



The Nomads of Media and Family Histories. Rethinking the Moving Images of Families in the Age of User-Generated Content

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Abstract. The title is referencing Hans Belting’s differentiation between image and medium: “images resemble nomads in the sense that they take residence in one medium after another” (Belting 2005, 310). This paper tries to build a methodological framework for the research of the nomadic behaviour of home imagery in the new media age. While the practice of home movies was theorised in the age of the celluloid film and so-called ‘nuclear family’, the refinement of these approaches occurred at the beginning of the 1990s, with the emergence of video technology. However, the literature of the new media reported the turning point-like changes of the habitus of amateur films: the home movie is just one of the amateur filmmaking habitus, neither more typical, nor more representative than any other practices. The technological, social, and cultural dimensions of the previous ritualised practice need to be rethought in this context. How have the content, status, and functions of the home movies regarded as places of memory changed in the age of presentist do-it-yourself media products? The paper argues that home movies and videos should be regarded as historical sources of the participative culture.

As visual anthropology has become a discipline, a legitimate field of cultural anthropology, this process has been accompanied by debates on mediality, among which most famously Margaret Mead’s pamphlet-like essay in which she defined the place of visual anthropology within “the discipline of words” (Mead 1975). In the “founding texts” of the discipline written in the 1970s and in its subsequent expositions as well,¹ three branches of visual anthropology have been distinguished: “1. the study of visual manifestations of culture-facial expression, body movement, dance, body adornment, the symbolic use of space, architecture, and the built environment; 2. the study of pictorial aspects of

1 For example, in Chalfen and Ruby’s 1973 conference lecture (Chalfen and Ruby 1974, 5) or in Jay Ruby’s historical overviews on visual anthropology and encyclopedia articles (Ruby 1989 and 1996).

culture from cave paintings to photographs, film, television, home video, and so on; 3. the use of pictorial media to communicate anthropological knowledge” (Ruby 1989, 10).

In everyday use, the expression visual anthropology has multiple meanings; however, most often it is still used to denote the third field, as a synonym of ethnographic or anthropological film, therefore, in Jay Ruby’s view, the cultural or historical approaches to the everyday use of pictorial media should be called the anthropology of visual communication (Ruby 2001).² Although the history of anthropological film also yields perspectives to the interpretation and appropriation of moving images in the home mode,³ in my paper I rather intend to build a theoretical approach based on the statements of the anthropology of visual communication (later to be used in the interpretation of the ethnographical field research I have conducted).

Theories of visual communication, similar to the theories of social representation or visual representation, are characterized by constructivist approaches. While the first anthropological analyses of home photos and movies appeared, the examination of representations was dominated by semiotic approaches which concentrated on images as systems of symbols, as artefacts. In comparison, the investigators of visual communication distinguished representation from its social use, and examined its semiotic aspects: what symbolic systems, what meanings regulate the formation and interpretation of representations?

2 In a study published in 1980 with the title *Margaret Mead and the Shift from Visual Anthropology to the Anthropology of Visual Communication*, Sol Worth claims that besides the images about culture, attention should also be paid to the images of culture.

3 According to film histories and theories, the appearance of subjectivity in documentaries is connected to the postmodern turn of (written) anthropology. In this sense, the status of representation becomes problematic: ethnographic texts are not to be regarded as documents, but rather as tools of meditation, close to the genre of the literary essay. Applying this to anthropological films raises further questions: how can the object of the ethnographic text, namely the observed, become the subject of representation? How can the hierarchy and power relationship between the authority of the observer/filmmaker possessing the tools of representation and the observed, which is in an inferior position relative to the former, be dissolved or reversed? This problem is very often dissolved by anthropologists/filmmakers exactly by the means of private film, or amateur film, occasionally also referred to as navajo or indigenous filmmaking (Renov 2004). For example, Ross McElwee’s *Sherman’s March* (1986) presents the process of how the project of a historical documentary film fails and turns into an autobiographical one. In another example, in Tamás Almási’s *Basement* (*Alagsor*, 2001), the camera is placed in the hands of youngsters living in suburban blocks of flats who have decided to move down to the basements and spend most of their time hanging around.

