EASA Media Anthropology Network
e-Seminar Series

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

**E-Seminar on Mihai Coman's working paper
"Media anthropology: an overview"**

(17 – 24 May 2005)

John Postill (University of Bremen)
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Dear network

The 5th EASA Media Anthropology Network e-seminar opens now and will end in a week's time (Tuesday 24 May at 4 pm Central European Time). We'll be discussing over email the paper 'Media anthropology: an overview'. The author, Mihai Coman, teaches at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication Studies, Bucharest University (Romania). He has published widely on media, myths and rituals, mostly in Francophone journals such as Communications (Quebec) and Reseaux. In 2003 he published Pour une anthropologie des medias, (Grenoble, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble). More recently, with Eric Rothenbuhler, he has edited an English-language media anthropology reader (Sage 2005). See http://easaonline.org/networkbiosa-f.htm#MC

The paper's discussant is Debra Spitulnik who teaches at Emory University (Atlanta, US). She specialises in linguistic and media anthropology and has worked on a range of media-related issues, including media and national identity formation, with special reference to Zambia. A number of her publications can now be freely downloaded from our online bibliography at http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/bibliography.htm

To participate in this seminar all you need to do is email your comments or questions directly to medianthro@abyznet.net (i.e. not to me) after the author has responded to the discussant sometime later today. The paper can be found at 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. Debra Spitulnik has asked me to forward her comments on her behalf as she won't be having access to email today. I will do so in a separate email in a few moments.

Best wishes

John

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

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

by Debra Spitulnik, Department of Anthropology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA

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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Dear All

Here are my reactions to Debra; I'm looking forward for challenging discussions
Best
Mihai Coman

I would like, for the very beginning, to thank Debra Spitulnik for her thoughtful comments. I felt a lot of empathy in her thoughts and, in the same time, I took the benefice of a lucid, critical and provocative viewpoint ('la mise a bonne distance').

Spitulnik is right when identifying in my article the existence of two articles in fact - one descriptive, which maps the debates about the relationship between mass media, as an object of inquiry, and cultural anthropology, as a scientific paradigm - and another article, somehow programmatic, that define a new discipline and advocates for its legitimacy. The article has a history, and its history makes clearer the dialectic of its ideas.

At the beginning it was an exotic experience, a sort of 'what if?' What if I apply anthropological tools to interpret journalistic discourse and media events? Thus were born my

studies of French press discourse during the Romanian revolution in 1989, of the Romanian press' discourse regarding Mircea Eliade, the University Square demonstrations, the media event that was the Michael Jackson concert in Bucharest in 1992, the visit of King Mihai in Bucharest, and so on. And then there was Bernard Miege's provocative dare to write a book about media anthropology (Coman 2003), and latter the enriching experience of collaborating with Eric Rothenbuhler on the 2005 Media Anthropology reader. I am speaking here of a period dominated by a 'missionary' attitude: I attempted to prove that similar approaches take place within anthropology and media studies. And, therefore, there was a need for mapping, describing, classifying and interpreting previous research and eventually of a special interpretative perspective (I advocated for a processual approach). This article marks the entry into the third period: constructing a model or theory. I am speaking of creating a theoretical construct to bring an anthropological approach to mass media (an approach that also requires rethinking the theoretical cannons of anthropology). This approach no longer merely defends media anthropology but shows what it bring to the understanding of both media as a cultural reality and anthropology as a science.

I tried to adopt a detached position, basically – the end of the article, that can be shocking especially by its rhetoric (a metaphoric- conceptual return to the formula that opens the article), can create the impression of a parti-pris of the author. I am not ready to bring all the necessary arguments to say that media anthropology will replace cultural anthropology - this is just a hypothesis that derives logically from the facts (media centrality for post-modern culture) and from the theoretical tendencies presented. I truly believe in such an evolution but, as Spitulnik showed, an elaborated argument in this area implies crossing the limits of an interdisciplinary discussion and entering a field of theory of culture.

On the other hand I think we should promote some disciplinary delineation. I am aware that such an action can be accused of essentialism. But if essentialism and 'reifying disciplinary divisions' are the risks of adopting such a position, we should not forget that maintaining of a disciplinary relativism leads to a scientific identity crisis that is damaging to the same degree. In the last years maybe I was to involved in the effort to promote media anthropology meaning in the fight against skepticism (at least) of those who did not believe in the chances of such an approach and/or refuse any discussion about such an approach. Maybe this reality shows up in some phrase turns. But, apart all these conjectures, I strongly believe that one of the main academic tasks is to define and critically think/reflect on disciplinary contents' which leads inevitably to disciplinary divisions.

This takes me to 'traversing the minefield'. I would suggest that what is at stake is more than a matter of academic recognition, prestige and power. As Spitulnik showed, this scientific adventure can lead us to the enrichment of 'the study of media and the study of the human condition more generally'. This was always the goal of anthropology, to discover aspects of the human condition in its most diverse cultural expressions. Can we do this without disciplinary labels? We can, evidently, and many times now, even during the discussions in our group, this position was expressed as an academic program and as a personal creed. However ..... When explorers go all around to discover new territories, from time to time, one of them stops the search to draw the map of the new discoveries. The history shows that, usually, these maps are incomplete and that the borders on them are always under revision. But the idea of cartography and the need for boarders- be them relative- remains.

John Postill (University of Bremen)
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Many thanks to Debra and Mihai for their opening contributions. The discussion is now open to all of us on this list. All you need to do is email directly to medianthro@abyznet.net, taking care not to reply to a contributor instead of to the list.

Please remember to add a brief subject line that sums up your comment or question.

John

Anna Horolets (Polish Academy of Science)
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Dear Mihai, Debra and the List,

I would like to thank the Author for providing a paper that addresses the ritual perspective on mediated communication, among other things.

This perspective (which is known to me from James Carey (1988a)) seems to clash both with functional and critical theories of the media (I am speaking rather of press and broadcast than other types of media). It seems to deserve more attention exactly because it is incongruent with the perspectives that can be coined "dominating" in humanities.

The theories that treat media as "fourth estate" (even works of Habermas) reject (or rather disregard) it on the basis on the serious challenge the ritual vision of communication poses to rational and normative claims of the media.

The theories that are critical of the media including critical discourse analysis are focused on the faults of the media (reproduction of domination, marginalization and the like) and underestimate its "mediating" cultural role, its ritual meaning or texture.

Ritual perspective could provide a fresh and de-mystifying (as Bourdieu suggests) view on mass media.

