

INTRODUCTION

The Anthropology of Mobile Media Technology. Smartphones, Wearables and Networked Selves

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Researching Mobile Media Technology is the very first special issue of the *Journal of Visual and Media Anthropology*, a brand new peer-reviewed open-access journal dedicated to research on digital environments and cultures, the impact of new media on expressions of self and social formations, the theory and practice of ethnographic filmmaking, and the study of online- and offline visual worlds. The journal is a venture of Freie Universität Berlin's Research Area Visual and Media Anthropology. It will present work that self-consciously experiments with innovative modes of representation, new forms of integrating written and multi-media ethnography and therefore seeks to challenge the conventions of academic publishing. With this initial special issue, we want to feature fresh and timely research by young scholars from the Master's Program in Visual and Media Anthropology at FU Berlin's Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology. Their work is concerned with the rise of mobile technology and apps culture and their influence on self-presentation and social relations in the digital age.



Image 1 Wearable. Foto: Takinosuke Ara, Flickr



Image 2 Pia Ilonka Schenk (director of the film *Immersion* in this volume is testing oculus rift)

Mobile apps are software applications that extend the capabilities of a mobile phone by integrating a plethora of other media like video, web browser, GPS navigation or social network platforms into the device, once again verifying McLuhan's dictum that each new medium remediates one or several older ones, i.e. that it does not simply replace the older media but complicates them and often enhances their subtler proprieties. The tremendous impact of mobile technology on our lives is currently discussed in very controversial terms. Many commenters highlight the variety of political practices that have become associated with social media. Without doubt, online communities nowadays have become civil platforms and act as important sites of techno-political activism (Tiburcio Jiménez this volume) with fully entangled on- and offline activities.



Image 3 DDED – political protest & animation artist Hongkong, Film by Kin Wong Lok in this volume

As Kin-Lok Wong's film about the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong that is included in this issue shows, the democratizing aspects of social media that actually have the potential to draw people out of their political apathy and allow for the decentralized organization of mass protests should not be underestimated.

For the techno-utopists among scholars, it was precisely the advent of such 'liberation technologies' (Diamond and Plattner 2012) that sparked the revolutionary fervor of the Occupy movements in New York and beyond and the demonstrations at Cairo's Tahrir Square or Istanbul's Gezi Park. They optimistically conclude that these revolutions were indeed 'tweeted' (Lotan et al. 2011). Other authors, however, have also pointed to the possibilities for mass geo-surveillance such technology offers for those in power and hence deduce that 'internet freedom' brought about by mobile technology is nothing but a delusion (e.g. Morozov 2012, Crampton 2008). Another

much-debated dichotomy is that between the beneficial social and downright commodifying aspects of social media.

Smartphones may be utilized by people living in remote areas to record and share their stories and worldviews (Sveinbjörnsdóttir in this volume).



Image 4 Freies Museum Berlin: Johanna Sveinbjörnsdóttir. Source: <http://www.freies-museum.com/to-from-between-us-1.html>

They allow the members of transnational families who are separated by borders and geographical distance to continue to care for one another and in this respect diminish one of the biggest social costs of migration that is affecting the Global South (Madianou and Miller 2012, Abrera this volume).

For many social groups like (in the case Yun presents in this volume) the elderly, they help compensate feelings of loneliness by providing a sense of being connected to one's loved ones, or indeed the world.



Image 5 Grindr.
Source: Flickr

As Chris Phillips argues in his contribution to this issue, mobile technology also reconfigures our modes of experiencing, exchanging and playing out intimacy. Yet this intimacy however might end up being a fragile and unfulfilling experience. The business models of most social media platforms are based upon their ability to turn our social lives and identities into products for advertising and/or data processing and therefore to sell us to the highest bidder. They create new real or symbolic markets in fields of human interaction that hitherto were not yet conquered by the logics of capitalism.

Melody Howse contributes to this volume a research paper on virtual fitness communities and wearable technologies that gives a detailed account of how these platforms' imperative of self-improvement might further lead to forms of self-disciplining and self-commodification that are completely in line with the capitalist ideal of the self-dependent individual.

