

**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
Philipp Budka
University of Vienna**

19-29 April 2022

Nina Grønlykke Møllerup (ninagmollerup@gmail.com)

19 April 2022

Dear all,

I am happy to announce the opening of e-seminar 68 - Media migration by Patricia G. Lange (California College of the Arts). The e-seminar will run from today and until April 29 (that is, a bit shorter than our usual two weeks).

First, our discussant, Philipp Budka (University of Vienna), will post his comments. Subsequently, Patricia 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 Media migration, it can be downloaded here:
<https://easaonline.org/networks/media/eseminars>.

I am looking forward to what I expect will be an interesting seminar about Patricia's thought-provoking text.

Cheers,

Nina

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. Self-actualization 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

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://digitaletnography.at/2022/03/29/some-provisional-thoughts-on-temporal-hierarchizations-and-the-digital/>)

Patricia G. Lange (plange@cca.edu)

20 April 2022

Hi everyone,

I'd like to start by thanking Elisabetta and Nina for the opportunity to participate in this wonderful E-Seminar. I also wish to thank Philipp Budka for his thoughtful comments on my chapter on Media Migration. I am grateful for the opportunity to have an exchange online on these ideas.

(A copy of the paper may be found here: <https://easaonline.org/downloads/networks/media/68p.pdf>)

One of my goals for writing this chapter was to encourage a collective conversation about social behavior that exhibits a key characteristic—moving from one social nexus to another in response to particular circumstances. My hope is to foster discussion and exchange on instances of media migration both past and present, to understand its nuanced dimensions and dynamics across technologies and social locations. I agree with Philipp’s comment that it is productive to understand and explore migration in older forms of media such as those in the analogue world. I look forward to hearing stories of migration and return in a variety of past and present ethnographic contexts.

A particular challenge will be to understand what constitutes migration in a specific context. I tend to think of it as something if not collective, at least a pattern that seems to be impacting several people within a particular group at the same time. For example, Philipp asked how Google influenced the migration away from YouTube that I studied among first-generation vloggers on the site. In interviews and in their own videos, several video bloggers interested in promoting sociality often cited the changing heavily monetized atmosphere as detrimental to the aura of sociality they were trying to maintain. The monetization metrics that Google introduced created a competitive atmosphere more focused on views than on friendship. But interviewees also cited temporal issues related to the slowness of response they felt they had with video. Quick exchange of messages via Twitter seemed to give some interviewees a more satisfyingly temporal exchange, and many of the participants migrated to that site.

Philipp mentions a fetishization of the novel, and how it is connected to specific ideologies. My chapter, I think, draws on ethnographic data to counter the idea that this group of vloggers was only interested in possessing the newest thing, in a shallow sense or to achieve conspicuous consumption. While I am sure that is true for certain groups or individuals who simply want what's new for the sake of a platform or device being new, I found that what was "new" or "cool" in this group (and for many other prior digital contexts) was often tied to a platform's affordances in allowing people to feel a sense of self-actualization, self-expression, and an opportunity for them to expand on their capabilities.

The digital media record shows many instances in which groups migrated to a new platform when they felt that their original locus of interaction began to block their ability to achieve the ethos of sociality or self-expression that they desired. The desire for "cool" can be (unfortunately I think) relegated to a shallow interpretation such as teen boredom or what is new for the sake of mere novelty, but the migration that I observed away from YouTube and toward Twitter exhibits deep-seated lessons about what participants can or should demand of their social media. What happens when a site of sociality or self-expression takes a left turn and no longer offers the infrastructure—both technical and social—to support human activity? Who is responsible for that? Is it the responsibility of the users to just find a better "place" or of the creators to support what participants need?

Philipp pointed to Slama's (2022) intriguing statement on temporality, and how temporal novelty can become a value in and of itself. I appreciate this connection being made. However, I am struck by how the YouTubers, in a way, wanted something that reached back in time,

rather than migrating to achieve novelty per se. Not all of them were going for lucrative online careers, and most whom I spoke to or who made videos on the changing aura of YouTube were actually more nostalgic about "the way things were" on YouTube. They left in search of more intensified sociality, rather than migrating away because they wanted to possess technical novelty. I appreciate Slama's point though, that media migration studies should avoid the "modernist trap of temporal hierarchization." Like the ethnographic example that Slama cited, the YouTubers in this case seemed to be gravitating not to newer technology per se, but to a social atmosphere that was more in alignment with what they hoped to achieve even as they were using what was to them a "new" site.

In order to avoid fetishization of the new, there is a real opportunity for digital media scholars to focus on the characteristics that an individual or group seeks in order to achieve their goals. A question I found fascinating is why do people leave a social media site? And where do they go? I feel that exploring this terrain will quickly move toward forms of activism that explore what society collectively expects from so-called platforms that are meant to support and facilitate sociality and self-expression.

