Inhabiting Digital Environments:
Social Influencers, Virtual Reality, and Digital Immigrants.

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This latest issue of the Journal of Visual and Media Anthropology presents four articles and five ethnographic short-film productions that are the outcome of timely and original digital ethnography research. A range of papers and films examine the important issue of influence in the social media realm, for example scientists communicating via Twitter (Ben Boteler's essay), or Italian beauty bloggers trying to make a living off YouTube (Arianna Marin's paper). Further, two films by Luiza Geraldi Folegatti and Leandro Goddinho focus on contemporary forms of digital activism. They convey how HIV-positive YouTubers and Brazilian Drag Kings use social media in order to raise awareness, fight prejudices and seek to influence public debate.

Another group of research projects explores the influence of virtual communities on the physical realm. Emily Leshner's film focuses on the Facebook group of a Brooklyn neighborhood and their successes in, for example, fighting gentrification. In a similar vein, Luiza Folegatti's film and research explore bonds forged etween drag kings in Brazil through sharing skills and information relating to their performance and alternate identities in this virtual space.

The remaining research projects then explore what Marc Presky (2001) has termed "digital immigration": María Bethania's experimental research project targets specifically the generation who grew up in an analogue world and thus had to "migrate" into the digital present and investigates the use of Instagram in that age-group. Brittany Nugent's article analyses smartphones as tools for imagination and memory for a particularly vulnerable group of users who are migrants both in the physical and the virtual sense, namely young female asylum-seekers in Athens, Greece. And the final article by Melody Koebler, based on interviews with VR developers, evokes a possible "post-private" future we might possibly migrate to sooner than we expect.

Abstracts of the Articles and Films

Ben Boteler's paper *Scientists and Twitter: How does this group of fact-finding professionals use Twitter?* investigates the use of social media by professionals within the scientific community in order to communicate to different audiences. In particular, Twitter has become a popular social medium of choice for many scientists looking to reach

vast audiences through simple and quick means. Limiting communication to 140 character Tweets means professionals must select and narrow down their message to the most essential information before disseminating to followers. The benefit of quick and ease comes with the cost of potential information loss or possible miscommunication of the intended message. Yet the numbers of users on Twitter make it a very attractive option for anyone looking to spread information.

Arianna Marin's article *YOUTUBING THE WAY UP: The Struggle for Economic Independence of Italian YouTubers in the Beauty Industry* explores the video platform's particular attraction not only to those dreaming of becoming online stars, but also to those who aim to access wealth by broadcasting themselves. The question posed here is: does YouTube really offer unprecedented chances of accessing wealth? Based on a three-month online ethnographic study, this article analyses the experience of five Italian beauty bloggers, who run small to middle-sized YouTube channels. Through interviews and online observation, the research sheds light on the resources and methods employed to climb the ladder of success on YouTube, and how this platform is being used as a tool to escape unemployment and economic marginalisation. By investigating qualitatively the YouTubers' hopes, struggles and achievements, this article questions the democratic potential of YouTube, as well as the power dynamics generated within it.

Luiza Geraldi Folegatti's *King On, Brasil!* is a short documentary featuring six Brazilian Drag Kings and their use of social media to share their work, knowledge and performances which in turn strengthen their community. The video consists of screen cast footage of uploaded videos and Skype interviews while they are involved in the transformation process of becoming their character selves. Thus, the film offers insight into strategies of representation, personal experience, and processes of exposure and acceptance.

Since the 1980's the HIV virus, specifically affecting gay men, remains strongly stigmatized within the LGBTQ community. Leandro Goddinho Nery Gomes' film *Positive YouTubers* follows four Brazilian HIV positive men who created *YouTube* channels to talk openly and positively about their status. They are digital activists spreading a new message about the experience of living with the virus. They attempt to show their followers that HIV is no longer a death sentence. Sharing their daily lives they have created a sense of community amongst themselves and online where people are encouraged to interact, learn and exchange their knowledge, worries, and doubts about a subject matter that remains taboo.

