EASA Media Anthropology Network
e-Seminar Series

http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/workingpapers.htm

**E-Seminar on John Postill's working paper
"Media anthropology in a world of states"**

(19 – 26 April 2005)

Philipp Budka (University of Vienna)
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Dear network,

The fourth EASA Media Anthropology Network e-seminar opens now and will end
in a week's time (Tuesday 26 March at noon Central European Time). We'll be
discussing over email a paper on media anthropology in a world of states by
John Postill. I shall be chairing the seminar.
To participate all you need to do is email your comments or questions
directly to medianthro@abyznet.net (i.e. not to me) after we've heard from
the discussant.
The paper can be found on
http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/workingpapers.htm

The rules of the e-seminar are:

**1. The discussion starts when the discussant emails his or her comments on
the working paper to the list.**
2. The author(s) then replies to those comments.
**3. The rest of list members can then add their comments, questions to the
author, points of information, etc. These will be addressed by the author(s)
at their own convenience throughout the week.**
**4. Full bibliographic references are not required, but they are always
welcome.**
**5. All contributions should be emailed directly to the list
(medianthro@abyznet.net) not to the chair.**
**6. Contributions should have a clear, concise subject. Please avoid
uninformative (e.g. Re: your comments) and empty subject lines (NB abyznet
rejects empty subject fields!).**
7. Contributions should be kept as brief and focussed as possible.
**8. Contributions should be sent in the body of the email, not in an
attachment.**
**9. The usual offline seminar norms of courtesy and constructive criticism
apply.**

Once the seminar is over, we will be saving it and uploading it onto the
website in PDF format, as we think these discussions can be a useful
resource for future research and teaching.

Now it's over to our discussant, Faye Ginsburg!

Best wishes

Philipp

P.S. If you're still unsure about how the e-seminar works, you can download
transcripts from previous e-seminar from our website
(http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/workingpapers.htm).

Comments on John Postill's paper: Media Anthropology in a World of States, introductory chapter to <u>Media and Nation Building: How the Iban Became Malaysian.</u>

by Faye Ginsburg, Department of Anthropology, Director of the Center for Media, Culture, and History, New York University

John Postill's chapter, 'Media Anthropology in a World of States', is an introduction to his forthcoming book, *Media and Nation-Building: How the Iban Became Malaysian*. Being true to the work it needs to perform setting the stage for a longer manuscript, the chapter offers the requisite ground (or throat?) – clearing around a number of key topics that are central to his work. These include a plea to rehabilitate concepts that have fallen out of academic favor such as 'cultural diffusion', 'nation-building' (as opposed to the perfectly sensible and useful concept of 'nation-making' which Rob Foster coined in 1997 to describe what was happening in the newly independent Papua New Guinea); as well as Postill's concern to place his own work within the relatively recent genealogy of what he calls "media anthropology", a term which he makes capacious (as do most of us in the field) to include a broad range of media including: varieties of print media such as Iban-language indigenous literature followed by Malaysian state propaganda and textbooks; radio and television broadcasts as well as the incorporation of TV sets as actual media of exchange; and, echoing Benedict Anderson's work, the effect of the introduction of technologies of timekeeping such as watches, clocks, and calendars along with the uniform scheduling of national radio, and the invented tradition of The Dayak Festival which has become 'an integral part of Malaysia's nation-building project', reversing its originary intention as a form of resistance to British colonists on the part of Native intellectuals. The depth and breadth of the work promised here are exactly what we hoped would emerge as more anthropologists recognize the epistemological value of training an ethnographic eye on media in their research.

In the meanwhile, I do want to take issue with the "straw man" of prior work that Postill suggests he writes against,, questioning in particular "the present celebration of creative appropriation of media forms", as if that were the predominant framework deployed by those carrying out ethnographic/ethnological studies of media Indeed, I write this as one of the co-editors (with Lila Abu Lughod and Brian Larkin) of the relatively recent collection <u>Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain</u>, a project that grew out of our "corridor talk" in which it became clear that while all three of us studied media, the relationship of our work to various socio-political formations -- which ranged from social movements to "nation-building" projects – traversed a broad swath of anthropological terrain. Our concern, then, was to show that ethnographic studies of media incorporated a range of research strategies and conceptual camps, and to give some order to the variety of work, indicated by the section titles offered in the book: 1) Cultural Activism and Minority Claims; 2) The Cultural Politics of Nation-States; 3) Transnational Circuits; 4) The Social Sites of Production; 5) The Social Life of Technology. I repeat them here not to be self-serving but to remind Postill and readers of this list that far from repudiating work that addresses the kinds of activities he subsumes under 'nation-building' or 'cultural diffusion', we sought to demonstrate that these are part of a range of a substantial foci of contemporary work that must always look at media in the particular socio-political formations of which they are a part. If Abu-Lughod, for example, found 'negotiated' or even 'resistant' readings of state-sponsored Egyptian melodramas among peasants in Upper Egypt or domestic servants in Cairo, this is not because she is determined to find a version of 'creative appropriation' but rather because she wanted to understand the efficacy of the Egyptian state's televisual efforts to unify and 'make modern'

its citizens. Postill apparently found different results with the Iban of Sarawak in relation to the efforts of the Malaysian state. They have, he argues, become thoroughly Malaysianized through the efforts of state-sponsored media, though their cooperation seems to have been apparently accomplished with some violence as he notes that in an earlier moment, "it is alleged that the federal authorities burnt and buried virtually all vernacular books. He also notes that Malaysia's success is distinctive in an era of "failed states".

Rather than misrecognize prior efforts to define the field, or to shoehorn other work into the rubric that works for his case, I would encourage Postill to work with those of us who are attempting to grasp the range of ways that media are being taken up (or imposed) in many different sites of cultural production. Alas, the tantalizing hints of what's to come in Postill's book – which looks excellent -- make up only a small portion of the chapter offered; to properly engage with the work, one would want to have more of that material to read, as a way of better measuring the interventions Postill makes on the theoretical field. I will certainly want to buy the book to find out more!

Guido Ipsen (University of Dortmund)
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Hello list,

I should like to give an opinion and maybe extending remarks to the discussion from the media semiotician's perspective.

I particularly enjoyed reading John's paper for two reasons.

a) What he described as the predominant top-down paradigm in media studies - if I may generalize the paradigm somewhat and extend it from anthropology - is one of the biggest contemporary obstacles in correctly evaluating the actual role of the media in the development of societies.
b) His approach (he himself stresses that by narrowing the focus of the research he gains more specific results) is a macroscopic study of the interrelationship between the individuals who from a strand of culture, i.e., here, a state-constituting body of population, and the mediation means that are employed by that culture.

Any focus of investigation on either the technology of the media or the so-called "makers" of the media ignores the user-oriented side. And then again, employing this very word "user", I do not feel comfortable. Even though John does not call the medial-cultural sphere so, I should like to label the Iban community under study an "autopoietic mediasphere". It is autopoietic (in reference with the writings of Maturana and Varela) since media and culture are one, and the mechanisms for interpreting and producing cultural signs in the ongoing semiosis of the participants of the community are the same. If state propaganda hits the nerve of the population, then the semiosic trends of that community have before hit the producers of the propaganda. If objectivity and criticism find their way in medial interpretation,then these concepts are part of the medial practice of the community. Either way, the media are neither external, nor a priori, but they are a integral part of the culture. The second term, mediasphere, I borrow from Regis Debray. He employs it to describe the entirety of factors (context, time, predominant mediation forms, etc.) which make up the media community, i.e., the media culture (I employ these various terms interchangeably as I believe that we cannot

really distinguish between culture, community, society etc. If we use the terms more specifically, there may be a difference).

In semiotic terms: signs mediated by the so-called "media", i.e., technological apparatus for transmitting messages must draw on the interpreter's experience. Hence, a mediated message must have something in common with the unmediated, or the everyday experience, at least. S.J. Schmidt calls this the "connectivity" of a mediated message. In other words, whatever the media present a community with, there must be something the community has experienced before to grasp the message. Hence, the media are always embedded in a culture.
Which results in the senders of the message becoming a part of the media community as well. This is especially interesting as we may look at the producers of the messages as not being part of the "cultural" community. Nevertheless they are part of the mediasphere - sharing a common ground with the addressees.

In summary: We need an investigative apparatus that can be applied to the developmental aspects of any community concerning media as an integral, not an external, aspect (it is not the community AND the media, but rather the community's media). The exact roles of the participants of the media community must be mapped. Larger historical, evolutionary or developmental models can be based on such sample studies.

Best,

Guido Ipsen

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John Postill (University of Bremen)
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Dear Faye, Guido and list

Many thanks for your comments, Faye and Guido. I look forward to a lively seminar! To keep my response brief, I'll address one of Faye's points about appropriation here, and will then respond to Guido in a later email.