However, if one is concerned with the theoretical grounding of the field, the ritual perspective could be a double edged sword. For instance, I am wondering what consequences ritual perspective, as a part of media anthropology, has for the anthropological research on e-democracy.

Generally, I am interested in the discrepancy between the public images of democracy, its academic images in political science and sociology (at least in Eastern Europe - Therefore I am particularly sympathetic with Mihai's account of the "missionary" phase of his research on media in Romania through anthropological lense) and the anthropological perspective on democracy. I am wondering how media anthropology would go about it?

On the other hand, are there and if so, what are the inherent "ideologies" of media anthropology (e.g. treating TV as an anti-diversity channel vs. Internet as a pro-diversity channel (e.g. in Scollons 2004) etc.)?

As for Debra's metaphor of a minefield – it could probably be stretched to the danger of antagonizing those anthropologists who do not FOCUS on media in their research. [And that would definitely be "negative public relations" (cf. p.3) for the emerging field.] The argument about mediated quality of contemporary culture has much truth in it. Yet, this argument has a lot in common with the argument much of the culture is mediated through language.

Best,

Anna

References:

Bourdieu, P., Wacquant Loïc, J. D., Zaproszenie do socjologii refleksyjnej, [Invitation to reflexive sociology], Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa, 2001.
Carey, J.W., Communication as Culture. Essays on Media and Society, Boston: Uniwin Human, 1988a.
Carey, J.W. (ed.), Media, Myth and Narratives, Sage, 1988b.
Calhoun, G., (ed.), Habermas and the Public Sphere, Cambridge, Mass., and London: The MIT Press, 1994.
Scollon, R. and S. Wong Scollon, Nexus Analysis. Discourse and the Emerging Internet, London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

My own attempt to apply ritual perspective on media representations:

Horolets, A., Obrazy Europy w polskim dyskursie publicznym [Images of Europe in Polish public discourse], unpublished PhD thesis, 2004.

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Sarah Pink (Loughborough University)
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First many thanks to Mihai Coman for a very thoroughly researched and informative paper. He succeeds in drawing together a set of literatures to demonstrate how far and in what areas media anthropology has developed.

Mihai has indeed set himself a difficult task because defining cultural anthropology alone is not easy. Adding on to this the split transatlantic identity of social and cultural anthropology makes it even harder. Therefore I do not want to appear too critical of what is a good and courageous attempt to both provide an overview and suggest some definitions of media anthropology. However for me the problem is that when Mihai writes about cultural anthropology and classical anthropology he does not ever seem to be addressing an anthropology that I as a social anthropologist recognise as the discipline within which I am working. This is of course because 1) anthropology has diversified to an extent to which two

colleagues who are both social anthropologists might well be working with very different theories and types of empirical topic, and 2) added to this the media anthropology network is made up of anthropologists who have been trained in and work in very different national anthropologies.

Yet I do want to question Mihai's association of anthropology with a very limited set of ideas originating from classical anthropology, the same set that proposed by Rothenbuhler and Coman 2005, cited by Mihai here when he suggests media anthropology 'prepares media studies for a more complete engagement with the symbolic construction of reality and the fundamental importance of symbolic structures, myth, and ritual in everyday life'. My question to Mihai here is why symbolic structures, myth, and ritual? – which are in fact vestiges of the classical anthropology that a media anthropology would challenge. Why not for example would it not be an anthropological theory of embodied practice that would be most suggestive to media studies for understanding media practices? – in some cases more useful than a theory of myth, ritual or symbolic structures. I suppose I am asking why locate media anthropology as part of this particular approach to anthropology?

My second question relates to the literature Mihai connects with. His review is very comprehensive, and one can never read and include everything that has ever been written about a topic in one article, so again I am going to make an unfair criticism. However I was surprised that, given his interest in media and ritual he did not include a discussion of Felicia Hughes-Freeland's work on Ritual Performance and Media (1997). This volume makes specific links between notions of ritual and media, demonstrating how the study of media events has been integrated into some anthropological studies.

Finally I have some doubts about Mihai's more radical proposals for a new anthropology of which media is a part and the concomitant 'death of conventional anthropology'. It is not infrequently that the death of anthropology as we know it has been heralded. Usually it is a revisionist and corrective approach advanced by a subdiscipline that is projected to kill it off. In the 1980s the 'writing culture' debate certainly did shake up social and cultural anthropology, its legacies were to make us more reflexive and conscious of the way we produce knowledge and text. Recently Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz (2005) have suggested that a new radical visual anthropology formed out of a collaboration with arts practice might, by producing new forms of anthropology, challenge and re-shape anthropological practice. David Howes (2005) has likewise suggested that we are in fact undergoing a sensory revolution across the social sciences and humanities as scholars are increasingly attending to the embodied or 'emplaced' (as in the mind-body-environment relationship) nature of human experience and practice. Of course anthropology is constantly changing – it is 'in process' or 'progress', but is it serially being killed and reborn? In this sense I think Mihai's ending statement exaggerates the case – a new order is not being established, rather anthropologists should be increasingly learning to attend to media and mediation as they undertake their normal practice as anthropologists. Is there really such opposition to media in contemporary anthropology? When I finished my PhD in 1995, which was, amongst other things about the televised and print media context in which women had been able to become bullfighters in Spain in the early 1990s, not once was my work challenged for having media as one of its key themes and I never perceived myself as working on a topic that was not accepted by mainstream anthropologists.

Looking forward to another interesting discussion
Sarah

Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)
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Congratulations to Mihai for coming out with all guns blazing, he must be the life and soul of a party...

As Anna Horoloets asks:
"... what are the inherent 'ideologies' of media anthropology (e.g. treating TV as an anti-diversity channel vs. Internet as a pro-diversity channel (e.g. in Scollons 2004) etc.)?"

In the spirit of this question, I would like to ask another. How do we understand the ways in which people understand their own communication, in terms of their 'embodied practices?" Are they implicated in the possibility or impossibility of communication? And what implications does this have for our authoritative claims about how communication works?

Daniel

John Postill (University of Bremen)
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I broadly concur with Debra's and Sarah's readings of Mihai's paper, so rather that reiterate some of their remarks I'd like to concentrate on a single area covered in the paper. If I've understood you correctly, Mihai, one of the main points you're making in your paper is that a truly anthropological approach to media would explore two great human universals (ritual and myth) not in traditional but in modern societies. You stress in particular the potentially fruitful study of how media are central to processes of ritualisation and mythification in (post)modern societies. You also point out that anthropologists working on media have so far taken little notice of ritual, unlike scholars in media studies and sociology who have used this term in a variety of ways (see Thomas 1998).

