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### The online crowd: a contradiction in terms? On the potentials of Gustave Le Bon's crowd psychology in an analysis of affective blogging

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The online crowd: a contradiction in terms? On the potentials of Gustave Le Bon's crowd psychology in an analysis of affective blogging

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The aim of the article is to investigate whether the concept of the 'crowd' as developed by Gustave Le Bon can help us understand the new types of affectively charged collectivities created via spontaneous interaction on various social media platforms. To do this I analyze the case of Eva Dien Brine Markvoort's blog, *65 Red Roses*, through the lens of crowd psychology. Initially I make a theoretical distinction between three different types of crowds that prioritize the role of physical co-presence in different ways: the traditional *body-to-body crowd* based on physical co-presence; the *mediated crowd*, which has a strong offline dimension but uses media technologies as tools or communication environments; and the *online crowd*, which I define as the *affective unification and relative synchronization of a public in relation to a specific online site*. Overall I argue that Eva Markvoort enables collective affective processes that can be identified in the responses on the blog, and that she functions as a crowd facilitator, motivating both linguistic and bodily imitation due to her personal prestige and her image-producing embodiment of an abstract disease and problem. On a theoretical level, I conclude that Le Bon's description of the crowd is productive when trying to transpose insights from crowd psychology into a cultural situation characterized by spontaneous and affective relations online.

**Keywords:** affect; blogging; crowd; discourse; embodiment; prestige; publics

### 1. Focus and questions

Online technologies enable new types of affectively charged collectivities to emerge on social media platforms through spontaneous interaction. In other words, the speed and immediacy of online communication (Tomlinson 2007) itself seems to bring about a certain degree of embodied 'immediatization' of social relations. To understand this collective 'electricity' (Brighenti 2010) of online communication, I wish to analyze and discuss the blog *65 Red Roses* by Eva Dien Brine Markvoort (1984–2010) (EM) through the lens of crowd psychology, with a special focus on Gustave Le Bon's late nineteenth-century conceptualization of the crowd. I have chosen Le Bon because his description of the crowd – despite its race-based explanations, its problematic later history, and its too clearly-cut dichotomies (Laclau 2005, 40) – is open to the idea of crowd formations that do not share a physical space.

The article contributes to the developing field of research dealing with media affect and contagious communication (Blackman 2012; Featherstone 2010; Gibbs 2008; Sampson

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2012), with affect or intensity as a force motivating media circulation (Grusin 2010; Lash and Lury 2007), and with affect as a key factor in contemporary mediated communities and relations (Boltanski 1999; Knudsen 2009). This interest in ‘the ways in which feelings and affective states can *reverberate* in and out of cyberspace, intensified (or muffled) and transformed through digital circulation and repetition’ (Kuntsman 2012, 1) attests to a growing dissatisfaction with media-analytical paradigms that focus too narrowly on discursive processes of interpretation or semantic encoding/decoding. These have downplayed the importance of bodily reactions, emotions, passions, moods, atmospheres, desires, threshold experiences, and intimacy in relation to people’s and collectives’ media practices.

The reason for applying Le Bon’s crowd concept to an online setting is precisely that it can highlight how new media alter the formation of publics and crowds (Olofsson 2010) and also allow for moments of intense mediated affect in relation to specific online events and spaces. The crowd concept thus helps to sharpen our understanding of various types of online practice in general, and a certain type of affective clustering around certain sites at specific moments in particular. This dimension cannot be properly described either by the more general term ‘public’ or by notions of communities based on shared identities or cognitive imaginations of a common space and time (e.g. Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’). These concepts simply show an underdeveloped understanding of the bodily affective qualities of the media collective that I want to investigate.

The contribution of the article is both theoretical in arguing for the relevance of Le Bon in studies of online culture, and analytical/methodological in testing these theoretical claims in an analysis of Eva Markvoort’s blog. I seek to answer three specific questions: (1) To what extent is the ‘online crowd’ a contradiction in terms, and how does it relate to established notions of ‘publics’? (2) To what extent does *65 Red Roses* motivate crowd behavior, and how can we identify it? (3) To what extent can EM be understood as a crowd leader, and why is she able to attract so much online and offline attention?

## 2. Publics and online crowding

To answer these questions, it is of course necessary to define a crowd. One of the most prominent theoretical works on the crowd is *The Crowd: a Study of the Popular Mind* (1895), by Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931). According to Le Bon, his time of writing was ‘the era of the crowds’ (Le Bon [1895] 2002, x), a remark which was not positive, as he perceived the crowd as a social formation that impeded a stable and effective societal structure. Thus ‘the advent to power of the masses marks one of the last stages of Western civilization’, as they are linked to ‘a barbarian phase’ (Le Bon [1895] 2002, xiii) due to the irrational and unpredictable nature of crowds. A crowd is not just many people gathered at the same spot, but a certain type of affectively synchronized and therefore de-individualized gathering which is ‘little adapted to reasoning’, ‘quick to act’, and ‘a single being’ or ‘mental unity’ (Le Bon [1895] 2002, xi, 2). It is the ‘disappearance of conscious personality and the turning of feelings and thoughts in a definite direction’ that constitute the crowd (Le Bon [1895] 2002, 2). It is impulsive, irritable, and susceptible to leaders with a talent for suggestion, exaggeration, affirmation, and repetition (Le Bon [1895] 2002, 11, 23). Thus the crowd is a way of being together in which the personal dispositions and rationality of the individual are subsumed under the unpredictable energy of the collective mind and psychology of the crowd. In other words, the crowd works according to a logic of contagion and suggestibility, as a certain disposition to act is transmitted to a composite of (no longer) individuals (Borch 2006, 2009; Le Bon [1895] 2002).