Thanks again Philipp for launching this discussion with several meaty provocations. I look forward to exploring these ideas together!

Best,

Patricia

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup (ninagmollerup@gmail.com)

20 April 2022

Dear all,

I am happy to announce that the e-seminar is now open for all to contribute.

Thanks to Patricia for presenting her chapter to us and to both Philipp and Patricia for kicking off a discussion, which is already taking us on interesting paths.

I hope you will forgive me for using my privilege as chair to provide some reflections right away.

I greatly enjoyed reading Patricia's chapter and found the discussion of media migration vis-à-vis human physical migration intriguing and worth interrogating further. For instance, Patricia invokes the notion of diaspora, which raises questions about what kinds of communities are at stake. In migration studies, a diaspora would not only include a longing for a past homeland, but also often a passing on of this longing and nostalgia between generations through narratives of the homeland and the community's belonging to it. How might this translate to a media migration context?

This concern also invites for reflections about what a community is in the context of media migration. Would a community only consist of practitioners, in this case vloggers, or does it make sense in any way to think of other aspects that might tie people to a community without being practitioners?

I am looking forward to this conversation, which is, as mentioned, now open to all. To post a comment, write directly to the list on medianthro@lists.easaonline.org.

Cheers,

Nina

Michael Goldsmith (michael.goldsmith@waikato.ac.nz)

20 April 2022

Dear all,

I wonder if the discussion so far is predicated on the assumption that 'migration' is primarily a concern of activist social media users. There are many kinds of social media platforms and some of them cater to people whose interests are much more entertainment-focused, not to mention hedonistic. One could mention, for example, users of 'dating' sites whose choice of platform is dictated to by whether or not the sites charge fees (which may be waived under certain circumstances or for restricted periods) or whether the sites' business models change (including amalgamation or extinction). In other words, instead of 'migration', 'nomadism' may be a better metaphor for many activities on the web.

Regards,

Michael Goldsmith

Hi Nina and Michael,

Thanks for your comments. They bring up a very important point in terms of how we will grapple with the many different types of media migration that merit anthropological attention. I very much agree that part of our collective project will involve exploring what exactly is at stake in specific instances of media migration. Examining the media anthropology record shows that for some groups, losing an online space was devastating and deeply disruptive to participants' sociality. Ethnographic examples from Boellstorff (2008) and Pearce (2009) in disabled communities showed that losing a collective online space severely impacted groups who relied on online social spaces and specific interactive technologies and parameters that were crucial to support their forms of sociality and interaction. Migration may not always be smooth and may present a number of challenges for certain groups.

However, on the other side of the coin, media migration may not be particularly emotional or dramatic in other contexts. In some ways the term migration is a useful umbrella term, coming as it does both from tech realms and anthropology. Technologists speak of "migrating" customers from one device or system to another, and of course anthropologists examine different forms of physical migration, including forced and voluntary. I see many other types as sub categories to the larger notion of media migration. Diaspora, for example, illustrates one conceptualization of how media migration might play out. Moving under certain circumstances may produce deeply emotional responses. What is interesting about the diaspora concept is that it can be applied to media movement in its own right, rather than reflecting or supporting a physical diaspora. The "break" is happening when one online group is forced to change to a different site or device, rather than in physical terms.

Migrating to a different device or system may or may not have the same type of emotional impact that communities who see themselves as part of a diaspora or simply felt a sense of imagined community might experience. I would place the YouTubers whom I studied as somewhere in the middle. It was not matter-of-fact for them. They clearly had emotional responses and were deeply saddened by the changing environment on YouTube. On the other hand, their responses did not appear to be as emotionally devastating as the digital diaspora observed by Boellstorff and Pearce, and YouTubers continued to socialize in person and across other media.

Nomadism, to my mind, is a sub-category of media migration that would apply in specific circumstances, and it may indeed apply in certain ethnographic contexts which would be fascinating to learn about. At root, I agree that it is important to broaden the scope of studying media migration from the deeply emotional or “activist” types to, as you say Michael, the more “hedonistic” or perhaps matter-of-fact types, where there is not as much at stake in retaining a particular platform. I agree that it is important not to associate media migration with only one form, but instead to use this lens to understand a broad array of contexts in the anthropological record.