I agree with this last point. If we look, for instance, at the readers by Askew and Wilk (2002) and Ginsburg et al (2002), between them they contain but three passing references to ritual, none of them in the introductions. On the other hand, Sarah rightly reminds us of F. Hughes-Freeland's (1998) edited Ritual, Performance, Media -- although it has to be said that Hughes-Freeland and other contributors to that volume are distinctly uncomfortable with the notion of ritual. Hughes-Freeland wants to use it as 'an odd-job word' subordinated to the broader category of 'situated social action'. So I think you're right, Mihai, to draw attention to this media anthropological neglect of ritual. In this regard, I was wondering if you could flesh out your position on mediated ritual(isation) with actual empirical examples from your own work on Romanian media events.

References:

Hughes Freeland, F. 1998. Introduction. In F. Hughes-Freeland ed. Ritual, Performance, Media. London: Routledge, pp. 1-28.
Thomas, G. 1998. Medien, Ritual, Religion, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

See also http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/bibliography.htm

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Dominic Boyer (Cornell University)
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Hi,

For my money, the best anthropological work on media and ritual is to be found in the essays that emerged from Terry Turner's Kayapo Video Project where Turner analyzes how videomaking became an integral part of Kayapo ritual practices.

See, for example:

Turner, Terence. 1991. Representing, Resisting, Rethinking: Historical Transformations of Kayapo Culture and Anthropological Consciousness. In Colonial Situations, ed. G. Stocking, pp. 285-313. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
Turner, Terence. 1992. Defiant Images: The Kayapo Appropriation of Video. Anthropology Today 8(6): 5-16.
Turner, Terence. 1995. Representation, Collaboration and Mediation in Contemporary Ethnographic and Indigenous Media. Visual Anthropology Review 11(2): 102-6.

The "Defiant Images" article is especially good.

Take care,

DB
--
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Debra Spitulnik (Emory University)
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Thanks Mihai for the response. I look forward to the dialogue on the list. I hope not too many people are gone for the summer yet. In a separate note you made some really great points about the Mendeleev table and prophets. I agree completely. Can you post them to the group? I am in complete agreement here that we can benefit by focusing on discplinary contributions without being overly essentializing or blind to complex forms of interdisciplinarity. I hope we can get more concrete in specifying what's in the tool kit besides (a) ethnography and (b) anthropological looking topics. I'm increasingly finding that these are the kinds of things that are important for training -- my students want to know -- so of course we can let this area evolve without knowing what it will look like, but at the same time the younger generation is seeking guidance. Any thoughts on this?
Debra

Mihai Coman (Bucharest University)
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Dear All

I was surprised and pleased, pleased and challenged, by the immediate reaction to my article and by the numerous perspectives for debate, for further investigations opened by them.

I'll try to react to some of them and also to stress aspects of my position that maybe were not clearly formulated in the paper.

1. It seems to me that there is a special interest for the media-ritual relation (Sarah, Anna, John). First at all that case study was a very small, compressed, part from a larger analysis (see my French book *Pour une anthropolgie des medias*, 2003 where these contributions were analyzed, classified and evaluated). So here I quoted only the books or articles offering a synthesis of the different ways in which the relation between media and ritual was discussed. I know and I appreciate Hughes-Freeland edited book, but it is not the only one addressing particular aspect of the interaction of ritual and media, and definitively it is not a theoretical synthesis on this subject.

On the other side media ritual couple is the only one that generated theoretical models - the media events one proposed by Dayan and Katz and the media ritual one proposed by Couldry. (I have to tell you that I'm close to finishing a study on the various definitions and usages of the notion of ritual in media studies and, even more important, on the challenges and possible changes these usages can bring to the 'canonic' theories on ritual for a draft of this perspective you can have a look in Cultural Anthropology and Mass Media : A Processual Approach in Media Anthropology (eds: Erich Rothenbuhler, Mihai Coman), Sage 2005 http://www.sagepub.com/BookItems.aspx?pid=10983&sc=1). So I believe that media-rital couple is a good instrument for thinking with, an instrument that enables us to see the general problems of a media anthropology more faithfully to anthropological 'lens'

I would like also to precise that I'm not quite in the line of Carey, for whom ritual is just a label, or a metaphor for a model of communication as 'sharing of ' and not as 'transportation of' ... something. But I'm in a profound accord with Anna on the consequences of the ritual frame (in a wider perspective of the anthropological look on media, specifically media roles and effects) on public sphere classic theories. Basically I advocate in the book I published in France for an acceptance of rituals and mythical constructions (meaning, for media scholars' tabloid news) as constitutive and effective in the creation and functioning of modern public spheres.

2. Another subject of interest seems to be the 'practice' or, to be more accurate, the 'practices' (expressed by Sarah and Daniel). It is a filed that appears as a crossroad where anthropology meets sociology, history and media (and cultural) studies. So the question is 'what would be the contribution' specific contribution of anthropology ? And here I have to come back to Sarah question WHAT anthropology ? the one she identify with as an social anthropologists ? The one more closer to my perception as an 'anthropologie culturelle', more centered on 'spiritual' products and practices? I believe that we have to agree on a definition (which like all definition is incomplete and oppened to 're-invention', because without a common understanting on what anthropology was and is (try to be) we run the risk of a perpetual relativism and finally of the lost off our communication ... practices. Sarah is right in that I

should precise more carefully my position inside the anthropological tradition and Debra comments stressed also that dificulty.

So, do we have an anthropological theory of practice? I'm not here inside my terrain ; I noticed several wonderfull ethnographic accounts of the media consumption (especially) and media production practices. It doesn't occur to me that they articulate (new) anthropological theory of practice (is Bourdieu book an 'classical' text of anthropology?) or, applied to that kind of practice, a media anthropology. And here we got the perfect circle : how can we define an anthropological theory of (let's say) practice if we do not know or agree on what is anthropology?

On the other side, Sarah is right in stressing that actual anthropological approaches are less rooted in the areas of interest specific to previous anthropological works. But, if one goes through the body of literature devoted to media and involving (some) anthropological 'elements' congruent to the 'classical anthropology', he or she would find that the most frequent references are made to ethnography (as an anthropological method) and to ritual and myth (as concepts elaborated mostly by anthropology). If one would go beyond this level, he or she would find that these approaches are dealing with culture and cultural change, with identity, with personhood, with experiences, with practices. Now the question is : are these concepts specific to anthropology (or do they have specific meanings in anthropology) or they are parts of a common vocabulary that scientist from different sciences use with no concern to their belonging to a specific discipline. If this is the case, a media anthropology is no more possible, because there is no anthropology (except the 'refuted' classical one). Which brings me to ....