### 2.1. *The public as non-crowd*

Many understandings of the crowd underline the importance of physical co-presence or being together ‘body to body’ (Borch 2009; Canetti 1960, 18) in the formation of crowds. In his famous essay ‘The Public and the Crowd’ (1901) Gabriel Tarde, for example, distinguishes between the crowd as ‘a collection of psychic connections produced essentially by physical contacts’ (Tarde [1901] 1969, 278), and the public as a ‘dispersion of individuals that are physically separated and whose cohesion is entirely mental’ (Tarde [1901] 1969, 277). That essay was a response to a social situation characterized by increasingly mediated social relations, which according to Tarde could not be described as crowd relations without conceptual confusion. As explained by Anna Gibbs, Tarde does acknowledge the public as a potential site of affective investments (e.g. via the media’s creation of fads), but he stresses that the public does not rely on unmediated bodily encounters as crowd affectivity does (Gibbs 2008, 137). Here I will nevertheless argue that the insights of Le Bon’s crowd theory can still be fruitful when used to analyze and understand the social dynamics of mediated or media-augmented collectivities.

Before elaborating on this, I want to stress that the blog *most of the time* simply constitutes ‘a public’, as described by, for instance, Michael Warner. Warner distinguishes between three types of publics. His first category is (1) *the public* as ‘a kind of social totality’ that includes everybody ‘within the field in question’ (e.g. a nation, a city, a state) (Warner 2002, 49). His second and third categories are *a public*, which can be either (2) a concrete gathering of people connected to each other by an event/a common space (e.g. a theatre audience) or (3) the ‘kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation’ (Warner 2002, 50). In other words, publics can be based on either *social totalities*, *concrete gatherings in spaces*, or *textual circulation*. Warner’s primary interest is the third, ‘circulatory’ version of publics, because this broadens a traditional notion of a singular public sphere by, e.g., implying that ‘multiple publics exist and one can belong to many different publics simultaneously’ (Warner 2002, 53; see also Squires 2002). Following Warner’s description, EM’s blog is exactly this kind of public because it is not based on established social totalities, it addresses and circulates discursive material among an indefinite number of followers, it establishes relations and communication among strangers (cf. ‘stranger-relationality’), it receives reader attention over a longer period of time, and it circulates both rational-critical and more poetic, affective or documenting types of texts. But to what extent is this public also a crowd, and how can these concepts, often understood as contradictory, be used to describe the same social formation?

### 2.2. *The mediated crowd*

As mentioned by Tarde, a person engaging himself in a media public ‘is much more in control of his intellectual freedom than a lost individual swept up in a crowd. He can think about what he reads, in silence’ (Tarde [1901] 1969, 283). Constructing a distinction between *crowd* and *public* is often based on the idea that mediation weakens the role of the body or makes body-to-body interactions impossible (Gibbs 2008, 131). However, the speed, immediacy, intimacy, and multimodality of online communication seem to put bodily connections and reactions at the center of this type of mediated exchange. These features blur the clear boundaries between a mediated public and an unmediated crowd, private sphere and public life, geographical distance and perceptual proximity, the body as an entity and the collective life of bodies. Looking e.g. at the instances of collective flaming or rage, hyping, bullying, and mourning in virtual worlds that are so characteristic of contemporary

online communication, the idea of a clear-cut distinction between the relatively controlled individual reflecting on the message of the media text and the uncontrolled (non-)person of the crowd seems difficult to uphold. Today, online media users can simply participate in crowd practices.

Is it not for instance a kind of irrational crowding when millions of people all over the world hurry to a certain online site and get a share of the electricity surrounding the hype of a scandalous YouTube video (e.g. the KONY video)? Or when, as in my case, large numbers of users rush to a blog to emotionally support the blogger after a dramatic event? This is simply a virtual version of the self-perpetuating logic of crowd attraction described by Elias Canetti:

Suddenly everywhere is black with people and more come streaming from all sides as though streets had only one direction. Most of them do not know what has happened and, if questioned, have no answer; but they hurry to be there where most other people are. (Canetti 1960, 16)

The linkage between crowd characteristics and online or new media practices is already found in the work of, for instance, Howard Rheingold and Stephanie Alice Baker. Rheingold's famous account of the rise of the 'smart mob' focuses primarily on offline gatherings that use mobile technologies to co-ordinate political actions by increasing collective 'swarm' intelligence on what is happening where and how (Rheingold 2002). The principal difference between Rheingold and Le Bon is that Rheingold attempts to describe the special type of intelligence that arises through these collectives, while Le Bon focuses on the loss of rational or intelligent behavior in the crowd. Stephanie Alice Baker explicitly connects new media and the concept of the crowd by creating the term 'the mediated crowd'. This describes 'an interactive community that both traverses and intersects geographical public space and the virtual public sphere' (Baker 2011; see also Olofsson's (2010) description of 'the traversing crowd'). For Baker, crowd studies analysts must simply put more effort into understanding the role of communication technologies in the formation of crowds; they have to acknowledge that many contemporary crowds co-ordinate and are to some degree created (practically and emotionally) through technological tools and environments, as in the August 2011 riots in Britain.

