—all depending on the context. Some lives simply cannot be grieved, as they have never been counted

as lives at all (Butler, 2009: 38). To recognize someone as a life to be mourned depends upon politically and socially determined—and discursively spread—structures of recognizability according to Butler. The structures of recognizability are interpretive schemas that distribute bodies and create the distinction between bodies one might fear losing (e.g. one's country men) and indifferent bodies (e.g. the enemy). In order to feel grief, the bodies we mourn over have to be inscribed in a circuit of social affect: "Our affect is never merely our own: affect is, from the start, communicated from elsewhere. It disposes us to perceive the world in a certain way, to let certain dimensions of the world in and resist others" (Butler, 2009: 50).

When analyzing the communal mourning over dead bodies, Butler's critical perspective is inevitable. Bodies are of course distributed hierarchically according to regimes of power and established discourses. What Butler does not take into consideration seems to be the various possibilities for engaging and mobilizing produ*s*ers across preestablished hierarchies. Although affective and visceral levels of nonconscious processing seem to be an inherent logic of the new media (Connolly, 2006; Thrift, 2008), the purposes can serve progressive forces as well as conservative ones. And affective responses are not only a way of affirming a discursively constructed status quo but also a force of transformation and spontaneous protest.

In order to better conceptualize these affective and nonconscious processes of transformation, one could turn to linguist Julia Kristeva's (1974) doctoral thesis *La révolution du langage poétique*. In opposition to Butler, affect is not produced as a result of discursive schemas according to Kristeva but as a prelinguistic force that disrupts discourse. She distinguishes between symbolic and semiotic processes in language, subjects, and societies. If the *symbolic* (phéno-text)—roughly speaking—is the already established discursive layers of meaning in language, subjects, and societies, the *semiotic* (géno-text) is primarily energetic processes and destructive/productive drives that precede the distinction between subject and object, for example, the entrance to the symbolic order. When a subject of enunciation obeys the rules of communication and the addressee is addressed following the grammatical and social rules and codes of communication, phéno-textual structures rule. If the géno-textual processes prevail (they are always present but more or less repressed), bodily drives, repetitions, rimes, intonations, rhythmic, and mimetic gestures become more obvious thereby denoting charge and transport of energy. It is important to stress that the géno-textual processes can both be destructive in their impulses to reject the other and constructive in their impulses to create sympathy and affectively common ground for change.

Recent research across the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences on affect go beyond the *recognition of differences* that most critics pose as primordial in order for social relations in modern societies to work. Theorists of affect count scholars from several disciplines (sociology, media theory, aesthetics, and philosophy) in their ranks, and the common denominator is that they offer an alternative understanding of the social as momentary constellations of forces, drives, and energies (Brennan, 2004; Clough, 2007; Massumi, 2002; Thrift, 2008). Relations between bodies and communal feelings of sympathy, pity, attunement, shared rhythms, and mimetic processes are at the core of the social according to the theorists of affect. Following this, the Internet can be approached as a certain type of sociality as the Internet's deterritorialization of communication, possibility of a high degree of immediacy, and personal interactivity enable the making of new types of environments, where collective affective bodily processes prevail.

Summing up, we have two understandings of affect at play: (1) affect as produced by discourses and interpretative schemas and (2) affect as a force that disrupts discourses by enabling new connections between bodies and thus social change. When looking at our material, we see both perspectives as relevant. The videos to a large degree reproduce established schemas of culturally grievable or indifferent bodies, but when looking at the comments below the videos, they

seem to trace another kind of affect that is obviously polyphonic and infected with difference and the negation of common cultural schemas. Here affect in its totality of heterogeneous forms instead marks the introduction of difference, dissensus, and democracy because it indirectly deconstructs the consensual model for commemorating war and distributing grief. But what strategies of communication are put to use in the tribute videos in order to mobilize viewers/users for the mourning of dead Danish soldiers? And how to describe the reactions when it comes to their political and democratic potential?

## *Commemorating war*

Commemorations—as the institutionalized mourning of communities—have been studied as ways of managing the *past* in institutionalized frames (e.g. education, army, commemorative policies) or as the invention of traditions in order to create a political *future* for a community (Hobsbawm, 2005; Lowenthal, 1985; Nora, 1984); though commemorations are often communicated in the form of large ceremonial media events, they are never politically neutral and always selective by installing particular memories at the center of the cultural world at the expense of others (Ashplant et al., 2004; Wight and Lennon, 2007).

Remembrance of war has historically taken many forms and has undergone many important changes: from the art of cast statue-making in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that "eternalized" military and civic heroes in town squares and public parks (Grider, 2007: 271) through symbolic monuments signifying victory and undisputable patriotism (e.g. *Arch of Triumph* in Paris from 1806 and *Siegessäule* in Berlin 1873) to *The Vietnam War Memorial* (VWM) in Washington 1982 and finally more modernist abstract sites of remembrance such as *The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* in Berlin from 2005. Generally, we can detect a shift from monuments as expressions of institutionalized patriotism to memorials referring to the defeats and/or the lives sacrificed for a particular set of values (Sturken, 2007).

An increasing individualization has taken place in memory practices and representations since the beginning of the twentieth century. This process culminated with the VWM enumerating every American soldier killed or missing in action from the Vietnam conflict (Blair and Michel, 2007). We also see a shift from war remembrance, which confirms and fortifies the nation-state to remembrance practices that stress the importance of individual psychological responses "to the death and suffering that war engenders on a vast scale" (Ashplant et al., 2004: 7). War remembrance is thus increasingly seen from the viewpoint of the still living and is becoming more and more individualized (cf. every man his memorial).