3. The 'radical' proposal of a new anthropology. In my answer to Debra I stressed (and unfortunately this was not well balanced in the original text) that the end of the article is maybe too rhetoric. Sarah perception that I'm exaggerating the case is correct from this perspective it was my mistake to play on a rhetorical device (the end confirms the beginnings) and not to add a final statement to 'cool' the metaphor. I expressed it more clearly in my answer to Debra's comments : all I have done was to follow the logical consequences of the basic arguments. Latter on in an exchange of letters with Debra I realize also something that was not obvious to me in the beginning - the pedagogical responsibility. Debra invited my to share with you this aspect and here is the fragment of that letter:

I do not know how would look like the possible new form of anthropology - it is more like in chemistry (the Mendeleev table) where you know that there is position for something, which comes logically from the system, but you do not yet discovered/find that substance in its material concretization; media anthropology is still an emerging field which could died as an embryo or transform itself in a cultural hero... And something else: the worst thing is to try to play the role of the prophet of your field – you run the risk to be/become a Cassandra .... Even if we have doubts as scholars we have to offer something to our students and colleagues. We know that the map is not perfectly accurate and that it would not last forever. But we have to propose some boundaries and this was I believe the main incentive of my paper.

Best
Mihai

Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)
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Dear list

Based on Mihai's feedback, it becomes a little clearer why there is a resistance to a critical approach to our own theoretical investments. It seems that there is anxiety about ending up in a free-floating mess, with little in the way of clear reference points, with approaches that are therefore not communicable to our friends and colleagues:

>Even if we have doubts as scholars we have to offer something to our students and
>colleagues. We know that the map is not perfectly accurate and that it would not last forever.
>But we have to propose some boundaries and this was I believe the main incentive of my
>paper.

It is interesting to note that one of the earlier theorists on communication was Dewey, whose influential take on education was that there was no fixed knowledge only inquiry. From working as a teacher, I can confirm that the ability to pick ideas up, explore them, criticise them and evaluate them is the most important part of education, and the open-endedness of that is very inspiring for students. Overdefining your position tends to get in the way of that, so there are limits to how useful defining boundaries can be in that sense.

Every discipline, even maths and physics, is dynamic due to its varieties of approaches, and because of critical work. University level students presumably are ready to appreciate that. A call for a critical approach is not a call to never build up positions, it is a call to build them up, break them down, rebuild them differently, build up another position etc... So in a sense it is a call for a more structured approach, one that is plural, and thus extremely challenging.

Since we are dealing with the Anthropology of media, this implies that media studies itself is a valid object of study. This means that the 'rituals' and the metaphysics / presuppositions of discipliniary practice should be up for grabs. If that type of existential discomfort is not your cup of tea, then Anthropology is the wrong place to be.

Daniel

Sarah Pink (Loughborough University)
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A quick reaction to Daniel's comment, is that I am not sure who is anxious about ending up in 'free-floating mess'? I don't think media anthropology is heading that way, and I think it is uncommon that academic disciplines do - just as it is uncommon that they are serially killed off. It seems to me that one of the things we are achieving is to identify a quite clear set of reference points in a media anthropology which, it is becoming increasingly evident, is approached differently by different scholars. I wonder how much this is related to national traditions in anthropology and it would be interesting to hear from people in other countries to see what their views are on this. I think Mihai has outlined one specific approach to media anthropology which exists with a plurality of others. I must admit that I find myself protesting about this approach, since I think it is limited in what it takes from anthropology and my own view is that to understand media practices we might (better) draw from other areas too. But

at the same time, his work has been based on what media scholars have themselves taken from anthropology. I would be really interested to in due course hear more about how media scholars have used the concept of ritual.

Interdisciplinary borrowing is often irritating to the borrowee – and borrowers are often accused of sloppy scholarship (there have been plenty of instances of this by borrowers of visual anthropology). However it might be useful to note how media studies approaches that have interests in common with anthropology can also feed back in to contribute to anthropology – at least in my own experience. When I was writing my PhD in 1994 I found little anthropological literature on media and found myself turning to media studies to understand the 'media bullfight', Dayan and Katz's notion of the media event was fundamental here and really helped me to think through what was happening when the bullfight - which has frequently been analysed anthropologically as a 'traditional ritual' - was reconstituted in various print media and television.

Sarah

Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)
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In response to Sara
Straw men or zombie categories often get a discussion going a bit.

> It seems to me that one of the things we are achieving is to identify a quite clear set
>of reference points in a media anthropology which, it is becoming increasingly evident, is
>approached differently by different scholars.

The point I am trying to get at is that there is a great variety of possible communication models, and they are directly implicated in our practice. Take the quote from Sara above: Her indication of reference points, is calling on a more empirical / information model of communication, while she follows it up with an invocation of situated agency.

So there is something like an information model and a transmission model in the same sentence. It is also taking part within an academic ritual of 'rational' debate. Now if I approached that sentence with a preconception about what communication is 'about' I might miss the diversity of communication models that seem to be implicated in it. If this is true for a sentence, it must be doubly true for the mind boggling complexities of people's lived experience.

So we need to not only to debate these communication models amongst ourselves, but also look for these tensions, implied or explicit, in our objects of study.

Daniel

John Postill (University of Bremen)
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Dear seminar participants

We seem to have strayed somewhat from Mihai's working paper. May I suggest that we have another round of comments and queries on the paper from now till Friday evening, followed by Mihai's reactions.
Best wishes

John

Mihai Coman (Bucharest University)
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Dear All

I do not share John feeling that our discussion is leaving the key issues suggested by my paper at stake was not only media anthropology but also the process of the creation and legitimization of a new (sub) discipline and, throught this, the actual status of our discipline

I started my inquiry from media scholars work (Sarah has so vividly stress the bewilderment of the anthropologists when approaching media and I must confess that for me also, in 1993 when I find it, Dayan and Katz book was a kind of revelation). My first reaction, reding Silverstone or Real or Goethals or etc was a strong disapointment they just picked up concepts from cultural anthropology (in European (continental) sense more anthropology of religion in anglo-american sense) and they used them as metaphors: labeling something as myth or ritual or liminality was the end and not the begining of the inquiry. In the begining I was dissapointed and I believed that the aim would be to educate media scholars in anthropology so they could use properly our tools at least the one they loved so much (myth, ritual, magic, religion) . Reading Sarah comments I realised that I was also prisoner (and this is not the problem the problem was that I didn't make it clearly in the text) of that branch, discipline or tradition of anthropology.