Anthropologist Richard Chalfen, theoretician of home visual media,⁴ raises similar questions when, following Sol Worth and Dell Hymes, he approaches the use of photos and movies as a symbolic activity, from the point of view of socio-linguistics (Chalfen 1987, 4–48). Starting from Sol Worth’s concept of symbolic environment and Nelson Goodman’s constructivist philosophy, he understands the family collections of photos and movies as a construed world comprehensible by the analysis of the symbolic system underlying the content, form, and use of the pictures. In this perspective, the pictures are not “copies of reality,” they do not become interesting on account of their reference value, but as visual statements. The author is less interested in the pictures themselves, much rather in the communication achieved by them and its pattern created in the social space of the home, which he calls “home mode pictorial communication” (Chalfen 1987, 6–9).

Chalfen analyses this type of communication by methods of the ethnography of speaking. He extends and generalises Dell Hymes’s sociolinguistic model to various aspects of human communication, among which to visual communication as well. Starting from the four basic questions of Hymes’s theory,⁵ Chalfen elaborated his own framework that he termed sociodivistic, in order to thoroughly describe the complex activity of taking photographs or filming. These partial processes are as follows: planning, behaviour behind the camera, behaviour in front of the camera, editing, presentation. In his description, these partial processes are connected to the following five factors of communication: participants, environment, subject, form of the message, code (Chalfen 1987, 19–20). According to this, the various events or factors, forming a matrix-like system, are connected among themselves in twenty-five ways.⁶ He thinks that this could serve as a descriptive framework for inquiries about the actual behaviour of people: because, while we can record almost anything, we do not

4 Home visual media is a distinctive subgroup of home media: “home visual media consist of mediated forms of audio-visual communication that are created in private, personal ways and meant for personal and private consumption. In this sense, *home* may be best understood as a metaphor – relieving us of the absolute necessity of always referring to home media as made or used literally in that moving target known as *home*” (Chalfen 2002, 143). In his approach, home visual media consists of: snapshots, photograph albums, scrapbooks, home movies, home videos, framed photographs, videotaped letters, etc.

5 “What are the communicative events, and their components in a community? What are the relationships among them? What capabilities and states do they have, in general, and in particular events? How do they work?” (Chalfen 1987, 17–18).

6 This number appears slightly modified with the authors who reconsidered this method, on the basis of how they grouped the communication events (see Musello 1984, 28).

actually do record everything.⁷ He coins the term Kodak culture to denote the behavioural patterns thus revealed by the research of visual communication, and Polaroid people for the representations of life that appear in images and can be revealed by content analysis (Chalfen 1987, 10–11). The author uses three examples to present the methodology of the ethnography of speaking adapted for home visual communication. The chapter which analyses the home movies most formally applies the sociodivistic interpretive framework (touching upon all section points of the matrix); this is followed by the account of the patterns of snapshots (what kind of symbolic forms does the photographic presentation of the individual's life-course draw up? [Chalfen 1987, 75]); then by tourist photography in the context of tourist culture.

The French theoretician of home movies, Roger Odin also applies Dell Hymes's communication theory, but he is not so much interested in communication forms within the family, but in the types of communication with moving images. The semio-pragmatic approach that he elaborated mixes the methods of semiotics and pragmatics, and interprets the constructedness of a text not as an immanent feature, but starting from its pragmatics: he studies the modalities of filmic texts as they change in relation to context.

The semio-pragmatic pattern implies two interpretive levels: the first level deals with the modes of producing meaning and emotional effect, while the second level is contextual. According to Odin, the modalities determine the communication spaces or discourses construable by the viewer. In his model, he distinguishes nine modalities, the last of these is the home mode,⁸ which makes possible the re-living of past events individually or in a group (Odin 2008, 255). In his approach, the home movie does not communicate, it does not work as a representation, but rather as an index, which makes the process of memory possible (2008, 259). The home movie is not edited as a text, it is a fragment rather than a text (Odin 2010, 41).

Home movies cannot be compared to professional filmmaking since they are not cinema, that is, the communication field of a home movie should not be

7 This is an appropriation of Dell Hymes's line of questioning: "which rules of proscription and prescription constitute a system in the community by providing that it is not the case that anyone can say anything to anyone in any form by any channel in any code in any setting of time and place" (Hymes 1967, 26.; see Chalfen 1987, 18).