References:

Boellstorff, T. (2008). *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Pearce, C. (2009). *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

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Patricia G. Lange

Martin Slama (martin.slama@oeaw.ac.at)

22 April 2022

Dear Patricia (if I may),

Thank you for sharing your inspiring paper on media migration with us. Your paper nicely points out the analytical possibilities that the concept can provide, yet it also indicates that reflections of scholars in migration and diaspora studies might not be directly translated into media anthropology or that there are at least limits to it when doing so. I also appreciate your reply to Philipp’s comments, which made me think about the temporalities of phenomena related to media migration, especially with regard to notions of “the cool” and “the novel”. While I agree that, when looking for reasons why people leave a certain medium and migrate to another, coolness and novelty are insufficient explanations (in many cases and certainly in the ones you describe), I think that there is more to discover in the accounts of your interlocutors with regard to their conceptualizations of time. In my view, the quote of K80Blog

(p.11) comprises a particularly interesting example of temporal hierarchization when MySpace is said to “had its time” and YouTube is regarded “on its way out” because “the novelty of it is kind of worn away”. This is mentioned in one breath along with the commercialization of YouTube. K80Blog thus perceives commercialization (or corporatization) as a phenomenon that strips away the novelty of YouTube and makes it into something old that one should leave behind (in temporal terms) or migrate away from (in spatial terms). What I want to say with this brief interpretation of K80Blog’s statement is that ideas (and practices) of media migration might be closely associated with the temporal hierarchization of media.

I think I can discern this migration-temporalization nexus also in how you characterize media migration as “a visible and meaningful break from one platform or media to use another” (p.4). Such a break, I contend, is always also a break with the past; not with the past per se, i.e., not with all previous media practices, but with the immediate past that extends into the present and has – for whatever reason – become undesirable. Such a conception of time has become particularly widespread in the modern era (whenever that has begun) and is not restricted to Western contexts. One can encounter Islamic reformists in Indonesia today, to refer to an example from my fieldwork, who reject most of Islam’s intellectual history (including most of its present representations) and only want to be inspired by Islam as it was practiced by the time of the Prophet Muhammed. Although this is a completely different example from the ones you discuss in your paper, the temporal dynamic we encounter in them is very similar: both examples exhibit a break with the immediate past while being inspired by a more distant one. The spatial dimension is, however, a more complicated one. In the case of the YouTubers this entails the virtual movement to another platform, whereas in the case of Indonesian Islamic reformists it might go hand in hand with migrating to another city, if one’s pious efforts in one place turn out to be fruitless, but movement is not at all a precondition for the temporal hierarchizations of Islamic history. What we might learn from this short comparison is that hierarchizations of time and space do not necessarily depend on each other, but that in the case of media migration, it seems, one can hardly do without the other.

Best wishes,

Martin

Hi all,

The idea to fold media migration along with other terms into a broader category of media mobility is an interesting one, and opens up the possibility of asking the more general question, why do people move from using one medium to another? A caveat in using this phrase “mobility” would be to avoid confusion with mobile devices. Exploring a category such as media mobility indeed would allow comparisons between different types of movement that are quite different phenomena, such as the differences between polymedia and media migration. The latter represents a distinct break rather than switching off between media for specific purposes. But your question, John, brings up the possibility of understanding the impulse(s) or forced circumstances of movement and how they are different as well as similar. My psychic friends tell me there is certainly a collected volume in there somewhere...

I believe it is a research question to explore whether migrations of past mass media hold the emotional salience of place-based types of media migration that anthropologists have studied recently in digital realms. As I noted earlier, technologists speak of media migration, and I think it is fair to say that even in physical migration there are different levels of emotional impact and investment. As was discussed earlier, it might be important to understand *when* migration takes on salience and when it does not. It is a very interesting question to analyze under what circumstances people care about the movement between media. Scholars sometimes lament the migration from television to online interaction for example (seeing the former as more social—even as prior generations saw television as a social threat to society!), and we can check in with those who study mass media to understand what impacts it had for people to migrate from one type of media to another.

From my perspective, the infrastructure of social media sites such as MySpace and Facebook are not the same. They have similar media elements perhaps, but I see them as quite distinct in terms of a variety of factors that warrant investigation. This includes everything from specific features that guide interaction, to look and feel, to purpose of the platform, to who is hanging out there. Both MySpace and Facebook are media that share certain characteristics, yet they are dissimilar in other ways. The way I see it, moving from one to the other constitutes media migration. To me, the act of media migration is not restricted to moving between completely *different* types of mediums. If one is moving from one site to another, this would be one type

of media migration, and part of the collective conversation I hope we have is understanding the research landscape and identifying many different types of media.

One thing that springs to mind from this conversation has to do not so much with digital place, but with “temporal” and/or “forced” media migration. In other words, what happens when people are “forced” into using a new platform because the site managers fundamentally change how a site works.

