Media Anthropology Network
European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)
E-Seminar Series

https://easaonline.org/networks/media/eseminars

E-Seminar 70
On digital avoidance:
Updating a classic social practice in an era of (over)sharing.
Ethnographic notes from Kinshasa

by
Katrien Pype
KU Leuven University

Discussants
Shola Adenekan (Ghent University) & Sahana Udupa (LMU Munich)

4 October – 18 October 2022

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup (ninagmollerup@gmail.com)　　　　**4 October 2022**

Dear all,

I would like to announce the opening of our 70th e-seminar: "On digital avoidance: updating a classic social practice in an era of (over)sharing. Ethnographic notes from Kinshasa" by Katrien Pype (KU Leuven University).

The e-seminar will run from today and until October 18.

First, our discussants, Shola Adenekan (Ghent University) and Sahana Udupa (LMU Munich) will post their comments. Subsequently, Katrien will post her reply after which I will open the seminar for all to contribute.

To post a comment to the e-seminar, write directly to medianthro@lists.easaonline.org. You need to be subscribed to the list from the email you are writing from.

If you have not yet had the chance to read the working paper, it can be downloaded here: https://easaonline.org/networks/media/eseminars.

I'm looking forward to an inspiring e-seminar.

Cheers,

Nina

Dear Nina and mediaanthro members,

Thank you for the opportunity to engage with Katrien Pype's new paper, "On digital avoidance: updating a classic social practice in an era of (over)sharing. Ethnographic notes from Kinshasa".

In this paper, Katrien presents fascinating ethnographic insights into "metatalk" about online sharing in the DRC, and the myriad moral evaluations and social distances they signal in a changing urban context. As she states succinctly, the paper sets out to "study the social possibilities of online shareability". The broader theoretical interest is to situate such practices in the study of social media and kinship, and, in a novel formulation, to place them in conversation with urban change and (dis)order. For Katrien, urban precarity upturns, or at the least, meddles with notions of distance tied to kinship realms and provokes new forms of sharing. It also inspires and necessitates modes of living that "thrive outside the kinship realms". The paper probes how such shifting urban/kinship realms shape what is shared online and the ways such sharing is appraised—whether it is admonished or applauded.

A compelling argument that Katrien advances is that "context-collapse"—the widely debated phenomenon in relation to social media—is very relevant in and as conflict situations in urban DRC. Context collapse can itself be a conflict, as she demonstrates through several examples in the paper. Therefore, discourses and practices that surround the "instantiations of context collapse" should be understood by situating them within a "longue durée of conflict avoidance practices" beyond the digital interactional worlds. This is a sharp conceptual move that takes the discussion beyond provincializing or universalizing "context-collapse" as an observed phenomenon and explanatory tool. When seen as a conflict, context-collapse opens up questions around practices of avoidance in the digital realms and outside—practices that shape what can be shared, by whom and with whom. Such evaluative stances can have profound implications for "rituals of repair" that communities enact, thereby drawing the boundaries around who should be protected from overexposure and how one can avoid the social risks of oversharing. Katrien ties together several forms of distance and repair to draw links between context collapse as an aspect of the urban everyday and its spillages in the digital realm.

Importantly, this analysis contributes to a broader field of kinship and online practices. As Katrien points out, the paper extends "the notion of "digital kinship" to indicate the performance of kin work, including responsibilities, obligations, privileges, and entitlements, in and through the digital domain". With a focus on online sharing, she highlights the significance of "avoidance rules" as they travel from kin relations into the digital worlds, and how they transform both the realms in the process. I have found kin-based obligatory ties to be highly significant in understanding why people share disinformation on WhatsApp, and I am excited to learn how this paper illuminates the flip side—parameters for not sharing or drawing limits to sharing through a sociality of avoidance.

While all these analytical strands—kinship, urban change, digital actions—are no doubt illuminating, it might also help to bring back the conflict analytics introduced at the start of the paper to tease out the stakes of each of them. For instance, while the readers are prompted to take note of urban spatialities and precarity as having radical effects upon notions of distance and obligation, she also holds the digital worlds responsible: "The digital world adds a new possibility of social promiscuity and renders the navigation of the established rules and

restrictions within specific sets of relationships even more challenging" (p. 17). In this line, it would be instructive to learn more about the insightful parallels she draws between urban disorder and disorderly speech. As a researcher of online vitriol and extreme speech, I find the links between social avoidance practices and orderly speech especially interesting. While the paper provocatively introduces this intersection, it awaits more elaboration. How can context collapse fuel insult exchange beyond the social circles where it is socially approved? How does it compare with 'disinhibition effects' discussed in hate speech and disinformation scholarship? How do careful calibrations of social distance crumble in and through digital speech acts?