### 2.3. *The online crowd*

Although open to the possibility that mediation and crowd formation do not mutually exclude each other, Baker seems to uphold the notion that mediated crowds still have to meet somewhere in a geographical space to become an actualized crowd. Interestingly, it may be Le Bon who is the most willing among the crowd theorists to suspend physical co-presence as a prerequisite for the formation of crowds. Unlike Tarde, he argues that media technologies intensify, rather than prevent, crowd behavior. Crowds became increasingly important, according to Le Bon, with the 'weakening of general beliefs', 'the extreme mobility of ideas', and the 'recent development of the newspaper press' (Le Bon [1895] 2002, 95). For him, the crowd is primarily about sharing affective processes and becoming a mental unity; media technologies can work as tools that enable crowd formation, by spreading and modulating affects.

Of course, Le Bon describes the crowds primarily as a composite of de-individualized individuals sharing a common space and time. Nevertheless, in a few passages he stresses that co-presence is not indispensable for the creation of crowd characteristics:

disappearance of conscious personality and the turning of feelings and thoughts in a definite direction, which are the primary characteristics of a crowd to become organized, do not always involve the simultaneous presence of a number of individuals on one spot. (Le Bon [1895] 2002, 2)

It is, however, unclear whether, for Le Bon, crowds can be prepared and stimulated at a distance but only become actual crowds when a specific co-present gathering is created, or whether they can actually exist without ever meeting body to body. The passage quoted above seems to imply that crowds can be prepared at a distance; but later in the same passage he states: ‘an entire nation, though there may be no visible agglomeration, may become a crowd under the action of certain influences’ (Le Bon [1895] 2002, 2). And later:

For individuals to succumb to contagion their simultaneous presence on the same spot is not indispensable. The action of contagion may be felt from a distance under the influence of events which give all minds an individual trend and the characteristics peculiar to crowds. (Le Bon [1895] 2002, 78)

Here it seems that if they are oriented towards the same event and collectively contaminated by a certain mental state, people can become a crowd – or at least just like a crowd – without offline co-presence, according to Le Bon.

In taking Le Bon into the digital age, I follow Lisa Blackman’s idea of a reconfiguration of the crowd in the wake of new media technologies:

The crowd was primarily represented by bodily proximity and a particular spatial location. What we witness in the twenty-first century is the transformation of the crowd into a series of more flexible, adaptable and mobile entities. The improvised crowds are imagined in the iconic image of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, and communication practices such as Blackberry Messenger, allowing a temporary and transient public to be formed on- and sometimes off-line. (Blackman 2012, 27)

This quote indicates that the ‘improvised crowd’ and a ‘temporary and transient public’ are not mutually exclusive social formations and that crowds do not necessarily have to have an offline life. Nevertheless, few academic studies refer directly to the notion of online crowds. Christian Russ is an exception as he defines the online crowd as a social formation of individuals who ‘gather virtually, behave and act collectively and produce effects and phenomena which would not be possible without the Internet’ (Russ 2007, 65). Russ’s main interest here, in contrast to this article, is in how online crowds ‘can be actively formed for promising business models’ and how ‘decision makers and providers will be better capable to predict and promote successful online communities and services’ (Russ 2007, 65): in other words, in how collective commercial buzzes and fads can be created. Tony D. Sampson also addresses the relevance of Le Bon for the study of online communication (e.g. viral marketing), but he is primarily focused on discussing the larger differences between the contagion theories of Le Bon and Tarde. In line with Sampson I acknowledge that Le Bon’s theory of contagion overemphasizes a conservative criticism of the irrational, hypnotized, and hallucinatory character of the crowd (Sampson 2012, 89). But I still maintain that Le Bon is particularly relevant for the study of affective crowding online as he, in contrast to Tarde, describes the possibility of crowd formation freed from the constraints of unmediated bodily encounters in physical space. A third example is Jennie Kristina Olofsson’s description of the crowd as a ‘socio-material density’ (Olofsson 2010, 765), which can take shape in virtual or physical spaces and often in both simultaneously. Although Olofsson is open to the existence of ‘virtual crowds’ (Olofsson 2010, 774), her main interest, like Baker, is seemingly the intertwining of physicality and virtuality in contemporary

formations of crowds made possible by computer-mediated environments. Compared to this work I focus more strictly on crowds forming online, and furthermore on offering ways of detecting online crowding in empirical material.

Following Blackman and going back to Warner's typology of publics, I argue that crowds and publics can coexist, when online publics of the third kind (based on sharing discursive circulations of text) intertwine with the second (based on sharing a certain, here textually mediated, event in a synchronized online space). But a shared online event or space is of course not sufficient. To become an online crowd or 'socio-material density', the public must be characterized by intense affective unification. Following this, the 'online crowd' is used here to describe a certain type of online behavior where the participants of a public simultaneously (1) share affective processes and (2) come together on certain online sites (e.g. in relation to a blog post). In other words, 'online crowding' refers to *the affective unification and relative synchronization of a public in relation to a specific online site*.

I have thus established at least three different conceptions of the crowd, assigning differing degrees of importance to co-presence: (1) the 'body-to-body crowd' of Canetti, Tarde (and most often also Le Bon), based on physical proximity; (2) the 'mediated crowd' of Baker, based on the technological augmentation of offline crowds, and (3) the 'online crowd', based on the idea of a contagious process that turns 'feelings and thoughts in a definite direction' among a collective of online media users (Le Bon [1895] 2002, 2).