Going back to the basic definition of media migration, this might very well qualify; it is only that people lag in their recognition of this fact that they have been migrated, per the technologists' lens. When sites dramatically change parameters, the users are arguably migrated from one instantiation of the platform to another. For example, in my book *Thanks for Watching* (2019, p. 5, 17 etc.), I point out that change was happening on YouTube all the time, and YouTubers might complain if they went away for a few months, that YouTube felt like a different site—sometimes with new parameters that participants did not appreciate. But it wasn't as though users were asked about new features such as monetization metrics or new layout designs that change crucial aspects of usage and interaction. I've done work on YouTube rants in which people complain but stay on the site. They could certainly leave, and eventually many of them did. But in the meantime, might we argue that participants were “migrated” to a different platform over time, thus constituting temporal media migration. Of course, one can get overly pedantic on this point and argue that the medium of YouTube 5 minutes ago is different than right now, or a few moments from now. The site is changing all the time as hundreds of new videos are posted in a single minute, and others are deleted, technically creating different “infrastructures.” But such changes may or may not have the same salience to broad numbers of users as would new monetization features that create competition or changes that create new types of recommendations based on a new algorithm. There are going to be things that researchers can follow and other things that are happening behind the scenes that are not shared publicly—a fact which concerns me as a media researcher and a concerned citizen.

References:

Lange, Patricia G. (2019). *Thanks for Watching: An Anthropological Study of Video Sharing on YouTube*. Louisville, CO: University Press of Colorado.

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Patricia G. Lange

Patricia G. Lange (plange@cca.edu)

23 April 2022

Hi Martin,

I think your point about the temporal hierarchization of media, defined as “privileging the future over the present and all the more so over the past” (Slama 2022) is an important one. I also agree that one of the challenges in participating in digital anthropology research is to avoid falling “into the modernist trap of temporal hierarchization without denying temporal sequence altogether, since there clearly are older and newer manifestations of the digital.” This is indeed a challenge. We wish to acknowledge how people deal with newer manifestations of technology, but it can be quite difficult not to succumb to the modernist trap of always focusing on the latest and greatest in digital realms when choosing our research sites.

This trap manifests on several levels. It manifests among researchers who wish to stay current with digital technologies. No one wants to seem out of date vis-à-vis what they are researching. In previous work (Lange 2014), I have discussed the idea of “performing technical affiliation,” which means performing affiliation to beliefs and practices assumed to be associated with particular technical groups. One can perform technical affiliation to one’s interlocutors by showing one is up to date and knowledgeable about the “right” technologies and cool sites and apps. But it is not only researchers who can get caught in temporal hierarchizations with regard to digital terrain. This dynamic is a challenge for publishers. Are publishers in digital anthropology as interested in publishing work on older technologies, as they are the latest sites and apps?

It is a delicate balance in recognizing and analyzing practices according to temporal movement while also understanding the biases of temporal hierarchization that are manifested in what people use and what researchers choose to study. In her work on digital waste, Gabrys (2013) discusses the concept of “cultural and material metabolism,” which can be studied through garbology. She argues that looking at material waste, such as digital devices, shows how quickly a culture moves on to always novel devices, by discarding old computers and

electronics at a pace that is detrimental to human health and the environment. It might be that collectively studying media migration (and related phenomena) might help gauge different societies' "digital metabolism" in terms of how fast a group leaves certain technologies and sites to embrace others.

Internet patterns suggest continual movement in terms of adopting new sites. In my documentary, "Hey Watch This", which documents the rise and fall of YouTube as a social media site for the early video bloggers, interlocutors discuss some of these patterns and perceptions. For example, a study participant who went by the name of 'thetale send' on YouTube notes that the internet exhibits patterns of frequent change. "Whoever gives the next best step," that's where people will go, he argues, because "that's the way the internet is" (See 42:59 of the documentary). Disentangling between "novelty," "cool," "self-actualization," and "time," present challenges for how digital anthropology researchers will study actual ethnographic patterns, while somehow not contributing to a "digital metabolism" that requires insatiable acquisition of newer and better devices at the expense of environmental sustainability.

References:

Gabrys, Jennifer (2013). *Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Lange, Patricia G. (2020). *Hey Watch This! Sharing the Self Through Media*. 53 minutes. Available on Vimeo: (<https://vimeo.com/394007182>)

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Patricia G. Lange

Patricia wrote:

“To me, the act of media migration is not restricted to moving between completely *different* types of mediums. If one is moving from one site to another, this would be one type of media migration, and part of the collective conversation I hope we have is understanding the research landscape and identifying many different types of media.”

I agree, a much-needed conversation - and topical, too, now that Elon Musk says he wants to take over Twitter and some culture warriors are tweeting about migrating if he does.

Perhaps one key qualitative difference worth exploring historically is between internet platform migration and other forms of media migration, including from one pre-internet form to another. I think there are fundamental differences between the way most people created, maintained, and terminated mediated relationships before the 1990s (e.g., via landline phones, radio, TV) and in the present era - although here we've got to be careful not to build too simplistic a contrast and overlook the continuities and remediations (e.g., internet radio and TV).

