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2017

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/596>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bosio, Dario: Watch Me, I'm Live. Periscope and the "New-Individualistic" Need for Attention. In: Urte Undine Frömming, Steffen Köhn, Samantha Fox u.a. (Hg.): *Digital Environments. Ethnographic Perspectives across Global Online and Offline Spaces*. Bielefeld: transcript 2017, S. 143–155. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/596>.

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Watch Me, I'm Live

Periscope and the “New-Individualistic” Need for Attention

Dario Bosio

INTRODUCTION

I'm on a small boat off the coast of Hawaii, the sky is as blue as the sea, a young girl is playing with a toy whale as she looks at the horizon. Suddenly, in the middle of the blue, a white spurt appears in the middle of the waves some hundreds of meters from us. It's a whale. The girl salutes the animal with an excited shout. I wish I could do the same, but I don't have any other option than typing “WOW” on my smartphone keyboard, even knowing that it will get lost in the flood of comments and hearts that are now streaming across the screen.

I'm not actually on the boat.

I don't know the young girl.

I'm just watching a live video streaming set up by her mother.

A few minutes later, the screen turns black; she signed off.

I'm back at my desk in Florence.

Image 1



“Have you seen any whales yet?” *Periscope* from Hawaii (Grifagno is my username on *Periscope*).

The experience described above, taken from my field notes, is only one among many I had since I started using *Periscope* some weeks ago. *Periscope* is a live video broadcasting app for smartphones that is owned by *Twitter*. It was launched in April 2015 and immediately gathered millions of users.

Periscope and apps alike (i.e. *Meerkat*) allow users to broadcast live directly from their smartphones. A smartphone and a decent internet connection are all one needs to set up a live video broadcast which could potentially reach the entire world. The live visual aspect and the ephemeral nature of the communication (all broadcasts are permanently deleted 24 hours after they end) has radically redesigned the way that people interact with one another on the internet, especially with strangers.

Over a period of three weeks I studied the way that people made use of *Periscope*, focusing on content produced by ordinary people, avoiding enterprises or companies. The aim of the research was to understand what motivates the users of these live broadcasting tools to disclose their intimacy in front of an audience of strangers and what the implications of such behavior could be.

Drawing from existing literature on the phenomenon of personal *vlogs* on *YouTube* by Michael Wesch and studies exploring the incentives of online relationship building (Valentine 2006; Fernback 2007; Turkle 2015), I will discuss how live broadcasting apps like *Periscope* challenge some of these findings and at the same time reinforce and confirm some of the worrisome predictions found in studies on the implications of digital connectivity on real-life relationships.

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT

Given the object of this study, which is a mobile phone app and the types of questions raised during the research, this paper may be of interest to those studying Media and Digital Anthropology, particularly for those focusing on online relationships. During the course of the research, I also found some theoretical tools from the fields of sociology and psychology that were useful to the study.

Research Group

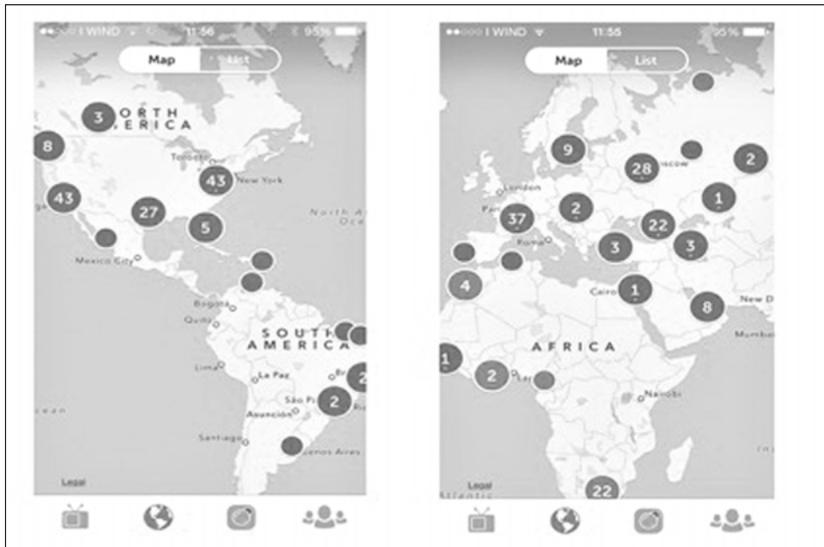
The scope of this study lies in comprehending how ordinary people make use of *Periscope*, and what the reasons are that prompt users to connect with strangers through this particular tool. I considered content produced exclusively by people who were not promoting a brand, a company or a religious movement

and disregarded broadcasts of major news events, even if they were filmed by ordinary (non-affiliated) people.