Sarah wrote: It seems to me that one of the things we are achieving is to identify a quite clear set of reference points in a media anthropology which, it is becoming increasingly evident, is approached differently by different scholars. I wonder how much this is related to national traditions in anthropology and it would be interesting to hear from people in other countries to see what their views are on this. I think Mihai has outlined one specific approach to media anthropology which exists with a plurality of others. I must admit that I find myself protesting about this approach, since I think it is limited in what it takes from anthropology and my own view is that to understand media practices we might (better) draw from other areas too.

I totally agree. I never was happy with the usage of ritual and ritual categories in giving meaning to individual media practices. I'm convinced that social anthropology (in classical delineations) have much more to bring in this debate. And we can find numerous other examples. So maybe the next step would be the identification, from our various perspective, of this 'set of reference points' we agree upon it and we can present as the core of media anthropology.

On the other side I believe that Daniel and myself, we are stressing (beyond the diferent rhetorical strategies) the same ideea: So in a sense it is a call for a more structured approach, one that is plural, and thus extremely challenging.

Mihai

Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)
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I agree with Mihai, and would like to respond to the call for reference points.

The tradition of Anthropology I am coming from is very much that of practice framed in terms of 'metaphysical critique,' (Hobart) that of being critical of our own analytical and social metaphysics, so we are more able to look into the metaphysics (unquestioned assumptions) that people bring to bear in their own social practices. This is relevant to anthropology of media, in as much as unquestioned assumptions often operate in overarching and totalising way, and the ways in which we must often get a sense of our world at large or cosmology often tend to be mediated to a great extent, from mass media, to 'ritualistic' enactments of religion etc...

Another reference point in this is anthropological critiques of dominant practices such as of scientism and development. This implies a model of communication distinct from how we imagine ritual, something that has reference to external 'objects' which are often constituted in this reference, even if this is assumed not to be the case, and something that is likely to produce returns, or be predictive and thus potentially productive. This is found in development in terms of 'information models' of communication, relating to ideas about post industrial society, and further teleological progress. Levi Strauss typified ritual as unproductive, seemingly placing the other in opposition to the rational and productive us.

My case study is in development, where these types of productive information discourses take on a distinctly ritualistic tone! Or they might be considered transmission models, ways of manipulating 'the masses.'

In terms of reference points, a critical history of the emergence of ritual as a way of representing the often irrational other, might accompany a critique of our own rationalistic and productivist rituals, especially in relation to the geopolitics of social practice in terms of how progress is imagined and transmitted within the hierarchy of states, and associated non-state agents.

Media studies stands in that hierarchy, in as much as it sits firmly in models of democracy that stress free speech and civil rights above substantive socio-economic rights. This can be seen in the unfolding of various transmission models, from Adorno's tyrannical post fascist tycoon to Fiske's 'semiological democracy.' - This mirrors a liberal civil rights agenda of freedom from political oppression. Thus the pressupositions in media studies are implicated in these geopolitics of social practice.

So I think, coming from the school of oriental and african studies, where institutionally we have blood on our hands in a historical sense, that one reference point we can draw from Anthropology is a wariness about being drawn into further 'colonial' projects, in the sense of

reproducing unquestionally the metaphysics of powerful agents, in relation to the concerns of powerful polities.

If you doubt this, take a look at the use of 'democracy' in the Middle East.

Having said all that, if there is an aspect of Mihai's paper John wants to look into, let's go with that.

Daniel

John Postill (University of Bremen)
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Dear list

I am sorry if my earlier call for a fresh round of comments and queries was unclearly phrased. In my role as moderator, I was merely inviting other people on the list to participate in this seminar so that we can get a broad range of perspectives.

We've had a slow start, but the good news is we're open for business through the weekend till Tuesday!

Best

John

Elisenda Ardèvol (University of Barcelona)
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Hello list!!!

First of all, thanks a lot Mihai, for your contribution to the list with an interesting paper about the 'minefield' of (media) anthropology. My impressions after the reading are that you try to map the current studies that can be included under the label of 'Media anthropology', its object of research and its connections with other specialized areas of research in anthropology (or established 'subdisciplines' or approaches). Is in that sense that I understand the 'detour' to ritual and myth as 'classic' concepts in anthropology that may be useful to understand 'media events'.

What I have clear is that 'media' itself is a difficult theoretical object to construct, because it designates a high variety and multiplicity of processes in our contemporary societies related with communication technologies, and because anthropological research practice has not yet developed its own widely accepted or shared- methods of analysis and grounding concepts related to that field.

The problem, it seems, is not to do research in that field, but to claim a 'subdiscipline' as well as the well established 'subdisciplines' (?) of kinship, economy, religion or political

anthropology, or whatever. In fact, it seems that now we have substituted an structural-functionalistic vision of our subdisciplines to an object-centred ones, like tourism, medical, body, etc. anthropologies... without forgetting other branches according to different theoretical frameworks, such as 'symbolic anthropology' or 'cognitive anthropology'... anthropology is not an homogenous discipline at all!!! So I am not worried about if 'media anthropology' is or is not a 'subdiscipline'. To my knowledge, we are free to choose what we want to research, teach and publicise.

It also seems a problem to recognize an affinity of object and goals with media studies or, what seems worse, with cultural studies, fearing of blurring the limits of anthropology itself as a clear defined discipline. It seems that now is not the 'fashion' as it seemed to be but I think it is not our problem, too. It is clear to me that there is an area of knowledge called 'anthropology' and an field of research that I like to call 'media anthropology', because it allows me to joint together my current research lines. Then, I happily found that there are other researchers that also investigate that subjects and that we can discuss topics that interests us and may be do things together. So, I discovered too, that there are colleagues in other disciplines, named mass media studies or audiovisual communication studies, that are also interested in the same topics and in the perspective anthropologists can offer. May be they misunderstand some things, but I am sure that they think the same when I try to make sense of their academic traditions. So, for me, they are welcomed!!!

Why I am saying all this? Maybe because I think that what we need is a map, as Mihai develops, useful to look at what kind of studies are under the label of 'media anthropology', but I also think that we not need to victimize our selves or try to categorize our field of research trough identity processes of exclusion and boundary tracing. We need to analyze works done to learn more about how we can do better research and more significative and relevant, not only in our mother discipline, but also among the concomitant research agendas and social commitments. If we are able to do that, I am sure that recognition will follow. Is in that sense that I appreciate our whole discussion and the debate of ritual concepts and embodied practice approach.