Another important media migration question we haven't touched upon yet in this seminar, I don't think, is our epistemological assumptions as media researchers, which often remain tacit. For instance, the notion of polymedia seems to require methodological individualism (and to go well with the idea of ever more personalized media in the digital era) whereas the notion of media migration (like that of platform or site) has more of a methodological holism or collectivism ring to it.

In other words, the term polymedia guides you towards the decisions that *individual* digital media users make about which channels or media to use for what social purposes (channel switching, a form of everyday mobility), whereas media migration suggests a group-based or societal phenomenon, e.g., the example of YouTubers moving to Twitter.

Does that sound like a fair distinction? If so, it would have significant implications for a practice-theoretical approach to media migration, given that practice theory is supposed to steer clear of both methodological individualism and holism.

John

Following on from John Postill's comments about methodological individualism versus group-based or collective action, it would be useful if notions like migration bore some resemblance to the ways that researchers discuss, for example, adaptation to climate change in the Pacific. In that context, 'migration' refers to the decisions made over time by individuals and family members to move from their home communities to other places, whether those be other countries or urban areas in their own countries. Where whole communities move from one place to another on the basis of a collective decision at an identifiable moment, the preferred term is 'relocation'. I'm not sure if that distinction resonates in the media sphere, but it's always useful to see if definitions can be calibrated.

Michael Goldsmith

Hi all,

I agree that it would be interesting and fruitful to explore media migration historically, to see what patterns might be similar or different between the pre-internet era and digital realms. It is important that we neither assume that media migration is the same type of phenomenon as what happened vis-à-vis mass media in those eras. But we must also as you say, John, not assume an overly simplistic or temporally-biased assumption of complete difference, if the data show otherwise. It is a question worth investigating. It is also important, as Michael points out, to understand how other types of terms in the literature have been used, such as re-location and how that differs from or might resemble what is happening in digital realms.

I am interested in diving a bit deeper into the discussion that John initiated with regard to individual versus collective movement. John writes:

“The notion of polymedia seems to require methodological individualism (and to go well with the idea of ever more personalized media in the digital era) whereas the notion of media migration (like that of platform or site) has more of a methodological holism or collectivism ring to it.”

It strikes me that it would be interesting to understand some of the nuances of individual versus collective movement, both in terms of the polymedia lens, and in terms of media migration. For example, Madianou and Miller (2012) talk about patterned types of switching among the mothers they studied in transnational migration in families. Their evidence at times suggests perhaps cultural patterns in choices about which media to switch to. An example might be the cultural pattern of people in the study choosing email when they wished to avoid confrontation. Deciding which media to use is an individual choice, but it may be worth exploring to what extent these individual choices exhibit collective, patterned preferences and why.

On the flip side of the coin, it is fair to say that some of the YouTubers whom I studied and left the site, or at least vastly reduced the intensity of participation on YouTube, did not *all* collectively go to Twitter, or if they did, their intensity of usage of Twitter was not all the same. Some embraced Twitter quite intensely, while others who had been engaged participants on YouTube, only lightly used Twitter.

It is worth exploring to what extent individual methodological lenses line up with polymedia studies, and whether collective movement is always the most evident or worthy aspect of study in media migration. It is possible to do a thought experiment and ask, if one single person leaves YouTube or any other site alone and permanently switches to another media site, is this worth studying? Or will the anthropological focus always be on collective forms of digital migration?

As for the Elon Musk takeover of Twitter - *heavy sigh* - there is a reason why there are rules and moderation on these sites. A recent review of metaverse (Bokinni 2022) brings to mind Julian Dibbell's (1993) piece on a Rape in Cyberspace. But the review paints a far worse and more widespread miasma of online hate. It would be fascinating to do a proper media migration study of this moment of Twitter. One would need a scrape of the site and identification of all Tweets containing threats of leaving etc., and then observing to see how the parameters of the infrastructure of Twitter actually changed (including technology and people), and then tracing down whether or not people really left, exploring what exactly prompted them to leave, and of course, following where they went and why they chose those sites. It would be interesting to understand who stayed behind, and what the impact of Twitter migrators into other sites had into these other sites. Studying the impact of arrivals on the existing community is an important thread of physical migration scholarship, and one that is important for digital migration as well. The current events on Twitter might just present a (sadly) fascinating and timely study of media

migration.

Now off to delete my Twitter account... Well, maybe not yet.

