Media Migration and its Limits: Lessons from the Emergence of the Pseudo Umwelt

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ABSTRACT: Media migration refers to the practice of moving one's locus of participation and sociality from one medium to another. The reasons for such movements often resemble motivations for traditional physical migration, such as leaving one's former environment due to intolerable circumstances and/or moving toward perceived opportunities. In the case of media migration, participants using a particular medium or platform may find their current media environment counter to their self-actualization. Media migration is arguably an act of optimism, which seeks better circumstances to accomplish interaction and sociality. At the micro level, this paper offers a case study describing why certain early vloggers on YouTube migrated to Twitter, given the changes in the monetized environment of the YouTube platform. At a more macro level, the paper also analyzes the viability of media migration across commercial digital platforms. Examining the social media landscape, concerns are emerging that commercial platforms supporting sociality may share certain properties that complicate an ability to migrate to infrastructures that offer genuinely better participatory opportunities. To explore this issue, the paper introduces the concept of the "pseudo umwelt," or false environment that may result from particular design choices, which provide an illusion of acceptable types of interaction that do not bear out in practice. As many forms of interaction around the world now require online interaction, it is vital to understand how design choices made by private entities are shaping the landscape of all of our professional and social environments.

Introduction

In April of 2022, Elon Musk, the Co-Founder and CEO of Tesla, and the richest man in the world (Perry 2022), announced his intention to acquire Twitter for more than $40 billion (Isaac, Conger, and Hirsch 2022). Founded in 2006, the popular microblogging site of Twitter now sees 229 million daily users (Watercutter 2022). As per the theme of this panel, it is arguably the case that Twitter functions as an important social infrastructure for many users around the world (Burgess and Baym 2020). Infrastructure in this sense refers to structures or systems that support desired goals, such as facilitating flows or exchanges of things and information (Larkin 2013).

Reactions to the acquisition proposal were swift and intense. Musk is known for so called "free speech absolutism" (Tiffany 2022), which for him translates into supporting unfettered forms of speech and eliminating content moderation. He has reportedly "bristled when Twitter has removed posts and barred users," especially those who share his political views (Isaac, Conger, and Hirsch 2022). Supporters of extremist and right-wing speech praised the proposal, while many Twitter employees protested the announcement, given that Twitter bans spam, violent threats, coordinated disinformation campaigns, the sharing of private information, and dis-information about the pandemic. Feeling that the site would soon become unsafe, many Twitter users exhorted others to #blockElonmusk. Some users threatened to leave the site if the deal came through, announcing their intentions through hashtags such as #GoodBye Twitter in April and #TwitterMigration in October of 2022.

After months of twists and turns, including threats by Musk to pull out of the deal, and a Twitter lawsuit aimed to force him to complete the $44 billion acquisition, Musk announced in October that he intended to follow through on his plan (Conger, Hirsch, and Sorkin, 2022). Calling it a "mistake" for Twitter to have barred former President Donald J. Trump from the site, Musk vowed that he would restore Trump to Twitter. According to *The New York Times*, these battles "cratered" its share price, "demoralized its employees" and frightened off advertisers (Conger, Hirsch, and Sorkin, 2022). Reports surfaced that 70,000 Twitter users joined the rival site of Mastodon the day after the deal was finalized (Chadwick 2022).

The recently unfolding events prompted many Twitter users to bemoan the fate of the site, using language of "leaving" and "migration" to describe their plans to try other sites such as Mastodon, Tribel, Discord, and CounterSocial. These threatened exists from Twitter—should they occur—are certainly not the first moments of what I call "media migration" (Lange 2022)

online, nor will they likely be the last. This paper explores examples and ramifications of media migration, in which people move from a social media site that forms a vital nexus of their sociality and online community, to a different infrastructure that provides a new locus of interaction. Such migrations differ from what Madianou and Miller (2012) refer to as "polymedia," which entails switching on and off between many different available media for social purposes. Participants sometimes exhibit a kind of "mediated center of gravity," meaning that they demonstrate strong preferences for particular media, which is tangibly manifested in the provisionally permanent dismissal of some tools in favor of adopting new tools and platforms (Lange 2014: 20).

People who migrate are seeking new and better opportunities for quality of life. But does our overall current media landscape offer realistic prospects for such aspirational migration, or are we simply moving from one site to another only to face similar or even greater risks? In the remainder of this paper, I will define media migration, describe one past case study, and explore the challenges of media migration by using the framework of what I call the "pseudo umwelt," or false locus of perceived safety around individuals. The pseudo umwelt provides a useful framework for analyzing what it means to engage in media migration in the present moment, in which companies and billionaires are taking over vast swathes of the internet. The paper will conclude with a recommendation to think civically and politically about how we wish the internet landscape of sociality to take form henceforth, and what role the idea of migration plays in our envisioned, communicative infrastructures.