Two final questions might be worth posing:

In Pype's analysis, urban disorder emerges in contrast to presumed orderliness in the rural areas (for eg., rural sociality in Yaka villages referenced on p. 17). To what extent do her interlocutors experience and articulate this contrast, especially those who have always lived in the city?

Katrien might also consider whether online debates about the remits of sharing and the very invocation of the term "paparazzi" to frame this tension, indicate that legacy media logics of 'mainstream and extreme' are penetrating the seemingly peer driven digital media environments. Alongside kin-based moralities and urban phenomena, are there moralities and practices linked to media production? Do users imagine themselves to be media producers in these situations? Do they seek to impose moral codes of media production upon fellow users and to themselves? What are the contours of media ethical debates in the DRC that might throw more light on this?

Thanks once again to Katrien for sharing a rich paper, and I look forward to a stimulating discussion at the e-seminar.

Sahana

Katrien Pype (katrien.pype@kuleuven.be)   **5 October 2022**

Dear Sahana,

Thank you very much for the attention you've given to the working paper. As you can see, this is a first analysis of online and non-digital material, and indeed, more work needs to be done to bring the various thematic lines together.

Let me address the issues you raised briefly:

1. I like your usage of "orderly speech", and think that in a next version of this paper, I will have to delineate the difference between "disorderly speech" and "insults" (the latter being one type of the former). I also like "digital speech acts". The video with which I open this paper is not a classic insult, meaning a discursive formulation that attacks the dignity of the addressee. Nevertheless, the sheer act of posting that video (and remediating it) can be perceived as an attack on Piroger's reputation. We thus can talk about "disorderly digital speech acts", to include these videos, photos, memes, etc. that can diminish a person's social esteem.

The significance of "disorderly digital speech acts" may be best illustrated with a digital controversy that animated many Digital Kinois early 2022, when a Pentecostal Pastor, living

in Kinshasa, divorced from his wife, living in the US. The ex-wife posted various videos in which she explained her experience of the marriage; she published screen shots of text messages, scans of official documents, and other intimate content on her social media accounts. While these posts did not formally meet the criteria of an insult, many followers and fans of the pastor did interpret her online behavior as insulting, as attacking the reputation of her husband. Here, exposure (a specific form of context collapse) was perceived as abuse. In turn, it led to vitriol from the pastor's followers and fans, addressed to the ex-wife. The pastor himself published various videos, and posted photographs of official documents, trying to rectify some statements his ex-wife had made about him. And so did she. A digital soap opera thus unfolded over the span of various weeks. (The pastor's fans applauded him for behaving appropriately online, for not engaging in similar abuse. The "right" way to respond to insults is not responding at all, acting as if one does not feel addressed by the insult.)

2. Your question "How can context collapse fuel insult exchange beyond the social circles where it is socially approved?" is most fascinating. The working paper focuses on the friendship world, which I have described as a safe social space for those who engage in online abuse. Your question pushes me to think beyond that realm. I observed that insults published on public social media platforms in "Digital Kinshasa" are very often directed to leading figures in Kinois society, and to those defending or attacking these. I think much of this has to do with the culture of bigmanity, where the performance of loyalty of (aspiring) clients towards their patrons/heroes/leaders is expected and admired. In such context, social proximity leads to (online) defamation. This is most manifest in the online insults oriented to political leaders. A few years ago, I published a chapter on resistance within the Congolese diaspora addressed to then president Joseph Kabila, and expressed in the form of insults, which in turn led to abuse from online followers directed to those belittling and defaming the president online (Pype 2020). The insults addressed to the pastor's ex-wife (see above) needs to be interpreted similarly. Pastors are also leading figures; followers are in a dependency relationship to their pastor that bears many similarities with that between a client and a patron.

This question leads again to the issue of proximity and distance. One can easily share a digital post in which more a distant other is attacked and insulted; however, people will be more careful when an intimate other (such as one's patron, a father, or an uncle) may become the victim of a video going viral, and may attack their reputation. In such instances, one would want to "cut the network" (Strathern 1996), by not "sharing" potentially contentious content.

3. Your question of the disinhibition effects is a difficult one. I am worried that it goes more into the direction of psychology: "when do people feel that they can behave in toxic behavior online?".

Scholars argue that the assumed anonymity of the digital world enhances a feeling of being allowed to engage in online toxic behavior. However, the comments posters wrote after the video with Piroger had been published online, as well as the request to me to speak with adult men in the diaspora about their online exchanges, point to the fact that in the mind of many (Digital) Kinois there is no such thing as online anonymity, even if people seem to act as if they are anonymous online.