I engage with the rich material culture work by Miller, Appadurai, Kopytoff and others in the chapter devoted to the social life and afterlife of television sets. In this introductory chapter, your comment makes me think that perhaps I should make it more clear that my rehabilitation of cultural diffusion (as the other side of the appropriation coin) is part of a wider strategy in which I seek to reconcile the sociocultural approaches prevalent today with an earlier ethnological tradition centred on cultural diffusion, culture areas, culture traits, etc.

I single out Debra Spitulnik's work on Zambian radio discourse as a rare example of a contemporary anthropologist asking diffusionist questions about why certain cultural elements (in this case metapragmatic phrases broadcast over radio, see paper p. 12) have spread more widely than others through a population. These are questions that one would more readily expect of an archaeologist than an ethnographer, but I think they are essential if we are to understand media technologies and media discourses beyond the immediate ethnographic contexts of their appropriation. That said, I think this approach is wholly compatible with Appadurai's and others' ideas about circulation and the social life of commodities. Appadurai and other contributors to The Social Life of Things (1986) call for the tracking of the biographical and social courses of artefacts. Spitulnik, whose work is partly based on that volume, adds to that tracking a set of questions about the intrinsic characteristics of radio artefacts and radio discourse. What is it about ghetto-blasters and metapragmatic discourse that makes these forms so readily appropriated by Zambians? she asks. This is a very different kind of query from the one we commonly find in ethnographic approaches to media (and indeed to other cultural forms), which go something like: How were people in X in the years 19nn-19nn appropriating medium Y to suit their own purposes Z? To me both queries are equally important and can be mutually illuminating. There is no diffusion without appropriation, and vice versa.

John

John Postill (University of Bremen)
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[To quote from Guido's email:

>If state propaganda hits the nerve of the population, then the semiosic trends of that community have before hit the producers of the propaganda.

Not necessarily. In the Iban case, some of the propaganda (esp. Iban-language radio and print media) did indeed arise from indigenous producers' firsthand experience in rural areas, while other propaganda (e.g. on TV) was produced 2,000 miles away in Kuala Lumpur and bore no direct connection to the experience of longhouse residents. This leads me to your next remark:

>If objectivity and criticism find their way in medial interpretation,then these concepts are part of the medial practice of the community. Either way, the media are neither external, nor a priori, but they are a integral part of the culture.

I'm not a semiotician, but the approach you propose doesn't seem to handle cultural change or geopolitical inequalities very well. If, as you say, the media are 'neither external, nor a priori, but they are a integral part of the culture' how then can we study, say, the advent and appropriation of TV in 1980s rural Sarawak? Until then, television had not been an integral

part of Iban culture, but rather of Peninsular Malaysian culture. This delayed diffusion both indexed and reinforced the existing unequal power relations between the Peninsula and Sarawak. At any rate this was not an automatic, unproblematic process of integration/ appropriation, as it entailed among other things -- shifting the locus of evening sociality from the longhouse gallery (ruai) and its crackling old Philips wireless sets which offered Iban content, to the semi-private family rooms (bilek) where most of the fare on offer is Peninsular and American and there is no Iban content. TV became part of a wide-ranging set of processes contributing to the ongoing 'privatisation' and Malaysianisation of everyday rural Iban life. This does not mean, however, that collective forms of social life have disappeared, not at all other imported media (karaoke, public-address systems, wristwatches, etc) have been recruited to the social work of celebrating public events such as the Dayak Festival or local weddings which these days always go by the clock (and calendar).

That's why I think an ethnological (historical-geographical) approach is useful in the study of media and social change.

Many thanks again for your comments,

John

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Dear List,

Thanks to Faye, John and Guido for opening the e-seminar. The floor is now open for all to contribute to the discussion. Please keep in mind that all contributions should be emailed directly to the list (medianthro@abyznet.net) not to the chair, contributions should have a clear, concise subject. Please avoid uninformative (e.g. Re: your comments) and empty subject lines (abyznet rejects empty subject fields!), contributions should be kept as brief and focussed as possible, contributions should be sent in the body of the email, not in an attachment.

Looking forward to a lively discussion,

Philipp

Mihai Coman (Bucharest University)
mcoman53@yahoo.com

Dear All

I believe John's paper is a very provocative one it raise a lot of questions and opens a lot of interesting perspectives. I would like to start with a sentence I pick up from
John response to Faye to understand media technologies and media discourses beyond the immediate ethnographic contexts of their appropriation

Much of the anthropological approach to media was (I believe under the influence of cultural studies agenda) excessively oriented to the immediate context (especially of reception). It goes in line with ethnographic concerns for close fields and local knowledge. But it forgets anthropological commitments for both transversal (intra-cultural) and horizontal (cross cultural) interpretation. So John's commitment for integrating media into a large (anthropological) frame (nation building, cultural diffusion, etc) is (for me, at least) a significant step foreword. I would also stress the fine distinction introduced by the concept of sustainable propaganda - in the context of the simplistic demonisation of the term propaganda it helps us analyze the phenomena of assuming state promoted values (which resonate some of the people aspirations, but also orients them towards certain hegemonic goals). Which raise some challenging questions.

These fields are interesting laboratories to see live the processes in work in XIXc Europe and an important difference is that if in XIXc the main media were books, newspapers and theatre, now we can see in action also television, movies, radio, music industry and Internet. Are they all state controlled media? How can we define this concept? It looks to me that in the end only Internet is not state controlled media.... At what level would we position the control? Legislative and regulations? Content? And what would be the contribution of global media in the formation of a nation identity? (I believe that some globally distributed products are reinforcing local values not dissolving them). It is possible that some of this question find answer in different chapter of the book ...but ...

I would also like to stress that the overview of media anthropology do not make justice nor to media studies nor to anthropology. I know that this was not the aim of John. However we cannot reduce all theoretical developments in media studies only to cultural studies contributions: new theoretical perspectives were raised by the French school of industries of culture (Miege, Flichy, Tremblay, Moeglin, Mattelart), by the sociology of the newsroom (to use Schudson label), by the political study of media (Garnham, Murdoch, Curran etc). And from an anthropological perspective we have not to reduce media anthropology to the ethnography of media production (by insiders) or of media reception (by insiders or by western audiences). This would mean to leave outside the contribution of media events school which can enlighten our reflection of the role of media in nation building. It is well known that rituals are important tools in this process. But now, more and more, this rituals are mediated. How would the Malaysian case enlight media events model? Not to speak about my media mythologies and their contribution in the creation of a group identity .....

Mihai Coman

Guido Ipsen (University of Dortmund)
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Dear List;

a few clarifications may be necessary before we go into the question of the role of media and mediation further.

From John's reply to my remarks, and also from Mihai's statement, I see that we have quite some issues to clarify.

1) What do we really mean when we try to avoid a "media-centered" perspective on media usage?

2) Let us not try to once more define medium, but what do we see as the central function of the media?

3) How is it possible for media users (remember: John is focusing on the user) to appropriately interpret messages which seem to be absolutely alien to their cultural sphere?

4) Mihai's remark: is the internet different?

5) What is "state control"?

My following brief answers may not be in accordance with other discussants' definitions; nevertheless we need to clarify these issues, as it seems to me.

My answers:

1) Avoiding a media-centred perspective means to focus on the interpretation of the message that comes into existence in the users' minds, regardless of the technology involved.

2) the central function of the media in our concern is the transport of messages that can be interpreted.

3) A media user cannot possibly interpret a message which bears no resemblance with former experience of the user. Example: A Latin American native tribe was confronted with a film on steel works. they reacted according to their former experience: they stated that these were the best "visions" they had ever had, referring to the hallucinations they have when ritually consuming drugs. Hence, messages are interpreted according to former experience. No matching experience, no correct interpretation. Especially propaganda has to take this fact into account.

4) The internet is not different. The internet can be as controlled as any other media. Example: In the Yugoslavian civil war, minorities' websites in the country were switched off by the dominant powers. Furthermore, technology is always usable to any ends, and any technology can be as controlled as you want it to be.

5) Sate control is not negative in itself. Only if the state power does not adhere to the rules and regulations of what we call a free society, then state control is abhorrent. But I suggest that the state is nothing primarily external to society: The entire populate forms the state. Therefore, in a time of globalization, the question arises whether it is desirable that law-and-society-governed "state control" is replaced by shareholder-value-governed "corporation control".

These may be provocative statements in themselves, but i still think that these are issues we need to address. If this leads away from the main line of argumentation of John's, I apologize.

Best,
Guido Ipsen

John Postill (University of Bremen)
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Dear List

Many thanks to Mihai and Guido for their thoughtful comments! I'll just take up one or two of the many important issues they raise, and let other people on the list have their say.