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Patricia G. Lange

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27 April 2022

Thanks, John for pointing me to the following tweet by EthanZ (@EthanZuckerman): "It's embarrassing that we've been willing to have our public, civic conversations on platforms controlled by corporate boards. Musk's purchase of Twitter just makes that absurdity even more apparent. Unfortunately, the solution is not as simple as mass migration to Mastodon." <https://twitter.com/ethanz/status/1518692847452520448?s=27&t=2JVcDF7OJSCXFJ3x39cR5g>

I'm posting it here to the e-seminar because it expresses nicely something that I have been thinking about for a while in my research, which involves examining certain parameters that are similar across social media sites. In a way, media migration is a fundamentally optimistic act. It presumes that however bad things are now, they might be better on another site. I have been developing some ideas about what it means when *anywhere* we go online means that we all experience certain commonalities, such as corporate control of sites with specific

parameters. Examples of parameters might be monetization of content, lack of moderation tools, etc. If participants leave one site, where will they go when all sites have similar commercial, privately controlled infrastructures, practically speaking?

Migration is also a non-trivial decision when one considers issues and advantages of critical mass. When I began my research of YouTube, there were—wait for it—200 video sharing sites. Yes. But I would argue, partly because YouTube placed home videos and vloggers alongside commercial and professional content, it gained a critical mass of viewership over other sites. This complicates the ideal of seamless and friction-free migration, depending on your purposes for being on a social media site, or a site exchanging creative content, such as video.

Where will we all go when *all sites* with critical mass have similar problematic constraints or are owned by private companies with similar commercial agendas?

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Patricia G. Lange

Sahana Udupa (sahana.udupa@lmu.de)

27 April 2022

Thank you, Patricia, for your stimulating paper and discussion. Your point on media migration as a “fundamentally optimistic act” is very instructive. We might add here that this optimism alongside strategic maneuvering also characterize right wing politics online. I have been exploring this as “migratory speech”: the propensity for extreme speech to migrate between platforms (Udupa 2021). Richard Rogers has shown that anti-establishment right-wing celebrities in Europe migrated to Telegram and to a “larger alternative social media ecology” after being “deplatformed” by major social media companies including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube for “offenses such as organized hate” (Rogers 2020: 213). The network graphs that mapped the connections between right-wing celebrities and platforms revealed the prominence of BitChute (an alternative to YouTube), Minds (an alternative to Facebook), Gab (an alternative to Twitter) and Telegram (the hybrid messaging and broadcasting platform) (Rogers 2020: 219). Similar migratory practices have been documented among violent Jihadi groups.

Among right-wing users, such migratory moves draw upon and mobilize niche formats of toxic mashups and playful interactional frames that characterize smaller platforms such as 4chan.

Often, right-wing actors utilize large social media platforms to decry actions against them and “announce” their migration to smaller platforms, urging other users to follow them. Migratory moves around extreme speech are also embedded within multilayered recruitment strategies spread across platforms of varied sizes and appeal. The sCAN report noted, for instance, how Instagram is used as an “eye catcher to establish first content with subtle propaganda and] from there, followers of extremist profiles are linked to more explicit and violent content on platforms with a more lenient stance towards hate speech” (sCAN 2019). Users employing such strategies have keenly followed the distinctive protocols and features of different platforms, devising ways to reach out to potential communities by exploiting uneven content moderation policies across companies.

The regulatory dimension of this problem is daunting. The EU framework (Digital Services Act in particular) has envisioned that breaking open the “centralized platform economy” comprising big transnational corporates, would significantly reduce the conditions of virality and amplification of online illegal content. In contrast to (justified) suspicion toward the Big Three, the EU Digital Services Act has highlighted the potentiality of small platforms to offer a space for alternative discourses that could provide a more level playing field in the “marketplace of ideas.” The principle of proportionality elaborated in these regulations has linked the pursuit of anticompetition policy objectives with the assumption that small platforms hold the possibility to push back against the Big Three’s monopoly over online discourse. This anticipates a scenario of ‘progressive’ Mastodons – although the Mastodon architecture is also instrumentalized for varied political ideologies.

The EU proposal to require very large platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) to open up to competitors with mandatory interoperability is relevant in the pursuit of anticompetition policy objectives, but this is not an obvious solution to the problem of extreme speech. This approach, thick with liberal baggage, underestimates the possibility that this very “marketplace for ideas” could provide an easy way for hate mongers—as illustrated by alt-right actors—to hop between platforms and innovate on content. This aspect of media migration requires both academic and regulatory attention. As you highlight, Patricia, many users seem to face the problem of where to go next, and the implications of this migration are vastly divergent.

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Sahana Udupa

Patricia G. Lange (plange@cca.edu)

28 April 2022

Hi Sahana,

You raise a number of crucially important issues and bring to the table some fascinating dimensions of media migration that I think will be very important to this area of research. One of the things that I appreciate about your post is that it underscores how prior research in digital spaces typically focuses on the (often collective) migration of *individuals*. Although it is a logical aspect of many research agendas to understand migration of individuals who have been de-platformed, your research shows the importance of also focusing on the migration of certain types of *political speech*. Although it might be important to follow individuals in many contexts, including right-wing extremism, it is important also to understand where a collective *type* of self-expression and self-actualization might seek to migrate to.