Nevertheless, there is a dimension of social class in the sociality of insults, which I have not addressed in the analysis. Several of my interlocutors in Kinshasa argued that people who have received a good education, do not engage in insults (neither online nor in the nondigital world). Although in practice this is not true, yet, there is a class-related ideology about insults – whether these are exchanged online or in the non-digital world. Exchanging vitriol then is not so much

considered to be a reflection of one's morality or immorality, rather it is an expression of one's social standing.

4. You ask: to what extent do her interlocutors experience and articulate this contrast between rural and urban sociality, especially those who have always lived in the city?

This contrast is something that I point out. I feel it is significant to situate the speech genres and ideologies of appropriate speech not only within interlocutors' understandings of the present and the past, but I also want to make connections (or contrasts) with the larger Congo library.

Your question encourages me to look into the representation of "village people" and how Digital Kinois interpret their online behavior!

5. Finally, you ask whether non-digital media logics and media ethical debates in the DRC also shed light on how people behave online and assess the moral contours of other social media users.

I totally agree that a wider lens on media ethics in Kinois society is relevant here. There is certainly a longer history of vitriol in mass media without which these digital insults cannot be understood. Many radio and TV shows in Kinshasa are participatory, listeners/viewers can call in. There is a history in Kinois mass media of anonymous spectators/listeners insulting the host or a guest in a radio or tv show. Some media channels have begun to broadcast the shows "indifféré" ("indirect"), meaning that there is a slight gap of a few minutes between the call and the broadcast, so that they can intervene, and cut the signal as soon as the caller abuses. Such callers take advantage of the anonymity of the phone call, they may give a fake name, and lie about the place from which they are calling.

Kinois are also very familiar with various instantiations of political censorship, on television, radio, in the written press, and also in digital media. Defamation of political leaders is punishable, and in previous decades, the state has taken on journalists and citizens who had attacked the dignity of members of the political elite have been intimidated, or imprisoned. The state has also carried this censorship politics on to the digital world. Citizens have been arrested and put in prison for having online content in their media library of their smartphone that was attacking the former president.

Obviously, the digital space is a particular media environment. Ordinary citizens can upload content, and remediate it. They thus become responsible media actors in their own right. My interpretation of the various debates and concerns that described in this working paper, is that these are very much instantiations of figuring out idioms of practice (as Gershon described in her research among her students' media practices). The (digital) speech acts performed by people commenting on the moderators of public Facebook pages, or when a friend reminds another friend of possible family members as lurkers, are moments in which the contours of appropriate and inappropriate behavior are publicly debated.

Yet, the question of media ethics is far more complex here because, as mentioned in the working paper, many of my interlocutors understand social media as a space of "bêtises", of foolish interactions, of play. With such a social media ideology, it becomes difficult to consider digitally expressed insults as abuse. When some people do not take social media exchanges seriously, then there is much more license for what is otherwise deemed inappropriate behavior.

Thank you again, Sahana, for these insights and questions. They have been most insightful, and push me to think from other angles about this topic!

Mentioned references:

Gershon, I. (2010). The Breakup 2.0: Disconnecting over New Media. Cornell University Press.

Pype, K. (2020). "Stones thrown online. The Politics of Insults, Distance and Impunity in Congolese Polémique". In: P. Budka, B. Bräuchler (Eds.), Theorising Media and Conflict, Chapt. 11, (237-254). (Anthropology of Media, 8). Oxford / New York: Berghahn Books.

Strathern, M. (1996). "Cutting the Network", Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 2: 517–535.

All the best,

Katrien

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup (ninagmollerup@gmail.com)   **7 October 2022**

Dear all,

Due to technical challenges, I am posting Shola's comments below.

After Katrien has responded, I will open the seminar to all.

Cheers,

Nina

Comments from **Shola Adenekan***:*

The author has written an important essay that dissects the concept of social media sharing in contemporary Kinshasa. It is well-written and the points being made are easy to follow.

The paper starts with an interesting story that directs the reader to the concept of "oversharing". One initially gets the feeling that this paper will be about inappropriate uses of contents foregrounded in an analysis of a video clip of a sleeping man. Such inappropriateness or misuse of digital contents should have tether us to questions surrounding digital consent.

Instead, the paper focuses on controversial sharing of contents on social media platforms and the relationships (kinship) that foreground digital sharing.

The paper provides robust insight into Kinshasa digitalscape. One hears the voice of a scholar attuned to the city's digital and offline life. But despite the detailed analysis, I think a more robust context needs to be set with the paper clearly stating its key objectives from its onset. This will we help the reader to follow the web of interesting human stories that the writer is woven together in this article. While the story the paper foregrounds its arguments on, is

engaging and amusing, I will suggest opening with a story of sharing between digital kin; a bamasta kinship sharing, for example.