On Mihai's point about my brief overview of media anthropology not doing justice to the broad spectrum of social scientific works on the media (the media events school, the sociology of the newsroom, etc), i.e. to an anthropology of media defined beyond narrow disciplinary confines, I wish to say that my specific frame of reference on this occasion is intra-disciplinary, i.e. I refer primarily to the work of social and cultural anthropologists. More specifically, and this goes back to Faye's earlier point about my media anthropological 'straw man', I concentrate on state-related ethnographies rather than provide a comprehensive overview of the entire research area. My aim was not to dismiss large swathes of scholarship but rather to pinpoint problems that remain to be properly studied and debated, especially the question of mediated cultural diffusion within postcolonial national projects.

I am all in favour of inter-disciplinary studies (and look forward therefore to reading Mihai Coman's and Eric Rothenbuhler's inter-disciplinary reader Media Anthropology), but this particular work of mine is more intra- than inter-disciplinary. I think there's plenty of room for both approaches.

Now to Guido's comment that I seek to move away from a media-centred to a user-centred take on media, and that the best way to do so is to study how messages are interpreted in users' minds. In fact, what I'm trying to do (but perhaps is not apparent enough in this draft chapter) is to study media both from the perspective of media artefacts and contents, and from the perspective of users. In addition, I look at the production of media contents, especially nationalist propaganda. My critique of much ethnographic work on media is precisely that it is user-centred at the expense of broader processes beyond the immediate context of use.

Further, I'm not sure I would place messages at the very centre of media research and theorising, like Guido seems to do. For example, calendars, clocks, wristwatches and other chronometric media allow people in most places today to coordinate many of their collective activities. Yet a semiotic analysis of their codes would not take us very far in understanding the profound social effects of these technologies down the centuries (effects, by the way, throroughly understudied by the anthropology of time). How would a semiotic approach to chronometric media proceed?

John

Anna Cristina Pertierra (University College London)
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It is with great pleasure that I join this list and e-seminar.

Mihai Coman asked whether the Internet might be the only medium free of State control. Whilst I agree with Guido Ipsen's response that the Internet is frequently controlled, I am not convinced that the broader direction of his email is useful to John Postill's analysis of Iban media use.

It seems quite clear to me that all media have the potnetial to be effectively controlled by the national state, although some states may select particular media as tools for state propaganda whilst repressing other media forms as potential threats to the nation. An excellent example

of this can be found in my own fieldwork in Cuba, where television has been a primary tool for the distribution of State ideals, whilst Internet access is highly restricted. Media technologies that allow for peer to peer distribution (such as video recorders and CD burners) occupy an interesting intermediate space; their capacity to evade State structures is politely ignored as long as video and CD contents are not directly critical of the State.

But to return to the paper at hand, the real question I believe John Postill is asking, is WHY and HOW are particular media objects and contents taken up? What are the properties of the forms themselves, or the characteristics of the national and local contexts, that encourage or discourage the adoption of specific media? For this reason, I don't really believe that Guido Ipsen's questions about state control is directly relevant to John's paper. In the Iban case, he seems to suggest a largely voluntary appropriation of State ideology (although Faye Ginsburg's reminder about the suppression of Iban identity remains important). The State propaganda and television content being consumed by Iban is clearly not "absolutely alien to their cultural sphere".

On a final note, I would like to suggest that John consider how some of the media he is studying might offer competing and conflicting forms of nation-building. These various media forms may not always be presenting complementary visions of the Malaysian nation. My own previous Cuban example implies this; I can also share an example that is somewhat closer to the Iban context of Postill's work. In the northern Philippines in the 1970s, children from Ilocos would speak Ilocano as a first language, with English and Pilipino from their classroom textbooks forming second and third languages. By the 1990s, the increased presence of Manila-produced television and cinema meant that children's use of Tagalog greatly superseded their understanding of English or Pilipino. In this case, a metropolitan majority language overtook both the "official national languages" (the former a postcolonial lingua franca, the latter a nationalist construct inspired by Bahasa). Different forms of national media (television and school textbooks) competed with different agendas and political economies, suggesting once again that nations and nationalisms are not homogenous entities.

I look forward to the rest of the discussion!

Anna Cristina Pertierra
Department of Anthropology
University College London.

Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)
danieltaghioff@yahoo.com

Hi. I'm finding the broad swathe of the discussion hard to follow, but would like to pick up on a specific aspect. I hope I don't wonder off the point to far...

John finished off his last posting thus:

>Further, I'm not sure I would place messages at the very centre of media research and theorising, like Guido seems to do. For example, calendars, clocks, wristwatches and other chronometric media allow people in most places today to coordinate many of their collective activities. Yet a semiotic analysis of their codes would not take us very far in understanding

the profound social effects of these technologies down the centuries (effects, by the way, throroughly understudied by the anthropology of time). How would a semiotic approach to chronometric media proceed?<

I am confused by the discussion in general, I believe, because there seems to be a dichotomy between message and object (i.e. time keeping devices) emerging. This seems to be about media technology, or media forms, so seems to be a dichotomy between the inner (meaning/message) and the outer (form) in mediation/diffusion.

I think this is an issue of time scale. If you take a frozen moment of exchange, or a specific diffusion event, then the forms stand out, as they do in a flash photograph. But if you continue to watch, you see the forms shift in an ongoing interplay of social practices.

Time keeping is a discourse as much as a technique, and the techinique emerged out of the discourse as much as the discourse out of the technique. Even this is too dualistic: There is no real grounds for distinguishing the two. It is clear that a textual reading of time is not enough to explain timekeeping, but the alternative is not necessarily to focus on fixed forms. This notion of diffusion is probably useful in the short term, but in the longer run it is not explanatory.

It is possible, in a long historical arc, to examine the shifts in temporalisation as a set of discursive practices, and examine them in relation to other shifts in the ways the world was imagined, including the various imaginings of the state. The same appplies for space. One clue is the emergence of the notion of space itself, as place devoid of content, or place rendered utterly exchangeable, and thus amenable to the demands of capitalist transaction.

It is for these reasons that I am uneasy with a rejection of 'message' in favour of underwriting research with statist notions such as time and space, and state for that matter. Yes there are technical issues involved, but as with media (as Winston points out in his history) these are always socially mediated. This means that all these notions are still subject to historical contingency, and thus remain problematic and thus open as objects of inquiry in terms of social practice.

Maybe John agrees with this anyway, but it still renders problematic the notion of 'culture areas' as anything but a contingent analytical category. For instance, what currently is the Kurdish cultural area, or the Tibetan one for that matter? And what about the cultural area of former supporters of the Shah of Iran etc...

Daniel

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Guido Ipsen (University of Dortmund)
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Dear List,

This seminar is a fruitful exchange of ideas. Even more so because of the different opinions and approaches we take.

In order to further exemplify my own statements - and then let us return to the issue of this seminar, namely John's theses - let me briefly summarize the problems of current perspectives on media, and let me also suggest a solution which is brought forward by current media semiotics.

First, a short excourse on interdisciplinarity. Naturally, intradisciplinary work is not only justified, but also essentially needed. However, in a way, John cannot escape interdisciplinarity. As soon as he embarks on an analysis of media usage by a given group, he is already travelling the wide grounds of media studies. I do not believe in splitting-up and sub-sub-diciplinizing scientific fields. Media anthropology therefore is necessarily a blend of anthropology and media studies. As soon as media become a substantial part of any study, the definitions, findings, and concepts of media studies proper become essential. Which is not simple as there is no unified media study either, which I have to admit.

However, I believe that our differences about the usage of media, their effects, and the value and importance of the message stem from this disadvantage of current media studies: it does not have a unified canon of what a medium is, what the role of producers and users of messages are, etc. This is not superficial criticism, as the focus of any investigative study shifts with the argumentation lines of media studies it supports. Let me again, e.g., turn to the question of media control. Media philosophers and critics like Baudrillard, Virilio, or Flusser have laid down the essentials of the apocalyptic perspective. Here, the media are governed by those who produce the contents, the machinery, and who possibly own a monopoly in the media business. We, as media consumers, are subjected to the effects of media usage, such as the increasing speed, the loss of cultural integrity, and possibly also the ideological influence. Others, and here I return to the argument on the Internet when I list figures such as Jay Bolter, or George Landow, have argued in favor of the media and created the hype of belief that media such as the internet were capable of fostering democracy and freedom, which I hold to be a pure myth. Umberto Eco quite fittingly described these two tendencies as "apocalyptic" and "integrated"; the former being supported by the prophets of cultural doom, the latter by the idealists of medial progression.

Where is the connecting point to our discussion, you might ask. Well, there are many other tendencies in media studies; there are the postmodernists who deny that media have any content meaning whatsoever; there are the traditionalists who hold the media to be technology simple and pure - whenever we speak of "medium", we cannot escape these tendencies and their diverging foci on the aspects of the medium.

We can see this in Anna Christina's argumentation line when she says, I quote:

> I believe John Postill is asking, is WHY and HOW are particular media objects and contents taken up? What are the properties of the forms themselves, or the characteristics of the national and local contexts, that encourage or discourage the adoption of specific media?