Self-actualization is technically a neutral term, but what happens when certain forms of self-actualization conflict with collective societal values or ideals of cordial communication? What is the responsibility of platform managers, and for that matter researchers, in cases where self-actualization means being free to engage in forms such as hate speech? I am reminded of comments that Michael Goldsmith offered early in this E-seminar regarding the “activist” tone of these discussions. I think his comments invite healthy collective self-reflection on what it

means when many of us feel that we are defending individual rights of “self-actualization” through media expression in digital spaces. What does it mean when certain collective communicative values conflict with the “self-actualization” of those who embrace extremist or hateful speech?

Lack of self-reflection on liberal values and biases can lead to, as you point out Sahana, arguably counter-productive assumptions regarding policy. The assumption seems to be that having smaller groups may provide alternatives to the “Big Three” of social media, but such a policy cuts both ways. It can also help certain groups to find a haven with regard to avoiding certain societal policies on social media platforms that ostensibly attempt to protect certain productive forms of meaningful and factual exchange.

Finally, an additional element to your post that I find very interesting has to do with understanding patterns of migration that orient toward people rather than sites. If you go back into the anthropological record on digital migration, several examples had to do with people leaving because a site closed, and they sought a new space to be together. My research showed dissatisfaction with a particular site as a motivation to migrate. But this discussion of right-wing extremism and hopping to different platforms brings up the very real question of people migrating to follow certain people, or in terms of speech, the views of particular politicians or public figures who might take advantage of regulatory rules to hop to different sites to spread hate.

It would seem that media migration inevitably brings up questions about policy, and what we collectively aim to accomplish with publicly social sites.

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Patricia G. Lange

Martin Slama (martin.slama@oeaw.ac.at)

29 April 2022

Hi Patricia,

Thank you for your response to my statement and please accept my apologies for the belated reply, as this was a busy week here in Vienna.

Your response adds an important point to the discussion by highlighting the role of publishers as being equally influenced by ideologies that celebrate novelty (and promise gains from such as disposition), which might pose another hurdle for work that does not conform to the demands of analyzing the latest technologies and media practices. And thank you for drawing our attention to Gabrys' work on electronic waste that reminds us of the material side of temporal hierarchization, which is fraught with serious consequences. Having said that, my main point of this short reply concerns the quote of the YouTuber that alludes to the dynamic character of the internet in terms of the rise and fall of platforms and their uses: "that's the way the internet is." This quote not only enunciates a particular observation of how the internet works today, but also presents an ontological statement that presupposes particular temporal dynamics and how actors position themselves in relation to them. Again, media migration here is closely associated with temporal hierarchization, as the new is imagined as the superior that becomes desirable (for whatever practical reasons) and induces users to migrate. In addition to the constant production of novelty, this privileging of the new is implied in "that's the way it is", which entails an expectation that this is the way it also will be. A closer look at media migration and temporal hierarchization thus allows us not only to explore users' ways of changing platforms and media, but it can also generate insights into the ontological-cum-ideological underpinnings of people's media practices.

I wish you and all list members a nice weekend,

Martin

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29 April 2022

I agree with Martin that "media migration here is closely associated with temporal hierarchization, as the new is imagined as the superior that becomes desirable (for whatever practical reasons) and induces users to migrate." There is also a common assumption that this is the way it is, and the way it will always be. Thus, as you say, Martin, studying media migration invites theorization of the very ontological underpinnings of internet dynamics. This is an exciting thought, and one that I hope will see continuing collective conversations and scholarship. This material seems especially appropriate to submit to *Hau*, the Journal of Ethnographic Theory.

At the same time, being alert to nuances in ethnographic examples also invites reflection on what exactly constitutes “novelty.” Are the sites people migrating “toward” actually novel? If so, in what sense? Are they novel to them, or are they completely new to the social media landscape as a whole? In some cases, it would seem that participants are leaving something behind more or less in desperation, which unfortunately is a dynamic that certain instances of physical migration share. It is not the rush to seek novelty per se, but rather a situation that has become intolerable for moral and safety reasons that prompt people to reconsider their spaces of interaction. They may actually go to established spaces rather than brand new spaces.

I have in mind the example that John Postill directed us to, which was a tweet from Ethan Zuckerman of MIT. Recall that Zuckerman said: “It's embarrassing that we've been willing to have our public, civic conversations on platforms controlled by corporate boards. Musk's purchase of Twitter just makes that absurdity even more apparent. Unfortunately, the solution is not as simple as mass migration to Mastodon.” Here we see that people wish to leave not because they aggressively need novelty but because they have moral concerns over how the platform will be run, perhaps without moderation. People have also exhibited safety concerns in terms of what Musk will do with their data.