The research subjects include people that chose to record and broadcast segments of their everyday lives and intimacy while chatting with strangers. Although the focus was not set on any particular age group, due to the app's demographics, the vast majority of the subjects observed were in their teens or twenties.

On account of language barriers, I could only consider broadcasts in English, Italian, French and Spanish. Nonetheless, while *Periscope* has indeed gathered users from all across the globe, most of them are based in Europe, the United States, Russia and Turkey. The *digital divide*; referring to access to fast internet connection or smartphones in Africa or Asia, as well as internet access restrictions and censorship, are among the reasons for the geographical concentration. Maps depicting the phenomenon of the digital divide support this thesis. The correlation between *Periscope* users and geographical areas where broadband internet is widely available is evident.

Image 2



"The Digital Divide". Two screenshots taken from Periscope showing the number of active users. The discrepancy in access between the Northern and Southern hemisphere is evident.

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted through participant observation and short single interviews carried out via *Periscope Chat* whenever possible. I downloaded and signed into *Periscope* through my personal *Twitter* account and made sure to write the reason why I was on *Periscope* on my public profile (“a visual anthropological research”). I logged into *Periscope* on a daily basis over a period of three weeks, sometimes for hours, and observed and interacted with dozens of *scopers* (namely, people broadcasting live video).

In order to fully understand the research methodology and the difficulties I encountered during fieldwork, it is necessary to understand how the app works.

After logging in, the user is presented with a world map filled with red and blue dots. Red dots represent the live *scopers* and blue dots the broadcasts that just ended. Broadcasts, or *scopes*, are stored on the system for twenty-four hours and then deleted permanently. Even if some apps like *katch.me* allow users to save the *scopes* that they watched on their hard drive, my research suggested that this practice is not very widespread.¹

By clicking on a red dot on the map, you are presented with a live *scope*. The smartphone replicates what the camera of the *scoper's* smartphone is recording. Other elements on the screen include: a text box at the bottom where the user can type in text to chat with the *scoper*, a series of balloons with text streaming on the left (chat messages) and a stream of hearts floating on the right of the screen from bottom to top. The hearts represent the equivalent of *Facebook likes* in *Periscope*: users give hearts to show their appreciation for the *scoper* or for what they have broadcasted. The entire interaction is live, meaning that once the *scope* ends, the users are no longer able to chat with the *scoper* nor with the other users; the screen turns black and the window closes.

The ephemeral nature of the *scopes*, together with the fact that there is no thematic search engine inside *Periscope* other than the aforementioned world map made it difficult to narrow down the focus of the research. I followed some *scopers* whose broadcast I knew fit the research topic, however I generally found myself jumping from *scope* to *scope* hoping to find something valuable, guided only by the user's short title descriptions (which, in many cases, were misleading).

1 | This ephemeral nature of the content shared replicates a trend that has emerged over the past years since the launch of ephemeral messaging apps like *Snapchat*. Uploading something on the internet no longer means that it will stay there forever. The possibility of replay, which characterized the internet so far, is gradually being abandoned by most recent apps. The implications of this change include the loss of “the possibility of recognition” as theorized by McLuhan: “the amazing thing about replay is that it offers the means of recognition—the first time is cognition the second time is recognition, and the recognition is even deeper.” (Dr Fallon: 2008).

The chat system itself proved to be far from ideal to conduct research given that the questions of the researcher were unnoticed in *scopes* in which more than five or six people were attending; but also because chat messages disappear from the screen after seconds. To cope with this problem, I sometimes joined conversations and used the app like everyone else, trying to find the answers to my questions through participant observation. In a few cases, when the broadcast was attended by less than five people, *scopers* became interested in my research and collaborated in answering questions I had for them. As long as no other *scopers* changed the topic, we conversed about my research.

I observed a few *scopers* reacting negatively when asked about the reasons why they scope, perceiving my question as an attack on their practice. In more than one case in which the *scoper* was asked, "Why do you scope?" They would attack back with answers like "Nobody is forcing you to watch this if you do not want to." or "Do you think that I do not have any friends in real life?" The presence of several *trolls* in the chat also made the research difficult in more than one case.