Added by John's statement:

>I'm trying to [...] study media both from the perspective of media artefacts and contents, and from the perspective of users. In addition, I look at the production of media contents, especially nationalist propaganda.

The first quote essentially justifies the second. From the semiotician's perspective, the media are an entirety in the first place. We can neither separate production from consumption, nor can we divide the message content from the message carrier. However, basically all features of the medium are discernible from the message, as here the signs that are mediated become manifest. John's quote basically says the same, and here I should like to return to my statement that we need to clarify what we mean by media. Current media semiotics favours an integrative view on the media, encompassing (in the good semiotic tradition of creating triads):
a) The experiential background and past of the mediated message, which encompasses production, intention, budgetary and directive power, etc.etc.
b) The cognizable mediated message, i.e., the analysable representation of the sign, and third
c) The effect of the mediation process.

As you can see, the exact nature of technology, or some other aspects mentioned by other participants of our discussion, are not listed. They are an intrinsic part of this threefold structure of the medium-sign. This is also why in this integrated perspective, as I mentioned in a previous mail, the senders and the receivers of the message are supposed to form one community. They may otherwise not share a single detail of cultural or even national background; still, within the mediasphere, they are unified. Also, this model suggests that by sharing the mediasphere, there is not a simplistic mechanism of first the sender and finally the receiver of a message. It is exactly by such inclusive models that we are able to find the reasons WHY somebody is attracted by a message. It is, in all cases, most presumably because there have been other aspects that were shared before. It is important to find out those. As to John's paper; I think that implicitly he is taking this approach even though he uses different words - which is why in reading his paper first, I was so refreshed that a similar grounding for media research is existent.

And finally, for John's question about time media. For all who are interested in the semiotics of time, please refer, e.g., to this volume: "Signs & Time: an International Conference on the Semiotics of Time in Tübingen = Zeit & Zeichen", Kodikas/Code Supplement, XXIV, G. Narr, 1998.

There are many aspects of semiotics of time, such as memory, media, museums, and of course time measurement apparatus. To my knowledge, even though there is a semiotics of the uses and significance of time-easuring and memorizing devices such as calendars, or watches, a historical account of these signs has not been produced. Nevertheless, we regard any sign as being embedded in the social sphere, as semiotic activity is defined as social activity. A semiotic approach that would investigate the social effects of chronometric media should focus on topics such as:
-The forming of habits (e.g., why do people start to have their lives governed by clocks?)
-The change of timekeeping (as this means that the signs themselves change, which again means that society has changed)
-The delimitations of time measurement
-The shifting boundaries of individual time and collective time

And possibly many other aspects which do not come to my mind so easily, but which would also lead us away from our subject even further.

In summarizing my points:
If I take John's words correctly, he aims at a joint, inclusive approach. This is what is needed in any study that concerns itself with media in whatever contexts.

Best,
Guido

Nick Couldry (London School of Econimics)
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Dear all

I found Johns paper very helpful in foregrounding provocatively the question of how to think about the work that media contents do in large societies. Im writing not as an anthropologist, nor anyone with a particular stake in the term media anthropology, but as a media sociologist who finds anthropological concepts and debate very useful in addressing the difficult questions about medias consequences.

Id like to suggest however theres a link missing in Johns chain of argument, at least as presented in this chapter (it may well be developed later in his book). John poses the question of media consequences in terms of a dichotomy between the large-scale diffusion of media contents (media being broadly conceived) and the local interpretation, negotiation and appropriation of those contents in particular contexts. I think this is a good way of putting the problem, since it raises the difficulty of taking sufficient account ethnographically of the material aspects of diffusion: that is, the fact that diffusion involves the more or less simultaneous spread of the same message across countless contexts, so that new types of link between those contexts (and further more complex feedback loops based on those links) are enabled. The material dimensions of diffusion are of course not in the local context, yet they may alter the preconditions of any context, even changing how local context is understood as local, as many have argued.

Once Johns dichotomy has been stated, and the importance of grasping both sides of it becomes clear, there is the problem that we are left with the difficulty of understanding how its two sides work together. What John does not provide is a middle-range concept, or set of concepts, that might help us grasp how this happens. How is it possible for, as Guido Ipsen put it, external content to be absorbed into a local context? Surely not just by the fact of being diffused (which was the basis, as I understand it, of Guidos concerns in his emails)? But also not through some assumed affinity between diffused message and receiving culture since, as I see it, instead of clarifying the mechanism, this just adds a further abstraction (culture) - an abstraction which, as Johns later email points out, obscures the uncertain and uneven process by which diffusion has effects in emerging states, as well as having many more general problems of its own (see particularly Mark Hobart's work).

Im foregrounding this issue, because I think it is extremely difficult. It is a problem that crops up elsewhere: for example, if we try to think about Bourdieus habitus concept (which many might want to use, even if they reject other parts of his work) and ask how it works in

mediated societies. Habitus, as de Certeau pointed out, implies a place of social reproduction (the house, the school etc) where the fit between structure and individual action is worked through. But how do we understand such a place in societies where countless messages are diffused between local contexts on a daily basis?

There may be ways of reworking the habitus concept, something that Ive been attempting recently; alternatively there may be other concepts that are more helpful. What Im interested to know is whether John thinks its useful to develop this or other mid-range concepts (his description of the later chapters suggests he might, eg in relation to ritual; or is the notion of categories still useful?), or whether he wants to explain the mechanisms that link diffusion to interpretative context in a different way. If the latter, then Im sceptical about whether the encoding/decoding model, or David Morleys development of it (page 7 of the paper), will help at all: many have criticised it, including Morley himself, and even if it still tells us something, it fails to address the complexities of how media contents are used and reworked beyond the moment of initial interpretation.

Nick Couldry

Dept of Media and Communications, London School of Economics

John Postill (University of Bremen)
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I'll respond to Anna Cristina and Daniel first, and to Nick in a later email.
Anna Cristina wrote:

1.But to return to the paper at hand, the real question I believe John Postill is asking, is WHY and HOW are particular media objects and contents taken up? What are the properties of the forms themselves, or the characteristics of the national and local contexts, that encourage or discourage the adoption of specific media?

To be even more precise, I am enquiring about BOTH the properties of the media forms (artefacts and contents) themselves AND the characteristics of the national and local contexts that encourage or discourage the adoption of specific media. For instance, the Anglican church in some parts of Sarawak makes use of 'indigenised' Catholic prayer books in the Iban language. In my view, these artefacts and their contents have gone down well with recent converts because (a) they offer practical solutions to local culture-specific concerns such as inauspicious dreams or bird sightings, and yet (b) they are still part of a Christian package of objects and practices that promises a better life and afterlife to converts.

2. I would like to suggest that John consider how some of the media he is studying might offer competing and conflicting forms of nation-building.

I actually do consider this problem in the book. What I found in the field in 1996-98, briefly in 2001, and through historical research in earlier decades, was a remarkable degree of consistency and embeddedness in the statist propaganda across media, which is how the notion of 'sustainable propaganda' came about (unfortunately, an Austrian artist had already coined this term). I analyse school textbooks, school homework, longhouse speeches over

public-address systems, everyday conversations, television content, television commentary, etc, and the core nationalist ideals are reproduced time and again.

Before setting off for the field in 1996, I expected to find 'everyday forms of resistance' to an 'alien state', but instead I found Iban people eager to develop (mansang) and catch up with those they consider to be more advanced, namely the Chinese, Melanau and Malays. To do this, they draw on state (schools, radio, etc) and other resources. Yes, as Faye points out, along the way the Malaysian state has resorted at times to violent means (including, it is alleged, burning vernacular books) to suppress cultural elements deemed a threat to their nation-building project, but these interventions have not resulted in a secessionist movement or even sentiment (supporters of such a movement would probably be in grave danger). Most Iban are not even aware that those books were destroyed. So state propaganda across a range of media, people's own firsthand experience of other ethnic groups' relative affluence, and the threat of state violence have all contributed to the swift Malaysianisation of the Iban.

Daniel Taghioff says my notion of 'culture area' is problematic because, like all other analytical categories, it is historically contingent. He then asks what would be the Kurdish, Tibetan, and Shah supporters' culture areas. To this, my answer is that I am not claiming that culture area is a timeless, placeless concept. On the contrary, with the end of Empire and the emergence of a world of modernist states, we can see around the globe the busy redrawing and remaking of culture areas around national seats of power. I am suggesting that there is an inextricable link between polity, territory and culture, albeit one not sufficiently studied within the anthropology of media, and one that we can easily overlook these days with our interest in 'transnational flows'. Unless and until the Kurds secure an internationally recognised state (a highly unlikely prospect, it would seem), the Kurdish culture area will remain weak, fractured and scattered.