In all societies, the weaker and more marginalized have less capacity and power to influence prevailing narratives, but sometimes, private memories can become a counterforce and challenge dominant narratives as was the case in Argentina during and after The Dirty War (1978–1983). The official version of dissidents being enemies of the state was challenged by popular activism turning sites of disappearance into sites of commemoration (Figures 1 and 2).

The web culture of commemoration characterized by easy access, openness, and interactivity underlines this increasing individualization of grief. The virtual memorials (i.e. the tribute videos) on YouTube are examples of vernacular memory in the making as individual users constantly inscribe interpretations of the past on them. The dynamic and mutable memorial is nevertheless not a completely new thing. Material monuments and sites of remembrance have likewise been used as platforms for inscription by cultural produsers. The monument *Flame of Liberty* on *Place de l'Alma* in Paris was given to France from the United States as a symbol of French–American friendship in 1987. Because of the Flame's proximity to the tunnel, where Princess Diana tragically

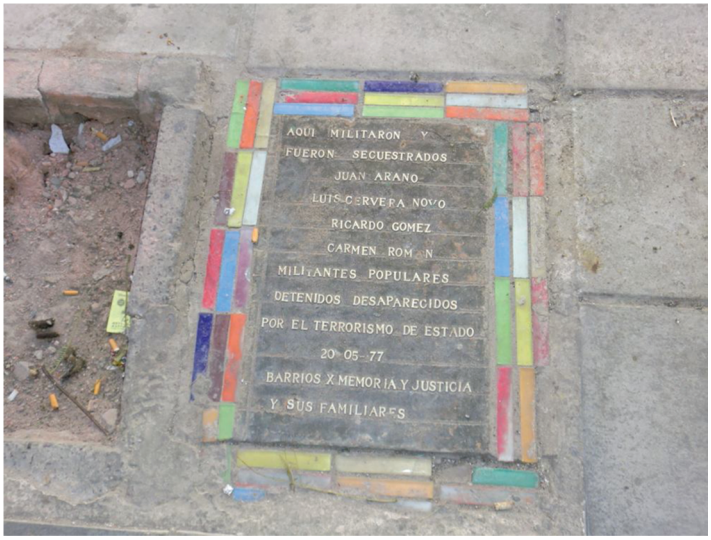


**Figure 1.** Private photo from Buenos Aires 2011.

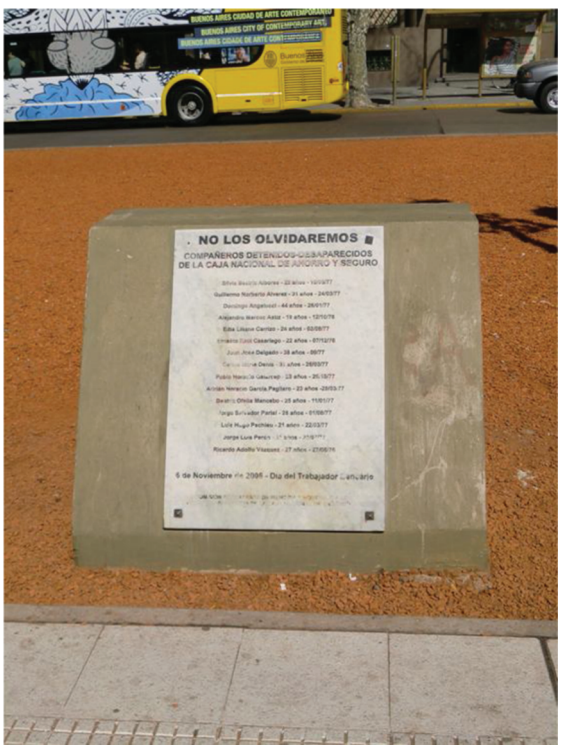


**Figure 2.** Private photo from 2011.

died in 1997, people have hijacked the monument in order to commemorate Diana and leave tokens, flowers, and letters. And they continue to do so despite occasional removals of flowers and official signs underlining that the memorial is not a monument for Diana. Another example of this vernacular inscription is Juliet's balcony in Verona that overlooks a small courtyard. Here, the walls are decorated with graffiti, post-its, flags, chewing gum, and so on from visitors wanting to be part of this romantic place.

In these two examples, the vernacular memory inscriptions are active and as such oppose themselves to officially sanctioned and stationary encodings of solemn monuments. Examples also exist of material memorials in which the interactivity is a crucial component of the memorials' state of being. One could think of the largest ongoing community interactive arts project in the world, the AIDS Memorial Quilt (Blair and Michel, 2007). It was founded by NGOs in 1987 and now consists of more than 46,000 panels. Each one of the panels, made by spouses, relatives, friends, colleagues, and so on, memorializes the life of a person who has died of AIDS. When it comes to interactivity and the cultural produsers' opportunity to coproduce memorials, the new media do not therefore represent a qualitatively different way of producing and experiencing memorials. They do, however, represent a further democratization of memory culture as it becomes the sine qua non of the memorials that are cocreated and changed as people relate to them and add further layers of meaning.