The paper should also put its focus into context vis-à-vis scholarly works that have been done on social media in Kinshasa or central Africa or Africa; the current gap in scholarly knowledge and why this paper is important. In her analysis of Kinshasa's physical and online spaces, the author implicitly touches on class without actually using the word or addressing the way in which class divide intersects with digital sharing. Perhaps, the author may want to touch on this as she further develops this paper.

On page 1, the paper touches on the phrase "Papa". In addition to the two germane interpretations that the scholar provides, may I suggest that the word can also be a term of ridicule - that may mean a man is old, archaic and feeble. In that context, the actual age is irrelevant.

On page 2, the author writes "The comments on the exposure of Piroger in a bar, draw attention to the risk of oversharing." I think it is worth rephrasing, or thinking through again her idea of "oversharing". Digital oversharing may mean that a content or post has been shared too much or that too much information has been shared. The 'oversharer' is normally the owner or the person posting the content, or the original source of the content. Oversharing is done with the willfulness and consent of the object/subject of the digital content. The fact that the author opens with an analysis of oversharing denotes its centrality of this concept to this paper. The notion of oversharing needs to be clearly defined and showed how it connects to the various mechanisms of sharing that the author analyzes in this paper. The author may want to clearly define oversharing on page 2, if she wants to still use the term.

The author cleverly analyzed how kinship is developed and how it is sustained in the digital space versus the offline space. It is worth noting that kinship online is different from kinship in the offline space. The two may overlap in other circumstances, of course, but there can also be a demarcation.

The author said: "Even though the urban demographics have swallowed that in-between space in the meantime, in the mindset of many, Kinshasa's city center remains a space of "white people". (14). The ascribing of whiteness to the city center of the capital city constitutes a ground for research, or in in this instance some explanation. The symbolism of this space in the twenty-first century as a site where modernity (digital and offline) is performed deserves a statement of two. Does the space still abound with Europeans? Or is it just Europeanised in terms of its physical structures and carry-overs from the colonial era?

"Social media are said to facilitate different kinds of "bêtises" along genders. Many Kinois hold that girls and women go online to cheat on their partner or husband." (16). Does this anxiety over female sexuality cut across gender or is it only male anxiety? Some sort of context will help in this regard.

Overall, the scholar has produced yet again an excellent piece of work that shows sensitivity to her subject. The article provides new knowledge that shows the complexity of Kinshasa's digital and offline space.

Dear Shola, dear all,

Thank you, Shola, for having read and having shared your comments on my working paper. I enjoyed your feedback, to which I try to react below. There may even be some opportunities for comparison with the digital sphere in Nigeria, which we could discuss in a later phase of this e-seminar.

Please allow me here to comment and freewheel on your questions and observations:

1. You mention that the paper could go into the direction of "digital consent". This question continues Sahana's question about media ethics. Digital consent is indeed another fascinating theme to look into. I am totally open to change the opening scene of the paper, as it seems to have given you other expectations.

"Digital consent" obviously leads us into the domain of ethics, of discussions about the right to expose others, to use other's images online. This most probably will become a major field of inquiry, as the legal domains in many societies - in the Global North, East, and South - are faced with new dilemmas, and new questions.

Furthermore, as scholars, we also need to reflect about "digital consent" provided by our interlocutors. "Digital consent" is most probably different from the classic forms of consent anthropologists are familiar with.

2. You mention that the issue of class is implicitly present in my paper. I totally agree. Class is indeed a rubric through which some of the material needs to be read, as I mentioned in my answer formulated to Sahana earlier.

3. You write that "On page 1, the paper touches on the phrase "Papa". In addition to the two germane interpretations that the scholar provides, may I suggest that the word can also be a term of ridicule - that may mean a man is old, archaic and feeble. In that context, the actual age is irrelevant."

I hear you, and I understand why you would think in this way, although I am not sure that the use in the described context would be one of ridicule. Why would these same posters then admonish those who manage the Facebook accounts – unless the admonishment is ironic as well?

4. Your next comment is on my usage of the concept of "oversharing". Thanks for pointing out that my use of it may not have been clear. The e-seminar is a great platform to spell out what in the working paper has been obscured. Indeed, what I want to show, is that "oversharing" is not only to be understood in the most conventional manner, i.e., of an interlocutor/speaker/poster who gives "too much information" about themselves; but rather, here, I am taking a broader lens. I want to throw a line to the "sharing culture" of the Web2.0. I actually try to bring these two layers of meaning together. By combining these, we can situate the studied social media practices better among larger, also non-digital societal interactions, and relate these to obligations, and to networking strategies, but also to moralities, and to economies. Ultimately, the discussions about "oversharing" in the double sense of the word" yield fascinating insights in politics of belonging (and its opposite, of exclusion).

