

Smartphone-based visual normativity: Approaches from digital anthropology and communication studies

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Abstract

In this special issue, we would like to take this opportunity to demonstrate the value and strength of a conversation between digital anthropology and communication studies around the topic of visual communication and the use of the smartphone.

Keywords

Visual communication, anthropology, smartphones, normativity, comparative study

In this special issue, we would like to take this opportunity to demonstrate the value and strength of a conversation between digital anthropology and communication studies around the topic of visual communication and the use of the smartphone. Personally, such a conversation started from September 2016 during a lecture tour¹ in China based on our then freshly released project ‘Why We Post’ (see below) with the lecture title ‘The Anthropology of Global Social Media’. On that trip, most of our audience were scholars and students in the field of communication and media studies. For many of them, social media is a ‘natural’ topic of media study, and they may have found it difficult to imagine what anthropology might contribute to a study of social media, especially given anthropology was still largely viewed as restricted to ethnic and minority studies in China. Part of the reason for our tour was to challenge this stereotype of anthropology.

We suggested that anthropology is even more essential today than prior to the rise of digital technologies. Our tradition of long-term ethnographic studies is vital because it gives time to build

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trust to be accepted within the private spaces where we can directly observe people using social media. This creates both depth and breadth, allowing us to interpret the consequences of social media holistically in the context of all that we are learning about people's offline lives. As a result, we received many follow-up questions about this methodology of digital anthropology as an approach to understanding today's digital world, which further convinced us that a long-term interdisciplinary conversation would be fruitful.

Anthropology has two main tasks: to understand what it is to be human and to examine how humanity is manifested differently in the diversity of culture. As a discipline, the inception of anthropology lay in studies of small-scale societies, which were regarded as traditional and often wrongly assumed to change slowly, if at all. By contrast, most people regard the digital as symptomatic of the fast-changing nature of contemporary societies. Within digital anthropology, we fully accept that society changes rapidly, and in many cases also did so in the past. Most important is our approach to ethnography as 'holistic contextualisation'. This may be what is most different from studies that are devoted to particular topics, such as media studies, internet studies and communication studies. Even when our primary topic is online communication, most of our actual observation will be about the offline worlds of the people we are studying because our main approach to explaining why people behave in particular ways is through an emphasis upon context. This means that we are not trying to theorise online life in and of itself but rather see this as a component part of our understanding the lives of contemporary people within which the online and offline are inextricably interwoven. This holistic approach means that we also expect more contradictions in how people act, for example, that what they do may be quite different from what they say they do, which is why we also stress direct observation rather than surveys or questions about digital practices.

In the book *Digital Anthropology*² (Horst & Miller, 2012), the term digital is defined as 'all that which can be ultimately reduced to binary code, but which produces a further proliferation of particularity and difference' (Horst & Miller, 2012, p. 3). We argue that the digital is not an abstraction but rather the creation of a plethora of quite concrete forms and processes. Furthermore, these are always encountered in the context of their use and consequences for some particular population, which means they become subject to cultural differentiation. For example, as papers in this special issue show, we can generalise that the digital leads to new forms of visibility that were previously unimaginable. But at the same time, we argue that these will take different forms and mean different things to people in Brazil, China and Japan. Seen from an anthropological perspective, it is the diversity and contradictions of the digital visual forms that become prominent.

The reason why we insist on this form of holistic ethnography is simply that it is truer to people's actual lives. Nobody lives just online, so to understand their involvement with digital technologies, you may need to know about the structure of their family, their religious beliefs, their economic position, what gives them status or pleasure. Since these are general ethnographies of populations, our emphasis will also be on those forms of digital culture that have become more ubiquitous, such as social media and smartphones. This lies behind the expectation that the ethnographer spends at least a year living alongside the population being studied.

In the everyday lives of our participants, there is rarely any clear divide between their employment of digital technologies and the gradual transformation in their relationship to prior communication media alongside other aspects of their lives. So digital anthropology builds upon an established approach to the anthropology of media. Fortunately, [Pertierra, 2018](#) has recently provided an excellent overview of the dialogue between the anthropology of media and media studies more generally.