The tribute video is, first, historically and foremost an American invention related to amateur documentations of important events in life, and second, it is inspired by funeral videos. The latter is a memorial video tribute produced by the funeral home to be shown at the service (Wahlberg, 2009). Wahlberg ascribes the often sentimental and kitschy nature of the tribute videos to the commercial influence on amateur culture. In a Danish cultural context in which funeral home videos do not exist, the video tributes seem to herald a new memory practice that has developed through copying the memory practices of more experienced warring nations. The astonishing similarity between the 28 videos we are analyzing could stem from the fact that they are imitating the same source, and one of our most important findings is that the video tributes are not memorials referring to the singularity of the deceased person or expressing the singularity of the bereaved as is often the case in American tribute videos (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009).

We see YouTube as the arena or sociopolitical space in which individual produsers articulate their specific war memories. And the grievers likewise hope to find communal consolation (Wahlberg, 2009) or a transnational realm of pity, compassion, and sympathy, in other words, a *community of affect* beyond political differences. Several scholars have criticized this tendency to depoliticize specific wars in order to commemorate those lost in "war" itself (Grider, 2007). Marita Sturken, furthermore, concentrates on consumerist tendencies in attitudes toward difficult and traumatic pasts and especially on kitsch as a key feature in evoking the idea of a universal emotion shared by mankind (Sturken, 2007). This linking of consumerism and kitsch leads to innocence and comfort preventing a politicized view of the situation to emerge, according to Sturken.

This criticism is relevant, but we see a third way between a naive praise of a realm of affect beyond political differences and a severe criticism of this endeavor as being consumerist kitsch. It is possible to imagine nonnaive communities performing communal grief, but for these to exist the communicative encodings have to present themselves in certain ways. In our analysis of the arenas of articulation within which the tribute videos situate themselves, we will look at the type of commitment that the videos target in their encodings and how the endeavor is interpreted in the decoding positions. Or using the concepts of the sociologist Luc Boltanki: Is commitment interpellated as *communitarian* (based on similarity between members), *humanitarian* (based on pity and compassion between those who have experienced loss and those who have not), or *cosmopolitical*

(based on recognition of difference; Boltanski, 1999)? And should we consider YouTube as a possible arena for antidemocratic potentially violent expressions of racist, xenophobic hate-speech (Christensen, 2009) or rather as an arena where democratic monuments—characterized by disagreement and internal complexity—can emerge?

## Analysis

### *Articulation I: the videos' encoding of the grievable body*

Analyzing the content of the videos, it is possible to see various similarities. First of all, the death of the soldiers is continuously related to greater political or historical dimensions and thus different from the American tribute videos that insist on the recognition of the fallen soldiers "as persons, as unique individuals" (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009: 24). The Danish videos also create individualization by showing the pictures of each and every fallen soldier over and over again, but their death is continuously legitimized inside the framework of a very salient discourse of heroism.

An example of a video that connects the individual loss to a greater cause in order to establish the dead soldiers as an object of affective inclusion is "In memory of the Danish soldiers who died fighting for peace" (20 October 2008). The video lasts 7 minutes and 19 seconds and is a mash-up of different photos of soldiers in action, monuments and burial ceremonies in Denmark (e.g. coffins wrapped in the Danish flag), private and official photos of 22 of the dead soldiers, graphics with textual statements, and, last, a few recordings of planes throwing bombs and soldiers in combat. The visuals are accompanied by very dramatic, expressive, and almost kitschy background music (consisting of both classical, choir, and back pipe sequences), which clearly frames the soldiers as epic and extraordinary characters. The score peaks while the video is showing photos of the dead soldiers thereby pointing out these faces as objects of intensified affective attachment. The videos thus seem to imitate a filmic, or rather Hollywood-inspired, way of using music to control and modulate the affective response of the viewer to a certain narrative composition.

The photos of dead soldiers are followed by a poster with the statement "The task ahead of you,/ is never as great/as the power/behind you" (1.52) placed above a kneeling soldier, a Danish flag and the text "Danske helte," which means "Danish heroes" (Figure 3).

The losses are also directly addressed later in the video via three textual sequences: "Our brothers did not die in vain/Danish soldiers are still keeping the peace in Kosovo. And every day Danish soldiers in Afghanistan engage the Taliban in combat." (5.18). The video's multimodal assemblage of visuals, text, and music thereby integrates the singular loss into a narrative of heroism, necessary sacrifices, and national coherence. It is a heroic narrative, which is underlined by more or less conscious references to established war icons (e.g. Joe Rosenthal's "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima" from 1945; cf. Figure 4).

This heroic interpretation of the bereavements is—following Butler—also a way of allowing for the dead body of the soldier to become an object of affective response and inclusion at the level of the receiver. The video is not so much about communicating factual information (we do not see the names of the dead soldiers or when/where/how they died) but about creating an affective connection to "the Danish soldier" as such.

The idea of the soldiers as heroes is articulated throughout our empirical material by using different types of justification that attempt to inscribe the receiver in a community with the soldier. An important analytical question is how the recipient is being interpellated as a person who shares the project and values of the soldiers. In what ways are the soldiers and receivers turned into a "we"?