8 The other eight modes described in this model are: "the spectacular mode (the film as spectacle); the fictionalizing mode (a film as the thrill of fictively recounted events); the fabulizing mode (the film's story demonstrates an intended lesson); the documentarist mode (the film informs about realities in the world); the argumeantative/persuasive mode (to analyze a discourse); the artistic mode (the film as the work of an author); the energetic mode (the rhythm of images and sounds stirs the spectator)" (Odin 2008, 255).

looked for in a cinematographic space, but in family space. From the point of view of pragmatics, it is a trivial thing that we recognize anew: the home movie is something “unsuccessful – mal fait –” (non-narrative, non-constructed, non-designed), but it works nonetheless. Whoever films the family moment, they do not regard themselves as professional filmmakers, and do not look for the possibilities for self-expression. The real author of a home movie is the institution of the family (Odin 2010, 40–45). Odin describes the textual construct of the home movie with the features of a bad, unsuccessful movie which can fulfil its functions precisely because of its shortcomings. The lack of coherence and design has a positive role, since it can stimulate the process of remembering, the family members must work together in order to be able to reconstruct the family stories, and the common story edition enforces group cohesion (Odin 2010, 52). Therefore the addressee of a home movie is not the viewer, but the participant (Odin 2010, 53), and the projection of a home movie resembles more a happening than a movie performance (Odin 2010, 55). This way the home movie has become the utmost example of semio-pragmatics: this is the par excellence modality which, in addition to being understood only by its pragmatics, behaves as an interpretable text only in communicational situations.

The application of Dell Hymes’s sociolinguistics to the field of visual communication research seems feasible; still, it needs to be completed at certain points if we wish to apply it to home video practices of our days. Amateur filmmaking in the 1920s was mostly structured by its symbiosis with celluloid film and nuclear family; however, by now these institutions have gone through several changes. The recent cultural criticism reminds us that the patterns of home visual communication have reached turning points or breaches, such as the dissemination of video technology and the “new media” age. This challenges us to rethink the patterns of our home media, to reflect on the dynamics of the institution of the family and of technologies, on the changes of lifestyle and communication concomitantly.

The approaches of Chalfen and Odin identify the home movie with its functions, implying that cultural meanings are essential ingredients of this form of communication. The analysis of the context of communication remains in the background, the medial differences are blurred: Chalfen, for example, places home movies, snapshots and tourist photos next to each other in order to present home visual communication. Furthermore, the changes of the media technologies also remained unreflected: firstly, because he formulated his communication theory against technological determinism and aestheticism.⁹

9 Chalfen has repeatedly emphasised the exclusion of these approaches, justifying it with the primacy of the communication theoretical approach.

Secondly, his research focussed only on analogue images shot on filmstrip, but meanwhile, as his results were published in book form, video technology became widespread, and with it, the question of medium specificity together with its social aspects has once again become a timely one.

Despite his paradigmatic methodological statements, Chalfen seems to schematise his subject: he draws up an ideal typical, homogeneous robot-picture of the American society's Kodak-culture, while failing to suggest the existence of local or strata cultures or subjective intentions; similarly, he also avoids to discuss the applicability of his method for individual cases. Although the presented method argues for the rich documentation of pictures and the anthropological possibilities of their interpretation, the conclusions seem, nevertheless, to overgeneralise, precisely because of the researcher's attempts for abstractions. The chapter dealing with the functions of home pictures (it enlists, in a quite monolithic way, documentation, preservation, memory, and socialisation, or attachment to places and material goods) may remind us of András Bán's ironic observations. In one of his studies, Bán summarises the main questions and results of the research of home photography as follows: "they examined how far the family's self-image, internal system and hierarchy appears on these images (the answer: more in the past, less today). They wanted to know whether the norms of conduct and behaviour defined by the family or the small community appeared on the images. (Of course). [...] They asked how far were photos the objects, helpers, starting points of family history? (The answer: it depends on the narrator)." He objects to the fact that the well-established, systematic analytical methods of the particular cultural phenomenon have excluded from their discourse that what he calls, following Jacques Maquet, "functional aestheticism:" "What these texts do not speak about: is that poetical, aesthetic act which happens nonetheless on contemplating these pictures (somewhere far away from any understanding of art); the instance which, albeit for a second, 'eases people's innate bad fate'" (Bán 2000, 26–27).