5. You ask about ascribing whiteness to the city centre of the capital city. You wonder: "Does the space still abound with Europeans? Or is it just Europeanised in terms of its physical structures and carry-overs from the colonial era?"

Here my answer is "both". On the one hand, the "city center" remains the place where people from Europe, and elsewhere work and reside.

In popular parlance, some people continue to describe the city center as "mboka mundele", the city of the white men. This also includes a metaphorical reference to the global economy and the state institutions as well as the international (non-)governmental organizations who not only have their headquarters and other offices in that region, but also organize their main activities there.

6. Finally, you ask whether the anxiety over social media as a space where female sexuality may be abused, cuts across gender, or whether it is only a male anxiety?

It is difficult to generalize, of course, but my answer here is that most if not all of my female interlocutors (and of various ages), have expressed worries about girls exposing themselves online. Both men and women have expressed these concerns to me.

There have been various instances in the history of "Digital Kinshasa" in which images of nude bodies of men have been circulating online, though the reactions towards these images were different than reactions on similar images of women's bodies. It is striking how – despite the strong concern about dignity and nudity (across genders) in general, the metatalk about social media emphasizes the risk of exposing female bodies.

It is important to note that one can also observe a transformation in the recent months, or maybe in the last year to year and a half: when a new scandal emerges, amidst the vitriol and excitement, one can read messages advising others not to watch these images (of men or of women) nor to circulate these. I had never read such comments let's say four years ago. The change has - in my opinion - nothing to do with the covid period. This is only a coincidence. Rather, in my understanding, there is a growing awareness among Digital Kinois of the digital harm (see also Sahana's work) that can be done on others by digital shaming and exposing intimate content.

Such observation reminds us on that digital cultures are not static either, and that media moralities transform.

Thank you very much for these questions, Shola!

I'm looking forward to continuing the conversation,

Katrien

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup (ninagmollerup@gmail.com)   **7 October 2022**

Thanks to Shola and Sahana for their comments and to Katrien for her replies.

The e-seminar is now open to all. To participate, simply send your comment to medianthro@lists.easaonline.org.

I'm looking forward to the discussion.

Cheers,

Nina

Daniel Miller (d.miller@ucl.ac.uk)   **10 October 2022**

Most studies of media and the digital imply a common question. What else has changed as a result of these innovations? The problem that comes with that question is it will always implicate one direction of causation from the innovation to the resultant impact. What makes the anthropological contribution particularly significant is that we tend to acknowledge and counter that tendency. Anthropologists can do this more effectively than anyone else since other disciplines tend to know most about the technological changes and therefore will tend to impute these as cause, while we are more fully embedded in all those other changes that were constantly occurring in the wider social context.

Pype's paper is a impressive example of this same point. With a focus on forms of avoidance in the use of new media it is the depth of her general ethnographic knowledge that allows her again and again to see these strategies as adaptations of long-standing elements within local kinship. As a consummate anthropologist she is aware of the constant evolving forms of kinship and friendship and how these impact upon the digital as much as the other way around. For example, in the interplay between friendship and kinship how much is dependent upon fundamental issues of trust. Where can trust be mutual and symmetrical or when do accusations around trust become a relationship of power and surveillance as gender asymmetries?

To see the importance of this it helps to have a comparative perspective. I recently wrote a paper in Hau [*ed.: see reference below*] showing how changes in media, in this case the development of Facebook around the idiom of friendship reflected on longer term changes in the relationship between friendship and kinship. Reading Pype's paper I came to appreciate a huge difference between my arguments and the situation amongst the Kinois. What accounts for the difference is most likely that the Kinois have a huge range and depth of kinship and friendship categories from which to choose. As a result, they are able to develop this subtle form of mutual accommodation between social categories as idioms and the impact they have on establishing new normativity in online relations. By comparison, the examples I was addressing in relation to Facebook are based on only a few relatively crude categories of friendship and kinship including fictive friendship and fictive kinship. There is no possibility of writing such a rich paper about the mutual adaptions between digital changes and English kinship, because the nature of the societies is so different. As my paper shows, kinship is constantly weakening as a primary idiom in my own society.

Reading Pype I now can see that it may be that precisely because we have lost these resources and live within a fairly denuded field of kinship nomenclature that if anything the rise of digital

sociality is enriching the range of what I have called scalable sociality. The English use the variety of platforms to construct a spectrum of different kinds of relationship that enrich rather than diminish the range available for considering their relationships. By contrast, Pype reveals the still highly embedded nature of kinship and relationship categories amongst the Kinois and how they adapt they for integrating digital relationships in a more complementary fashion.