In that thread, Zuckerman also posted the following statement: “Don't get me wrong - I love Mastodon. I've had an account since 2016, and I'm basing some of my own projects on the Mastodon codebase. But it's not a good solution to assume that everyone will leave Twitter due to a change in ownership.” Later in the thread, he uses the term “interoperability” seemingly the way I have been using the term “critical mass.” In other words, a concern of his is leaving behind the people who do not leave, as well as expressing concern over whether the new site has the technical scalability to support millions of Twitter users in a “mass migration” to a different site. Mastodon opened its doors in 2016 and Zuckerman performs technical affiliation by showing he has long been in the know about that site. He states he has had an account since 2016. But is Mastodon truly novel? It clearly is for those who are unfamiliar with it perhaps, but it is 6 years old, which is a geological age in internet time. He also mentions an aggregator tool he is working on called Gobo and another tool that Jose van Dijk is working on called Pubhub. But as Zuckerman implies, not everyone is going to be jumping off of Twitter due to boredom or need for new novelty in the form of Mastodon. Exploring what constitutes novelty and for whom, would seem helpful for understanding different ethnographic contexts.

As we close this E-seminar, I would like to consolidate some of the research questions that

have emerged from this rich and engaging discussion. Looking over this provocative and extensive list, my ‘spidey-senses’ tell me that a symposium may be in order.

Summary of Research Questions in Media Migration:

What is the trajectory of migration? (Migrating away from something, to something, or both?)

How does migration differ between digital spaces and more traditional forms of media?

What are the impacts of the migration on the people who stay behind, the people who migrate, and the new community in which the transfers migrate to?

What do the temporal trajectories, political beliefs, and behavioral assumptions reveal about the ontological underpinnings of internet interaction?

Is the locus of migration an individual, group, or a set of discursive practices (such as political speech of a certain kind migrating to another platform)?

What type of “self-actualization” is being sought by a particular migration?

How does the novelty factor of new sites prompt migration, or are people leaving due to intolerable circumstances?

What constitutes “novelty” in a migration site?

How does the role of policy tie into media migration both for the former and new sites?

What is the political role of the researcher in fighting for certain forms of digital rights and self-actualization?

What happens when the political agenda of the individual or group seeking self-actualization by media migration conflicts with the ethics of the researcher?

How is media migration changing over time? Do patterns of movement that were representative in the early days of social media resemble today’s migratory impulses and behaviors?

What is the “media metabolism” of the internet? How fast do people migrate?

Are these rates changing, and what are the factors that prompt these migratory patterns?

How do technical “affordances,” including technological possibilities and constraints influence what is possible with regard to media migration?

How does “critical mass” influence decision-making regarding media migration?

When people “leave” a site, do they generally migrate to something, or do they simply switch out options that they have already been using, in a form of polymedia?

What is the relationship between media migration and its material consequences, such as needing new phones or devices to accommodate the technical specs of new apps?

Does media migration always imply the study of a collective, or are there instances of individual migration?

Is it anthropologically appropriate and/or necessary to study individual, rather than only collective cases of media migration?

How might researchers and publishers be incentivized to disrupt the pace of society’s harmful media metabolisms by focusing not only on the novel, but encouraging discussion of other forms of media in research and publication?

Will there be any places to migrate to in the near future, given the corporate landscape of social media?

I am sure there are many more questions to explore, but I will close by echoing a concern I articulated earlier, which is manifested again in a post by Zuckerman: “What we do know is this: two billionaires will now control four of the major digital public sphere platforms.” My concern is the question about where we will all go when *all sites* with critical mass have similar constraints or are owned by private companies with similar constraining commercial and/or political agendas. I remain concerned about the political aspects of this, and this is where my current focus is going to be in my research. Of course, I am aware, as was pointed out earlier, that a political agenda is but one of the many areas to explore in studying media migration.

In closing, I would like to thank Nina, Elisa, and Philipp for their work and support of this E-seminar. I thank everyone who has commented and read these posts. I have very much appreciated the opportunity to discuss my research with everyone and exchange ideas. I look forward to stimulating discussions ahead!

Yours very truly,

Patricia G. Lange

Nina Grønlykke Mollerup (ninagmollerup@gmail.com)

29 April 2022

Dear all,

E-seminar 68 is now closed.

Thank you so much to Patricia for allowing us to discuss her work and for her engaging responses to comments. Thank you also to Philipp for starting us off with his thoughtful comments as discussant, to everyone who engaged and to Elisabetta, who organized the e-seminar.

As always, the transcript will be posted on the website as soon as it is ready.

We have several more promising e-seminars lined up for this year – more info will follow.

Cheers,

Nina