### 3. Eva Markvoort's 65 Red Roses

From July 2006 to late March 2010, Eva Dien Brine Markvoort (EM) (see Figure 1) communicated about her life with the life-threatening lung disease cystic fibrosis (CF) on her blog *65 Red Roses*. On 27 March 2010, EM died, having shared her life with her many readers in a very intimate and disclosing way. The blog clearly had several purposes over time, including creating social relations with other people suffering from CF, and promoting both a political cause (creating awareness of CF and the need for more people to sign up for organ donation) and other related projects (such as the documentary made about EM, *65\_Redroses* (2009), by Phillip Lyall and Nimisha Mukerji).



Figure 1. Picture of Eva for the 65\_RedRoses #4Eva campaign.

The development of the blog from 2006 to 2010 can be divided into three phases. The first phase ranges from the initial entry on 15 July 2006 to the end of October 2007, and consists of EM's descriptions of life with CF and the increasing worsening of her condition, leading to her double lung transplant. The second phase, from late October 2007 to the end of August 2009, follows the improvement of EM's condition after the transplant, and the public screening of a documentary film about her. The last phase is initiated on 30 August 2009, with an entry where EM explains that she cannot breathe as well as before, and ends on 27 March 2010 with her death. Today the blog serves as a place for the family to post information about the projects and campaigns that EM took part in and as a space for commemoration of and tribute to EM. The blog (and documentary) were highly effective in raising national and global awareness of CF and organ donation. According to Canadian member of parliament Joyce Murray, the number of people signing up for organ donation in Canada clearly increased because of EM, and she furthermore became well known in many different national contexts (such as in Poland).<sup>1</sup>

### 3.1. Methodology

The analysis is based on a case study of the blog, thereby prioritizing an in-depth perspective rather than general claims about a larger empirical category. This is not, however, to imply that a case study cannot produce or contribute to the production of generalizable knowledge (Flyvbjerg 2010, 473). A case study can become a source either of current generalization (by relating to existing research in a critical, confirming, or negotiating way) or of possible future generalizations (as it can be taken up in further studies contributing to academic knowledge about this particular type of communication or cultural practice). As I have been able to find only very little academic work referring to the figure of the online crowd, the contribution of my case study is precisely to suggest that crowd theories have been neglected in relation to the understanding of online practices, and in that way to propose the need for further research to supplement the current body of knowledge on the subject of online crowding.

Of course the blog also has analytical and theoretical limitations. As described by Robert Glenn Howard, 'vernacular' voices online, often perceived as personal and 'bottom-up' contributions, regularly intertwine with institutional and commercial voices (Howard 2008). This is also relevant in relation to EM, who is blogging not only as a private person, but also as a campaigner raising CF awareness and, additionally, as the key character in a documentary film. She thus has multiple coexisting, but not necessarily contradictory, agendas. This relates to a general problem in the analysis of online relations: how do we know that articulated vernacular intentions are authentic and truthful, rather than institutional and strategic? In contrast to this focus on transparency, or perhaps the lack of it, between online and offline subjects, quite a lot of research maintains that computer-mediated communication is increasingly used to augment media users' ordinary lives by confirming or creating new networks, rather than as a sphere of inauthenticity or semi-fake relations (Baym 2010). Following this – and taking into account EM's continuous performances across a range of media platforms (e.g. on TV and in newspaper interviews), her ability to motivate offline actions (e.g. signing up for organ donation), and the size of the blog's public – concerns about communicative inauthenticity seem less acute in relation to this particular case. That said, the possible disconnection between online and offline subjects of course implies that text-based studies of online practices should continuously evaluate the authenticity of its empirical material.



At the time of writing, the blog consists of 555 entries, of which EM herself wrote the vast majority, while a smaller number were written by relatives after her death or during spells when it was impossible for her to blog. These entries have received more than 20,000 comments from all over the world.<sup>2</sup> After exploring and taking notes on key characteristics in this large amount of material, I choose various examples – including both primary text written by EM and tertiary texts produced by the users (Fiske 1987) – to ground empirically the exchanges of affect and imitation in relation to the blog. My primary examples are: (1) a coughing video and the user comments it generated to highlight the transmission of affect from blogger to followers; (2) a farewell video and its approximately 2,500 comments to focus on a clear instance of online crowding; and (3) the memorial event, ‘Eva’s Celebration of Life’ – an event which was both online and offline – to look into the complex intertwining of different types of crowds in relation to the blog. In addition to these examples, I refer more briefly to other blog posts and textual material about EM for further empirical grounding.

If crowds are defined by shared affectively charged behavior, an important question is of course what counts as ‘affective’ processes. Brian Massumi defines affect as related to bodily sensations of microshock: ‘Affect for me is inseparable from the concept of shock. It doesn’t have to be a drama. It’s really more about microshocks, the kind that populate every moment of our lives’ (Massumi 2009, 4). As so described, affect arrives at the level of the body before language has clearly conceptualized or interpreted it, and the role of language becomes to integrate the experience of the microshock into the order of socially compressible communication. Ruth Leys has offered a timely critique of the risk of Massumi’s description generating a rather simple dichotomy between mind and matter, meaning and affect, cognition and body (Leys 2011). I agree with this and therefore want to stress that my support for the idea that affective stimulation of bodies (e.g. via the atmosphere in a room) often comes before language or stable interpretation (e.g. understanding the atmosphere as pleasant) does not imply that affect is prior to cognition, meaning, and cultural discourses. In other words, I take Massumi to be describing what affect in language might look like, not how bodily affect comes about in the first place. A source of confusion is the word ‘discourse’, which can be used to mean both ‘language’ and broader cultural ‘systems of knowledge’. I would accordingly agree that we have to distinguish between affect and ‘discourse-as-language’ in order to be able both to describe the bodily states that sometimes disrupt or escape language, and at the same time to remain aware of the broader patterns of ‘discourse-as-knowledge’ that make certain affective reactions more likely than others.