Emily Leshner's film *Linked: The Influence of Virtual Communities on Physical Spaces* examines how social media and virtual communities, like *Facebook*, can influence the physical environments in which they are situated and which they represent. It follows the

experiences of four residents of Prospect Lefferts Gardens, a neighborhood located in Brooklyn, New York. The residents belong to a *Facebook* group where members discuss community-related issues, share information about retail establishments, as well as advertise events, goods and services. In the film, the residents share individual perspectives on how their neighborhood, and their perception of it, is linked with their membership to the *Facebook* group. The general sense from residents is that the virtual group positively influences their perception of the physical space around them. It facilitates an awareness of developments and debates occurring in the neighborhood, which residents say foster a deep sense of connection to their community. Many residents rely on the *Facebook* group to get involved in local events, some of which have directly shaped their experience of their environment. The film includes the case study of a locally beloved bakery threatened with eviction. Community activists used the *Facebook* group to galvanize support to ultimately help in securing a new lease. Several other examples, including those that portray the group's influence in less positive ways are addressed to emphasize that virtual communities, particularly those which occupy a coterminous relationship to a physical space, can have a strong impact on their physical and social landscapes.

María Bethania Medina Padrón's project *Do you feel me? Tales from the front of the 'latergramers'* tackles the question how non-digital natives, also known as *digital- immigrants* use the social network *Instagram.* The educator and author Marc Presky coined the term *digital-immigrant* in 2001, describing this group as old world-settlers, who had lived in the analogue age and immigrated to the digital world. The short film focuses on a group of both male and female adults between 33 and 37 years from Argentina and Venezuela. The experimental approach explores how the respective interviewees reflects on their use of *Instagram,* whilst they are simultaneously logged in and use the platform. Two specific approaches of participant observation were applied alongside semi-structured interviews. The first approach encouraged participants to record their faces trained to the device during several hours of a regular day in order capture and subsequently observe their gestures, frequency, and use of the app. The second simultaneous approach was a screen-cast recording of the devices (mobile phone and tablet) of the researcher, while she enters the app, to observe and analyze the accounts of the subjects.

The smartphone has become an invaluable tool for migration. Brittany Nugent's piece *Asylum Imaginary Smartphones as Tools for Imagination and Memory at a Network for Migrant Women in Athens, Greece* shows how applications like Facebook, Viber and WhatsApp connect a significant portion of the 62,000 refugees suspended in the "limbo state" of Greece with loved ones back home and in Northern European asylum destinations as they navigate next steps. Inspired by the work of Benedict Anderson, Nugent applies his *Imagined Communities* to the digital age, investigating how smartphones influence the way members of the Melissa Network, a resource and

advocacy center run by and for migrant women in Athens, relate to migration, home and their future host nations. In a climate of deep uncertainty, she explores how the traits of desired asylum states are imagined, portrayed and communicated on mobile devices, transforming senses of belonging as destinations are experienced digitally outside the boundaries of their geographical contexts. Mobility propels migration and smartphones, and Nugent's research addresses the intersection of these forces as neoliberal policies continue to redefine technology and citizenship.

The final essay in this collection, Michelle Melody Koebler's *Engineering the Future: Exploring self-reflexive thoughts in the virtual reality developer community and their considerations of privacy issues that will shape its future* examines privacy concerns associated with contemporary virtual reality (VR) usage, and reveals issues identified by VR developers that could have long lasting impact on society and culture. The recent emergence of consumer VR technology like Head Mounted Displays (HMDs) from *Oculus Rift* and *HTC Vive* boast sensors and fidelity that finally achieve the long anticipated promise of 'full immersion' marking an exciting moment in VR history. This has brought forth a host of compelling VR experiences for users and creative opportunities for developers. The very near future holds more dramatic technologic innovations that will permit VR developers to incorporate sophisticated biometric data analysis into their creations allowing for enhanced immersion through the monitoring of individual users. Real-time feedback will provide unique and custom-tailored VR experiences. The additional implementation of such biometric technology not only has the potential to impact the way we interact with virtual reality, but can have other far reaching implications. Online and offline ethnographic fieldwork conducted with participants from the VR developer community provides insight into what the future of virtual reality may hold for users and society at large. The information presented in this paper gives a voice to members of the VR developer community which has largely been muffled inside a VR community echo chamber. This innovative research sets the groundwork for future anthropological observation and analysis related to contemporary VR and begins the modern day conversation about the VR's impact on sociality, meaning making, lived experience and power structures.