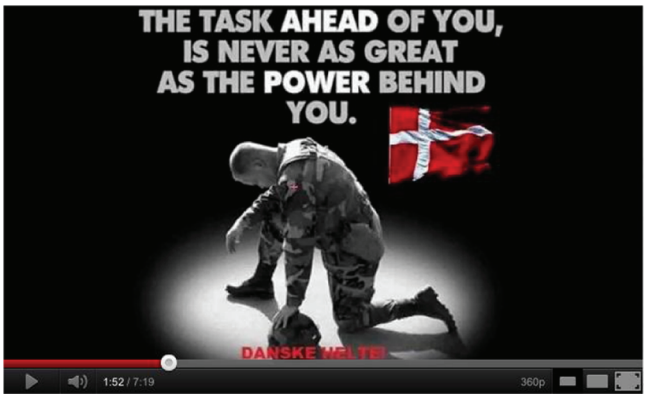


**Figure 3.** Framegrab from "In memory of the Danish soldiers who died fighting for peace" (2008).


**Figure 4.** Framegrab from "In memory of the Danish soldiers who died fighting for peace" (2008).

We argue that overall the videos employ three different strategies—often intertwined within one and the same video—when it comes to including the receiver.

The first strategy is the use of different national and religious symbols/markers to create a bond of commonality between individuals regarding themselves as Danish and/or Christian and the dead soldiers. As an example, some of the videos associate the soldiers and the war to Viking symbols (e.g. Thor's hammer (Figure 5)) thus referring to the prenational Viking culture that dominated Scandinavia in the centuries before and after year 1000 AC (e.g. "Til ære for de faldne" (3 December 2010) ("Honoring the fallen") and "The fallen Danish soldiers" (19 September 2009)).[2]

In that way, the bereavements are turned into sad, but "meaningful," events by relating them to different widespread national symbols, rituals, and institutions. The war itself is at the same time legitimized, and the soldiers are articulated as collectively grievable on a national level via the idea of a bond between an already commonly accepted core aspect of the national past (e.g. the Vikings) and the current war and its fatal consequences

The second strategy focuses primarily on how the local viewer owes the soldiers respect because of the fact that they have created a state of security and safety that the viewer can take for granted.

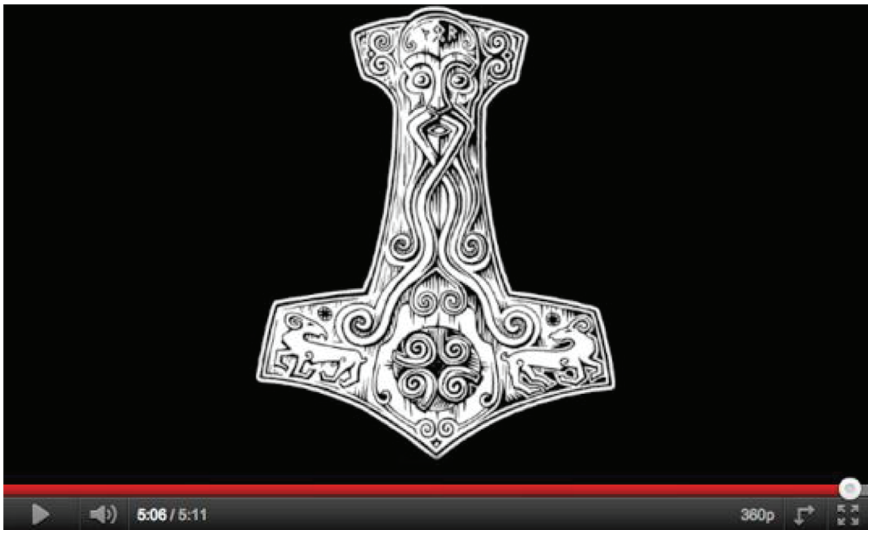


**Figure 5.** Framegrab from "The fallen Danish Soldiers" (2009).

This way of legitimizing both the war and the bereavements and to commit the viewer is focused on how the courage and death of the soldiers are the precondition for the security and local safeness of the viewer. An example is the video "Til ære for de danske soldater der er faldet i krig" ("In honour of the Danish soldiers who died in war"; 25 March 2008) where the narrator is Santa Claus who visits a soldier's basic living accommodation. The soldier explains that he has chosen this lifestyle, which gives Santa the opportunity to state that it is soldiers like him who give their lives so that the majority of the population can live in relative safety: "they (ed. people around the world) all enjoyed freedom each month of the year because of soldiers like the one lying here" (2.05). This narration is told while showing pictures of fallen soldiers and news headlines about these deaths.

The third strategy articulates commonality between viewers and soldiers by describing the military actions as part of the creation of a better and more civilized/enlightened world. The most striking example of a cosmopolitan line of thinking is a video that states, "I have no country to fight for; my country is the earth, and I am a citizen of the world. You'll never have a quiet world till you knock the patriotism out of the human race" (0.3.23) (5 June 2010). Other videos focus on kind and positive relations between the soldiers and civilians (e.g. soldiers giving candy to children (Figure 6), smiling, and calm interactions; 19 February 2009). Another video begins by claiming: "We bring enlightenment to where there is darkness" (0.09) (2 April 2008). Using this argument logically makes the person opposing the war into an opponent of progress and justifies war operations that improve people's lives in a respectful way. And the warfare is simply justified as a mission in favor of mankind and universal values.