Elisenda

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Hello list,

It is maybe a detour of the main discussion (which, this time, seems to consist more of detours anyhow), but the questions raised by Elisenda are essential. Indeed the question of media research is nowadays shared by so many disciplines that it becomes difficult to tell apart the approaches. Now, this is a very general statement, as I admit, but still it raises questions for any approach towards the media. As the German scholar and science advisor Jürgen Mittelstraß emphasizes, we need clear disciplinary definitions first before we may apply an

inter- or transdisciplinary approach. Hence, Elisenda's remarks about the overlapping interests of various disciplines raise the question of fruitful exchange of knowledge.

I should suggest that the following list of issues must be clarified, and I should very much welcome your opinion as anthropologists if a) you hold these questions as important as I do, and b) if (regardless of your answer to question a)) what your replies are:

1) A mixed approach (such a s media anthropology) must be governed by one predominant paradigm; in this case an anthropological one.
2) Results produced under the auspices of this paradigm must:
a) if they resemble those produced by, e.g., media sociology, media history, media semiotics, or media studies proper, be interpreted differently, or
b) if they vary from the results produced by, e.g., said disciplines, be explicable by using said anthropological paradigm.
3) If no such paradigm can be formulated, media anthropology (m.a.) risks disciplinary dissolution.
4) What are the common traits between m.a. and other media studies?
5) What are the essential differences, i.e., where can m.a. produce knowledge or solve problems other disciplines can't?

All these questions serve to mark the disciplinary field.

Best,
Guido

--
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Scientific Communication and Semiotics
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Dear all

I have found this discussion so far in this stream very stimulating we owe a lot to Mihai for providing such a bold starting-point for discussion. I wonder however whether the most interesting issues and debates might be better uncovered by sidestepping (at least for a while) the issues of what is media anthropology? does media anthropology supplant an old anthropology? is there any longer an old anthropology to supplant? and raising a more open set of questions, less tied to particular disciplinary loyalties, questions about the types of new theoretical and conceptual issues that arise in the zone where the past 20 years of anthropologically-oriented media research and the past 20 years of media-oriented anthropology converge. For me media anthropology is not a sub-discipline and here I disagree with Mihai but simply that zone of engagement between two largely independent disciplines of media sociology and anthropology, but nonetheless interesting for that.

So the issues we might debate now are: what are the new questions emerging in this area? What role do some concepts from a certain older anthropology (such as myth and ritual) have to play whether in original or transformed versions and, if not much of a role (as Sarah Pink suggested - it would be good to debate this specifically, here or in a later stream), why not? What other concepts are more productive in understanding how media (whether of more or less centralised sorts) are embedded in cultural and social formations, and why?

At stake here to refer to Mihais comments of yesterday is certainly more than whether certain terms such as myth can be transported metaphorically, let alone just gesturally, from older contexts to newer ones; any such concepts have to be put to work and justified in new settings, which may involve transforming them to some degree. Whether it worked or not, that was what I was attempting in my book Media Rituals, for the concept of ritual for a media setting. But it might be good to discuss more generally what concepts are likely candidates for the zone of media anthropology - but without claiming, or reclaiming, ownership of them from any particular disciplinary position.

Best wishes

Nick Couldry

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Dear Mihai and the List,

I apologise for may be stepping too far aside of the main discussion that turns around the definition of the media anthropology as a field, sub-field, discipline or zone, as was suggested.

I am wondering about some particularities of Mihai's article, since i find much of it refers to my - small, but never mind - experience of trying to analyse Polish media in ritual (but also semiotic) terms. Since Mihai also has an experience of reserach in Central and Easter European media (contexts? contents?) - his opinion is particularly interesting to me.
On pp.5-6 Figure one offers a division between Western and non-Western (as sameness otherness dihotomy) - this division as any sceme is an abstraction, yet, where one should plave e.g. Polish press disocurse on Europe and the EU. More generally, how do we deal with border cases - actually wit most of te cases that are in flux and border.

Even broader question - which might be of interest to media anthropology and which it might be able to deal with - how to find the middle ground for the narratives of anthropologists - that avoid essentialism, evolutionism etc - with the technical (but not only) development (a debated word itself as Kuper explains in his resent article from SA) - modernisation - and the categories like backwardness that seem to die hard in the "native" narratives (such as Polish press narrative of the Self as compared to European "civilized" Other - or better Self.) If the narrative of backwardness is there - can it simply be explained as a manifestation of a myth of eternal return or something like that and be treated as irrelevant - or should it be treated as a

product of power relations and an part of people's life? may be it is a false opposition altogether.
But I will be happy to hear your reaction.
I apologize if my questions are a bit far-fetced for the general discussion.
Best,
Anna

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Very interesting comments from everyone--I feel myself provoked and pulled in several directions.

I agree with Nick's characterization of media anthropology as a territory of engagement, or--let's push it farther--mutual plundering. If anyone is yelling "death to anthropology," it is the pirates and it probably has more to do with pirating than anthropology. But maybe Nick just quit agreeing with me.

Sarah earlier called for hearing from the media studies side of the discussion. I am one of those folks trained and employed in communication, but with a long history of interdisciplinary searching. What anthropology I know is from the library--it was self guided, and in my case, at least, it was a search for ideas, for concepts, for explanations and theories. On reflection, that has produced abstraction, if not idealism, to my adaptations from the anthropological literature. Nevertheless, I believe I got some of it right enough for my own purposes, at least.

Mihai is right on the money characterizing the interest of media scholars in anthropological ideas as dominated by ritual, myth, magic, and religion.

But why? Speaking only for myself, but betting that we could generalize, I encountered ritual, myth, magic, and eventually, religion as concepts that plugged gaping wholes in the communication theory of my own field, threw light on aspects of communication that my own training drew our attention away from, seemed to have politically and philosopically important implications, and presented me with a whole new set of very interesting questions.

Why the older anthropology? Why do the classic readings still have so much influence over media and communication scholars? No doubt there are lots of reasons--accessibility, desire to begin at the beginning, their greater focus on ritual, myth, magic, and other concepts that solve problems in communication theory. Professors of communication reading anthropology, after all, are not trying to become anthropologists; they are working on their own professional agendas. Someone made reference to the humanism of classical anthropology and that may be attractive to communication scholars as well--certainly it is to me (I know the critique--I still side with the poets--inside joke to Nick, I read your intro to MediaSpace this morning.).