Definitions and Histories

Migration has been defined in the anthropological literature as a "one-way residential relocation to a different 'environment'" (Beekman and Christensen 2011). I define media migration (Lange 2022) as instances in which people stop using media or leave an online site that was previously a crucial part of their sociality or perceived means of self-actualization to intensively use or focus on a different site. Initially, it may seem that there is little similarity between physical and media migration given the intense circumstances of leaving one's home. However, the literature on traditional physical migration suggests that, although migration under duress clearly still occurs, leaving because of poverty, conflict, or environmental threat no longer constitutes the majority of reasons that prompt many people to migrate (Castles, De Haas, and Miller, 2014: 5). Scholars have found that as people's situation improves, such as through education, people's aspirations and capabilities to migrate also increase (Castles, De Haas, and Miller, 2014). Although there are obvious differences in terms of the physicality and financial ramifications between the two, there are also important similarities. For example, people engaged in media migration and geographical migration often exhibit a wish for self-actualization and/or strong motivations for leaving a prior social environment. At times they also both demonstrate a longing to return to a physical place or media site, at least nostalgically (Lange 2019).

Instances of online community members becoming disillusioned or disturbed by the management or environment of a site, and then leaving permanently, have occurred since at least the early 1990s, although researchers and participants did not use the term "migration" to characterize this movement (Rheingold 2000). My chapter "Media Migration" (Lange 2022) in the forthcoming volume, *The Routledge Companion to Media Anthropology* (Costa et al. 2022) contains a lengthier description of the landscape of media migration in digital environments,

including how the term "media migration" may be applied in past and current contexts, including technology migrations (Bourreau, Cambini, and Dogan 2011) and "digital diaspora" (Boellstorff 2008; Pearce 2009). In this paper, I wish to focus on dimensions and complications of media migration amid our current ever-consolidating, interactional, online landscape.

My interest in this topic emerged during a multi-year study of early vloggers on YouTube. Study participants were very interested in using the site for sociality, as well as to communicate their message through videos and to improve their craft (Lange 2019). Many study participants eventually became disenchanted with YouTube given the site's intense monetization efforts (Lange 2017). In 2007, a vlogger friend told me about Twitter, which I immediately joined. She said that many people were using it more than YouTube to connect with vlogging friends. In recording interviews for my ethnographic film *Hey Watch This! Sharing the Self Through Video* (2020), I asked YouTubers about whether or not they considered the fact that they had intensified their Twitter use, while vastly decreasing their YouTube postings, as a "migration." Their answers were varied. While some were reluctant to see the transfer of usage as a migration, others admitted that their intensity of YouTube had declined, given YouTube's competitive, extremist, and advertisement-laden atmosphere. One video blogging participant who mostly vlogged on her own vlog outside of YouTube, told me that vlogging felt less "live" and it was easier to make more temporally vibrant connections with friends using Twitter.

To investigate this question further, I supplemented comments from interviews with an examination of usage patterns during a three-month period (February – May 2020) on the YouTube and Twitter accounts that study participants on YouTube had made known to me during the research. Out of 55 interviewees whom I continued to follow on social media as of May 2020, none of them posted more videos than they had posted Tweets, suggesting a shift in

their social media use. About 25 interviewees exhibited an even distribution between videos and Tweets. Usually those who distributed such evenness were actually posting very little on either site (basically less than 5 videos and 5 Tweets during the three-month period of data collection). Conversely, about 20 interviewees did post demonstrably more Tweets than videos, often with the ratio being significant, such as 50-100 Tweets but less than 5 videos, or sometimes even 0 videos in the three-month period. Even taking into account that it is obviously far easier to post a Tweet than to craft a video according to vlogging standards, the weightings still suggested either a decline in use of both sites, or an actual migration away from YouTube toward Twitter. One woman who admitted in my documentary that YouTube was most likely on its way out in terms of social uses of the site, posted only three videos in May 2020, having not posted anything to her YouTube account in the prior 5 years. In contrast, she tweeted 58 times between February and May 2020. One YouTuber actually did vastly decrease his usage, but also expressed reluctance to characterize the move as a migration. This reluctance to see his usage decline as a migration away from YouTube speaks to the emotional investment many interviewees had not just to YouTube as a platform or infrastructure, but feeling it more as a "state of mind" in terms of wanting to hold onto a perceived set of democratic and social possibilities of video sharing (Lange 2019).