These few examples hopefully make clear how new mobile technologies radically alter our particular ways of self-fashioning and being connected to each other. New cultural and social forms arise and new modes of communicating, sharing and caring lead to new ways of being in the world. For almost 20 years now, anthropologists research into our increasingly mediated lives. They have closely followed the drastic changes brought about by the wide dissemination of cell phones, a technology that transformed communication throughout the world like few did before. Particularly in regions with large low-income populations who never had access to landline telephony, the cell phone's impact on local economies, political participation or gender relations cannot be overestimated (De Bruijn 2009, Horst and Miller 2006). Likewise, anthropologists have witnessed how the growth of Internet access over the last decades allowed for a greater connectivity not only on the local, but also on a global scale. In her fascinating study on youth in the Internet cafes of Urban Accra, Ghana, Burell (2012) examines how people from the margins of the global economy enact an imagined mobility and a 'cosmopolitan self' by cultivating relationships with foreigners in chat rooms and on dating sites. Global connectivity has led to the formation of online communities and virtual worlds in which people can relate to each other uninhibited by geographical distance (e.g., Boellstorff 2008). As Daniel Miller emphatically argues in *Tales of Facebook* (2011), such online social

networks have to be considered much more than mere communication platforms. Rather, they have become places where people now actually live. With the advent of immersive virtual reality technology, Miller's statement might actually become even less metaphorical very soon as the company Oculus Rift is just about to release the first consumer targeted virtual reality head-mounted display (see Ilonka's film in this volume). As Facebook recently acquired the company for two billion Dollars, VR will most likely not only revolutionize video gaming but might soon allow for social interactions over vast geographical distances that feel like actual corporeal co-presence.

Yet the widespread availability of GPS, 4G or Wi-Fi networking on our smartphones and mobile devices already now has lead to exciting new reconfigurations of the local and the global. Location-based social networks like Foursquare or dating apps like Tinder and Grindr, location-based games and services that attach information to place such as Google Maps complicate our cultural and social constructions of space (Gordon and de Souza e Silva 2011). The advent of mobile apps and locative media thus calls into question the dichotomy between the local and the global but also many other distinctions that have informed earlier work in media studies, such as the one between producers and consumers or actors and audience.

We strongly believe that the only way to make sense of these developments and the changes they bring about for people all around the globe is to become truly immersed in the everyday life of the users of these technologies, both online and IRL ('In Real Life'). Anthropologists will continue to invent digital ethnographic research methods (Boellstorff et al. 2012, Pink et al. 2015) that account for how the numerous upcoming new applications for wearable or mobile technology will extend not only our bodies, senses and minds, but also enlarge our perception of our surroundings and the communicative spheres of individuals and communities. On the other hand, we have to be aware of the limits and losses that such wearables and mobile technologies can mean for individual users. Melody Howse summarizes this problematic relationship of the body and mobile technology by citing one of her interview partners during her research about fitness tracking. For him, 'running was becoming like a part time job' and he consciously decided not to use his devices every time he goes for a run, so that he can 'smell the flowers again' rather than 'gritting his teeth through every mile'. The research papers gathered in this publication in this respect are exemplary of the unique strength of committed ethnography to make us come to terms with the transformational power of mobile

media technologies, the unexpected ways in which their users appropriate them and the future consequences this may have.

In her paper *Aging on WeChat*, **Ke Yun** explores the impact of the Chinese instant messaging application *WeChat* that became very popular among elderly people in urban China and is used by 1.8 million users above 60 years.



Image 6 Elderly people in China using mobile technology.
Source: Ke Yun. *In this volume*

Ke Yun interviewed 20 research participants in the age group between 60 and 75 as well as their adult children. She discovered that the application WeChat improved the relationships between the parent generation and their adult kids, especially because of the portability of the app on the smartphone or Ipad. Ironically, some adult children started to set rules for their elderly parents to limit the time they spend with the app, because they were worried that the intense use of the application might affect their health.

Pila Ilonka's film *Immersion* is a self-reflexive experiential documentary that explores the virtual present. The film's focus is on Immersive Virtual Reality (IVR), and in particular on the Oculus Rift gadget, which permits the user to immerse him- or herself in a 3D high definition environment. IVR is highly popular in entertainment and gaming, but has other uses such as in professional training, education and therapy. Pia Ilonka meets with a private enterprise and with professors in computing and virtual reality at the Mexican National School of Polytechnics to explore the possibilities that lie within immersive virtual reality. The film gives a picture of what we are to expect from the virtual realm in the near future.

Melody Howse conducted a two-month research among users of 'Daily Mile' an online fitness community whose members use wearables for tracking their movements, especially during running and cycling. They motivate each other online via a text and image-based platform. They share their daily progress, their successes, but also their doubts.