The original debate about context collapse centred on US kids finding their posts were being read by their mothers. But transferred to Kinshasa we can see this paper as about the degree to which a society is able to protect the richness of their cultural values expressed as the diverse forms of kinship and friendship. While the English may now use a variety of platforms for scalable sociality Pype shows how the Kinois actually elaborate a whole new spectrum of relevant nomenclature to describe the various forms of friendship and kinship that have become elaborated by the degree to which people share or don't share online. In short rather than allowing context collapse to diminish cultural elaboration they simply elaborate further. They can then use these to develop normative consensus around what should not be shared. That way social promiscuity does not endanger the marriage of digital and non-digital relationships! At least that was how I read it?

References:

Miller, D. (2017). "The Ideology of Friendship in the era of

Facebook". Hau 7 (1) 377-395

Daniel Miller

John Postill (jrpostill@gmail.com)   **10 October 2022**

I agree with Danny Miller's remarks about the richness of this paper, steeped as it is in many years of fieldwork in Kinshasa.

I've a question about the perceived norms and risks of online content, Katrien. My question is: perceived by whom?

You write (p.18) that 'many' Kinois are concerned about women's images and men's speech. For instance, men's digital speech 'is considered risky because "[it] inverts or perverts the norms of seniority and is a threat to community life" (Devisch 1998: 143). Again, considered risky by whom?

I'm wondering whether this is a conservative, or traditionalist, viewpoint not shared by everyone, and certainly not adhered to by many Kinois at all times; a normative ideal.

Given that you highlight Gluckmanian conflict in relation to context collapse, how much viewpoint diversity and/or conflict is there when it comes to these lofty ideals? Are those young women who share seductive pictures of themselves, for example, worried that they might be 'a threat to community life'? Are the men who make fun of the drunk Papa worried about the harm

they're causing? I imagine there are significant gendered, age, class, and idiosyncratic differences and definitional conflicts over what counts as appropriate behaviour online?

Also, a quick suggestion. It might be an idea, in my view, to add a brief historical section about the making of "Digital Kinshasa", not merely as background but also because I think it would strengthen the paper's sociocultural continuity + change argument.

John

Katrien Pype (katrien.pype@kuleuven.be) **11 October 2022**

Dear Danny,

Thanks for this comment. It allows us to make a deeper comparison between the usage of kinship terms in English society and in Kinshasa. I think you are touching at one of the hearts of anthropological inquiry: the comparison shows that kinship is organized differently in different societies. This was already documented by the earliest generations of anthropologists, but the comparison shows that this does not change at all with globalization nor with digitalization.

As I write in another article (Pype 2016), in Kinshasa, people commonly use fictive kinship terms to include others, and maybe to open venues to claim connections (intimacy) and maybe to make demands in the (near) future. Concepts of "mama", "papa", and "noko" are commonly used as terms of politeness. Others can call a friend "brother", or "brother-in-law" (semeki), or "older brother" (yaya), even though there is no (classificatory) kin relationship going on. We should not consider these as banal transfers of the private, kinship realm to the realm of strangers, rather, it says something important about the value of kinship relations in Kinois society.

These observations situate your argument of your HAU-article firmly within English (British; other?) society. There, the "friendship" idiom disrupts the classic, western kinship relationships (mothers become friends). This, as you wrote, was not new or is not invented by social media; rather, you show how the distance between the adjacent relationships has diminished, leading to parents and their children preferring to get into a horizontal, friendship-like relationship, and labeling their relationship as such as well.

Thanks for the feedback!

Katrien

Dear John,

Thank you for your reflections on my working paper.

I think that your questions are about the generalizing discourse in my paper; and about the difference between discourse and practice.

The difference between discourse/ideology and practice is important to spell out. Girls who send nude pictures to their lovers, they do so by using private channels; they do not use public digital media. They are very much aware of the fact that their reputation, and that of their relatives, can be at jeopardy when such an image begins to circulate. Very quickly when I began researching social media practices and ideologies in Kinshasa, I was told one very painful story over and over again. It recounted the tragic fate of a girl, who had been sending nude photographs of herself via a public computer in a cybercafé in Ndjili, to a Facebook contact. She had not realized that the photograph may be stored on the hard drive or in the memory of the computer. One of the men working in the cybercafé found the photograph, and sent it to his friends. Very quickly the girl learned about this, was mocked, and committed suicide, out of embarrassment. This story was told over and over in conversations with interlocutors about how the digital is a space of bêtises, and how risky it could be.