I don't quite know how to put this, but it's as if culture abhorred a political vacuum. When strong, prosperous new states are built – e.g. Singapore, Malaysia or Brunei, but not Indonesia – their ideals and institutions diffuse and become appropriated by the population to such an extent that they almost become second nature, habitus. Very few people in Malaysia doubt today that 'traditional' farmers should 'change their mindset' and become 'modern', to use three common Malaysian English terms. These statist ideals have been fully routinised and are now transmitted to younger generations.

John

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Dear List,

We had so far a very lively and stimulating discussion on John's paper from diverse kinds of theoretical and methodological perspectives. Thanks to all who have contributed to it. Please note that the seminar is open during the weekend. So keep on sending your impressions and comments on "media anthropology in a world of states".

All the best,

Philipp

Tom Wormald (University of Manchester)
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Dear List,

I have found this discussion very interesting, although like Daniel Taghioff I have found parts of it difficult to follow. Therefore excuse me if I make points that are slightly detached from the main thread of the argument.

Firstly I'd like to comment on the question of the internet being different, raised by Mihai and Guido. Guido claims that "the internet is not different" and here I must disagree with him. While it is of course possible for governments to restrict access or 'broadcast' capability for the internet as well, I feel that looking for 'actual' differences or similarities between different technical artefacts that are used in media too often leads in anthropological work to a preoccupation with abstracted ideas about how technology and social context are related. In this abstract way it is of course possible to argue that "technology is always usable to any ends, and any technology can be as controlled as you want it to be", but as I suggest below technology never really exists in this abstract way, does it?

In John's paper he is making the clear argument that certain nation building practices are the result of certain media technologies and certain receptions, or certain kinds of interaction with content and so on. Much of the discussion of the paper has been about whether or not people media anthropologists should be studying, or can study the forms, the technologies, the reception and so on. However, I suggest that it is more helpful to borrow from Andrew Barry when thinking about this question. Thus we might rethink a 'technology' as being a technical artefact located in a given set of social relations? In John's case it is not the television itself that is the 'technology' in the Iban case, but rather the configuration of television, longhouse, family groups, internal and external social relations, state practices, history and all the other things. Therefore, in considering the importance of media here, we do not say that "a social form has changed because of the introduction from 'outside' of a new media form or new technology but rather that the socio-technical arrangement of a given domain (John's ethnographic fieldsite, examined in a particular range of time and space as a zone of research) has been reconfigured by the inclusion of a new technical artefact and the new possibilities or restrictions that this brings.

This allows us to sidestep a risk of becoming bogged down in seeking the 'actual' effects that belong as inherent properties to a given technical form (the television, radio or wristwatch), because I would argue we will never find these by thinking of this artefact as an abstract thing... it can only become a 'technology' with effects, impacts, advantages or dangers when it becomes a technology in Barry's sense, an inherent part of the socio-technical context in which it exists. The nation (and nation-building) that John talks about cannot exist without the media he discusses, but equally the media cannot exist without the nation.

This is, I suppose, quite a MacLuhan-esque approach, but I think I am not simply arguing that the medium is the message. I am also trying to explore the ways in which the message is also the medium... to highlight how talking about 'media technologies' is in part at least to call into

question how different social settings - in this case the nation - are articulated and made viable by certain kinds of information exchange located within a specific socio-technological form.

Anyway, this has been a bit of free-braining, I hope it makes sense and doesn't just state the obvious (something I sometimes end up doing!)

Thanks very much, Tom Wormald

Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)
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This is really a side note to the main discussion.

It feels like this discussion is running parallell to debates on structuration. The issue of 'message' versus form, or agency versus structure seems implicated somehow, and there is a similar emphasis on broader scales, and space, time and the state.

It is interesting to note that 'structuration' as an idea tends to assume that these issues are passively mediated, that structure, or the 'behaviour' of communication (like networks or memes) is determinate rather than human agency.

John's replies to the comments put to him seem to hinge around the sense that these issues, external to the agency of representation, are nonetheless not determinate in themselves, but also are mediated via social practice.

This means that this type of enquiry has strong implications for debates on structure and agency, where, within the Giddensian school, the active, agentive mediation of contingency, surprise, specificity and of ongoing broad scale practices has often been neglected.

One example of this would be the obfuscation of the active mediation of 'globalisation' through the liberalising discourses of the richer nations. So these considerations are also about the analysis of power, from attributed agents of statehood, interstatehood etc...

The point being that there are many interesting implications with this type of research agenda, but this is only so if statist assumptions are carefully unpacked, and studied as a part of practice (e.g. individual, time, space, distance, area, 'global,' 'local' etc...)

Daniel

""
Daniel Taghioff
Media Program
School of Oriental And African Studies

Guido Ipsen (University of Dortmund)
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Dear List,

This is just a short remark on Tom's opinion about the internet. I cannot say that I completely disagree - but we have here shortcut arguments about media, which need to be explained more. therefore, my point in detail:

Is the internet a "different" medium?

1) Yes. it is different from any other medium as, say, a newspaper is different from a book, or a picture is different from a telephone. Each medium has its own peculiarities of message content, representation, speed, and many other aspects which are too many to be listed here. But, in this sense, also one book is different from another book, and both are different media. How so? I have to take up my first argument: media technology is NOT the predominat factor. It is used to convey meaning. Meaning does not yield to technology. Surely there are some messages which you cannot transport equally by any media. But you can transform the message so that it fits other media. This is the reason why , e.g., the same propaganda message can be transported by, say, film, or in a life speech, even though the speaker does not produce pictures. Please note that this fact does not mean that the interpretation of the message will always be the same. But it is as naive to believe that a message conveyed by five media to the same person will create the same interpretation as it is naive to believe that a message conveyed by the same medium to five different persons will create the same interpretation. Here my argument holds that creation, transport, and interpretation all belong to the mediation process, and it is very difficult to map the interpreation in the first place.

2) No, the internet is not different.
I disagree with Tom here, because you can burn books, make newspapers illegal and ban movies, as you can block internet sites. And as you can print papers illegally from the underground, spread books inofficially and pass on messages secretly, you can use the internet to broadcast around the measures taken against you. I purely see no difference here. But the more important point about the equality of media is something else. And here I have to strongly oppose Tom's view. He argues that "abstracted ideas" about media are off the point:

> This allows us to sidestep a risk of becoming bogged down in seeking the 'actual' effects that belong as inherent properties to a given technical form (the television, radio or wristwatch), because I would argue we will never find these by thinking of this artefact as an abstract thing... it can only become a 'technology' with effects, impacts, advantages or dangers when it becomes a technology in Barry's sense, an inherent part of the socio-technical context in which it exists. The nation (and nation-building) that John talks about cannot exist without the media he discusses, but equally the media cannot exist without the nation.>

Naturally, media can exist without a nation. Let us simply agree on that. Tom presumably means "social group". But: On the contrary, in order to correctly decode the actual realization of any medium, we need to first conceptualize its "abstract" properties, if you like to call it that way. These are concepts that are basically the same for all media, but which are, unfortunately, neglected in the mainstream of media studies:

1) Cognitive aspects. Each medium uses one or more sensory channels. The capabilities of message sending are restricted to those. The processing of the respective signs sent via these channels is similar, regardless of the technology used. I.e., a picture of a rose is interpreted visually equally ("a rose"), regardless of whether the picture is sent via paper or the internet.

2) Principles of textuality. These being linguistic in nature, into which I do not want to go here, suffice it to say that any medium that uses language must adhere to these principles.
3) Other aspects that basically cover also no. 1 and 2 but which I should define further as the syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of the medium. Syntax means the combination of signs into messages, semantics means the rules for creating a specific meaning, and pragmatics means the relations towards usage and users.

This, of course, is again a semiotic approach. It includes all aspects of media, and it reduces the surface aspects of the actual appearances of media to its essentials. The question, namely, is not, e.g., "how does the internet foster nation building", but it is "which are the processes EMBEDDED in a particular mediation which result in the shaping of a nation". If you as anthropologists do not argue along this line, I should be quite interested how you compare nation-building processes in different areas of the world, different times, etc.

The building of states is not a new phenomenon. Neither is the usage of media in the process something new. It is not acceptable to coin arguments such as "today the internet has a special role in this process". It does not. Not at all! From my point of view, the state-building processes, as John points out, follow a pattern of filling a power reconstruction. I do not use here the term vacuum, as I do not think such a vacuum exists, as I do not follow the argument that we are living in a post-colonial age. We have to seek out the mechanisms and processes, as well as the intentions which are BEHIND the medialisations. Those were embedded in paper in the 18th century, in film in the 20th and maybe today on the computer screen, sent via a satellite network. But still the mechanisms are the same. they must be, because

a) people's cognition has not changed. It's still human cognition. Media producers can't escape that.
b) people still use language. Language has rules, as, for that matter, composition of images has. Media makers also can't escape this.