Summing up, the three strategies' attempts to create different relations of commitment share certain characteristics with the three types outlined by Boltanski. The first focuses on identity as a preexisting bond that makes the suffering of the soldiers grievable for the viewers vis-à-vis their status as Danes or Christians (cf. the *communitarian* logic). The second strategy creates a bond between the viewers and soldiers by pointing at the sacrifices made by the latter. In that way, suffering becomes grievable because of the hierarchical relation between those who have lost their

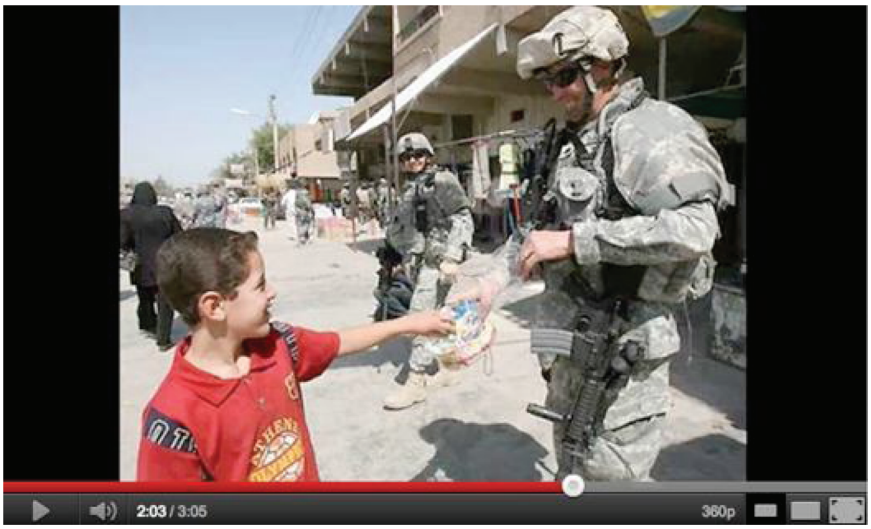


**Figure 6.** Framegrab from "danske soldater" (2009).

lives and those who can (and therefore ought to) help (cf. the *humanitarian* logic). Last but not least, the third strategy focuses on a larger human project of improvement and recognition as the reason why we should regard the lives of the soldiers as grievable. They have helped increase the well-being of distant human beings and as such deserve respect (cf. the *cosmopolitical* logic).

## *Articulation II: the comments' contestation of grievability*

The three different strategies of creating commonality in the video tributes—a communitarian patriotism, an appeal to the locals that they should honor those who secure peace, and the idea of war as a way of creating a better world—are also at work in the comments decoding/responding to the tributes. They are nevertheless not left undisputed, as they are all topics for critical discussion. An offshoot of the nationalist way of arguing uses a kind of imperialist argument thereby stressing former glory, conquest, and bravery in the form of the Vikings: "Try finding out the following: What country has the oldest flag in the world.—Who discovered Greenland and Iceland—Who discovered America before Colombus—Why is English pretty similar to Danish?" (Eskib0, 2 years ago) and "we will always be the Vikings who beated the crap out of Britain, stole your goods and raped your women" (bonde 92, 1 year ago). The idea of Denmark as an old imperialist power is opposed in the following way: "danish vikings What trip are you on? Talk about punching above your weight. The Afghans defeated the British Empire three times, your minute little country doesnt make a crumb of a difference" (humanityfirstnow, 1 year ago).[3] As shown the megalomaniac focus on Denmark as a historical grand nation is opposed and replaced by a discussion of which countries have grander pasts.

The argument about the soldiers as securing the "home" against the enemy is likewise criticized. This is done by focusing on the damage done by the soldiers in foreign contexts. Here, the soldiers are not defending local security, but rather creating local (but distant) instability. And instead of being the ones that sacrifice and deserve respect, the soldiers are described as the brute power

destroying other families: "does a child that becomes a part of Taliban because nato killed his father not have a family? Or fathers that become Talibans because their children or someone close to them were killed?" (GrimmjowProduction, 1 year ago),[4] and "And what about the innocent civilian victims? Should they not also be commemorated?" (HOLDTHAPHONE, 3 months ago).[5] In that way the "grievable body" is no longer, or not only, the soldier, but also the local people who have died because of the war.

The third idealistic argument about creating a better world has many adherents: "I believe we are there to make a difference for the people of Afghan, making democracy and helping women who are being raped, tortured and killed. I believe its worth fighting for" (Jonasyeah2680, 10 months ago), and "CIMIC has done a lot for the people of Afghanistan ... To make the living conditions better for the average afghan man woman and child" (Galen816, 2 years ago).[6] But this argument is also not undisputed, and the presence of Danish soldiers in Afghanistan according to some mainly serves the economic and political interests of superpowers: "This war is all about money and not sacred idealism" (humanityfirstnow, 1 year ago), "That however doesn't change anything with the fact that Denmark has ABSOLUTELY nothing to do in Afghanistan watching a USoil pipeline" (jakslevius, 1 year ago).[7]

How do we understand the social role and potential of this messy unity of different views on the war, discussions, fierce name-calling, flaming (Baym, 2006), and verbal attacks? Following Butler, it first of all becomes clear that the different participants in the discussion reproduce different interpretative schemas in relation to the war and that these different schemas also allow for the production of affect and grievability in different ways. For some, not at least the produsers of the videos, the grievable body is the body of the Danish soldiers, while others point at the civilians as the more just objects of grief. Furthermore, it is obvious that affect is contagious in a highly complex and fragmenting way (Knudsen and Stage, 2012) in the sense that the feeling of grief in a video can produce counteraffects (like consideration of the harm done to civilians) and that these counteraffects produce even more affects (like anger over the lack of grief in relation to the soldiers). Such affects are clearly contagious but not necessarily harmonizing because social actors make sense of events by using different interpretative frameworks.