However, despite their warnings, many of them also shared nude pictures, or requested their girlfriend to send them des photos sexy… Girls talked about how much they trusted their partners (the intended receivers of these images). They assumed their images were safe. But, as I say below, I have been shown very intimate digital content by men.

It may be important to repeat that in the paper, I have been discussing metatalk, leading to an exploration of normative discourse, which allows to open up discussions about kinship ideologies in the digital space.

I think that class, religion, gender or age impact on the social media ideologies but that they do not deny the ideologies described in the working paper. I guess there would nuances or variations of the ideologies.

I totally agree that class, religion, gender and age impact on digital media practices, e.g. influencing digital media literacies, and thus knowing better how to protect devices with passwords; or knowing how to choreograph an image in such a way that one can deny it is them portrayed in the photo/video; and ultimately, producing intimate images (photographs or videos) at all. Men have shown me very graphic images that they received from their (aspiring) girlfriends, and very often while talking about these images, these men made assessments about the girl's social class, or mentioned to which ethnic group they belonged, or in which community they lived. Here, stereotypes about female sexuality related to class, religion, ethnic belonging, and geography were articulated, as part of the explanation of the sender's social media practice. So, I certainly concur with you. I actually plan to discuss this more in depth in another piece, on des photos sexy.

Great advice to say something more about the "making of Digital Kinshasa". I'll think further about that!

Thank you very much, John.

All the best,

Katrien

Sean Smith (sean.smith@kuleuven.be)   **12 October 2022**

Dear Katrien and all,

This is a compelling and deeply informed account of how kinship structures in Kinshasa mediate digital social life, enjoyable to read as much for the highly relevant topic as for the many and rich vignettes that could only have come from years of fieldwork and relationship-building. In a period where many kinship formations appear to be etiolating under the impact of apps and digital media (as Daniel Miller mentioned in his earlier comment), this paper illustrates that, instead, Kinois are bringing the digital into their kinship systems rather than the other way around. Prime examples of this are the conversation with Fiston (pg. 12), in which he asks for help in reigning in the insults bandied about by his elder companions on Facebook, and the pushback over sharing images of the (purportedly) drunk papa in the introduction.

With kinship formations persisting despite the context- and scale-expanding duress of social media, however, is it possible to see in more detail how platforms are being used to (re)produce these formations digitally? I'm wondering about the situations in which one smartphone is shared among multiple people; I would imagine that everyone has their own accounts, and thus their own passwords. Has this situation provoked tensions or different footing around shéma, or has "mind your own business" etiquette become all the more salient? How does it work in the case of photo libraries, which are often stored on the device rather than on an individual account? I'm also curious if the work of digital avoidance is undertaken through recourse to the features of specific apps, where on several platforms it is possible to hide content from one's friends/followers without unfriending/unfollowing them. Would such cases of hiding content track along the levels of intimacy, or "sharing," that are so richly described?

It may be interesting to elaborate if there are some sharing practices that are better established on particular platforms, or how Kinois kinship structures emerge as vernaculars in the context of given infrastructures for posting, commenting, direct messaging, etc. For instance, I was interested in your account of partagisme, or the ethic of collaboration among kin and close friends. How is this sociality transmuted onto apps where users are motivated to accrue likes and followers? In other contexts, various platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok) have been shown to foster the accumulation of symbolic capital that leverages social standing and/or can be monetized; does the same hold true in Kinshasa?

These questions really just reflect how engrossing the paper is, and how relevant to a wide array of research fields. The perspectives and examples raised provoke a much closer consideration of how kinship and other context-based relational systems impact digital life in other settings, especially given the frequent blame popularly levied at social media for dismantling long-held practices.

Thanks very much for sharing!

Sean

Dear Sean,

Thank you so much for your feedback and for sharing (!) your reflections.

Several of your questions deal with the continuity of non-digital kinship practices in the digital space. Many of the themes you are touching on could be a topic of a separate paper. Please allow me to address them briefly here. I am aware that I am unable to go in depth here.

Re your question on how platforms are being used to (re)produce kinship formations digitally.

Here, I can mention that transnational families have set up WhatsApp family groups in which the "elderly" of the family reunite around a family problem, very much like they do in a palaver in a village or city. Furthermore, again in transnational contexts, father-son relationships, marked by obligation, distance, respect, and authority, inspire a particular type of social media interactions: it seems that especially for men living abroad, the early morning WhatsApp call (e.g., around 4am) is a metonym of their relationship. Such conversation only takes place when serious matters need to be discussed, e.g., when a father wants to have a conversation about the son's private or professional future; or when a medical condition of a family member needs to be discussed, and the son is required to assist materially and/or financially. These conversations are usually taking place within the intimate realm of one-on-one conversations, in which the practices of speaking and listening are unequally distributed over the conversation partners: the senior person, the (classificatory) father talks; and the (classificatory) son listens. This early morning WhatsApp call stands out as online voice conversations between father and son are rare. Therefore, when they do occur, they have much significance.

