The Digital Turn: New Directions in Media Anthropology

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With the advent of digital media technologies, internet-based devices and services, mobile computing as well as software applications and digital platforms new opportunities and challenges have come to the forefront in the anthropological study of media. For media anthropology and related fields, such as digital and visual anthropology, it is of particular interest how people engage with digital media and technologies; how digital devices and tools are integrated and embedded in everyday life; and how they are entangled with different social practices and cultural processes. The digital turn in media anthropology signals the growing importance of digital media technologies in contemporary sociocultural, political and economic processes. This panel suggested that the digital turn could be seen a paradigm shift in the anthropological study of media, and foregrounded three important streams of exploration that might indicate new directions in the anthropology of media.

More and more aspects of people's everyday life and their lived experiences are mediated by digital technologies. Playing, learning, dating, loving, migrating, dying, as well as friendship, kinship, politics, and news production and consumption, have been affected by the diffusion of digital technologies. We often hear far-reaching statements about these transformations, such as euphoric pronouncements about digital media as a radical enabler of grassroots democracy. Yet, new forms of exclusion enacted via digital circulation and online extreme speech need anthropological attention,

since meanings and contention around diverse practices of online actors in situated contexts are often ignored in the heated debate between freedom of speech and action against offensive speech. Similarly, social media have been blamed for promoting individualism, but in- depth ethnographic study of mediated personal relationships have shown a more complex situation. The constitution of gender, gendered relationships, and digital technology is, indeed, a crucial area of study in media anthropology. Similarly, different forms of digital visualities have accentuated the materialities that constitute everyday digital experiences and their varied cultural ramifications. Charting the three directions as gendering digital media, materialities of digital visualities and online extreme speech, this panel aims to push further the ethnographic knowledge into the role that digital media play in people's everyday life and broader sociopolitical transformations.

Digital visualities

Digital media technologies and mobile networked devices, such as smartphones, have become ubiquitous means of visual production, communication and representation (e.g. Gómez Cruz et al. 2017). Moreover, digital platforms and social media services, such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, are utilized to share and consume visual artefacts. Constituting and changing thus communicative practices and visual culture alike. Consequently, these transformation processes provide new challenges and possibilities for the anthropological and ethnographic study of the visual (e.g. Pink 2011). The increasing interconnection between "the digital" and "the visual" is obvious and has been studied in a variety of disciplines and research fields, for instance under the term "digital visuality". The interdisciplinary Nordic Network for Digital Visuality (2018), for example, defines digital visuality as "the production and consumption of digitally mediated expressions of selfhood and society through visual and audio-visual interfaces" focusing in particular on "the role of digital mediation and multimodality in contemporary social life, the ubiquity of visual recording devices, and the convergence between computer-based and mobile platforms for communication and interaction".

How has this phenomenon been studied? How has it been conceptualized, particularly in relation to other concepts that have been applied to study aspects of social life in the digital age? Which kind of conceptual approaches to the digital can contribute to the analysis of digital visuality? And what does this tell us about possible futures of the anthropology of digital visuality and digital visual culture?

Jari Kupiainen (2016), for instance, analyses visual production and reproduction as well as related digital transformation processes at a Pacific art festival. In doing so, he focuses on "issues of cultural identity construction and aspects of cultural agency" related to these digital visual practices "in the context of the overall modernization of the Solomon Islands society" (ibid.: 131). He concludes that new formations of "digital cultural identities" can best be understood by considering pre-digital forms of identity construction and visual representation (ibid.: 132). As his case shows, contemporary digital identity is not necessarily only about the individual and its digital self, but also about including visual representations of the collective, the community.

By utilizing social representation as theoretical framework, Matteo Stocchetti (2017: 38) investigates the communicative process that constitutes the "visual construction of meaning in the digital age". With visual examples of 9/11 and the Arab Spring, he demonstrates that digital visuality, as a (new) form of communication, is, at the same time, depending on and effecting the process of visual meaning making (ibid.). Digital visual communication, he argues, is therefore not inherently emancipative or empowering, but can also subvert openness or diversity. He emphasises that "[…] the meaning of images is constructed not independently from, but functionally connected to, the purposes, interests, values, histories, etc. of the most influential among the agents participating in the process" (ibid.: 54). And, moreover, that "[…] viewers never see images in a vacuum. The context of the uses of images contains situational clues that perform like interpretative keys for the decoding of the image and disambiguation" (ibid.).