One could also understand András Bán's observation as a display of the shortcomings of these communication patterns: they fail to take into account that in the course or as a part of communication, the act of seeing, contemplation also takes place (or perhaps this is what their use is about). In a different approach: although it may seem that Hymes's pattern can be applied to social communication in general, it, nevertheless, implies the metaphor of the world as a text. The criticism of the visual culture reminds us that: "visual culture is a tactic with which to study the genealogy, definition and functions of postmodern everyday life from the point of view of the consumer, rather than the producer. The disjunctured and fragmented culture that we call postmodernism is best imagined

and understood visually, just as the nineteenth century was classically represented in the newspaper and the novel” (Mirzoeff 1999, 3). Mirzoeff quotes Mitchell, according to whom picture theory “stems from the realization that spectatorship (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that ‘visual experience’ or ‘visual literacy’ might not be fully explicable in the model of textuality” (Mitchell 1994, 16). Thus we have to inquire “the modern tendency to picture or visualize existence” (Mirzoeff 1999, 5).

Further criticism was also addressed to the social theory of the images, implied by the presented semiotic approaches. If Chalfen’s sociodivistic method is not treated in a normative manner, but rather as a heuristic starting point,¹⁰ then one could in fact access the narrow (family) context, a momentary snapshot about the family life of the images. The methods of socio-pragmatics also reveal the narrated family history and memory, the family as an institution. However, this communication pattern has not much to do with the modelling factor of these images outside of this restricted social area: the broader context of social history, the historical changes, and those situations of communication that a picture can possibly go through in the long run, in the course of its social life.

Patricia R. Zimmermann’s criticism of Chalfen’s book draws on much the same objections: she thinks that this approach based on family communication offers an image of family photos which may make us conclude that it is a self-regulating, self-identical practice, opposing public or industrial, commercial discourses. In her work on the social history of home movies (*Reel Families. A Social History of Amateur Film*), she performs discourse analysis: the practice of amateur film becomes a construct which, besides the institution of the family, can also be created by the ideology of the dominant media practice, and also by social power relations in general. In Patricia Zimmermann’s interpretation, the family communication according to Chalfen (intentions, desires, functions) also becomes a construct of ideologies.¹¹ In her opinion,

10 The events taking place between the taking and the watching of the picture could be so distant in time, and could involve so many participants that they can hardly be researched *in vivo*, taking all their aspects into consideration. The retrospective accounts of these instances may highly differ from the explanations given during or after the events taking place. This is not merely a difference in research methodology, since the ensuing accounts do not speak of events, but of representations of events.

11 Zimmermann tries to explain in fact how home movies have become the dominant type of amateur filmmaking. She unravels such kind of (mainly commercial) discourses which subordinate the amateur film to the ideology of the family, obscuring thus methods of filmmaking which could have ended up as alternatives of cinema, of industrial film production.

amateur film is best characterised not by the static pattern based on family communication (as in the essentialist approaches), but one must start from the effect of changing power- and social relations (from external influences and contexts), and describe their diachronically changing relations (Zimmermann 1995, x).

Although Zimmermann treats new problems when she describes the family embeddedness of amateur filmmaking not as an evidence but as a discursive process, this ideological thesis, however, obliterates the difference between discourses and practice (for a criticism on this, see Moran 2002, 52–54). As an alternative solution, James Moran argues for a thesis which he deduces from Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and social field. The concept of habitus creates a kind of in-betweenness, it explains the various kinds of practices as being shaped by different discourses and empirically documented individual (in our case family) decisions alike: "the concept of habitus is relational in that it designates a mediation between objective structures and practices. [...] Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside of agents. [...] The theory of habitus, again, allows us to overcome a whole series of antinomies into which the theory of action routinely locks itself, those of consciousness and the 'thingness' of social facts, of mechanicalism and finalism, of subjective teleology and objective teleology" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1989, 43–45).