I would also like to raise some ethical considerations regarding the content of the *scopes* since many of them were broadcasted by teens, sometimes as young as fourteen years old. Regarding this matter, I would like to share the following passage from my field notes:

Every time I started watching the *scope* of a teenager I felt like I should not do it. It feels like I am intruding, invading the kid's privacy and wrong on many different levels. Yet, it is completely legal to do so—it is completely legal that I, as an adult, can watch a teen talking about private matters with his/her peers and showing his/her own room and intimacy, while remaining completely anonymous and silent. This is very dangerous.

In more than one case I stopped the vision of a certain *scope* because I felt uncomfortable with what I was watching, deeming it too "personal" for the public. The manner in which teenagers are using Periscope and the way they perform for the camera—through extensive use of make-up, posing and "cool" clothes—proves that they are very aware of the way they should behave in front of a camera, and that they are expected to play "a heightened version of themselves" (Grindstaff 2012: 27).

Image 3

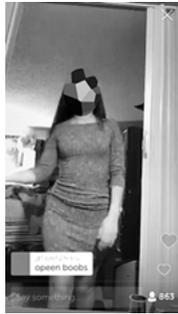


Image 4



“Open Boobs.” A 16 year-old girl is seen performing a dance for the camera, while the anonymous audience asks for her to undress.

Alone together. A group of young women on *Periscope*. Each of them is focused on their smartphone rather than interacting with one another. One of them was watching the same *Periscope* in which she was featured.

In several situations, *scopers* were prompted to undress, especially when the *scoper* was female. In fact, many young people promised nudity in the title of their *scope* in hopes of gathering more users. Given the anonymous nature of the service and the possibility of lying about your age and gender, there are various reasons for concern for underage *scopers* to be regarding what and how much they reveal; the images could easily be captured and used for pornographic purposes. *Periscope*'s terms of use ban nudity and illegal activities like the consumption of drugs. However, due to the sheer volume of *simultaneous scopes*, policing the platform is impossible. Being that most abuse reports come from the users themselves, this remains an open issue.

CONTENT

Periscope co-founder, Kayvon Beykpour, came up with the idea for the app during a trip to Turkey in 2013 when protests were raging in Taksim Square. While he could *read* about what was happening through his *Twitter* feed, he regretted that he could not *see* it. His initial intention for *Periscope* was to be “akin to teleportation, a technology and user experience that lets you be anywhere and witness anything” (Shontell 2015: par. 7).

Despite this intention, however, the vast majority of content being shared on the platform is not about exceptional events. While indeed there are *scopes* that let users see “news as it happens, see sporting events from the sidelines, see behind the scenes of anything official” (ibid: par. 29), these constitute a

very small minority among the thousands of simultaneous broadcasts available at any given moment. Interestingly, most of the broadcasts feature one *scoper* pointing a camera at him/herself in what I would call a *selfie-fashion* while talking to their audience, performing for the camera, answering questions or simply reading aloud what people are writing in the text chat. In most cases, there is no exceptional landscape or relevant events to be shared. My research concluded that most common people are using *Periscope* just to be on camera and talk to strangers, even more so if the situation they find themselves in is too “boring”².

I found a strong similarity between the use of *Periscope* and Turkle’s description of how people are making use of text messages. In describing how people use mobile phones, she writes:

These days so many people—adults and children—become anxious without a constant feed of online stimulation. In a quiet moment, they take out their phones, check their messages, send a text. They cannot tolerate time that some people I interviewed termed “boring” or “dull.” (Turkle 2015: 23)

Most of the *scopes* I watched took place in situations where the broadcaster was bored or had to spend time alone. Sometimes the *scope* would feature groups of friends. In such cases, the people being featured were mostly observed in quiet situations or “killing time” together, and used the app as a way of breaking their boredom. Interestingly, as soon as the camera was rolling, most of them dedicated their entire attention to it - in a way that reminded me of the way we treat newborns, a sort of reverent and absolute attention - with a preference for an abstract and ephemeral relationship as opposed to real life conversations.

Periscope offers its users the possibility of breaking this boredom by providing them with “so many automatic listeners” (ibid.). As soon as you log in and start broadcasting, an audience is available and you no longer have to spend time on your own.

In contrast to text messages that imply a sort of real-life relationship between sender and receiver, the audience on *Periscope* is largely made up of anonymous viewers. Apart from private *scopes*, which can be directed to specific users, public broadcasts can be attended by anyone. The kind of bond between broadcaster and viewer in this sense is a very loose one and practically non-existent. Most of the conversations hardly go beyond simple questions and answers regarding the geographic location of the broadcaster or viewers, comments on one’s appearance or sexually charged requests, particularly if the broadcaster is female.