The study of affective collectives online raises a range of methodological challenges; e.g. how to decide which empirically identifiable phenomena you interpret as symptoms of affectivity. According to Massumi ‘[l]inguistic expression can resonate with and amplify intensity’ (Massumi 2002, 25–6). As described by Massumi, affect can be traced in linguistic material in instances of functional redundancy, temporal and narrative noise, in the creation of a ‘state of suspense, potentially of disruption’, and in the ‘excess of any narrative or functional line’ (Massumi 2002, 26). All these formal characteristics function as the ‘dampening’ of affect, in the sense that the semiotic excesses indirectly point to the microshock or affective force that created them (Massumi 2002, 25). Massumi furthermore describes the self-ascription of an emotional experience as a re-registering of affect: ‘An emotional qualification breaks narrative continuity for a moment to register a state – actually to re-register an already felt state, for the skin is faster than the words’ (Massumi 2002, 25).

Inspired by Massumi, but also by Richard Grusin’s point that affect often intensifies media circulation (Grusin 2010), I argue that affects can be traced in (1) the representational

*content* of the posts and comments (e.g. if they directly express the bodily reactions of the receiver), (2) the *form* of the comments (e.g. if discourse is distorted, ruptured, or redundant), and (3) in *temporally simultaneous gatherings* around specific blog posts in relation to certain dramatic events (e.g. if a singular post attracts an instantaneous outburst of emotional comments). My approach is thus based on a kind of methodological ‘re-electricification’ of the material, in the sense that my goal is to be able to focus on the processes and energies that motivated and shaped the production of communicative objects (composites of letters, pictures, and sounds).

### 3.2. *Online crowding on 65 Red Roses*

EM sometimes seems to aim directly at creating microshocks by means of her body. One of the clearest examples of this is a video entry from 18 January 2008, which lasts three minutes and shows a close-up of EM having a severe coughing attack that is clearly extremely painful.<sup>3</sup> She uploads the video in a situation where she is getting better and alerts the receiver: ‘I warn you, if you don’t have CF, it’s not easy to see and is probably not work or child-safe’.<sup>4</sup> According to EM the video serves as an ‘honest glimpse’ of life with cystic fibrosis and consists of no narrative or speech – only EM continually coughing while her face is tormented with pain. The sound of the rattling lungs and the face-to-face view into EM’s eyes make the video almost unbearable to watch. As the citation shows, EM is well aware of the affective power of the video, which seems to aim to transmit the bodily state of EM’s pain to the body of the receiver via an affective response of co-suffering.

One of the comments made on the day of the video upload seems to confirm that an affective body-to-body transmission has taken place. The response states:

It was for the eyes for me too ... damn those eyes ... they hurt. The first few coughs I felt / in my chest. I felt your fear ... my fear ... wow. / Damn girl, we need to go out and change the world ... cure CF, and while we’re waiting make people donors ... / because no one should hurt like that. / HUGS! / :) and a smile because I can right now.<sup>5</sup>

Following Massumi, the comment can be understood as an emotional qualification, ‘re-registering’ an already felt affective sensation on the body (‘the first few coughs I felt / in my chest’). After this re-registering, the response then re-establishes a narrative logic (‘we need to go out and change the world ... cure CF, and while we’re waiting make people donors’). To me this is a clear example of the affective transmissions that EM’s blog enables, and the vitalizing, mobilizing, and discursively rupturing character of affect. The post is not an example of online crowding, however, as the video attracts a very limited amount of online attention and almost no evidence of users ‘clustering’ around it (in terms of e.g. a large amount of comments or views). Here we can identify an affective transmission between EM and the user writing the above-mentioned comment, but not online crowding.

An example where crowding is identifiable is the video ‘Farewell’ from 11 February 2001 showing EM with her father, mother, and sister, in a hospital bed.<sup>6</sup> In the video, EM explains that her ‘life is ending’ (00.00.57) as the doctors can no longer find effective treatment. Despite this dramatic information, EM is remarkably calm and remains focused on the positive dimensions of her situation and life – that she has loved and been loved more than you can expect – and on the support she has received during her illness (for instance by showing the so-called ‘wall of love’ in her hospital room, letters and pictures sent by her

blog readers and supporters). Her bodily weakness is not only reflected in the content of her words, accepting that she will soon die, but also in her rusty voice and in the way she sometimes leans towards her family to find rest. The affective power of her words is directly transmitted to the faces of her family (e.g. to her sister’s shaking chin after hearing the words ‘my life is ending’ (00.00.57)).