We believe the journal *Global Media and China* is an ideal place to present such a research endeavour also because the core concerns of this journal align with our strong beliefs in comparison – a

better understanding of China will be attained via global comparisons. As authors, we have worked together for many years. Wang was born in China and her two long-term ethnographies were conducted in China, while Miller has developed his interest mainly through supervision. For example, he currently supervises five PhD students from China on topics ranging from ByteDance to period tracking apps and e-commerce. So, we both recognise that as a major global force in digital technologies, China is shaping and being shaped by digital technologies at a breath-taking speed and scale. Today's China holds many digital records, from the most internet users to the largest smartphone market in the world. But figures and successful business cases can only provide us with one perspective on the complicated digital landscape and digital ecology in China. A comprehensive understanding of Digital China requires a contextualised knowledge of its people and society as well as the comparison with other societies.

Defined as 'the comparative study of cultural and social life' (Eriksen 2001: 4), anthropology has its traditional commitment to comparison as methodology. Having said so, as we argued in an earlier article on contemporary comparative anthropology (Miller et al. 2019), this has mostly led to very diverse studies of particular populations but not necessarily to as much direct comparison as might have been anticipated. If anything, the fear of losing the specificity derived from the inevitable parochialism of studies has led to a neglect of this claimed commitment to comparison. Also, in the past, it was logistically difficult to make such comparisons until after ethnographers had returned from their fieldwork. Fortunately, over the past 9 years (since 2012), thanks to grants from European Research Council, we³ have had the unprecedented opportunity to conduct two global scale simultaneous anthropological comparative studies on the use and consequences of digital technologies.

The first of these, called 'Why We Post', was an anthropological study of the use and consequences of social media around the world. The project consisted of nine simultaneous 15-month ethnographies, including one of the new factory towns (Wang, 2016) and a rural town in China (McDonald, 2016), a town on the Syrian–Turkish border (Costa, 2016), low-income settlements in Brazil (Spyer, 2017) and Chile (Haynes, 2016) an IT complex set between villages in South India (Venkatraman, 2017), small towns in south Italy (Nicolescu, 2016) and Trinidad (Sinanan, 2017) and a village in England (Miller, 2016). In the comparative book *How the World Changed Social Media* (Miller et al., 2016), we demonstrated the ways people in different societies appropriated, or recreated, the social media and the sophisticated social media practices that can only be explained by a holistic and contextualised knowledge of people's daily life. Through the lens of ethnographic comparison, we also demonstrated that the differences between the two field sites within mainland China could be as big, if not bigger, as the differences between China and these other countries.

This 'Why We Post' project was comparative from the beginning, with team members exchanging and discussing fieldwork reports every month during the ethnographies. The same comparative model was then applied to our second project, the 'Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing' (ASSA), which would focus on the social consequences of the use of smartphones among older people globally (with the following fieldsites: Al-Quds/East Jerusalem, Brazil, Cameroon, Chile, China, Ireland, Italy, Japan and Uganda). Three of the authors of the papers in this special issue come from the ASSA project. The project developed a more general and theoretical approach to the smartphone itself based on terms such as 'The Transportal Home' and 'Beyond Anthropomorphism' as well as focussing upon the impact of smartphones on older people and their health (Miller et al., 2021).

Through the ASSA project, we have been able to develop clearer exemplification of the complementary relationship between communication studies and anthropology. The ethos of this project exemplifies an approach called 'smart-from-below' (Pype, 2017). We argue that smartphones represent a profound change in the locus of creativity when it comes to digital technologies.

The smartphone is amenable to considerable transformation by users, who may delete or add apps, change settings and create content. As a result, it is often ordinary people who develop creative and ingenious ways of adapting their smartphones to develop helpful solutions to problems associated with ageing, health and social relations more generally. So instead of top-down solutions, the ‘smart’ created by developers, we try to learn from our observations of how users themselves have made their smartphones ‘smart’. We then collate, analyse and disseminate what has thereby been gained from such research.