2 | As evidenced by the numerous scopes with titles like “bored”, “keep me company”, “come in and talk” or similar.

The kind of relationships that are established through *Periscope* confirm previous studies of online communities regarding the type of bond that is created through online social tools, namely the creation of a *connection-without-constraint* (Fernback 2007). The results of my research also concluded that the kind of relationship that users are building is in most cases aimed at filling dull-time and not to create a long-lasting bond.

Similarly, by studying the phenomenon of personal *vlogs* on *YouTube*, a practice that in many cases is similar to these numerous *selfie-scopes*, Wesch defined the kind of bond between viewer and viewed as a “deep and profound but not strong” one, characterized by its being “in most cases completely anonymous, fleeting and ephemeral. It is a diffuse experience of connection; an anonymous hand with the message: You are not alone.” (Wesch 2009: 28). It looks like this fight against loneliness is in many cases what drives people to broadcast their own lives on *Periscope* as well.

In contrast to *Periscope*, *vlogs* on *YouTube* can become very personal and in some cases self-revealing for the subject, given the inherently reflexive nature resulting from the possibility of replay and the non-simultaneous nature of the communicative act (Wesch 2009). *Periscope* lacks the structural tools needed for an introspective conversation with oneself. The fact that there’s an audience watching at the time of the broadcasts puts the *scoper* under a performative pressure that is inherently different from the one experienced by the *vlogger* who can record the same monologue over and over again, watch it, edit it and change it. *Periscope* is live; a fact that puts the *scoper* under the impression of having a certain kind of obligation towards his/her viewers. This becomes evident in the performative nature of many broadcasts. I would like to give a few examples from my field notes:

I am watching an American girl singing in front of the camera - probably before going to bed, it must be 2.30am where she is. She is smoking weed from a glass pipe and singing songs following the requests of the audience. You can hear her friend spitting and vomiting in the other room, calling her. She doesn’t reply, but stays and performs for the camera.

Watched a video by a teenager in France. The title is “prof=pute” (teacher=bitch). They are in class and are filming a helpless young teacher while shouting swear words at her from their desk. Roughly eight hundred people are watching the *scope*. They are suggesting what swear words to shout at the teacher. He follows their suggestions.

Both examples show how users are able to transform a “dull” moment (like the one before going to bed or a high school class) into something possibly more exciting. These also exemplify how important the anonymous audience is in addition to the act of being watched.

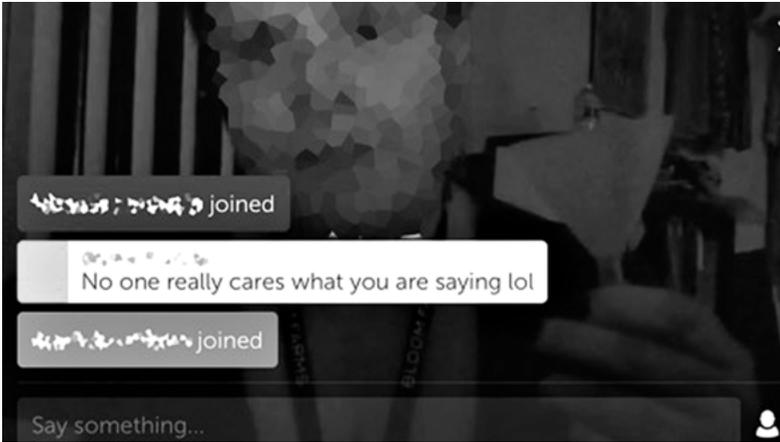
Many broadcasters complain about a lack of viewers during their *scopes*, stressing how important it is that somebody is watching; as though one could get some sort of validation through the very existence of an audience and not through his/her actions. The fact of being watched is satisfactory enough, regardless of the exceptionality of the content. Concerning this point, the triviality of the activities that people chose to broadcast does remind, in some ways, of reality-TV, where ordinary life turns into something exceptional for the mere fact of being broadcasted—and the character's social validation arises from being watched during their daily routine.

If we start conceiving the communicative act happening through *Periscope* as a form of reality-TV, then it becomes easier to understand the shallow nature of the communication and equally as important - the bonds created. As Grindstaff evidenced in her studies of reality-TV, the content of such programs hardly rely on the quality of the communicative act, rather the potential of the transmission function of the media to convey strong messages is hardly taken into consideration. What's at play, instead, is a different set of goals, namely: validation, to be part of the discourse and part of the scene [...] If there [is] a communicative dimension at work here, the communication is 'I exist' rather than 'here's what I think'—the talking body rather than the talking head" (Grindstaff 2012: 31).