The theory of practice makes possible such an approach of family/home modes which grows out from the historical experiences and cultural environment of media users. Habitus are thus mediating mechanisms: family communication adapts image recording techniques for the expression of intentions and narratives already present in culture (Bourdieu names this the solemnising and immortalising of family life; 1990, 19–20). "Habitus, like medium specificity itself, is a mediating discourse that generates and validates practice as proper to the goals defining it" (Moran 2002, 55). Moran equals the family community with the class; accordingly, within the field of home/family communication practices, the family possesses its own habitus, which is appropriated during childhood with the mediation of the practices and attitudes of the adults. In Bourdieu's view, the practices of all the agents of the same class are similar in their style (and therefore, as a result of this similarity, any individual practice can be regarded as the metaphor of any other).

The practice of home filmmaking is also structured by individual motivations, while, at the same time, the family community filters and integrates, in accordance with its own value preferences, the history of the conventions of home filmmaking, thus they subordinate their practices to functions which belong to other family communities as well, regardless of

environment and class (Moran 2002, 56). Filmmaking is not merely a technological means used in a private context in communicative situations by the members of a 'speech community' (Hymes 1967); instead, this practice must be rethought as a mutual effect of technological, social, and cultural determinations, as a "liminal space in which practitioners may explore and negotiate the competing demands of their public, communal and private, personal identities" (Moran 2002, 60). Therefore, if one understands the practice of home filmmaking as a habitus, then the question "what and how is worth presenting in a home movie?" must be given multiple solutions: the dominant ideologies influencing the practice of home filmmaking, the changing family institutions¹² and lifeworlds, and the history of the conventions, technologies of amateur recording must be analysed together. James Moran lends an entire chapter for theorising the latter, in which he treats family filmmaking as a separate habitus within amateur filmmaking. This time he describes the habitus (and not the filmmaking method) by its cultural functions: representation of daily life, place of creation of public, community and individual identities, manifestation of the continuity of generations, which outlines the home as an affective and cognitive space, and yields a narrative framework for family and personal histories (2002, 59–63).

This description of the habitus of home movies, the refinement of previous approaches occurred at the beginning of the 2000s, with the emerging use of video technology. However, the literature of the new media age written in the subsequent years reported on the turning point-like changes of the habitus of amateur films. In this new media culture or convergence culture, we may no longer speak of consumers but of producer-consumers (prosumer culture), and the limits of private and public spheres get blurred.¹³ In Lev Manovich's formulation: mass consumption was replaced by mass cultural production (2009, 319). The definition and differentiation of professional and amateur media products becomes once again problematic: Jenkins thinks that it wasn't only the multimedia-surfaces of contents produced for commercial purposes

12 James Moran questions the functionalist paradigm because it emphasises family stability, consensus and continuity, but cannot properly account for "the contemporary era of families we choose, each based on a constantly shifting set of biological, social, and discursive relations structured by a habitus seeking the common denominators shared by all members" (Moran 2002, 56).

13 Media anthropologist Danah Boyd, for instance, differentiates between various levels and degrees of the private and the public in her research (see: <http://www.danah.org/>, and mainly the study *Making Sense of Privacy and Publicity*, <http://www.danah.org/papers/talks/2010/SXSW2010.html>). Moreover, Lawrence Lessig speaks about the modification of the architecture of the private sphere, with shifting limits of observability and researchability (Lessig 1998).

that multiplied, but also “our lives, relationships, memories, fantasies, desires also flow across media channels. Being a lover, a mummy or a teacher occurs on multiple platforms. Sometimes we tuck our kids into bed at night and other times we Instant Message them from the other side of the globe” (Jenkins 2006, 17). This is not only to say that the channels and surfaces get multiplied, and this creates a new culture, but it is also convergence when people take media into their own hands (Jenkins 2006, 17). In this approach, convergence is not only a feature of digital culture, it has not started nowadays, yet it has become dominant now. As a result of the explosive dissemination of participative culture, we have turned from media to social media (Manovich 2009, 319). Consequently, everyday life is filled up with media in such a way that the strategic thinking defining institutions and power structures is changed for tactical thinking characteristic for the everyday life of individuals. Paraphrasing de Certeau: the practice of everyday life was replaced by the practice of everyday media life (Manovich 2009).