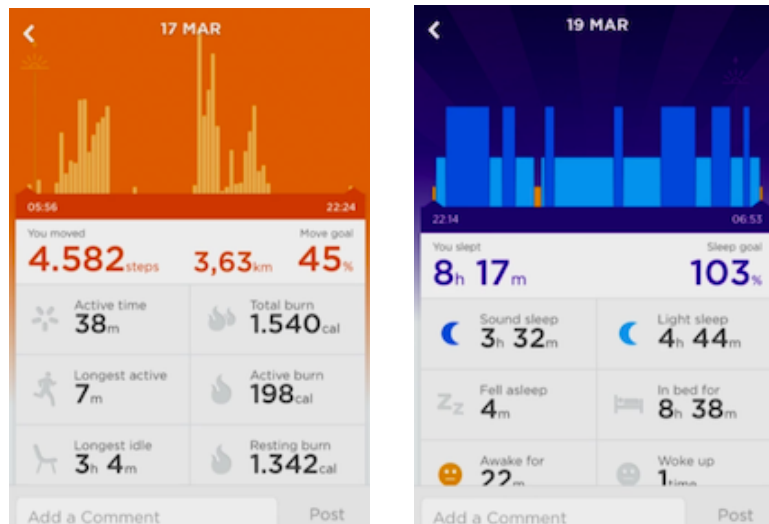


Image 7 and 8: Jawbone data. Source: Melody Howse, Film „Mile“ – in this volume

Howse became an active member of the community and for her participant observation wore a 'Jawbone - Up24" wristband herself which tracked her movements and sleep patterns. Her short film is a poetic ethnography of the new cultural practices forming around such wearable technology and gives insights into the trend of tracking fitness and measuring the body. What is surprising about this community is the complete absence of a deeper discourse or private problems. Melody Howse discovers and describes an apparently apolitical sphere and her film shows us how people construct their own very private, enclosed and highly individualistic parallel worlds that obviously constitute the real world for millions of people. Or, as a member of 'Daily Mile' framed it during one of her interviews: 'exercise is my perfect getaway from all the chaos in my life'.

Jóhanna Björk Sveinbjörndóttir's research findings are based on a participatory smartphone video ethnography with children in Kulusuk, East Greenland. The short video stories which the children of Kulusuk created with their smartphones in a workshop with the anthropologist reveal interesting and surprising insights into the life of children in a small village in East Greenland. Furthermore, the videos they produced with their devices establish a new arena for storytelling in Greenland that is completely mediated by mobile technology. Besides participatory mobile video-

ethnography Johanna Björk Sveinbjörndóttir used digital mental mapping techniques to draw a lively image of the village and the children of Kulusuk.

Lola Abrera's video *Virtual Balikbayan Box* is a fascinating collaborative film project about the experiences of female OFWs who work as caregivers or domestic workers abroad. A "Balikbayan box" is a kind of a care package, a corrugated box overseas Filipinos send to their loved ones containing presents and sundry goods that 'constitute a performance of diasporic intimacy' (Composano 2012: 84). These boxes are the prime symbol for the transnational existence many Filipino families share. Arbrera invited the participants of her film to contribute through mobile phone video diaries, pictures, artworks, and even Facebook messages sent to the Virtual Balikbayan Box Facebook page. Her aim was to empower these migrant mothers by giving them the opportunity to share their stories on their own terms. The result is a film that makes tangibly manifest what it means to leave one's own children behind to look after the children of others.

Chris Phillips conducted his research amongst users of Grindr, a gay dating application. With his research, he tried to answer the question how connecting online – either with the use of dating portals or mobile apps – affects the way people interact sexually. Chris Phillips discovered that the erotic self-portrait, taken with the smartphone or a webcam (the so-called 'Selfie'), is a central means of communication within these new dating apps. Phillips' research demonstrates, that the app's users always behave with regards to an 'interactive situation' (Goffmann 1985). They choose from a set of possible actions, expressions and symbols and make some information about themselves available to other users in order to sustain an image of themselves with the final aim to meet for a sexual encounter. Phillips finds that public profiles on hook-up devices can be understood as a public performative space and a vital part of digital-self-representation.

Kin-Lok Wong's film *The Voice of the People* documents how the protests of the 'Umbrella Movement' in Hong Kong have inspired new forms of resistance in online communities. Wong interviews various activists who use humor and satire to raise their voice politically within the virtual realm.

Teresa **Tiburcio Jiménez** explores in her research aspects of *techno-political activism in the Spanish movement against housing evictions*. She participated offline during meetings in Madrid and conducted qualitative structured and semi-structured interviews online on the digital *Plataforma de Afectados contra la Hipoteca* (PAH - movement of mortgage victims) Tiburcio demonstrates with her research in which

ways the current economic and political crisis in Spain is reflected online in the creation of specific platforms of groups affected by housing evictions and how such activities in the online space become an active coping strategy.

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