

**Discussant comments on Mihai Coman's paper "Media Anthropology: An Overview"
for European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) Media Anthropology
Network e-seminar May 17, 2005**

**"Claiming Media Anthropology:
The Minefield of Disciplinary Essentialism and Scholarly Agenda-Setting."**

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This provocative position paper by Mihai Coman traverses a minefield of disciplinary essentialism and scholarly agenda-setting. As such the paper attempts to open new ground, but at the same time it risks reifying disciplinary divisions and prematurely homogenizing academic practice in ways that may not accurately reflect current scholarship or vigorously catalyze the new agenda that Coman envisions.

In the paper, Coman seeks to both define and problematize (a) media anthropology, (b) anthropology's distinctive contributions to the study of media, and (c) media's centrality for culture. Along the way, Coman provides an assessment of why media have been ignored or even cast as taboo within anthropological research, comments on particular historical moments of and intersections between anthropology and other fields which study media (e.g. cultural studies), and offers some very stimulating theorizations of the ritualizing and myth-making functions of media, based on his own research. He concludes by stating that taking seriously media's centrality for culture forces a disruption or even death for the way that anthropology is conventionally practiced.

The first area of comment concerns the conclusion and the new agenda. While the conclusion is somewhat overstated -- and somewhat off the mark, since for many, conventionally practiced anthropology is an ideal type that has already been dethroned -- it is very provocative nonetheless, and I would like to hear more from Coman about just what this new form of anthropology would look like.

As I read Coman's arguments about the centrality of media rituals, media myth-making, and mediation in general (p.10), numerous other scholars came to mind (Baudrillard, McLuhan, Benedict Anderson, Stuart Hall, Mark Poster). None of these are cited in the bibliography and I wonder if Coman finds their work useful and how his views of mediation might be similar or different from theirs. None have claimed to be anthropologists, but all have looked at media's centrality for culture and society and some have claimed, like Coman, that "the media are, in post-modernity, the culture" (19). At the same time that I want to push Coman to look for connections to these media studies and social theorists, I would invite him to put a more critical lens on the post-modernists' claims about media's centrality for culture and ask a more refined set of questions that are informed by the disciplinary tool-kit of anthropology. The questions go something like this: To what degree are the media the culture in post-modernity? Which media? Which technologies, outlets, genres? Which culture? Whose culture? For whom ideologically? For whom in everyday practice? How does this all play out in individual people's lives?

The second main area of comment concerns the minefield. Is the minefield worth traversing? What's at stake? Who cares? Are there ways to talk about important new research directions and what counts as good work without using disciplinary labels? I think the minefield is worth traversing, in the sense that I think it is important and productive to think through how the

scholarly study of media be enriched by using anthropological approaches, theories, and methods. As part of the anthropological tool box, Coman mentions ethnography, the study of myth and ritual, symbolic systems, webs of meaning, and critical attention to the nature of difference, exoticization, and scientific authority, to name a few. To this I would add theories and concepts of social organization, commoditization and exchange, sociality, personhood and subjectivity, phenomenology of lived experience, lived space, everyday habits of speaking, ritual language, and last, but not least, a robust and viable concept of culture as semiotic process. Bringing these topics and concepts to bear upon the study of media certainly enriches the study of media and the study of the human condition more generally. At the same time, however, the minefield becomes a very dangerous place if one is going there to look for territory, disciplinary legitimacy, and singular definitions.

Coman traverses the minefield with great flair and caution. I look forward to the discussion that ensues and I look forward to moving past the minefield.

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