And as to my arguments about the colonial age, I should point out here that the states in Asia which might rise as "independent" areas will be subjected to the globalisation processes as is the West; maybe even easier and sooner in their history. The state as an entity is today endangered by the ideas of the market, the corporation, shareholder value, etc.

I should be grateful if some of you as anthropologists might respond to the two concerns which rise from my remarks:

1) How do you map processes like nation/state-building independent of certain case studies? Or are you not capable of doing so?
2) If you perceive state building as an important concept of the present, how do you explain the shift of power from state-controlled organs to corporation-controlled organs in the West, e.g., Europe? In the wake of Neoliberalism, the role of the state is diminished as well in its integrative role as in its role of taking responsibility (The US even partly privatised their invasion army in Iraque; a drastic example of the shift of power!)

If we really live in a world of states, then states are an endangered species. It could as well be that we are moving towards a world of puppet states, the strings being pulled by others. This - but this is now pure speculation - could be an indication for the rising value of mechanisms such as propaganda. When the role of the state is diminished in everyday life, the only power that remains is the one executed on opinions that do not have a market value.

Guido

Sarah Pink (Loughborough University)
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I very much enjoyed this paper and found it very well written. I think John draws together some literature and debates not commonly connected in media anthropology, which leads to some very provoking results. I have two things to say, one is more of a comment and the other a question

1. I wanted to (critically) reflect on the type of text this is. Its not my aim here to completely deconstruct the writing of the paper but I felt that not only was John trying to resurrect some 'old' ideas in anthropology (i.e. diffusionism) but that he also expresses himself though a 'old' form of narrative. The paper is written in a confrontational style – John critiques recent work in media anthropology for focusing unduly (in his view) on appropriation. It is also a paper about debates in anthropology – about diffusion/appropriation, memes/sociality, culture areas/imagined communities. In short it is a paper about contesting ideas and approaches that creates its own approach to contest another. Of course we need to critique one another's work and debates in anthropology are fascinating. However the way John develops this critical review is very much in a combatant style as opposed to a negotiating stance. I was wondering how intentional this narrative style is?

2. I have a question about one of the themes of the paper: the question of the transmission of knowledge (whether as a biological or social process). John tells us that Malaysian ideologies, and practices that represent them have been transferred via media to Iban culture, and as such have become a part of Iban culture. I'm interested in knowing how John would theorise the relationship between knowledge and practice in this context. How does he define knowledge and by what processes does knowledge inform practice?

Sarah

John Postill (University of Bremen)
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In response to Nick Couldry's:

> John poses the question of media consequences in terms of a dichotomy between the large-scale diffusion of media contents (media being broadly conceived) and the local interpretation, negotiation and appropriation of those contents in particular contexts.

I should first clarify that

1. I do not deal with all media consequences but rather with those related to state-driven processes of nation-building in postcolonial countries.

2. I study both media contents and artefacts.

Nick then goes on to pose the following question:

>Once John's dichotomy has been stated, and the importance of grasping both sides of it becomes clear, there is the problem that we are left with the difficulty of understanding how its two 'sides' work together. What John does not provide is a middle-range concept, or set of concepts, that might help us grasp how this happens. What I'm interested to know is whether John thinks it's useful to develop this or other mid-range concepts (his description of the later chapters suggests he might, eg in relation to ritual; or is the notion of 'categories' still useful?), or whether he wants to explain the mechanisms that link diffusion to interpretative context in a different way.

I don't think diffusion and appropriation can be described as two "sides" that work together but rather as a single process that runs its course. Perhaps the well-known term 'diffusion of innovations' will help here. Radio was a technological innovation that diffused from urban areas and became appropriated throughout rural Sarawak in the 1950s to 1970s. This process of diffusion/appropriation was completed when radio sets and contents became as integral a part of everyday longhouse life as chewing betel nuts or bathing. The process ran its course.

In the 1980s, television sets started arriving and displacing radio sets as the focal point of evening socialising. This shift was also a shift from the longhouse gallery to the family rooms as the main loci of sociality in the evening. In many longhouses, the process ran its course in the 1990s, when virtually all family rooms had a TV and their occupiers gathered around it on a daily basis. (The best model I've found to analyse the process of how media technologies are 'domesticated' -- by no means a straightforward matter – is in the edited volume Consuming Technologies, 1994, but I welcome other references).

To take up Nick's question of how I want to explain the mechanisms that link diffusion to interpretative context, I will turn to the recent exchange between Guido and Tom in my next email.

John Postill (University of Bremen)
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How do I want to explain the mechanisms that link diffusion to interpretative context? asks Nick.

Tom, adopting (in my view) a social anthropological stance, has suggested that we shouldn't get bogged down with the inherent, 'abstract' characteristics of media technologies as these can only be properly understood within their socio-technical contexts.

Guido disagrees, and argues that if we don't analyse the specific features (cognitive, textual, pragmatic, etc), that attend each form of mediation, we cannot possibly understand these technologies.

I would agree with Guido here, but would add, with Hutchins in Cognition in the Wild (1996) that cognition doesn't take place only 'in our heads' but is also distributed through our technologically-mediated networks of social relations. Hutchins did fieldwork on an aircraft carrier, and linked the division of labour on board the ship to a division of cognitive tasks,

many of them pretty simple but requiring the constant propagation of updated 'representational states' regarding the ship's current position.

Therefore I concur with Tom that TV among the Iban must be understood as part of a socio-technological milieu, but I would also stress that the universal features of this medium (audiovisuality, reliance on electricity, high production costs, etc) shape both individual and collective processes of cognition. When the cultural process of appropriating TV (i.e. when watching TV became a routine practice) was completed in the 1990s in Iban longhouses, each household had become a quite different 'interpretative context', to use Nick's term, from that of pre-TV periods. News about the world beyond the locality was now being received and interpreted (a) audiovisually, (b) via Peninsular Malaysia (not Sarawak). Television literally provided a new frame of reference and a coherent worldview (that reinforced that on radio): while all was well with Malaysia, the rest of the world was mired in conflict, famine, etc. The propagation of representational state about the world (nama berita? what's the news?) was unevenly distributed, as it was largely one-way, from the urban mediocracy to the rural residents.

Tom Wormald (University of Manchester)
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Dear list,

Firstly thanks to Guido for giving me a lot to think about, I really enjoyed reading his post of Saturday. And following from John's subsequent contribution, I would like to try and restate my opinion a bit more concisely!

In my (indeed social anthropological!) view, I would indeed argue that technical artefacts of the media are best studied within certain social contexts. This does not of course preclude any other approach, nor does it suggest that other ways of thinking about things are less important, simply that this is what I see as the anthropologist's task. There can be no denying that technology has universal features and specific cognitive impacts and so on, and that certain technologies lead to certain clearly visible trends of impact in different social situations.

And I must stress that I am not simply offering a constructivist's view of the technology as wholly determined by social context, quite the opposite. I would argue that it is the way that universal features of technical artefacts engage ACTIVELY with social contexts, inevitably 'changing' them that creates the social technological milieu that is known - in John's case - as the Iban village, or the Malaysian nation but of course, as Guido says, this would be relevant to any social group under study.

All I was trying to propose is that it is possible to spend too much time seeking the definitions of things, or the boundaries of their sphere of impact. Technical artefacts will always suprise us with their diversity, and the diversity or uses to which they can be put, and it seems (and again speaking as an anthropologist!) that there will always be ethnographic cases where a "universal impact" of an abstracted technology is negated or a totally new use/impact is employed, with all the attendant effects on cognition ot text. Here I think that Guido and I are in agreement...:

"it is as naive to believe that a message conveyed by five media to the same person will create the same interpretation as it is naive to believe that a message conveyed by the same medium to five different persons will create the same interpretation. Here my argument holds that creation, transport, and interpretation all belong to the mediation process, and it is very difficult to map the interpreation in the first place."

Exactly! It's just that it would seem to me (personally) that this interpretation is what research should be trying to achieve, and my simply point was that this is best done through examination of cases, rather than in the abstract where it becomes an effectively impossible task (at least for someone with my training :)

Thanks to John for a really interesting paper, I hope that we have given you something to think about (and not merely disappeared down a blind alley that is of no use to you!!!).

Cheers, Tom
Tom Wormald
Department of Social Anthropology
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UK

John Postill (University of Bremen)
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On Sarah's point about my writing style being 'old' and confrontational rather than 'negotiated', and whether this is intentional.

First, this point seems to imply that we've made progress towards less confrontational, more collaborative forms of writing anthropology. I don't know if this is the case, but I've always felt (since I started my BA in the UK in 1988) that there is far too little sustained debate or discussion within the discipline. We used to have, for instance, the Manchester Debates but I think these have now been discontinued. Our conference 'discussions' are often reduced to 5-minute Q&A sessions that follow rushed presentations. One notable exception in America is the journal Current Anthropology with its Comments section, but on the whole my experience is one of not enough debate or discussion, which is why I was keen to set up this e-seminar series. So I think my style (inasmuch as I have a style!) is connected to this. That said, it was certainly not my intention to dismiss earlier work on the anthropology of media (see Faye's opening remarks), so I will go back to the paper and see how I can revise the relevant section(s).

