

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

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

**E-Seminar 63
The Digital Turn: New Directions in Media Anthropology**

16 October – 9 November 2018

Follow-Up of the EASA Media Anthropology Network Panel “The Digital Turn” in Stockholm, Sweden, 15 August 2018

Comments

by

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Dear All,

First of all, I would like to thank Sahana Udupa, Elisabetta Costa and Philipp Budka for organizing a truly inspiring panel. Many questions were raised during the discussions, but here I will focus on only one of them: How can anthropological research account for the particularities of digital media in contrast to non-digital media? This question is not new, of course (see for example the contributions to Horst & Miller 2012, Koch 2016), but the panel demonstrated the importance of an ongoing discussion about what it means for anthropologists to study “the digital”. In our research, we often use the term as a clarifying category that includes a broad set of technologies based on binary code. “The digital,” however, can also serve as a conceptual tool to better understand the transformations of everyday media-related practices which we currently witness in a large variety of anthropological fields.

For example, the panel included empirical examples for the negotiation of gender relations through both digital and non-digital media. What particular potentials, we might ask, do digital media provide for the reshaping of gendered agency and subjectivities? Or, from the opposite perspective, how can digital media be used for practices of surveillance and control in asymmetric gendered power relations?

Similar questions can be raised regarding online extreme speech: As Sahana Udupa has pointed out, extreme speech is not a new phenomenon, but it takes on new forms and practices as it is enacted through the internet. We might ask: What particular properties of “the digital” are relevant for these transformations? How do factors such as anonymity, the possibility of easy participation (through comments, sharing, etc.) or the opportunities for visual communication (through Emojis, Memes, etc.) influence the course of political debates?

Among the three sections of the panel, the discussions concerned with “digital visualities” were most directly dealing with these issues. As the organizers ask in their discussion paper: “Which kind of conceptual approaches to the digital can contribute to the analysis of digital visibility?”

I suggest to raise this question about the particular value of conceptual approaches to the digital not only in studies of digital visibility, but also in the research areas of gender and extreme speech, and – quite frankly – in all anthropological fields in which digital media play a constitutive role.

I argue that the conceptual approach of affordance theories, which has been frequently discussed in the Media Anthropology Network in the last years, is particularly helpful here. Analyzing the affordances of digital media, which are always part of complex “assemblages” (Hopkins 2016) or “environments of affordances” (Madianou & Miller 2012), allows anthropologists to consider the particular action-potentials and action-restrictions of such media (Hutchby 2001) and how they relate to everyday practices (Costa 2018) as well as to embodied knowledge and emotions (Bareither, forthcoming). While affordances have often been discussed in media anthropological research, the question about what is particular about digital affordances in contrast to non-digital affordances remains largely unanswered.

Since affordances, especially in anthropological research, are always relational to practices

and embodied knowledge, there is certainly not one answer to this question. A digital medium or technology can afford very different practices, depending on who uses them and in which situations. However, for anthropological research this is not a hindrance. Rather, it provides an opportunity, because it is exactly this relational character of affordances, their entanglement with everyday practices and embodied knowledge, that makes anthropological research perfectly suited for discussing the particular affordances of “the digital”. This is, in my opinion, a crucial aspect of what a “digital turn” in anthropology can entail: to use the strengths of anthropological research for the study of situated practices to better understand what “the digital” is. The panel “The Digital Turn” made some promising steps in this direction.

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17 October 2018

Dear all

I’d like to thank Sahana Udupa, and the EASA medianthro group, for inviting me to comment upon this paper. Offering a follow-up e-seminar to the panel in Sweden does alleviate the sense of FOMO (fear of missing out) among those of us who couldn’t attend the 15th EASA conference, and I am pleased to have had a chance to read through this paper and learn of the array of rich ideas and projects that were shared.

As the opening sections of the paper discuss, most anthropologists interested in media have shifted their attention to digital technologies in recent years. In some cases, they are simply following a natural transition of the practices they were studying: in my own research on television consumption, I have had to follow my research participants’ transition from largely watching free to air broadcast television, to increasingly engaging with multiple platforms and networks to access their preferred television content. But other anthropologists have also

critically considered the rise of digital technologies as potentially creating much deeper kinds of transformation – both to social practice and to social theory. By bringing together the range of papers at the EASA panel, this paper and many of the panellists seem to be engaging in this second, deeper kind of questioning.