We also argue that the use of the smartphone should be examined as factors in social transformations and the development of new social norms. For example, as observed in the field site Cameroon, the online world facilitated by the use of the smartphone has become the place where the emerging middle class create their ‘public sphere’ (Habermas, 1989) which is characterised by intense political discussion. The emergence of a smartphone-based public sphere suggests both continuities and discontinuities. While in Ireland, a reversal of past attitudes to same-sex marriage, divorce and co-habitation have led to newly established norms, and we found that people’s use of smartphone embodies these liberal and secular values (Garvey & Miller, 2021).

In addition to this anthropological emphasis on emerging social norms, a particular focus on this volume is visual materials. In their comparison between England and Trinidadian postings on Facebook, Miller and Sinanan (2017) make two points that are further developed in these papers. The first is the importance of comparison and thereby cultural relativism – for example, if we compare what happens when someone becomes a mother. In England, we found that new mothers typically disappeared from their Facebook profile, replacing themselves with the image of their infant, while in Trinidad, they did the exact opposite, posting attractive images of themselves that show they are not just a mother.

The second point is that posting remains highly normative. English men typically post images about beer while English women post images about wine. In a similar manner, if we examine what the migrant factory workers studied by Wang (2016) posted on QQ, they may be a new and marginal population, but their postings remained normative, with a clearly gendered ‘visual grammar’ on how to look ‘cool’ and ‘modern’, such as men posting about fast cars and women about European-style weddings. These visual norms both constrain what these migrants are supposed to post, but also provide a kind of collective security around their new sense of identity. These two points are central to the papers presented here. For instance, in Brazil, the new norms of a healthy ‘third age’ find clear visual expression in people’s posting on their social profiles and WhatsApp groups. In China and Japan, the evolving visual normativity in interpersonal interaction via the smartphone is manifested in the highly sophisticated appropriation of social media (WeChat/Line) stickers.

The starting point for the four papers in this special issue is that social media and smartphones have made human communication more visual as the complement to textual and oral communication. As these four papers demonstrate, this visual component has important consequences, such as the increased capacity for the expression of emotions and self-representation. On the other hand, it is important to recognise the potential constraints such visual normativity imposes upon people in daily practice, for example, the standardising aesthetics of smartphone photography and the emerging social norms surrounding ‘age’ through image consumption and circulation on social media.

The four papers also work together to create a comparative dimension. Li’s paper (2021) ‘*The Media Image of Chinese Older People: from stigmatic stereotype to diverse self-representation*’ presents a substantial content/visual analysis of the WeChat public account ‘*zhiqing wang*’, which is popular among older people in China. The case study illustrates the discrepancy between the image of older people presented via mainstream media and self-representation among the older people themselves. This issue around the image of old age in Li’s paper (2021) creates an intriguing

comparison with Duque's paper (2020) '*Performing healthy ageing through images: from broadcasting to silence*', which is focused on the negotiation of the images of old age among older people in Brazil through WhatsApp. Li's paper (2021) discusses the impact of the use of smartphone upon the changing discourse of ageing, while Duque's paper (2020) investigates the discourse of ageing as a daily practice via the smartphone and how the use of the device is both a means and an end.

As Grimshaw (2001, p. 7–8) argues, rather than being 'read' as a particular kind of literature, anthropology can be 'seen' as a project of visual imagination. Visualisation has always been a component of ethnographic enquiry, and the visual has long acted as a vital prism for a wide range of anthropological concerns. As Yang (2021) points out in his paper, compared to Euro-American societies, smartphone photography in China has its own unique features, partly as the consequences of the restricted access to international social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram. It is necessary to interrogate smartphone photography through 'a lens incorporating the dynamics between this ubiquitous, worldwide practice and its indigenous, non-Western appropriations' (Yang, 2021).