What new questions should we be focussing on? Working just with that short list--ritual, myth, magic, religion--the last term begs for analysis. It is not a concept, but a whole field of study. Others are doing very good work on media, religion, and culture (Hoover, Schofield Clark, Lundby, Thomas, and more) and I am very late arriving and haven't done all my

reading yet, but what about faith? Let's take that one element of western religions. How is it signified? How does it show up in communication? What differences does it make to the processes of communication, to the shapes of cultural expressions, discourse communities, social activities? Can the study of explicitly religious communication illuminate the implicitly faith-based aspects of secular communication?

I hope I haven't go on too long.

Cheers,

Eric

Mark Hobart (SOAS)
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Dear All

May I offer some belated thoughts?

First of all, I think these MediaAnthro debates are increasingly becoming a sine qua non for anyone seriously interested in cultural approaches to media studies. So congratulations to John and everyone else involved in setting it up.

As regards Mihai's paper, I have been sorry to see that Debra's comments as discussant were not explored more fully. Had they been, I think less time might have been spent reinventing some rather battered anthropological wheels. On the other hand, the sheer diversity of intellectual backgrounds, agendas and opinions is distinctly cheering, not least for showing how slippery and elusive a myth 'communication' is even among consenting professionals.

As I read them, Debra's comments were an exhortation to move away from attempts to define sub-disciplines of anthropology, which have so consistently resulted in reifying and homogenizing that this reiteration of mythic entities has itself become ritualized. Here Nick's and Eric's tack may be useful when they prefer metaphors such as 'zones of engagement' or 'mutual plundering' as ways of imagining what W.B. Gallie argued to be the 'essentially contested' nature of complex relationships. Instead of Kelly Askew's genealogical tracing of media anthropology as 'the brainchild of Mead, Bateson, and Powdermaker' (Introduction to The anthropology of media, eds. K. Askew & R.R. Wilk, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002: 11), Debra invited us to consider the relevance of such scholars as Baudrillard, McLuhan, Benedict Anderson, Stuart Hall and Mark Poster, a set of critical engagements that seems to me overdue. Similarly I would have enjoyed discussion around the sorts of questions which Debra posed as alternatives. (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?)

There are serious and well rehearsed problems with the attempted resuscitation of ancestral anthropological concepts like myth, ritual and symbolism. For a start they have a long history of Eurocentric invocation, which easily slips in and which is why careful scholars use the terms at best as labels or, as did Nick in his book, to break frame and force reconsideration of

habits of use. The terms were constitutive of a hegemonic European rationalist project. Arguably, if anthropology has any perduring value, it lies in challenging this project by appreciating the inherently double discursive nature of all inquiry. In other words, the task of scholars was to recognize the distinctive and potentially incommensurate ways that the people they worked with thought about their worlds – here presumably mediated worlds – and, perhaps more important, deployed these distinctive intellectual practices recursively to comment on their own categories and presuppositions. So, like Daniel, I am concerned over the apparent lack of critical discussion about the presuppositions and history of use of such deeply prejudiced terms. That Debra's suggested list of more contemporary concerns has been by-passed in favour of fetishized old chestnuts seems to me more informative about the participants' intellectual practices than any residual value the chestnuts might have. So, for all sorts of reasons, I am finding these debates quite fascinating.

Cheers

Mark

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Dear Mihai and List,

Sorry for joining into the discussion quite lately. With Mark I think it is a pity that in the discussion Debra's important questions have not been adequately dealt with. So I will try, not to answer these, but to pose some related questions that came into my mind by reading Mihai's stimulating paper.

First I think that the quest for defining media anthropology is, followed by media anthropology's actors and fields, nicely illustrated at the beginning of the paper (this aspect was also discussed earlier on the mailing list: http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/discussion_ma_definition.pdf). Mihai's conclusion that 'the label' 'anthropology of (mass-) media' could find more acceptance under 'canonic' anthropologists than 'media anthropology' is, at least according to my experience, slightly overdone (p.14). In my rather simple view, media anthropology is the anthropology of media. I also doubt 'too close vicinity' with other, I prefer to call them, fields of anthropological investigation, such as visual anthropology, etc (p. 14). Particularly social sciences are moving closer together jointly exploring in inter- sometimes even transdisciplinary manner diverse fields of inquiry (for instance Latin America Studies). Consequently, I cannot follow Mihai, that within an anthropology of modernity, 'accepted as a legit discipline', mass media phenomena can create a 'self-standing academic territory' (p.16).

After all, Mihai's paper leaves me with two general questions: are media the framework for anthropology of modernity, or is modernity the framework for anthropology of media? And, as examples in this working papers series indicate (Graffman 2004, http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/workingpapers.htm), is it culture that is produced through media or are media produced through and within culture? Basically, I doubt that media are 'the culture' of post-modernity. But I agree with Mihai that social/cultural anthropology cannot ignore (mass) media phenomena.

Best,

Philipp

John Postill (University of Bremen)
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I think this seminar has become an ad-hoc brainstorming session on the myriad paths open to the anthropology of media in the years to come, with a number of individual attempts at finding a manageable set of questions to work with. In addition to Mark's selection of questions raised by Debra, she writes:

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. END OF QUOTE

I agree with Debra and others that asking specific questions for future research is more important than agonising too much over disciplinary boundaries or definitions. In my view, the really challenging but necessary next step, perhaps through a workshop or e-workshop, will be to agree as a network on a core set of questions that the anthropology of media ought to concentrate on in the coming years. Do other people think such a workshop would be useful?

Elisenda Ardevol Piera (University of Barcelona)
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I agree with Nick that it's better to construct our research field "without claiming, or reclaiming, ownership of them from any particular disciplinary position", but sharing concepts and methodologies and open our minds to other insights comming from other academic traditions, without fear of dissolution (that's an old fear linked with some essencialist ideals, I feel).

I don't think that anthropology as a discipline is in trouble because one of its research fields (!!), but of course I see that every research, if relevant, intorduces changes in science practices and theories, in a constant feedback.

About John's proposal, I think it's a good idea, but... we already have a common agenda, and I don't think necessary to establish an "a priori" research program or "programatic issues" from top -abstract, normative- down -empirical, descriptive-. It will be difficult to agree. I would rather like a workshop for sharing our research experiences and theoretical or methodological problems, such as this we are having. For me, that's the better way to construct something in common, new and alive!!!

best wishes,
Elisenda

Elisenda Ardhvol

Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)
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Hello again

The discussion we are having seems to be related to a discussion between Dewy and Lippmann, early on in comunication studies. Lippmann was advancing an early information model of communication, that stressed clear representation, or "transparency" thus rendering the representing agent as a spectator.

Dewey was arguing for a more active epistimology, stressing how we make the world, and the importance of interactive discussion in this.