Does the “digital turn” require any rethinking of media anthropology’s purpose? Does it really constitute a “paradigm shift”? Has the ongoing acceleration of digital technologies’ presence in the media ecologies or everyday landscapes of people and their communities disrupted any of the founding principles of our ethnographic work? These are productive questions, but my answer to each of them at this stage is “no – which is good”. I think this is borne out by the careful and considered work in the paper but I do invite other list members to respond.

Across the three sub-themes, the researchers show that understanding their topics of research requires an ongoing attention to matters of materiality, of structure and of power. With the rise of visual elements in digital technology, it is clear that scholarship in visual anthropology and material culture studies offer important insights. But just as important is the acknowledgement (an old one in media anthropology) that economic and cultural contexts shape great differences in how “visual” digital media can be. Smartphones remain elusive for many low-income mobile users, at least for now, and video-heavy downloads require high-speed connectivity. Differences in access and in opportunity lie within as well as across communities, and along these lines the sub-theme of the gendered dimensions of digital media research was correctly described as filling a gap that has not been sufficiently explored.

Transforming or expanding the options for communication seems, at least at moments, to offer new opportunities for people to try out new ways of expressing, resisting, or avoiding preferences and expectations. But in their individual acts of expression, resistance or avoidance, users may not necessarily be uprooting social norms (as Costa observes). Still, the capacity to communicate in a wider range of ways does seem to “give voice” to less powerful people and groups. This is seen not only in the case of women discussed by Costa and Tenhunen, but also in the case of people engaged in online extreme speech as studied by Hervik and Udupa.

Across the projects, we see many examples of what anthropology has long done best: the rooting of analysis in local contexts and existing traditions, while also acknowledging the shifting technological and political dimensions that open up new practices. As the Kupiainen (2016) study quoted suggests, new formations of digital cultural identities might best be understood by considering pre-digital forms of identity construction and visual representation. Hervik emphasises how “a neo-nationalism - neo-racism narrative is what leads people into activism and not the new technology per se”. Close attention to the complexity of actors’ contexts and lives, whether in the selection of emojis or the posting of online extreme speech, obliges us to not assume the technology as inherently transformative, nor to assume the transformation as total. In these and other ways, the work considered across the session shows that the digital turn of media anthropology has not done away with the particular recommendations that anthropologists have long brought to the study of media. So my rather conservative assertion that the digital turn cannot be said to constitute a paradigm shift is far from being a critique of the work presented, and is rather an assertion of the ongoing value of our contributions to interdisciplinary debates in the face of digital transformations.

Some final thoughts: as I was reading this seminar paper I was in Manila, having just participated in a conference on Digital Transactions in Asia. As many of you will be aware, in Manila digital technologies are playing a central role in current political developments. While

reading of Mollerup's discussion of photographers in Aleppo, I thought of the Manila's "nightcrawlers", photojournalists who cover the night killings by police and vigilantes that have reached many thousands in the past two years. Online extreme speech too plays a role in the Philippines, where recent research shows that trolling and extreme political debate is often the result of paid and organised economies of political disinformation. In public scholarship, close ethnographic research is playing an important role alongside other methodologies and approaches<<https://drugarchive.ph/post/14-antidrug-dataset-public-info-killings>> in documenting how the digital, while inserted into longstanding political and economic structures, produces real effects in people's lives (and as Cheryll Soriano observed at the closing of the Digital Transactions conference: the dead also play a role in these digital economies) (Ong & Cabañes 2018<http://newtontechfordev.com/newton-tech4dev-research-identifies-ad-pr-executives-chief-architects-fake-news-production-social-media-trolling/?fbclid=IwAR352pL6alHbQf-aVH3vaB9hIFYMTRhobn2l_NQTfRXV-hmMBoDX9jFZbDw>). It is noteworthy that much (if not most) of this ethnographic work is being done in digital media studies, by scholars who are deeply familiar with, but are not themselves, anthropologists. I offer this as evidence that the "digital turn" in media anthropology converges with, and is perhaps subsumed by, an equally significant and well-established ethnographic turn in digital media research.

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17 October 2018

Dear all,

Thank you so much for organizing this e-seminar, as a follow up to the EASA panel in Stockholm in August.

I have been asked to provide some comments on the position paper, so here we go:

The title of this discussion paper, *The Digital Turn: New Directions in Media Anthropology*, offers a productive provocation. Those familiar with digital anthropology might wonder what is so new about this direction, while media anthropologists may challenge the notion of a digital turn. Without doubting the empirical validity of "the growing importance of digital media technologies in contemporary sociocultural, political and economic processes," is it really epistemologically justifiable to suggest "a paradigm shift in the anthropological study of media"? Is there perhaps a risk involved that anthropologists fall prey to the hyperbolic polemics that have framed the development of digital media for the last few decades? I mention this here to remind us all that it is perhaps not enough to counter far-fetched claims with anthropological caveats about complexity, but we also need to be self-reflexive of our own positionality in studying digital mediations (cf Boyer 2012).