Anthropologist Paula Uimonen (2013) highlights the importance of social media platforms, like Facebook, in the rise of digital visuality. As she exemplifies with the case of students' profile pictures at a Tanzanian art college, social relationships in Facebook – and of course in other social media platforms, such as Instagram or Snapchat, and smart phone applications like WhatsApp – have been "increasingly communicated through images" (ibid.: 122). People are developing, producing and changing their " digitally mediated identities" in close connection to and in "interaction with their online social relations" (ibid.). As Uimonen shows, conceptualisations of performativity and (social) aesthetics can be helpful to capture and investigate practices and processes related to the construction of digital identity and selfhood. In another study, Uimonen (2015) analyses the role of digital visuality in the mourning of Nelson Mandela. The memorial service for Mandela was not only a globally broadcasted media event, it also included different local events in South Africa and in many parts of the world. The Grand Parade in Cape Town, as Uimonen vividly describes, was of distinct ritualised and mediatised nature, including the use of

digital visual technologies to mediate " a sense of global communitas, thus momentarily overcoming historical frictions between the global north and the global south, while expanding the fame of Madiba" (ibid.: 1). Moreover, different forms of digital visuality, in particular "visual memory objects", contributed to the linking of the past and the present, the living and the dead (ibid.: 10). Digital visual objects that carry Mandela's words or images are thus adding to his fame, also in the future.

Philipp Budka investigated the social life and cultural history of the indigenous website environment MyKnet.org, which was developed and is still maintained by the First Nations internet organization KO-KNET in Northwestern Ontario, Canada (e.g. Budka 2015, 2018). MyKnet.org can be conceptualized as a field of practices that include and interconnect several digital practices and activities that are co-constitutive of this social environment. The production, displaying and sharing of images, website layouts, videos or artwork, for example, can be connected to "social rewards" that again are related to social status as well as symbolic and cultural capital in this social field (e.g. Bourdieu 1993, Warde 2005). In MyKnet.org, people were "extrinsically rewarded" for providing and sharing visual material by an increase of website traffic and hits and thus an increase of social status. By connecting the practice of sharing visual material with the practice of measuring and displaying hits, website producers, moreover, were also co-creating a digital "economy of recognition" (Stern 2008: 109). On the other hand, people were rewarded "intrinsically" for creating visual content for their websites by utilising this content for self-reflection, catharsis and self-documentation. Creating digital artwork, for instance, also allows for self-documenting personal growth and self-evolution, in respect to software skills as well as in respect to personal development.

Considering the material dimension of digital visuality can also contribute to the exploration of this phenomena and related emerging practices and processes, as two papers of the Media Anthropology Network panel at the recent EASA 2018 conference in Stockholm show (see also Miller & Horst 2012). Christoph Bareither elaborated the argument that digital media technologies afford practices based on the similarity between physical entities (objects, bodies, spaces or processes) and their visual computer-mediated representations. By using the example of Emojis, he showed how affordances of digital visualities unfold in practice. In doing so, he also critically reassess the widely used concept of affordances and its potential for the investigation of digital media in contrast to non-digital media. Nina Grønlykke Mollerup interrogated in her paper the importance of digital media technologies for local, non- or semi-professional photographers in Aleppo, Syria, and their

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ability to disseminate their work. She showed that in the everyday life of photographers in war, materialities of the digital is pushed to the fore because access to digital infrastructures is dependent on the shifting physical control of places, proximity to political borders and availability of devices. Thus, she also emphasized the co-constitutiveness of digital media for conflicts.

As these examples indicate, digital visuality has been studied in a variety of contexts and by focussing on different aspects of sociocultural life in the digital age: from cultural identity formation and the visual construction of meaning, to visual mediation, ritualisation and sociality, as well as the relationality and material dimension of digital visual practices. While anthropology's methodological and conceptual toolbox seems flexible enough to adapt to new sociocultural phenomena related to different forms of media technology practices and processes in our increasingly digital world (e.g. Pink et al. 2016), it is still necessary to critically and continuously reassess these methodological tools and theoretical conceptualizations in the light of contemporary digital transformations and entanglements.