But looking at the totality of outburst and affective responses to the videos, affect also plays a different role as we see it. Affect is not only a "product" of discourse but can also—inspired by the aforementioned affect theory of Kristeva—be analyzed as (opposing) political energies that disturb discourses. This is detectable if you look at the formal characteristics of the empirical material. One of the formal features we want to stress is the expressive and conative functions of language pointed out by Roman Jakobson. The former is related to the addresser adding information about the speaker's internal state, and the latter is related to engaging the addressee directly by vocatives and imperatives (e.g. the use of capital letters, punctuation (especially exclamation marks and signs of omission), and expressive signs (e.g. :) or :( and onomatopoeia). These formal choices are expressions of the emotional state of the addresser in the communication situation. An example from the comments to "Danish soldiers fighting in Helmand" (2 April 2008) is: "those are British soldiers duhhhhhh unless the Danish stole are enfields??" (MRAK47itification, 2 months ago). Another from a response to "Til ære for de danske soldater der faldet i krig" (24 March 2008): "pff!!! God xD you crazy [ ... ]" (martinboanders, 2 months ago).[8]

These formal features indirectly point at the type of memory practice that YouTube enables. It is less conventional, messy and filled with flaws, bottom–up, clearly marked by the affective state of the participants, in a state of becoming (i.e. always open for new inscriptions), and "dissensual" by definition. By focusing on the inscriptions of highly differential affective responses on the YouTube interface, affects are not so much regarded as products of discourses but rather as

conflicting political energies that reveal what democracy is all about: upholding the possibility of disagreement and dissent. In that way, the affective clashes and disruptions of conventional rules of communication—or following Kristeva: the géno-textual disturbance of the phéno-text—point at the opportunity for change and the many possible ways of intervening in this political debate. In opposition to many official monuments, the videos thus reveal that the commemoration of war is a contested and always politicized phenomenon. And, as we see it, there is something democratically promising about using this composite of affective and discursive clashes to commemorate war.

## *Arena: online memorials of democratic dissent*

In the online communication on YouTube, we see the official framings represented in the video tributes and in the comments via the focus on national heroism, local security, and the clean war. But we also see all these official framings as disputed topics as they are confronted in the comments. This is important if you want to describe YouTube as an online memorial because it simply transforms a traditional monument based on consent into a cocreated and user-generated memorial characterized by dissent.

The official state legitimization of war is in many ways reproduced by the DIY videos, but by making it possible for the viewers to express and leave traces of disagreement (via the comment function), the media space created around the videos become polyphonic and politically fragmented. In this way, the political, contested, and selective character of war commemorations is revealed and inscribed into the commemorative object itself via the ongoing dialectics between the encoding of the video and the decoding of the video in the comments. This type of media memorial, where dissent can be articulated as part of the continued rewriting of the media text, is by far more representative of, for example, the Danish population's views on for instance the war in Afghanistan. Approximately half of the population supported Danish troops' involvement in the war in 2008 and 2009, but by 2010, this had dropped to one-third of the population. Also by 2010, 69 percent of the population was under the impression that the war in Afghanistan could not be won.[9] From this perspective, the media space of YouTube allows for a commemorative practice that is open to an existing plurality of voices, affects, and standpoints in relation to the ongoing war activities.

Two other practices, which transcend the mere clash of perceptions, are worth mentioning. We find a few examples of recognition of the commemorative space beyond politics: "The last picture was beautiful even though I don't support the invasion" (DejoMadridista93, 6 months ago).[10] Here, it seems as if the beauty of the image leads to the solemn level of communal grief while still pointing to the political differences beneath. The second practice that we see in the YouTube commemorative space is a practice that expands the democratic use of the platform. In this use, the democratic processes of disciplining and self-disciplining become visible:

> You have the right to be "here" as well as he does. I can see why you insult, but it doesn't mean it is OK to insult him the way you did, in that case you're as big a nobhead as he. Think before you speak: have you heard of it? (DejoMadrista93, 6 months ago)[11]

And another example: "I want to apologize for encouraging that kaasclaesson should killed himself in traffic. Of course I do not mean that" (JesusFreakDK, 3 years ago).[12]

The transformation of the commemorative space into a political arena without a common ground of communal grief disintegrates the arguments put forward by Grider (2007) saying that the virtual character of the Internet escapes the materiality of war and death thereby depoliticizing the

losses. It also confronts Sturken (2007) who points to the use of kitsch in order to invoke universal emotion shared by mankind, which she sees as a way to preserve a depoliticized innocence in relation to warfare. Because of the foregrounding of dissent as a part of commemoration itself, we approach the online memorial as an interesting successor of the official monument and we understand the polemical reactions from produsers to the video tributes' official framings as a democratic response and an attempt to repoliticize the depolitized articulations. The polemical reactions are not present in the rare cases where the tributes are personal (e.g. "Dan Gyde—Begravelsen" (trans. "Dan Gyde—The funeral"; 17 December 2008). Political contestation appears only when official framings of the war are uncritically adapted by the videos.