I have also seen WhatsApp conversations between women, mainly sisters-in-law, who give each other support and advice in matrimonial matters and regarding educational issues with (classificatory) children. The latter WhatsApp group conversations are also very often characterized by humour, and they can share funny memes and other more playful texts. The intimacy of their relationships translates into banter, and innocent provocation, which also appears in comments they post on each other's Facebook and Instagram posts.

These are some examples of how intimacy or distance - qualities that accompany kinship relations differently - also play out in the digital/social media realms. I certainly need to carry out a more systematic study of the continuity and discontinuity of characteristics of kin relationships and their appearance on social media.

Re the question whether the differences between sharing or not sharing the shéma within a couple may have led to tensions or whether the "mind your own business" etiquette has become all the more salient: I have data from several young, unmarried, couples whose disputes about access to the phone and social media accounts literally have led to the breakdown of the couple. Within matrimony, there are various figures within the family and outside (e.g. in the church, the godfather and godmother of the married couple, their pastor), who give advice in situations of conflict and discord. Usually, they manage to restore the harmony. Yet, for young, unmarried couples, or in case one of the two parties is committed, there are less figures of authority involved. It is mainly in this sphere that dramas unfold, e.g. in one case study, over the span of three months, a man began to suspect that his girlfriend was cheating on him. As she did not want to give him access to her social media accounts, he confiscated her smartphones; a few

weeks later, she got him arrested through her contacts in the army; upon detainment, he was forced to hand over her smartphones as well, which she went to pick up a day later at the army office, where he spent several nights (as it was an unofficial arrest) until his friends managed to get the money together to pay him out. Eventually, three months later, he ended the relationship. This case is extremely dramatic, but confiscation of phones by the other romantic partner (usually the man) often occurs. The issue had not been about the photos in the photo gallery but rather about the social media conversations that the girlfriend wanted to hide (as she told me later).

To come back to the question: as far as I can tell, it seems that the "mind your own business" etiquette is very much practiced within matrimony; the sharing of the "shéma" seems to be part of trust-building during the first stages of the romantic/love relationship; once consolidated through marriage or cohabitation, it seems - though more ethnographic evidence is required - that this withers away after a while.

Re digital avoidance and usage of the various features to hide content: None of my interlocutors were using the pages of Instagram or Facebook (where you can select which groups can see which posts) did so; though almost all of them were erasing several private conversations. A married woman told me she avoided this kind of dramatic experiences as the one described earlier, by deleting her Messenger conversations with other men. She thus did not keep a digital archive of these intimate, extramarital conversations. She furthermore had made an arrangement with these men that they were not supposed to initiate an online conversation. She would send a "bjr" ("bonjour", "hello") when she was available to talk. If her husband asked access to her social media conversations, he would see the conversations between her and me; between her and some female friends; and between her and some relatives. Though, there were no traces of conversations with other men. This practice of erasure is not new to the smartphone/social media space, but has been transferred from the dumb phones to the social media platforms. All in all, the material leads to new questions about digital dexterity; and digital literacies.

Re your question whether Kinois kinship structures emerge as vernaculars in the context of posting, commenting, direct messaging, etc.? I am not fully sure I understood your question. Though, what I can tell, is that kin-organized rituals appear in "Facebook live" events, especially mourning rituals and customary wedding ceremonies in the context of transnational families. For those ceremonies that take place abroad, relatives in Kinshasa organize gatherings in private or semi-public compounds, where live ("direc") digital images are projected on a white screen that has been hung out for that occasion. This is a continuation of remote participation in rituals which has been going on in the pre-digital era; In the early 2000s, I noticed that these remote events were videoed, and videotapes found their ways into the communities at home and in the diasporas; now digital infrastructures add a synchronous dimension to the sharing of the sorrow and joy.

These are some answers on your thoughts. Thanks again, as these reflections will be most helpful in the near future, when I plan to analyse these media practices in further writing.

Best wishes,

Katrien

Dear all,

The 70th EASA Media Anthropology Network e-seminar is now closed.

Thanks to Katrien Pype for sharing her inspiring work with us, to Shola Adenekan and Sahana Udupa for their insightful contributions as discussants and to everyone who participated.

Thanks also to Sahana for organizing the seminar.

As always, the transcript will be available on the network's website as soon as it is ready – we will let you know.

If you would like to present your work in an e-seminar, do get in touch with either myself or one of the network convenors, Philipp Budka, Sahana Udupa and Elisabetta Costa.

Cheers,

Nina