The video attracts what I would call an online crowd, one which is clearly taking part in a contagious process turning feelings and thoughts in a definite direction after their affective attunement by the video. The approximately 2,500 comments (and more than 170,000 views on YouTube) are to be seen as lasting imprints of online crowding behavior, where people dispersed all over the world momentarily ‘become one’ via entering the affective gathering that is trying to support EM. The affective attunement (Massumi 2009) of the receivers is expressed in various ways in the linguistic traces that the online crowd leaves behind. In the video, EM is very much focused on love and loving – a focus that is contagiously transmitted and imitated by most of the receivers, who also declare their love for EM. These are three examples that show the contagious character of her message of love:

Lovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovel  
Lovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovel  
Lovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovel  
Lovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovelovel  
(12 February 2010)

I love you.  
I love you.  
I love you I love you I love you  
(12 February 2010)

LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE  
LOVE LOVE LOVE  
(12 February 2010)

Following Massumi, the redundant passages are due to the fact that language functions as the dampener of affect, rather than the creator of narrative or structures. The redundancy expresses a certain bodily state of empathy or ‘hole in time’, and similarities in the specific type of redundancy deployed in the comments (‘love’) show how a certain behavior becomes contagious and spreads. This also underlines that crowds should not only be described as destructive or destabilizing formations, as is often the case in the crowd literature (Canetti 1960, 19). Following Le Bon: ‘Without a doubt criminal crowds exist, but virtuous and heroic crowds, and crowds of many other kinds, are also to be met with’ (Le Bon [1895] 2002, xiii).

If a crowd is a gathering that shares affect and behaves in a unified way, I would argue that the people ‘swarming’ around EM’s blog could be described as an online crowd. Approximately 2,000 of the comments were made between 10 and 15 February, which underlines the fact that the blog serves as a virtual gathering-point for a (slightly de-synchronized) crowd. In the online crowd related to the farewell video, social position such as economic, cultural, or social capital plays no role (Canetti 1960, 29), in the sense that all comments are equally important and have the same status and visual output. Established identities, in other words, seem to be cancelled out by a more bodily logic of collectively moving towards the same online site to experience and share affects of empathy and compassion. In that way, the online public momentarily becomes an online crowd by gathering around an event in time and space to express, according to the comments, unified affective

responses. Following Sara Ahmed, it is of course a possibility that it is only from the outside that the crowd looks unified, while the individual experiences of similar practices, or here a choice of words, might be rather different in terms of intensity and content (Ahmed 2010, 43). To solve this, Ahmed proposes that it is suggestion that spreads in the formation of crowds, rather than precisely the same affective quality across bodies. To identify an online crowd would then imply finding symptoms of a shared suggestive quality (here represented as 'love') among a group of media users, rather than verifying the existence of the exact identical affective state in everybody involved (Ahmed 2010, 39; see also Knudsen and Stage 2012a).

Actually, another type of crowd – the technologically augmented or mediated crowd – is also relevant in relation to the case, as EM's family created a combined online and offline memorial service to honor EM after her death. The commemorative event, 'Eva's Celebration of Love', was held on 30 April 2010 at Massey Theatre, New Westminster, Canada, and live-streamed on the blog, thus creating a complex assemblage of online and offline 'event publics'.<sup>7</sup> Before the live stream began, EM's father gave an introduction that helped to synchronize online and offline participation and conflated online and offline presence: 'We're at the theatre now and the live stream will commence at 3:30 pst. / we will see you there / Bill / Eva's dad'.<sup>8</sup> The memorial service was an open event; according to a Canadian newspaper it mobilized a couple of thousand participants.<sup>9</sup> The event lasted just over two hours and consisted of various tributes to EM, including personal speeches (by her mother, brother, sister, and her best friends), musical and theatrical performances (e.g. by her father and ex-boyfriend), and an audiovisual slideshow of private pictures of EM.

As both an offline and an online event, the memorial service established a quite multi-faceted type of crowd, combining a large physically present crowd with a presumably even larger online audience, all sharing the same highly affectively charged experience. Traditionally, both offline and online gatherings would be defined as publics, while following Baker the offline audience would be described as a possible mediated crowd. The argument of this article is that the online gathering united around the live stream – and synchronized by what, according to the comments, was an affective media experience in real time<sup>10</sup> – can also be described as an online crowd. Unlike the social formation created online in relation to the live-streamed service, an online crowd is most often only relatively synchronous, because different users access the event a bit out of sync, but still close enough to be part of a common movement towards the site. The memorial service intensifies this synchronicity, because of the live character of the online media experience.

Additionally, the memorial service is yet another example of a rather private experience being made into a public event, which also reaches *the* public sphere via mainstream news coverage, in relation to EM – something that makes her a more likely crowd facilitator, because of the affective potential of shared privacy and bodily authenticity. And the case surely participates in a larger social de-privatization of illness and death resulting from new media technologies (Walter et al. 2011). This of course raises a more principled question about the political and social transformations of public spheres in the wake of illness, death, and dying going public as triggers of potential crowding. Following Laurent Berlant, this trend could be described as taking part in the creation of an increasingly more intimate public sphere, where an excessive focus on victimhood leads to a 'privatization of citizenship' (Berlant 1997, 3) and the collapsing of 'the political and the personal into a world of public intimacy' (Berlant 1997, 1). This tendency is problematic, according to Berlant, as it could end up re-routing 'the critical energies of the emerging political sphere onto the sentimental spaces of an amorphous opinion culture' (Berlant 1997, 3). In other words, an

overload of public intimacy in relation to affective crowding could turn critical and structural engagement in political change into individual and momentary investments (Hess 2009).