Gender and digital media

Anthropological approaches are well equipped to shed light on the multiple ways in which the everyday usage of digital media can shape meanings, practices and relationships between genders in different social and cultural contexts. The study of media and gender in the humanities has largely revolved around issues of representation and text, whereas in science and technology studies the scholarship has been directed at understanding how "a system of gender relations becomes inscribed in a technology and, vice versa, how technology reinforced, embodies, or disrupts gender ideas and relationships" (Johnson 2010: 36). By contrast, the field of media and digital anthropology has not developed any in-depth reflection on the ways in which digital media and technologies are entangled with everyday gendered practices across the world. The three papers in the section aimed at filling this gap by fostering a discussion on the gendered dimension of the uses and consequences of digital media.

Elisabetta Costa's paper aimed at reflecting on the concept of women's agency to accommodate a proper recognition of the role that digital technologies play in people's ability to act in the context of cultural and social constraints. Her paper drew on the ethnographic data collected in a medium-sized town in southeast Turkey, where social media are used to satisfy wishes and desires that remain unfulfilled offline under the constraints of social norms ruling relationships between genders

and age groups. The findings show that young women "liberate" themselves from constraints that are experienced as oppressive, but do not challenge old institutions and hegemonic social norms. They created an heterotopic space where they can maintain anonymity or engage in private conversations out of the gaze of relatives and friends. So, what starts as an act against constraining and oppressive social norms ends up reproducing social structure. Costa integrated two different scholarly traditions, social anthropology of the Muslim Middle East, which has extensively elaborated on women's agency and overlooked the force of technology and material objects (among others see Kandiyoti 1988, 1996; Mahmood 2005; Marsden 2005; Mittermaier 2012), and digital anthropology, which have instead called the agency of subjects and objects into questions. Costa's suggestion is to view human agency as the appropriation of technology governed by desires, whose outcome is governed both by socially and materially constituted desires, and technologies' properties and affordances (Costa, 2018). One discussion revolved around the temporality of desires and their transformations. Did these desires exist before the introduction of social media and remained stable until its adoption? Or, did desires take shape through the use of the platform? Are social media both creating and fulfilling the desires for romances and gender-mixed friendships and relationships? Or are social media simply satisfying pre-existing desires?

Irene Arends' paper dealt with issues of positionality in doing ethnography on, in and through the digital. Her paper showed how digital anthropology asks for a constant re-thinking of methods, which in turn also needs the re-thinking of how researcher's characteristics can affect data collections and analysis. Her paper showed that researcher positionality is not static, but rather contextual and under change. Interactions between the ethnographer and the research participants evolved together with the different online contexts where the relationship took place. Reflexivity is always a situated act offline, online, and in WhatsApp groups.
Sirpa Tenhunen's paper contributed to the understanding of gender, mediation and social change by exploring mobile phone use in rural India. Her paper focused on the role of mobile phones in creating new contexts of speech.

Based on long-term fieldwork (2005-2013) in rural West Bengal, she provided a nuanced picture of the contested nature of kinship and gender. She argued that the role of new media in social change depends on how the emerging media-saturated contexts of social interaction and communication relate to pre-existing contexts and social changes. By enabling new contexts for speech, phones create possibilities to voice critical ideas, which can challenge the power structure in the household. Mobile phones contribute to the multiplicity of discourses by mediating speech contexts, the

meaning of which extends beyond dyadic communication.

Both kinship relationships and women's rights discourses have encouraged and motivated mobile phone use, which, in turn, has helped transform relationships. Women's increasing access to a mobile phone influences the relationships between men and women, but—more crucially—it influences the kinship code of conduct and kinship hierarchies within families and between kin groups. Phones have helped introduce changes in women's relationships with each other: phones facilitate young wives to challenge their mother-in-law's authority and build closer relationships with their mothers after marriage. Unlike women's lengthy visits to their natal homes, which are regarded as a threat to women's work contribution in her in-law's house, greater communication by phone with one's natal relatives does not undermine their position in their in-laws' house. A woman's ability to use the mobile phone does not only signify her agency but also the position she has been able to carve for herself in her family.