The democratic potential of YouTube depends on whether you think it should optimally offer a "space of rationality," where reason will prevail, or a "space of articulation," where voices (sometimes irrational or playful) can be expressed—but not always heard (Couldry, 2010). Following French thinker Jacques Ranciére, we argue that the online memorials analyzed in this article confront what one could call the "consensual" model of democracy (Ranciére, 1999). The consensus model is prominent in a lot of traditional monuments that assume a sort of national unity or basic agreement about the warfare of a certain nation. For democracy—or nonconsensual democracy—to take place, according to Ranciére, singular individuals have to appear not representing anyone but themselves in order to conduct dispute as an alternative to a consensual model of democracy in which the community's and the individual's strivings are the same. And as such, the online memorials are democratic monuments as they reveal the lack of communal consensus in relation to the war and create a hypercomplex arrangement of singular voices speaking in their own way. Scrolling down the YouTube page is in that way enabling a direct experience of the messy and unfinished chaos of democratic and affective energies. If "incompletion and provisionality belong to the essence of democracy," as stated by Ernesto Laclau (1996: 16), the constantly evolving online memorials are democratic.

Whether one accepts that the often brute and hostile interaction about the tribute videos on YouTube can be approached as political deliberation depends on the definition of this concept. According to Aaron Hess, effective deliberation is "conducted through the use of reasonable argument (Goodnight, 1999) toward reaching common ground (Barber, 2003; Sunstein, 2007)) as opposed to divisive arguments derived through fallacies" (Hess, 2010: 109). Following this Habermasian ideal, Hess is skeptical toward the democratic and political potential of YouTube, as this platform often seems to motivate a rather extreme, demonizing, and overtly playful type of interaction (Hess, 2009, 2010). Political deliberation could also be threatened by copyright issues on YouTube limiting free speech and criticism, by the financial interests of the media platform (Burgess and Green, 2009; Hess, 2009), by the very systemic nature of the platform (e.g. the number of characters is strictly limited in the commentaries), or by the fact that it—just like many other types of online communication—often is very difficult to verify who has produced a video or comment (Smith and McDonald, 2011). These problems all point to the fact that it is important not to end up in a deterministic understanding of new technologies that equals social media with democracy or overlooks the institutional and economic forces that also affect them.

These concerns are also highly relevant in our case, which is certainly characterized by incidents of flaming, ambiguous authorship, and rather incomprehensible intertwinements of institutional and noninstitutional voices. Following McDonald and Smith's nuanced acknowledgement of both the potential pitfalls of online communication and the necessity of "exploring new models of deliberation as they occur in the new media landscape" (Smith and McDonald, 2011: 306), we nevertheless maintain that this type of communication is a democratic improvement compared to the previous dominant practices of war commemoration focused on national unity and coherence.

This is the case for two reasons: first, the increasing ability for ordinary citizens to share their view on war (commemoration) is in itself a positive democratic change. It is simply easier for a lot of people to participate in commemorative practices in different and also oppositional ways. Second, the bare manifestation of disagreement in relation to war memorials has a democratizing effect—whether or not this disagreement is playful or irrational—because commemoration of war often tends to support dominant discourses. Our point is, however, not that YouTube delivers an optimal platform for political deliberation as such or that one should approve of all kinds of online communication as long as it is oppositional but rather that YouTube's ability to make dispute visible can have a democratic potential in relation to a social phenomena, which has often been "depoliticized" or deprived of its controversial character via official encodings.

## Conclusion

In the article, we have analyzed our empirical material on two different levels focusing on the level of articulation (the content of the videos and comments) and the level of the media arena as a space of online commemoration. The main points have been that the videos support official framings of the war as just and necessary, and that they attempt at creating a bond of commonality between the dead soldiers and the receivers in three ways: By focusing on (1) a common identity, such as Danes or Christians as the thing that makes the soldiers deaths grievable; (2) a bond based on obligation as the sacrificing soldiers secure the safety of everyday life that many locals in the warring societies take for granted; or (3) a cosmopolitical logic describing the warfare as a quest for enlightenment and the war activities as clean and righteous. Looking at the comments, all these positions are topics of dispute and fierce discussions thereby transforming the arena of commemoration into a political space of democratic struggle. Following this, we have argued that YouTube as a media arena enables the creation of a democratized memory practice where official justifications of war can not only be affirmed but also disputed and scrutinized via all sorts of discursive and affective investments.

Are these democratic practices celebrating hate-speech? Are they fundamentally dishonoring the dead soldiers as many of the reactions to the critical outbursts claim? Not necessarily. The disagreeing comments are not only democratic in the sense of Rancière but also occasionally articulate transindividual communal expressions of sympathy and empathy beyond political differences. As an online memorial practice, the tribute videos on YouTube and their comments therefore break with the traditional war monuments' focus on national unity and establish a more democratic situation characterized by public commemorative disagreement.

### Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### Notes

1. http://nyhederne-dyn.tv2.dk/article.php/id-35146700:l%C3%B8kke-kampsoldater-ud-efter-2014.html
2. In the article, Danish video titles are translated in the text. Quotes in Danish from the videos are translated and the original piece of text is placed in an endnote. We attempt to maintain the style of the translated quotes (e.g. spelling mistakes and creative use of language).
3. Comments to "Danish soldiers fighting in Helmand" (2 April 2008).
4. Comment to "Heltene" (2 July 2007). Original: "et barn der går I Taleban fordi nato myrdede hans far har ike nogen familie? Eller fædre der melder sig I Taleban fordi de fik deres børn eller nogen tæt på dem dræbt?"