I will nevertheless argue that the public affect created in relation to EM's blog is genuinely political, in the sense that an otherwise marginalized individual (the weak and sick person) and the crowd surrounding her succeed in pushing the boundary between the private and the public in order to make her life conditions into an object of public and political concern. According to Seyla Benhabib, it cannot really be claimed that certain issues are too private to become an issue in public contestation (Benhabib 1992). Women's movements have been insisting precisely that issues perceived as private (e.g. the relationship between man and woman in the intimate life of the household) are of public concern in need of general reflections (e.g. about gender inequality). In EM's case, the transgression of the private/public boundary likewise becomes a way of claiming that her personal suffering has general implications, which should be confronted and changed (e.g. by more people signing up as organ donors).

### 3.3. *Eva Markvoort as crowd leader*

Previous sections have focused on theorizing the existence of such a thing as an online crowd, and on identifying crowd behavior related to the blog. In the remaining section I want to move away from verifying *that* an online crowd is established on the blog to the question *why* EM is capable of motivating crowd behavior. The discussion will consider EM's role as a kind of crowd leader, and examine (1) personal prestige, (2) image-production, and (3) social discourses as three different explanations of EM's ability to 'electrify' an online and offline audience.

A crowd 'is incapable of ever doing without a master', according to Le Bon ([1895] 2002, 72). Rather than being a rational or manipulative person, the leader facilitates the formation of the crowd, as 'the intensity of their faith gives great power of suggestion to their words' (Le Bon [1895] 2002, 73). The aura of the leader is secured by his/her prestige, which is either *acquired* (via their name, fortune, or reputation) or *personal* (via personal characteristics) (Le Bon [1895] 2002, 81). Personal prestige is: 'possessed by a small number of persons whom it enables to exercise a veritably magnetic fascination on those around them, although they are socially their equals, and lack all ordinary means of domination' (Le Bon [1895] 2002, 83). Prestige motivates imitation as a form of social action: '[T]he thing possessing prestige is immediately imitated in consequence of contagion, and forces an entire generation to adopt certain modes of feeling and of giving expression to its thought' (Le Bon [1895] 2002, 88). EM would be an example of someone possessing personal prestige related to her individual characteristics, and therefore becoming an object of imitation (Tarde [1895] 1903).

As shown, the blog commentators as an act of sympathy imitate her way of writing and describing reality (the focus on love); but imitation also occurred through bodily transformations like those connected to the 'Reddy for a Cure' campaign, where people dyed their hair red in remembrance of Eva, who was herself red-haired, and to raise awareness of CF.<sup>11</sup> And when people describe EM they focus exactly on her ability to transmit energies and positive affect to her surroundings. The host of the 'Eva's Celebration of Love' event, CBC broadcaster Gloria Macarenko, described her first meeting with Eva as follows:

I was instantly impressed with Eva's spark; that spirit and that energy that you just instantly feel when you meet her [...] I will never forget the day in our CBC studios where she came bounding in with her fresh new lungs and she had this wild shock of red hair. You know she was the

epitome for me of ‘*joie de vivre*’. *It just shone through her*. (Eva’s Celebration of Love (part 1/3): 00.01.02)<sup>12</sup>

In other words, Eva served as a radiating figure, transmitting energy to and vitalizing her surroundings – an instance of personal prestige that seems also to have effect in an online context.

In his account of the differing notions of ‘the leader’ in the theories of Freud, Tarde, and Le Bon, Urs Stäheli opposes the logic of identification prevalent in Freud’s thinking – the logic that turns the leader into a strong, law-creating ideal who motivates submission – to that of Tarde and Le Bon. In these two latter theories the leader is an affective and imitative force: not necessarily in control, but rather a kind of medium: ‘Being a medium of self-organization, the figure of the strong and heroic leader is now translated into a magical and affective form of communication’ (Stäheli 2011, 77). In this way the crowd leader, with the connotations of control, manipulation, and dominance, is turned into a crowd facilitator, with the ability to move, intensify, and transmit the affective processes that motivate crowd formation. As an example, it was not EM’s intention to create crowds when she started blogging. Her very first post stresses that she only wanted to connect with other people with cystic fibrosis.<sup>13</sup> The goal was thus to create what Catherine Squires calls a ‘satellite public’ (Squires 2002, 463), where members (peer patients, in this case) could meet and share experiences, without ever reaching the national public sphere in general. Nevertheless, as EM over the years became the center of massive attention, she thus began to explore the transformative potential of her capacity to attract attention by participating in campaigns and using the blog to raise CF awareness. That EM became an online crowd facilitator because of her diffuse ability to motivate affective transmission and imitation shows that the blog quickly transgressed the identity-logic of the satellite public by enabling the creation of open and affective gatherings around the blogging body.

