

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

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

E-Seminar 68
Media Migration

by
Patricia G. Lange
California College of the Arts

Discussant's Comments by
Philipp Budka
University of Vienna

Philipp Budka (ph.budka@philbu.net)

19 April 2022

Dear Patricia, Nina, and all,

It is a pleasure to open the discussion for the 68th e-seminar of the EASA Media Anthropology Network. I very much enjoyed reading Patricia G. Lange's paper and it got me thinking about quite a few media anthropology related themes and problems. Please find below a selection of these thoughts that hopefully are useful for continuing discussions, about Patricia's paper and this e-seminar's topic.

First a big thank you to Patricia for providing this highly interesting text for this e-seminar. As Nina told us, this text is part of the forthcoming Routledge Companion to Media Anthropology, and reading it definitely made me want to dive into this edited volume. I would also like to thank Elisabetta for organizing this seminar and Nina for chairing it.

"Media migration" is – at least for me – a rather new concept, term, or (analytical) category in the anthropology of media. It is, however, not a new phenomenon, as Patricia illustrates by referring to pre-social-media times. It may be described as the moving of people from one media (site, platform, etc.) to another including the (permanent) shift of related practices. Something that, as I would argue, has always been part and parcel of the changing media landscape or environment. So, was media migration also relevant in pre-digital-media times, for instance, when radio audiences moved to television? Or is this a new phenomenon, bound to digital, internet-based platforms and services?

In any case, it is high time for media anthropologists to look into this phenomenon. Not only in an implicit manner as, for example, I did in my research on the web-based platform MyKnet.org (Budka 2019), but in a more explicit manner as Patricia has been doing in her work by exploring motivations of YouTubers for media migration. Besides looking into "the everyday", anthropologists and ethnographers have also been aiming to address "the

complexity” of human sociality. That’s why Patricia conceptualizes social media sites and platforms as infrastructures.

Allowing thus to include the social, the technical, the material, the organizational, and the normative into the analysis. This also allows not only for exploring infrastructural affordances, but also for considering desires and promises of infrastructures (Anand et al. 2018). Connected to this are questions of how these infrastructures “impact sociality” and how people perceive “infrastructural problems” (p. 3). But what are the limitations of conceptualizing (social) media as infrastructure?

Patricia identifies two “key factors” of media migration (p. 3): (1) “centrality of media” in everyday sociality, and (2) the conceptualization of place beyond the physical, as, for example, a social event. These two factors lead to several questions that she is then going to discuss by bringing media and migration studies into dialogue with the overall goal of “proposing and analyzing dynamics in the anthropology of media migration” (p. 5). By building on the results of long-term ethnographic fieldwork among YouTubers, which included interviews, participant observation, and the examination of visual artifacts, she emphasizes the importance of longitudinal studies and the methodological relevance of comparison in media anthropology and in anthropology in general.

Her study results show that changes to YouTube and its business and organizational model, such as the monetization of digital-visual practices and the increasing commercialization of services, complicated socializing, social interaction and/or “sociality” (p. 11). Thus, prompting users to leave the platform and the community they co-created for good. While reading through these passages, I was wondering about the role of Google, the tech giant that purchased YouTube only 18 months after its launch in 2006. How does being part of the Google universe affect users’ decision to leave or return to the platform; their media migration patterns? And, on a more abstract or theoretical level, how can change and/or changing, as two distinct (analytical) categories (Postill 2017), be conceptualized in relation to media migration practices and patterns?

Through the recurrent discussion of the similarities and differences of media and geographical migration, Patricia is developing a framework for investigating media migration. As her analysis indicates, one of the key motivations mentioned by interviewees for leaving YouTube was the need of and search for self-actualization. Something that became increasingly complicated for some users because of the changing characteristics of the platform, from participatory to commercial culture through the monetization of digital practices. Selfactualization is also connected to the “novelty” and therefore to the “coolness” of media. And this makes users migrate from one media platform to the next.

What does this tell us about the general characteristics of social media? How is this obsession with or fetishization of “the novel” connected to specific ideologies? Just recently, Martin Slama (2022), for example, provided some interesting thoughts on what he calls “temporal hierarchizations” in relation to digital media and technologies. He asks, for instance, how digital anthropology is affected by ideologies of the new or “of being up-to-date”? What are the consequences of researching only the new? Benefits of longitudinal, historically sensitive studies, like the one by Patricia, are apparent here. But such studies are often difficult to conduct and to finance.

At the end of her paper, Patricia identifies three types of media migration that considerably

support the exploration and understanding of the media migration phenomenon (p. 19-20). Media users migrate in different scales and different manners, from a complete break with a media platform to keeping connections to their “media homelands”. By referring to the dialogue between media and migration studies, she concludes that the latter may provide “meaningful analytical categories for exploring media migration” (p. 22). Yet another proof for the importance of interdisciplinary exchange in efforts to further develop the field we call media anthropology. I think Patricia’s paper contributed to this development.

Again, I would like to thank Patricia for this really thought-provoking paper and I am very much looking forward to a lively discussion and exchange of thoughts.

All the best,

Philipp

Dr. Philipp Budka

Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology

University of Vienna

<https://ksa.univie.ac.at/en/department/people/post-docs/budka-philipp/>

<https://www.philbu.net>

<https://twitter.com/philbu>

References:

Anand, N., Gupta, A., & Appel, H. (2018). (Eds.). *The Promise of Infrastructure*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Budka, P. (2019). “Indigenous Media Technologies in “the Digital Age”: Cultural Articulation, Digital Practices, and Sociopolitical Concepts”, in S. S. Yu & M. D. Matsaganis (Eds.), *Ethnic Media in the Digital Age*. New York, NY: Routledge: 162–172.

Postill, J. (2017). “The Diachronic Ethnography of Media: From Social Changing to Actual Social Change”. *Moment Journal*, 4 (1): 19–43.

Slama, M. (2022). “Some Provisional Thoughts on Temporal Hierarchizations and the Digital”. Digital Ethnography Initiative (DEI) Blog.
<https://digitalethnography.at/2022/03/29/someprovisionalthoughtson-temporal-hierarchizations-and-the-digital/>