The social side of smartphone photography is a significant extension of traditional photography. In the recently released comparative book of ASSA project *The Global Smartphone: beyond a youth Technology*, we suggest that 'perpetual opportunism' is one of the key properties of the smartphone: 'Simply because the smartphone is always with us, it creates the possibility of being opportunistic as a constant. But what matters is the evidence that this possibility is appreciated by users, who in turn develop a more opportunistic attitude to their everyday lives' (Miller et al., 2021, p. 104). Not only is the sheer number of images that people take, circulate, exhibit and store once they possess smartphones unprecedented, but so is the ability of the device to transform people's relationship to the image. Through this perpetual opportunism, smartphone photography significantly extends trends already evident during the shift from analogue to digital photography (idid., p. 107).

Yang's paper (2021) explores how sociality and technology intertwine and interact, producing a thriving, everyday landscape of social media photography. The visual phenomenon manifested in the rise of 'professional amateurs' in Yang's paper (2021) continues a conversation with the traditional concern within the anthropology of photography in terms of photographic agency and the visual construction of class and taste (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984; Larson, 2008; Pinney, 1997). On a related note, Li's paper (2021) touches on another form of emerging visual agency: that of WeChat public accounts due to the proliferation of WeChat social media in China. Li's paper (2021) also represents a new approach to visual production and consumption in the digital public sphere, where seemingly public dissemination is confined, in practice, to audiences of a certain age group.

If the first two papers focus upon on institutionalised visual practices and visual representation within an emerging public sphere, then the last two papers (Duque, 2020; Wang & Haapio-Kirk, 2021) zoom in to bring a focus on visual practices at a personal level, drawing on ethnographic accounts of vernacular visual production and consumption via the smartphone in Brazil, China and Japan. These two papers showcase the role smartphone-mediated images take in evolving social identity, personhood and self-expression. For example, Wang and Haapio-Kirk (2021) widen this discussion of visual communication beyond photography through their examination of the role of the emotional labour accomplished through stickers, which can convey that which is difficult to put into words. Together, these four papers help us to appreciate how the current concern with multiple, relational and affective meanings in visual communication via the smartphone are not simply the result of new technology but are embedded in the production of social norms and life meanings within social practice. As a whole, they showcase the arc of anthropology's embrace and subsequent move away from 'traditional' photography, while at the same time demonstrating continuities in the way anthropology understands the society and sociality through visual normativity.

In terms of research methodology, papers in this special issue also showcase the potential of interdisciplinary research on the use of smartphones. Li's paper (2021) tackles a classic research question about 'media image' in media and communication research and also draws on quantitative research methods in media studies. Meanwhile, Wang's 16-month ethnography fieldwork in Shanghai had also come across similar WeChat public accounts, including the 'zhiqing wang' in question. Wang's ethnography then provides contextual explanation for the popularity of those WeChat public accounts among older people in China. As a result, Wang's ethnographic observations could be included in Li's paper to further interpret the latter's quantitative data. This collaboration is suggestive of the ways in which it is possible to combine the strengths of both communication studies and digital anthropology, even at the later stage of writing up.

Overall, then, we welcome the opportunity to consider the wider relationship between the contribution of an emergent digital anthropology and the well-established disciplines of media and communication studies, not just through comparisons and contextualisation in writing up but potentially through highly integrated collaborations that are developed in tandem, perhaps particularly in relation to the two issues exemplified in these four papers – the importance of cultural comparison and understanding the emergence of normative practices.

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Notes

1. During that lecture tour (September 13–23, 2016), Miller and Wang visited nine universities in mainland China and Hong Kong: Hong Kong University, Baptist University, The Chinese university of Hong Kong, Sun Yat-sen University, Peking University, Chinese Academy of Social Science, Communication University of China, Shanghai New York University and Fudan University.
2. The Chinese edition of *Digital Anthropology* was translated by Xinyuan Wang and published by the People's publishing house, 2013.
3. Miller as project PI and Wang as researcher for both projects.

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