One reason for EM’s ability affectively to charge people surrounding her is her personal prestige. Another is that she creates a very easily understandable incarnation and image of a tragic, but for many nevertheless abstract disease: ‘A crowd thinks in images’, according to Le Bon ([1895] 2002, 15). Crowds are not impressed by statistics or rational abstractions, but by large events or images that clearly embody an event or problem:

The epidemic of influenza, which caused the death but a few years ago of five thousand persons in Paris alone, made very little impression on the popular imagination. The reason was that this veritable hecatomb was not embodied in any visible image. (Le Bon [1895] 2002, 37)

In other words the great suffering and loss of life in the epidemic were not epitomized into a singular image or body, and did not therefore have a crowding effect. It is not facts themselves that impress the crowd: ‘It is necessary that by their condensation [the facts], if I may thus express myself, they should produce a startling image which fills and besets the mind’ (Le Bon [1895] 2002, 37). Le Bon’s idea that crowds need condensing images and bodies in order to be mobilized can be confirmed by the many instances when international mobilization has occurred only after the establishment of a strong image or icon (e.g. the girl fleeing naked from napalm bombs during the Vietnam War or Neda Agda-Soltan in Iran). And this is also EM’s role: she embodies a larger and, for many, abstract problem – CF and the lack of organ donors – by producing startling images that haunt the mind.

A third explanation of EM’s crowd leader potential is her specific social position. In contemporary theories of affect there seems to be a rather clear distinction between (1) theories that conceptualize affect as belonging to a bodily sphere that is prior to, and often

disrupts or disturbs, established discursive patterns (e.g. Brennan 2004; Massumi 2002; Thrift 2008); and (2) theories that describe affects as channeled or even motivated by these discourses (e.g. Ahmed 2004; Butler 2009). The dilemma seems to be whether human beings are living a life as bodies to be touched or shocked, before (or underneath) the constraints of cultural narratives; or whether these bodies are always already sensing via these very same narratives (Knudsen and Stage 2012b).

This dilemma is relevant for understanding the affective potential of the blog. The affectedness that one can experience via perceiving – as in the coughing video described above – seems to occur in a spontaneous way. Seeing and being affected are conflated, and expressing this experience through language becomes a way of re-articulating a bodily state through established cultural categories ('I felt X'). This reading supports the idea of affect as somehow prior to language. Taking the other approach, one could ask if it is not also due to widespread cultural discourses that have taught us that true heroism is the ability to endure sickness and death with a positive spirit (see, for example, the sixteenth-century essays of Montaigne) that EM becomes such an affective transmitter. Is EM not re-enacting such cultural archetypes as the martyr who sacrifices him- or herself for a cause, or the endlessly good-hearted, self-effacing saint that we meet so often in religious writings, fairy tales, and film melodramas (e.g. Lars von Trier's *Goldenheart* trilogy)? Furthermore, EM's physical appearance makes her into a more likely object of affective investment and sympathy than for instance people who do not fit cultural understandings of beauty. EM is in other words positioned in the social field in such a way as to allow her to become a motivator of affect, an object of emphatic self-transgression and therefore a potential crowd leader.

This discursive line of thinking is not foreign to Le Bon, as he maintains that messages of great intensity and with the ability to be contagious and travel must somehow be in agreement with the ideas (and discourses) of their time:

At every period there exists a small number of individualities which react upon the remainder and are imitated by the unconscious mass. It is needful, however, that these individualities should not be in too pronounced disagreement with received ideas. Were they so, to imitate them would be too difficult and their influence would be nil. (Le Bon [1895] 2002, 79)

In that way the irrational dimension of the crowd is somehow intertwined with established discourses and beliefs, which, in EM's case, could be discourses on beauty, heroic sacrifice and endurance, and the tragedy of premature death.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this article I have argued that we may distinguish between three different types of crowds that prioritize the role of physical co-presence in different ways. These are the traditional *body-to-body crowd*, based on physical co-presence (e.g. Canetti and Tarde); the *mediated crowd*, which has a strong offline dimension but uses media technologies as tools or communication environments (e.g. Baker); and the *online crowd*, which 'becomes one' by sharing relatively synchronized affective processes in online settings. Furthermore, by investigating the formal traces of mutual affect in the blog responses (e.g. redundancy, re-registering affect) and the clustering of energy and online presence in relation to certain events or videos (e.g. the video 'Farewell'), I have shown that EM's blog seems to enable these collective affective processes. The online crowd is also supplemented by more complex assemblages of online and offline crowds at, for instance, the 'Eva's Celebration of Life' memorial service. Finally, I have argued that EM functions as a crowd

facilitator, motivating both linguistic and bodily imitation (such as the ‘Reddy for a Cure’ campaign), due to her personal prestige, her image-producing embodiment of an abstract disease and problem, and her both discursively challenging (in terms of language categorization) and discursively channeled (in terms of cultural patterns of knowledge) affect production. In theoretical terms, I have shown that Le Bon’s description of the crowd is productive when trying to apply insights from crowd psychology to a cultural situation characterized by ‘immediatized’ and embodied relations online.

## Notes

1. <http://65redroses.livejournal.com/140407.html>
2. <http://65redroses.livejournal.com/58813.html>
3. <http://65redroses.livejournal.com/42315.html#comments>
4. <http://65redroses.livejournal.com/42315.html#comments>
5. <http://65redroses.livejournal.com/42315.html#comments>
6. <http://65redroses.livejournal.com/2010/02/11/>
7. <http://65redroses.livejournal.com/144422.html>
8. <http://65redroses.livejournal.com/142459.html#comments>
9. <http://65redroses.livejournal.com/142894.html>
10. For user comments verifying the affective quality of the service: <http://65redroses.livejournal.com/142685.html> and <http://65redroses.livejournal.com/144422.html>
11. <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Reddy-For-a-Cure/108071815888330?sk=photos>
12. <http://65redroses.livejournal.com/144422.html>
13. <http://65redroses.livejournal.com/2006/07/15/>

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