5. Comment to "Til ære for de danske soldater der faldet i krig" (25 March 2008). Original: "Hvad med de uskyldige civile ofre? Skal de ikke også mindes??"
6. Comments to "Danish soldiers fighting in Helmand" (2 April 2008).
7. Comments to "Danish soldiers fighting in Helmand" (2 April 2008).
8. Original: "pff!!! Gud xD du crazy [ ... ]."
9. http://jp.dk/indland/article2166582.ece
10. Comment to "Danish soldiers fighting in Helmand" (2 April 2008).
11. Comment to "Danish soldiers fighting in Helmand" (2 April 2008).
12. Comment to "remember" (24 February 2007). Original: "Jeg vil gerne undskylde min opfordring til at kaasclaesson skulle slå sig sig ihjel i trafikken. Det mener jeg naturligvis ikke."

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## Appendix 1

### *Tribute videos to fallen Danish soldiers on YouTube*

| Title | Upload | Length (min. sec) | Views (on 28 April 2011; *on 31 June 2011) |
|---|---|---|---|
| "Danish soldiers fighting in Helmand," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xDeV3TxEIE&feature=related | 2 April 2008 | 6.03 | 76,020 |
| "Til ære for de danske soldater der faldet i krig," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sj3Fk1CkBec&feature=related | 25 March 2008 | 3.49 | 36,203 |
| "In memory of the danish soldiers who died fighting for peace," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StoNHszwFwo&feature=related | 20 October 2008 | 7.18 | 27,479 |
| "remember," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hgaVU1MtTOQ&feature=related | 24 February 2007 | 4.24 | 26,402 |
| "Heltene," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBcUhz2Ecq8&feature=related | 2 July 2007 | 2.26 | 26,163 |
| "Fallen Danish soldiers," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2M8oKBzgG0&feature=related | 12 January 2008 | 3.51 | 23,223 |

*(Continued)*

**Appendix 1.** (Continued)

| Title | Upload | Length (min. sec) | Views (on 28 April 2011; *on 31 June 2011) |
|---|---|---|---|
| "Danish Soldiers KIA," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j6ZtVU-Jh4o&feature=related | 2 July 2007 | 3.38 | 23,126 |
| "kongernes konge," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wX-X6HegaBo&feature=related | 15 December 2008 | 2.42 | 22,172 |
| "Tribute to danish soldiers," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQAUGa9yAVk&feature=related | 19.10.2007 | 2.04 | 19,022 |
| "Royal Danish Lifeguard KIA ISAF," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kzuwAf1B2E&feature=related | 13 April 2008 | 3.54 | 18,265 |
| "Remembrance Hall—Fallen Danes in Afghanistan," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGuCaVh75V4&feature=related | 13 February 2008 | 2.33 | 13,240 |
| "Til minde for vores faldne soldater," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpbMAgYvlGQ | 3 March 2008 | 2.56 | 10178 |
| "In memory of the Danish soldiers," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xx4GwNV5Boc&feature=related | 28.7.2007 | 2.39 | 8721 |
| "Tribute to fallen Danish soldiers/Hyldest til faldne danske soldater," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWMve4Hc3VY&feature=related | 24 March 2010 | 5.27 | 5698 |
| "ISAF 9—Æret være deres minde," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DOvG2seHQm4&feature=related | 9 July 2010 | 4.00 | 5004 |
| "Martin Hjorth," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qa4L9i-2fVs&feature=related | 6 October 2008 | 2.04 | 4498* |
| "Danish Dragoons," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2P33CP4cSTM&feature=related | 15 April 2008 | 3.41 | 4354 |
| "Never forget," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-t9dzlFfJXk&feature=related | 20 October 2008 | 3.52 | 4269 |
| "danske soldater," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRGfnY4bH7c&feature=related | 19 February 2009 | 3.05 | 4166 |
| "Dan Gyde—Begravelsen," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMSbuRokuBs&feature=related | 17 December 2008 | 4.50 | 4103 |
| "Vi mindes de Danske soldater der gav deres liv for fred," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_edpDMxIGZs&feature=related | 9 February 2009 | 2.22 | 4016 |
| "The fallen Danish soldiers," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7R3cX69wzs | 19 November 2009 | 5.11 | 2982 |
| "Tribute to danish soldiers," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gQwR70J8pY&feature=related | 27 October 2009 | 3.06 | 1692 |

*(Continued)*

**Appendix 1.** (Continued)

| Title | Upload | Length (min. sec) | Views (on 28 April 2011; *on 31 June 2011) |
|---|---|---|---|
| "Til ære & minde om de faldne danske soldater," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gqp3FXi8nsg&feature=related | 5 June 2010 | 4.27 | 1412 |
| "De faldne danskere i Afghanistan," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qxc1n1yHSOc&feature=related | 27 May 2009 | 4.12 | 1302 |
| "Danske soldater," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=doSeM7Xcs4I&feature=related | 29 January 2009 | 3.05 | 1301* |
| "Til ære for de faldne," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=baM-q6spOQM | 3 December 2010 | 6.25 | 193 |
| "Minde film—Til ære for soldater & pårørende," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcqDBru5r_0&feature=related | 6 January 2011 | 2.05 | 53 |

## Author biographies

Britta T Knudsen is Associate Professor, Department of Aesthetics and Communication, Aarhus University, Denmark. Her research areas include difficult heritage places and tourism, cultural heritage and nostalgia, event culture and experience economy, online communication and affect.

Carsten Stage is Assistant Professor, Department of Aesthetics and Communication, Aarhus University, Denmark. His research areas include political/activist online communication, cultural globalization and participatory/DIY culture, national identity, and affect and discourse analysis.