The paper focuses on three areas of research: digital visualities, gender and digital media, and online extreme speech. Each area is presented with a thorough review of recent research, along with descriptions of ongoing research projects, thus offering the reader a useful survey of the field. These fields are of course interrelated. For instance, investigations of digital visuality from a gender perspective can shed light on online extreme speech, not least sexist 'net hate' (yes, we have a word for this in Swedish, *näthat*). These fields can also be ambiguous. While digital visuality is a growing phenomenon, it by no means suggests that images have replaced text or other forms of communication, which are often mixed in intricate ways. At the same time we also need to pay attention to what is visualized without images, as in the recent #MeToo campaign (Uimonen 2019a).

Digital visualities offers an interesting field of inquiry, which is well presented in the paper, summarising various recent and ongoing initiatives. Having co-initiated the Nordic Network on Digital Visuality (2011-2014), I can add that it was the network's interdisciplinary openness that proved particularly fruitful. Some scholars from this network are now active in the ECREA TWG on Visual Cultures, <https://research.uta.fi/visualcultures/>. While interdisciplinary approaches offer fruitful venues for the study of digital visualities, there is also something to be said for the strengths of anthropology. I certainly agree with the flexibility of anthropological toolboxes and the need to “continuously reassess these methodological tools and theoretical conceptualizations in the light of contemporary digital transformations and entanglements” (page 5). But I would also argue for the continued validity of earlier methods and theories. I am currently involved in Collecting Social Photo, a Nordic research project that explores how museums and archives can collect photographs in social media, see <http://collectingsocialphoto.nordiskamuseet.se/>. In this project, museum and archive staff grapple with conceptualising digital photographs in social media in terms of networked assemblages, mixtures of images and words, ubiquitous and ephemeral records of social life, a form of communication as well as memory making in everyday life (Hartig et al 2018). To collect these photographs, memory institutions have to think out of the box: engage with communities, create user-friendly online interfaces and actively participate in social media flows. As an anthropologist, I can contribute with theories and methods that can help make sense of this complexity, from earlier conceptualisations of photographs as relational objects (Edwards 2006) to experimental collaborative research methods, on- and offline. In digital anthropology, I have always appreciated how colleagues use ‘pre-digital’ theory to grasp digitally mediated social processes, a fruitful combination of ‘the old and the new.’

When it comes to gender and digital media, I am delighted by this effort to fill gaps in anthropological research. As noted by the presenters, unlike related disciplinary fields, “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” (page 5). While the studies mentioned in this section mostly focus on women, anthropologists ought to pay due attention to all genders, thus capturing digitally mediated gendering, gendered media practices etc more fully. In addition, anthropologists can also bring forward cultural variations in gendering, thus showing how for instance femininity and masculinity are (re/de)constructed online in different cultural contexts around the world.

The section on online extreme speech outlines an important albeit problematic field of inquiry, which could fruitfully be cross-fertilized with the other streams on visibility and gender, while recognising pre-digital and beyond-digital linkages more fully. I find it quite astonishing that none of the papers or studies mentioned seems to pay attention to gender? Online extreme speech is a highly gendered social phenomenon, which clearly requires a gender sensitive lens, along with attention to racialized and classed dimensions. Similarly, historical contextualisation is a prerequisite in this field. The statement “How critical are digital media for the growth of xenophobic, nationalistic expressions?” (page 7, emphasis added) might come across as a disturbingly ahistorical postulation, not least when it comes to efforts to decolonize anthropology (Uimonen 2019b), while those familiar with its history know that online abusive language can be dated back to the early days of the Internet. I am not at all convinced that emphasising ‘morally neutral transgression’ to nuance current understandings of hate speech “will help to historicize online vitriol” (page 8), but I am concerned that it might depoliticise a phenomenon that begs for ethical positionality. Moreover, while online extreme speech is worth investigating more fully, it is equally important to investigate digitally mediated social movements and other forms of protest that

offer alternatives to what might otherwise be reified as contemporary meta narratives.

The paper raises some questions, which I hope I have addressed by probing some of the premises for those questions. I look forward to constructive discussions that can enhance our knowledge about the topics addressed in this e-seminar and the EASA panel that preceded it.

Kind regards,

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