The Pseudo Umwelt

Media migration is arguably an optimistic act. The presumption both for physical migration and media migration is that things will be better elsewhere. Social media serves as a kind of connective and emotional infrastructure for contemporary sociality around the world (Miller et al. 2016). Thus it is important to understand the overall landscape of possibility, and to explore

what it means to leave one technological infrastructure as social nexus for another. For example, what if the next site that people migrate to is at first acceptable but somewhere along the line, suddenly changes in deleterious ways, after a participant has built up a following or vast network of connections? What if the new site feels less safe in terms of encountering hate speech and aggressive trolling? What kinds of lenses might we turn to, in order to understand how participants decide where to go, and what to expect once they get there?

One such framework draws from literature lying at the crossroads of biology, anthropology, and semiotics. This is the idea of the umwelt, which refers to a real but also conceptual protective bubble (Von Uexküll, J. 2001 [1936]) that surrounds and moves with living beings, through which dangers may be detected through sensual perception. When we detect a danger through use of our senses, such as a troll online, we can take steps to avoid such dangers.

However, not all threats are detectable by the human senses (Beck 1992 [1986]), and lack of accurate perception may yield a kind of false sense of security about what is deemed safe or even acceptable in terms of one's surroundings, including online interaction. When dangers cannot be detected, participants in online groups are dealing with what I refer to here as a "pseudo umwelt" or environment that contains inadvertently hidden or deliberately obscured threats to one's well-being. In a pseudo umwelt, the signals one uses to assess danger may be obscured, and one may think they are safer than circumstances warrant. Lippman (1921) long ago defined "pseudo-environments," as media representations of complicated political landscapes that essentially produced fictions. He was referring to collectives such as nations making political decisions amid unknowable information. Although both ideas share concerns about media manipulation, the idea of the "pseudo umwelt" is inspired by biology and semiotics, and refers to how individuals conceptualize their immediate environments and interactional limits of safety.

Sets of confusing and lengthy terms of service, for example, create a pseudo umwelt. Many people many never read them, or truly understand them if they do read them, thus crafting an impression of a participatory environment that a user does not know about or understand, but which may be deleterious to them. Many online participants know that data is collected about them on social media and shopping sites, and that this data is used to sell them products. However, security experts claim that some companies use techniques that are designed to "trick" users into unintentionally activating data tracking (Horton 2021). Scholars argue that contemporary data collection is not only used to sell us things but to manipulate beliefs, thoughts, and ideas about reality (Zuboff 2019).

Without an ability to meaningfully understand surrounding threats, how is it possible to make judgements about our online environments? It is time to recognize that we are not operating in an umwelt of safety but rather moving through a series of interconnected pseudo umwelten across the internet that contain dangers that are at times obvious but at other times far less so. We collectively need to understand that in some corners, the internet is moving away from functioning as a series of individual "sites" and instead is becoming an infrastructure that is controlled by a small group of large-scale corporations and executives such as Elon Musk. Although it has been severely challenged over the past few decades (Marcus 1995), the anthropological penchant for researching phenomena in terms of sites still orients much anthropological thinking and must continually be revised amid interactional circumstances.

A Connected Infrastructure

The Musk/Twitter debacle has shined a bright light on numerous dimensions of media migration, including what prompts participants to leave, what prompts them to stay, and where

might users choose to go when they perceive dangers in their online umwelten. Even though the deal was solidified a couple of weeks ago, these events are far too new to know whether Twitter users are permanently "leaving" or "migrating" to other social media sites. Indeed, some users have vowed to stay on and fight for their digital rights on the site. What we do know, is that many Twitter users perceived Musk's proposed changes as creating an unsafe environment for their interaction. Their umwelten went into high alert and they began seeking what they perceived to be viable alternatives. They may yet permanently relocate. But for how long? And under what conditions? An umwelt or zone of safety may turn out to be a pseudo umwelt that exhibits an illusion of safety, but contains hidden dangers or at least challenges that participant must navigate that are similar to the sites they recently left. If we wish to ensure some spaces of acceptable online participation, civic action will be required to protect pockets of acceptable forms of interaction, which must be supported with commensurate infrastructures. On October 27, 2022, when Elon Musk took over Twitter, he tweeted, "the bird is freed." But where will it fly to, and what will happen when it arrives?

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