Online extreme speech

How critical are digital media for the growth of xenophobic, nationalistic expressions? What can media anthropology contribute towards understanding extreme speech online?

Peter Hervik and Sahana Udupa discussed their research on vitriolic exchange on social networking sites, suggesting that online extreme speech aimed at minoritized communities has played a critical role in the recent rise of right-wing politics in different parts of the world.

In his paper, "What's New? Turns, Re-turns in Digitalization of Danish Right-wing Online Vitriol Language", Hervik argued that although there is much talk within digital and media anthropology about shifts, transformations, turns, and accelerated change brought about by digital media technologies In digital and media anthropology, it does not adequately capture the perspective of persons who frequently write pieces for the traditional news as well as for social media platforms. His talk focused on far right-wing activists who use extreme speech targeting so-called "non-Western" refugees, migrants and asylum seekers. Through an analysis of ethnographic interviews with these activists whose writings and engagements extend beyond social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others, he argued that a neo-nationalism - neo-racism narrative is what leads people into activism and not the new technology per se. Furthermore, while anyone can access and check information anytime, the community building relies on blurred boundaries

between fact and fiction and little critical assessment of sources or opposing views. He argued that the community of the liked-minded relies more on ritual opposition than anything else.

In her paper, "Extreme speech: Online media cultures as a context for right-wing politics", Sahana Udupa emphasized the role of locally translated, yet globally circulating online cultures in enabling right-wing movements. Online extreme speech aimed at minoritized communities, she suggested, both reflects and provides the means for exclusionary nationalism and populist sentiments to become acceptable and enjoyable. While resentment against global migration and neoliberal consensus are recognized as key reasons for right-wing populism in the global North, beneficiaries of globalization and economic growth are some of the key actors of online nationalism in countries like India, and in China, bottom up nationalism has a complex relation with state control, but all the instances have depended on the use of online resources. It then raises the question on the mediation of global digital cultures beyond the diverse political-economic factors, and the need for critiquing new media as a sociotechnological dynamic inflected by the market that provides the resources, formats, and cultures of use to normalize online vitriol. Examining the format inducing effects of new media such as meme cultures, she argued that online media culture should be seen as a context in itself, and not merely as a channel for the discourse produced outside of it.

Why "extreme speech"?

The concept of "extreme speech" is an anthropological critique of the hate speech discourse. It departs from the legal-normative discourse of hate speech to foreground two perspectives. First, extreme speech emphasizes the need to contextualize online debate with an attention to user practices and particular histories of speech cultures. Second, related to context, is the ambiguity of online vitriol, which defies a simple antonymous conception of hate speech versus acceptable speech (Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017). Our intention is not to abandon but to complement existing concepts around hate speech, by highlighting aspects they have ignored or political effects they have triggered due to their use in regulatory action.

Extreme speech can be defined as speech acts that push the boundaries of acceptable speech along the twin axes of civility/incivility and truth/falsity. It is essentially transgressive. However, transgression is morally neutral. Therefore, as a concept, extreme speech is open-ended to acknowledge its potential both as a resource for agonistic politics (Mouffe, 2005) as well as dominance via exclusionary logics, reflecting the "ideological flexibility and moral neutrality of the rule of transgression" (Deem, 2018). Such a perspective will help to historicize online vitriol, rather

than seeing these actors as rabble-rousers and antagonists who have suddenly appeared on the scene.

Second intervention comes from the emphasis we place on media practice. "Extreme speech" analyzes online vitriol in situated contexts and meanings that people derive from their online use. This is perhaps the most basic media anthropological insight, but it is yet to see its full implication in debates on online hate speech. This implies a methodological and ethical stance that seeks to understand people who participate in online abusive exchange. In other words, it avoids a tendency where critique precedes knowledge, or a moral-evaluative framework predetermines what to expect. Taking a step back to understand online actors of vitriol is especially important in qualifying dominant legal-normative definitions and the discourse of securitization around terrorism and political extremism. In these definitions, hate speech is approached primarily as a "discourse of pathology" based on the need to diagnose, preempt and mitigate its negative effects. With extreme speech, we argue that the production, circulation and consumption of online vitriol should be approached as much as a cultural practice and social phenomenon as it is a legal or regulatory concept. This comes with the obvious need to situate online extreme speech within broader sociopolitical contexts.