Sarah also asks how I would 'theorise the relationship between knowledge and practice' in the context of the mediated Malaysianisation of the Iban. She adds: 'How does he define knowledge and by what processes does knowledge inform practice?'.

This is a tricky one! I don't think I define knowledge at all in this book, to be perfectly honest. In a subsequent chapter I study how local knowledge (whatever this may be) in a certain area of Sarawak is shaped by a local 'dialect' of the modernist ideology found across the breadth of the Malaysian culture area. This modernist ideology favours formal school education over indigenous forms of teaching and learning, and it is mediated (with remarkable

consistency) through a range of information and communication technologies such as writing, print media, public-address systems, radio, TV, etc. Thus, 'book knowledge' (penemu surat) is highly valued, whereas 'old knowledge' (penemu lama) is paid lip service during 'traditional' events but generally seen as a relic of a backward past. This closely corresponds with Jack Goody's findings on the diffusion/appropriation of literacy in post-War rural Ghana where the Ghanaian English phrase 'know book' was used to distinguish 'modern' younger leaders from their illiterate elders.

By what processes does knowledge inform practice, then, in rural Iban areas? I find it difficult to separate knowledge from practice, more still to see knowledge 'informing' practice. What I would say is that in Iban lands and rivers the acquisition and transmission of knowledge about the world is today strongly mediated by a modernist nation-building ideology diffused/appropriated in the 1960s-1970s. This ideology is now firmly 'in place' (it has ceased to diffuse) and it is regularly sustained through multiple media, both local and interlocal, as well as face-to-face.

Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)
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Hi, this discussion remains stimulating to the end, there is remarkable endurance to these themes (and commentators,)

In response to John's comments below

>By what processes does knowledge inform practice, then, in rural Iban areas? I find it difficult to separate knowledge from practice, more still to see knowledge informing practice.<

I think there is a reason for this difficulty. Knowledge and practice are founded on incommensurable notions. Practice emphasises the transformativity of agency in social performance. These are mediated performances, and this is in line with a view of mediation as necessarily transformative, as it is neccesarily selective in how it represents something (Goodman, languages of art.) This implies agency in as much as this selectivity tends be enacted by situated agents.

Knowledge emphasises continuity, and unchanging categories, which tend to be seen as being moved around, untransformed, by mediation, which implies a kind of Reddy-style conduit metaphor. This leads to what seem like contradictory ideas, like 'representational states.' (oxymoronic due to the necessary transformation implied by representation.)

In a sense our model of communication frames our communicator's agency: How much room do we imagine them as having in forming or reforming that which they represent. I think that diffusion / appropriation is an interesting site to look into this. However, it seems that there is a danger of importing the metaphysics of the solidity and form of 'objects' into the ultimately malleable realm of thought, representation and imagination, and its implication in practice.

Daniel

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Dear John and list,

In my comment on John's paper I would like to concentrate on his argument that we need to reintroduce diffusionist approaches to study media in their nation-state context.

As John points out, first diffusionist approaches to explain cultural phenomena were undertaken in Vienna by Pater Wilhelm Schmidt and Pater Wilhelm Koppers, both Catholic priests and ethnologists. With their "Kulturkreislehre" (culture-circles concept) they attempted to offer an anti-evolutionist and anti-Marxists cultural history of non-literate humanity (Dostal & Gingrich 1998). In the late 1950s the culture-circles concept was renounced by the then-head of the Viennese department.

Being educated in Vienna, I understand diffusionist concepts in social anthropology primarily as processes in which "prime" cultural areas or circles fertilise "primitive" areas, so that these can develop. Of course this is a rather extreme view resulting from the radical changes the Viennese department underwent in last 70 years. Maybe British colleagues experienced a similar development with functionalism.

Therefore I am thankful to John of reintroducing and testing a theoretical concept which, at least in Vienna, was put on the scrap heap a long time ago. However I think it is necessary to be very careful in using such a difussionist approach. Whether I don't doubt that media technologies diffuse across the globe and therefore within nation-states, I doubt that cultural concepts embedded into these media diffuse in the same way. For instance Maori computer scientists started to translate the whole Microsoft Office package into their language. Not only texts but also signs and icons which would make no sense in Maori cultural context.

I agree with John that media are fundamental in building and maintaining nation-states. Nevertheless there are processes of media diffusion that run on transnational levels which undermine the nation-state in diverse ways (Beck 1997). Players on these levels are e.g. NGOs which on the other hand rely heavily on new media, such as the internet and the WWW. These actors of "globalisation" should not be neglected, also in a study with nation-state framework.

With Faye, I am very curious to find out more in John's book.

Best,

Philipp

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Beck, Ulrich. 1997. Was ist Globalisierung? Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

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Dear list,

I would like to give some views about a very interesting paper and a very interesting discussion.
Firstly I'd like to concentrate on the paper: I agree with Sarah that it had a sort of confrontational tone.
I think that derived from John's (conscious or unconscious) desire to come out with some 'inactual considerations', going against the intellectual trends and the academic grain. This involved his reviving of theories deriving from an approach that has long fallen out of currency and that nobody would dream of sustain nowadays.

However, if we go beyond this confrontational character, I think that John's position is not so far apart from that of other media anthropologists and that, liberated from its resonance with 'unfashionable' theories, the idea that cultural forms (if we can call them so), when they move around (the globe) are appropriated but also can remain quite unchanged in their shape is not alien to anybody.

I also agree with John that

"What is it about ghetto-blasters and metapragmatic discourse that makes these forms so readily appropriated by Zambians? she asks. This is a very different kind of query from the one we commonly find in ethnographic approaches to media (and indeed to other cultural forms), which go something like: How were people in X in the years 19nn-19nn appropriating medium Y to suit their own purposes Z?"

As he argues, diffusion and appropriation are two sides of the same coin.
The main source of his disagreement with faye seem to lay in the fact that the empirical findings led one to stress the former and the other the latter (John's findings seem more interesting as they seem to support quite different conclusions from those of many others..).

More radical problems, however, have come out in the discussion: if we take the dichotomy diffusion/appropriation does it correspond to a form/substance one? many contributors to the debate seem to have concentrated on the substance, but there are always McLuhan-inspired arguments for the contrary. Maybe the right lies in the middle?

And even more radical: do diffusion/appropriation correspond to external (mechanical, related to object) vs. external (human, free) agency?
If so, it seems that a theoretical model for describing the 'effects' of media on the Iban brings us further into theoretical issues of agency, structuration, as daniel rightly suggested.
For these we don't seem to have satisfactory models yet, but at the same time I think we should be able to appreciate the value of empirical works, such as that by John, which might give us clues about how to theoretically solve these problems.

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Dear John and List,

I have been following the current threads of debate around John's paper, but for me it's difficult to summarize or to joint one of the open points. So I just want to do a few comments related with the paper. First of all, as the discussant pointed out, this is not a "normal" paper, but an introductory chapter of a book, and in fact, an introduction that deals with some current concepts in the "media anthropology" arena. So, we cannot deal with the "data" but with the "approach".

For me, the question is: Are the "old" terminology more appropriate to describe the "facts" that John is trying to explain? And, from what I have read of this introductory chapter, It seems that at least for the author, they are. But as I remember of my ethnographical lectures, "facts" and "theories" are bounded together...

My impression after the lecture is that this reflexive thought is useful to strong situate the reader in the context of contemporary states, old and more recent political formations that we can not elude from our analysis of the media. On the other hand, I feel a little bit uncomfortable with some asseverations. One surprise for me is to situate Morley among the U.S. researchers (pag.6), but may be it's in reference to book's content. The other is the use of the concept "culture area". I don't understand how it is being used: as a "space" defined by the anthropologist, through the examination of data patterns (Bourdieu)? or as a "space" defined by the media? and or the state? or as a "space" defined by some other political forces? Or as a subjective experience when we travel across boundaries? All of them?

The problem I see with the concept of "culture area" is of this order of definitions, and also, the subsequent implications of "nations without state" reclamations, or the need to specify sub-sub-sub cultural areas (I am thinking in the Pais Basque in Spain, for example, will it be a sub-cultural area, from a cultural area defined by Spanish state, that is a sub-area from a bigger area, called "European Union", and so on? Will think the same a Basque citizen?) I am confused.

"Culture are" is opossed to "imagined community", but, as I see in John example, there is no incompatibility to think that states promote "imagined communities" with the "real" control over the citizens, army, etc. I do not agree with the idea that imagination is always founded in a figment, or it has to be a lie, or something that has nothing to do with other social and material realities. I don't see the confrontation, any case.