Several attempts have been made to grasp the passage to the age of social media by the description of the functions of the new media. According to this, the function of mediated personal memory objects (also) changes in the new culture: the primacy of memory preservation and storage is taken over by the function of making contacts and identity construction,¹⁴ the practice of preservation and memory alternates and competes with the immediate sharing of experiences, as a performative mode. The new media literature paraphrases the McLuhanian thesis of “the media is the message” in the following way: “the I is the message” (McConnell–Huba 2006). McLuhan’s sentence referred to the fact that mass media are not primarily efficient by their content but their primary message is the medium itself, the change that their appearance causes partly in interpersonal relations and partly in the relation human–reality. In relation to the new age, attention is drawn to the fact that the authority of media has changed, and “the basic truth sounds somewhat different today. Something like this: ‘You are the message!’ Since You, as a ‘receiving-transmitter,’ [receiver-transmitter] You edit your own show, weaving in Your own attitudes, by Your taste” (Sas 2008, online version).

The discourses dividing the “old” and the “new” media age resulted in a binary logic, and caused the production of dichotomies similar to the above oppositions. The more recent literature warns that there is a need to tone down this binary logic and criticise it based on empirical data, since the delimitation of the boundaries of old and new media has brought about distortions and slips

14 In her book *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* (2007), José van Dijck analyses this transition, the shift of communication functions, starting from the example of three old media: the diary, the home photo, and the home film.

in the right proportions. The media of the young generation, the activist and political contents were paid more attention since they were perceived as relevant examples of the “new media,” whereas these practices are nothing more typical than others (Manovich 2009, 321). Patricia G. Lange examined two dichotomies from the point of view of the habitus of young video producers: amateur vs. professional, and memory record, turning to the past vs. communication, presentism (Lange 2011, 25). By the analysis of a collection of videos, the author points out that the producers and consumers of the shots use these analytical categories in a flexible way: the video, originally shot with the purpose of communication, may later become a means of retrospection (Lange 2011, 42). She proposes a research perspective also appropriate for tackling the connections of experiential and nostalgic video use: which aspects of community life become objects of mediated nostalgia; why do people turn to mediated forms of the processing of the past (by making or watching videos) in the age of ubiquitous private videos (Lange 2011, 42)?

In this theoretical context, the research of home movies offers the possibility of investigating present-day media usage, the mutual influences of media and society, and at the same time it also offers a historical perspective which turns towards home movies in a search for the sources of this participative culture. This is so because amateur filmmaking, taken into account ever since the beginnings of cinema, can be regarded as a kind of participative culture, whose dominant form up to the recent past had been family filmmaking. To put it differently: the institution or community of the family has adopted these films, ensuring their long social life, that is, it produced the habitus of home movie making. Consequently, the term home movie is used less and less often as a synonym of amateur filmmaking in new media culture, as it is increasingly replaced by the term user-generated content. It is as if the concept of home movie is no longer sufficient to be used as a metaphor of amateur productions: the institution of the family has changed, films have left the social space of the home, technologies have changed, and the ways of usage have multiplied as well.

In contemporary “media landscape” (Moran 2002), the home movie is just one of the amateur filmmaking habitus, neither more typical, nor more representative than any other practices. Starting from this new system of relations must we then understand the habitus supported by family communities. This is not to say that one practice replaces the other, but it is not a case of simultaneity either. Then again, it is not the end products of home filmmaking that become public, since these products are made for the publicity of video sharing sites. (Returning to Bourdieu’s words quoted above: family filmmaking has no self-identity, any individual practice can be regarded as a metaphor of another one, which can be understood following the principle of

historicity.) The technological, social, and cultural dimensions of the previous ritualised practice must be rethought. How have the content, status, and functions of the home movies regarded as places of memory changed in the age of presentist do-it-yourself media products?

Compared to the video practices of young generations preferred by new media research, home movies offer a field of research where one may even study questions of media history, since the habitus of home movies has a documented, theorised history, while, at the same time, the change can also be sensed in the practice of contemporary movie making families: they grew up on “old media,” in contrast with the young generation socialised on new media. Paraphrasing James Moran, the habitus of the home movie is a discourse which also mediates the social representation of permanently changing media. From this point of view, home movies become the historical sources of social media, of participative culture. This source type then allows the analysis of everyday life experienced within community frameworks, as it increasingly becomes an object of mediation, while at the same time, it also yields the opportunity to research the dissemination of moving images.

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