While extreme speech can be progressive and destructive in relation to the situation it is implicated in, current constellation of factors point to the prominence of exclusionary extreme speech, twice empowered with an enabling digital culture of "cultivated rage" (Mazzarella, 2018) and translocal convergences of user cultures on digital networks. We base this argument on preliminary observations from a comparative practice approach to online extreme speech (Udupa & Pohjonen, forthcoming).

Udupa suggested that one key aspect of translocal digital networks is the format inducing effect of social media and its implication for right wing politics. This means certain formats and resources shared on online media have turned out to be especially suitable for exclusionary extreme speech. Conceptually this opens up the question on how media material configurations prefigure media action in situated contexts of practice.

Online extreme speech of right wing politics is increasingly normalized and rendered enjoyable by formats of humor and the general sanctioned Internet culture of "lulz". Here, humor coached exclusionary discourse relies on formats that provide a formulaic shared language. Shared formats

work with local cultural repertoire in ways to energize social approval for various forms of exclusionary extreme speech, including those aimed against immigrants, Muslims and the so-called "pseudo-liberals" or the politically correct. A good case for the format induced effects is the Internet meme culture: the irreverent, funny, creative and sometimes pungently provocative mashups.

Anthropologist Nell Haynes (2018) researching anti-immigrant discourses in Chile has noticed the effect in the "formulaic language" of memes which allow for the expression of that which may not be voiced under other circumstances. The genre of text and its digitality are important contributing factors. Peter Hervik has traced the role of digital humor in "ritual opposition" among far right activists in Denmark. Similarly in India, where Udupa has been doing fieldwork among Hindu nationalist volunteers, meme cultures have been a key vehicle for right-wing ideologies. Although diverse contestations to Hindu nationalism have also occurred through Internet memes and memes have continuously ridiculed the ideological project, it is possible to think of them as establishing a quotidian infrastructure for right wing ideologies where squabbling over ideological positions through witty, humorous, tongue-in-cheek or plainly abusive online exchange produces repetitive summaries of the right-wing ideology. In India, it is through the very bickering on social media – the little differences with an operative logic – that right wing positions have begun to settle as a familiar ideological vision for a new generation of supporters. Format inducing effects of Internet media are further bolstered by globally shared resources such as meme generator, 4Chan and online catalogues for abusive terms (Udupa, 2017). Formats and resources of Internet media as formulaic, familiar bickering have thus become crucial in detoxicating exclusionary extreme speech.

The discussion above has developed general arguments from a comparative practice framework, working from below, as opposed to affordances-based context free analysis. This approach would be a key contribution of media anthropology to wider debates on online extreme speech.

Finally, anthropology of online extreme speech raises the concern around information security and physical safety of researchers. If on-the-ground fieldwork is a distinctive, and even an indispensable, feature of anthropology, what techniques are needed to ensure anthropologists navigating volatile spaces of vitriol are not targeted online and offline? As more anthropologists get active in researching online extreme speech, and remain committed to carrying their methodological toolkit onto a turbulent terrain, techniques of protecting data and digital traces become a necessity, alongside a refined set of ethics to gain the trust of right-wing interlocutors.

Key points raised in the discussion in Stockholm and general discussion

- Is there a digital turn? Should it be seen as the reduction to bits consisting of 0s and 1s (Miller & Horst 2012)? Should it be understood in terms of different phases of mediation? Should it be seen as a different approach?
- Is visual the language of the digital age?
- Is "offline", on-the-ground fieldwork the defining feature of media anthropology? Can media anthropology in the digital age be done without on-the-ground fieldwork? What are our strengths as anthropologists in carrying out fieldwork when we are not able to be in the same places as the people we are doing fieldwork with? What new challenges arise when anthropologists begin to study people whom they do not "necessarily like" or strongly disagree with, for instance, far right actors?
- What are the limitations of practice theory in understanding digitally-mediated worlds?

These and more questions shall be discussed in the e-seminar which kicks-off with comments by Christoph Bareither (Humboldt University of Berlin), Anna Cristina Pertierra (Western Sydney University) and Paula Uimonen (Stockholm University). We thank them very much for supporting this e-seminar!

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