Just thanks to John again to give us the opportunity to think aloud and discuss subjects that we all concern, as anthropologists, media analysts and as "state citizens".

Elisenda

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Dear List,

With this e-mail I would like to close the e-seminar on John Postill's working paper „media anthropology in a world of states", which is a draft first chapter of his forthcoming book "Media and Nation-Building: How the Iban Became Malaysian".
As chair of the seminar, I will try to give a very short overview of the discussion on the paper, which provoked quite a broad exchange of ideas. Please note, that I am not able to include all contributions into this summary.

First, Faye Ginsburg, the discussant of the paper, reminds us that activities such as 'nation building' and 'cultural diffusion' "are part of a range of a substantial foci of contemporary work that always must look at media in the particularly socio-political formations of which they are a part." Guido Ipsen provides us with some very interesting insights into the interdisciplinary field of (media) semiotics, concluding that "we need an investigative apparatus that can be applied to the developmental aspects of any community concerning media as an integral, (…), aspect (…)".

For Mihai Coman, John's "commitment for integrating media into a large (anthropological) frame (nation building, cultural diffusion, etc) is a significant step forward" in the inter- and cross-cultural interpretation of media. Regarding the correlation between media and nation, Anna Cristina Pertierra suggests to consider how some media "might offer competing and conflicting forms of nation-building". This aspect addresses John in a later chapter of his forthcoming book.

According to Daniel Taghioff key-notions of John's work such as 'time', 'space' and 'state' "are still subject to historical contingency, and thus remain problematic and open as objects of inquiry in terms of social practice". Nick Couldry misses an "a middle-range concept" between the "the large-scale diffusion of media contents and the local interpretation, negotiation and appropriation of those contents in particular contexts" that explains how external media content is absorbed in a local context. Answering to Nick's comment, John makes clear that for him diffusion and appropriation together form "a single process that runs its course".

Tom Wormald turns in his comment to the integration and (re)configuration of media technologies in social contexts: technologies such as television, radio or wristwatch "can only become a 'technology' with effects, impacts, advantages or dangers when it becomes an inherent part of the socio-technical context in which it exists". In her comment Sarah Pink refers to the "confrontational style" John's paper is written and she asks for his intention of doing so. John answers that for him there is "far too little sustained debate or discussion" within the Social Anthropology community. An aspect the EASA Media Anthropology Network e-seminar series is successfully counteracting for the last couple of months.

Philipp Budka tackles the concept of diffusionism from Viennese perspective in its historical and media context. Fausto Barlocco highlights in his comment the importance of empirical work for constructing theoretical models. And finally, Elisenda Ardevol Piera sees no incompatibility between 'cultural areas' and 'imagined communities': "I do not agree with the idea that imagination is always founded in a figment, (…)".

I would like to thank John for providing us with a chapter of his forthcoming book that we could discuss within the scope of the e-seminar, and for being such an active discussant. Thanks to Faye for taking time and opening the seminar with her comments, and of course thanks to all who have actively and passively participated in the fourth e-seminar of the EASA Media Anthropology Network.

The collected seminar contributions can soon be downloaded from the working paper webpage (http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/workingpapers.htm).

All the best,

Philipp

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Dear seminar participants

I have learned a great deal from this discussion, and I thank you for giving me a hard time! I won't have the time or space to address all the questions you've raised, but I'd like to at least offer some concluding remarks.
Daniel wrote:

'Practice emphasises the transformativity of agency in social performance. These are mediated performances, and this is in line with a view of mediation as necessarily transformative, as it is neccesarily selective in how it represents something (Goodman, languages of art.)' (end of quote)

This not how I see social practice. I see practice as a routinised, culturally recognisable form of social action, for instance, the practice of classroom teaching, or the practice of family TV viewing. Practice is most clearly revealed in its breach, e.g. when the teacher decides she's had enough and jumps out of a 4th-floor classroom window, or when the novice anthropologist blunders through a ritual performance. Practice follows social scripts (cognitive schemas) but there is always an element of improvisation. Without well-rehearsed scripts, social life would be unworkable (and unbearable).

Going back to the rural Iban case, many of their social practices were by the late 1990s strongly mediated by technologies diffused from urban areas. For instance, the Dayak Festival is a series of timed scripts assembled by urban Dayak intellectuals in the 1960s. It spread to rural Sarawak in the 1960s and 1970s. I would describe this public event as an institution, i.e. an established set of practices (social scripts). These practices (or social scripts) are familiar to all of us on this list: quiz nights, award-giving ceremonies, disco dancing, karaoke singing, midnight countdown rites, etc. The media used are no less familiar: festival programme print-outs, clocks, wristwatches, PA systems, karaoke videos, etc. Over time, some of the festival modules have changed but the clock-and-calendar template (built on the passage from 31 May to 1 June) has remained unaltered.

How transformative is the agency of festival participants, to use Daniel's language? Well, some modules have been changed or replaced, but on the whole participants have 'gone

along' with the imported meta-script, so that it is not hard for an outsider to navigate these longhouse events. This homogeneity is in stark contrast with what we know of pre-independence harvest festivals, which were celebrated at unpredictable times owing to the vagaries of weather, crop pests, illness, warfare, etc, and had a very strongly parochial rather than 'ethnic' and urban character.

This brings me to Philipp's remark about Maori computer programmers rewriting Microsoft software to render it meaningful to a Maori customer base, and to Tom's comments on anthropology's scholarly niche as the study of sociocultural diversity. I could have written this paper – and the whole book – on Iban media appropriations in the 1990s that are unique to that people of West Borneo, e.g. the Iban-language Catholic prayer books riddled with 'pagan' notions. But because an important part of my research was historical, and centred on state-led efforts to build a Malaysian nation and people (bangsa), I found overwhelming evidence of a rapid process of cultural integration and homogenisation across he Malaysian culture area from 1963 onwards. This came about not by the migration of people from the dominant Peninsula to the weaker Borneo states (migration to Sarawak is severely restricted), but rather by the 'migration' of media artefacts and contents resulting in remarkably similar social scripts and institutions (sets of scripts). Much remains to be done as far as the country's nation-builders are concerned, but the practical and institutional foundations have been laid. The Iban and other Dayaks are allowed to display what Laura Rival calls 'tolerable differences', e.g. their Dayak festival costumes, but secessionist or culturalist projects would be regarded as intolerable threats and summarily stamped out. I am no New Zealand specialist, but my understanding of that culture area is that it has a national project that follows a British rather than Maori blueprint. I would guess that most Maori today speak far better NZ English than their original mother tongues, and that Maori software is a tolerable difference that poses no threat to the state or its national project. But do correct me here if I'm mistaken. At any rate, if we are serious about studying cultural diversity, I think we need to set it against the massive processes of state and market homogenisation at work around the globe for centuries.

To conclude, I don't want to leave the impression that my rehabilitation of 'old' anthropological notions is fanciful. It comes through a long engagement with the problem of media and social change. Having reflected on the reactions during this seminar to my use of diffusion as a complement to appropriation, which led me to propose the composite diffusion/appropriation, I suggest it might be better to use the well-worn phrase 'diffusion of innovations' so as to avoid the erroneous implication that diffusion and appropriation form a static dichotomy with a missing middle (Nick Couldry earlier). Diffusion entails appropriation; if people don't appropriate a new artefact, or symbol, or social script, it cannot diffuse, as scholars working within the diffusion of innovations field have insisted for decades. As I said earlier, processes of diffusion (like all processes) eventually run their course. Historical research allows us to reconstruct those processes, while ethnographic research allows us to study what these processes left in their wake. By this I don't mean to suggest that diffusionist models can explain everything, but rather that they force us to look more closely at the relationship between routine practices and historical processes. Creative human agency works on and through processes that are not of its own making.

Best wishes

John

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Dear John, dear list,

sorry for sending in my remarks so late, I thought the seminar was closing in about an hours time (13h.). Given that situation I would just like to add some quick ideas. Thanks for sharing this first chapter with us, I very much appreciated reading it! Greatly looking forward to your book of course. My main interest would be to learn more about the ethnography, which seemed to be somewhat hidden behind the theoretical lens. Which leads me to my main point: I am sharing Sarah's ideas concerning the hidden fight that seems to be ongoing. But - is there anything you should be against? I don't think that its necessary at all. And probably not refreshing to use the old diffusionist ideas (I am especially opposed to it as I have been forced to read all this stuff during my first semesters - its not promising at all, I can tell you). Diffusion as such might be an interesting thought, but the older diffusionist theory certainly is not worthwhile bringing it up again. If you want to combine local examples with contextualised examples of state influence or technological inventions, diffusonism will not be of any help.

The second point I just briefly want to touch is power. As far as I can see there is a sideways mentioning of this vital aspect of states and nationalims, but you never mentioned it as an point per se - it is also deeply connected to knowledge, of course.

Cheers,
Dorle