This focus on the bodily appearance of the *scopes* might also be one of the reasons why many *scopes*, especially young ones, promise to "flash" (slang for "showing briefly") their intimate parts on camera if they reach a certain number of viewers, a trend that proved to be successful, at least in the words of some of the users I encountered during my research. As a young boy from Italy told me:

Periscope used to be cool, but now it only works if you put in a title like "le esco" ["I show my tits"], or if you do something pornographic, like [name of another *scope*] who showered during his *scope*.

Image 5



“No one really cares what you are saying lol”—“If there [is] a communicative dimension at work here, the communication is “I exist” rather than “here’s what I think”—the talking body rather than the talking head” (Grindstaff 2012: 31).

The research suggests that there’s little interest by the *scopers* to create a relationship or bond with the audience through this kind of communication and that what one aims at is *being watched* and *appreciated* by his/her audience. This also explains the obsession of counting hearts (the tool provided by *Periscope* to show appreciation) that some broadcasters have during their *scopes*. These hearts represent a lasting mark of validation for oneself and can be consulted at any time by checking the *scoper’s* personal profile.

CONCLUSION

The scope of my research concluded that *Periscope*, despite the intentions of its founders, has been re-appropriated by a large number of its users to pursue personal intimate goals, compared to the concept that it was originally intended to be. Through usage of the app, users are able to fill dull moments and experience a form of relationship with an audience, even though it is generally an ephemeral one.

Not surprisingly, the observed behavior is strongly related to existing theories on “New Individualism” as an age where traditional roles (family, relationships) and social orders (state) collapse and the “ethics of individual self-fulfillment and achievement is the most powerful current” (Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 22). *Periscope* destroys every spatial and hierarchical context and puts individuals on the main stage; a stage whose audience can potentially reach millions.

Periscope, in this sense, is a product of a cultural trend that is specific to our time and its success is tightly linked to the fact that the cultural context for its emergence was ideal at this historical moment. After all, *Life-casting*, or the act of broadcasting one's own intimacy, is not a new phenomenon on the internet and a great deal has been written about the very first attempts at this practice since Jennifer Ringley set up a webcam that broadcasted her dorm room in 1994 on the website *jennicam.com*. When interviewed about the motivations that inspired her to expose her life, Ringley didn't deny that "there were certain elements of insecurity that go along with being, you know, 19 years old" and claimed that she was doing it to seek approval (Reply All: 2015). At the same time, she admitted that the presence of the camera also made her feel less lonely (Burgin 2000: 80). Ringley is a programmer and scripted the software that broadcasted her life herself. What *Periscope* offers its users is nothing but an easy and accessible way to satisfy those very same needs that pushed Ringley into her *cam-girl* experience, reinforced by the cultural background of a generation that grew up watching reality-TV in which the division of *private* or *public* became unclear.

The use of *Periscope* by ordinary people therefore reinforces the theories that perceive the longing for online relationships as a symptom of a diffuse incapacity of being alone. Nonetheless, they offer a surrogate for the lack of real-life relationships (Valentine 2006; Turkle 2015) and satisfy the need for sharing one's own life as a form of social validation exemplified by the formula: I share, therefore I exist (Turkle 2015).

Given that online bonds need constant connection in order to be lived fully by the user (Franklin 2009), there's a risk that users give priority to "connections" over "relationships", pushing away the possibility of a fulfilling bond in real life.

This analysis of *Periscope*, which is a relatively new phenomenon (launched in March 2015), reinforces some of the most worrisome predictions for the impact of mobile devices on individual, *real-life* relationship skills. Given that there's no sign that the trend is going to stop or revert in the short future, as new apps and tools for ephemeral, anonymous and instant connectivity emerge at a faster pace, it would be of great interest to carry out in-depth studies on how connected individuals, particularly younger generations build and live their relationships through this new set of tools. It would also be significant to examine how the spread of these forms of *connected loneliness* are developed at the expense of *real life relationships*. Given that online relationships are often characterized by "narcissism, disinhibition and the failure to care about the feelings of others", the risk of finding ourselves living in "a world devoid of empathy" (Weisberg 2015) should be something we should be concerned with when studying the way users satisfy their relational needs through online interactions.

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