In terms of setting up a set of common questions, the question is how much do we need to spectate on what we are doing? We seem to have worked through some questions and issues here, whilst neglecting others, so shouldn't we carry on our discussion somewhat before attempting to canonise it?

I think that there is a spectatorship built into our attempts to canonise various views of communication also, we are hiding ourselves as representing agents imposing a view of communication,rendering ourselves as spectators, whilst also rendering our communicators as spectators to their own communication, since their ideas about what they are doing are not really seen as consitutive of their communication, nor is, as Mark flagged up, how they reflect on their own practices.

This bears on one of Deborah's questions. Is the media 'culture' in a postmodern condition. I think this is a slightly self contradictory starting point, since post structuralist approaches would tend to be wary of a sense of cultural unity, and would treat 'culture' as lacking any unitary refrence or predictive power as a reference.

I think the issue of spectatorship comes to bear here. People participate in media, as spectators, but do not participate in what is being referred to, 'public events,' even as they participate in observing.(Familiar problem for Anthropologists.) I would venture that people make meanings in their participations, so their practices in relation to media are perhaps more significant than the relative inaction of reception. In other words, what you participate in has more of an impact on you, on your meaning or self making, and issues such as commentary on mass mediated discourse, relations of this commentary to other practices takes on more significance.

This addresses the issue of 'postmodernity' in as much as media cannot take the centre stage if it is divorced from a notion of participation, or agency/performance. Mediation may well be integral to cultural practices in general, but the ways in which people experience their own participation in these mediations is crucial to any sense of 'culture' even a highly contingent one.

In other words, I am not sure that postmodern culture is made mostly on a sofa.

Daniel

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Dear all,

I am for the (e)workshop, too.

Here are some belated thoughts, which might be repetitive but through reading the paper and discussion I felt to utter these. forgive me if they are all redundant. It is more like an intrapersonal communication, i am talking to myself in order to clear where i stand in the course of my fieldwork.

I frequently come to conclude that the main difference between anthropology and other social sciences is its particular methodology; that is, the predominance of the idea of fieldwork. That is, the main source of knowledge production within the discipline is ethnography. The rest of what could be said as difference or borders of the difference is too contested to declare. I know the dominance of ethnography is heavily questioned within the discipline and fieldwork was not always the dominant method in the discipline but i believe this is still a powerful marker of boundaries in our times. And why shouldn't we use it with a critical mind?

'(Mass) Media is culture' is a very strong statement and valid to a large extent. But i think ethnography can still be a valuable methodology to study the modern society. 1) Although Media can claim to cover all society, some cultural production - even in the modern society- has its own relative independence. I wonder how the inner working of small but pioneer biotechnology and genetic firms could be studied through media? (Rabinow's recent works are in my mind, for instance). Only face-to-face, insider relations can open the doors for further information... 2) media itself should be studied (deconstructed?) ethnographically. I believe in addition to discourse/content analyses etc or macro-sociological analyses, there is more to find if one happens to be part of the media production. I am quiet uncomfortable in my fielwork about how to qualitatively study media....BUT this quest for how to study can provide answers to the so-called crisis in the anthropology in general. in a correspondence with John ages ago, that was my point. Media anthropology can provide substantive clues to the reshaping the discipline in general due to media's centrality...

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I should like to return to some of the earlier points made, by asking for some indication through examples of what the paper may mean for ethnographies of media, as it is difficult to engage with a lot of the discussion in the absence of contextual illustrations. This is also about engaging with why the more pragmatic workshop which John asked about might be of use.

Coman's description of anthropology as interpretive, "a hermeneutical enterprise, based on interpreting and subjectively reconstructing a universe of meanings, an enterprise that cannot lead to generalisations..." (p17) is an accurate synthesis, but what does it mean for the anthropological project in practice? One of the things I enjoy about this paper is the negotiation of different manifestations of fragmentation - the post-modern, cultural pluralism, critically-oriented theory, the image of the other (although the image of a pre-modern or non-western Other is less useful than it once was), and the idea of the new. These are often mutually confused phenomena which represent the need for 'interpretation', the first part of Coman's description of interpretive anthropology above, and he distinguishes them carefully. In order to address many of Debra's questions and comments, however, I felt it necessary also to engage with the second aspect of the definition, the 'subjective reconstruction' which we as anthropologists and the people we work with engage in. As Sara comments, ritual and so on are not the only means of re-integrating of making sense of the world, and her call for more attention to embodied practice is important. For McLuhan, the concept of media is itself a containing aspect. I would add material culture from my own perspective.

As a brief example, many Romanian households I am working with here now have an expensive broad-band connected computer at the centre of their sparse, rented homes, on the main table; and these are constantly in use communicating with family and friends in Romania, Spain, Italy, and elsewhere. In the first homes I unexpectedly saw this, I was very disturbed by the sense that culture might be "through mass communication and within mass-communication" (in practice, an on-line relationship with a four-year old daughter seems a source of cruelty and sadness than a joyful exercise, and to be honest I blamed the media for enabling the existence of such a relationship); but as I have encountered the same patterns in home after home, of course, I begin to 'reconstruct' the patterns. The physical centricity to homes of the computer, the advance arranging of regular on-line appointments with family, the vivid group-life of constant visitors going on around computer-users every evening, begin to render such things very routine (if not ritual), and I see a normality. I also see families reunited in time, not forever fragmented. There are multiple sources of reconstruction in this, both in my own exercise and those of the people I work with.

This paper in some ways begs for a companion paper on this exercise of multiple modes of 'subjective reconstruction'. Which sources might we be emphasising more in the re-shaping of our understandings of anthropology, not just our understandings of the world?

Adam Drazin

PS. Multumesc pt lucrarea, Mihai, mi-a placut si e folositor pt proiectul meu si ma ajuta sa clarifica gindul.

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Adam's example of the rearrangement of uses of time, household space, relationships, and I would add distributions of attention and other resources, attendant to the computer in many Romanian households is very useful. Among other things it can be connected with a trajectory of media research going back to the 1920s and a bit before—studies (and speculations) of the audiences, uses, industries, and impacts of movies, telephones, automobiles, phonographs, radio, television, paperback books, comic books, and more by a host of earlier scholars independent of the anthropological tradition. Even the initial dismay at the apparent effects of the media on family activities and relationships has been replicated many times before, in studies of each medium at the time of its newness.

In light of that research I am not sure how to respond to the formula "media are culture." Maybe it is a way to point to the permanent changes in communication and culture with the coming of the mass media (mass audience, live broadcasting, doubled sense of place, the huge amounts of time and attention devoted to fictional scenes, etc.) and effects on other social institutions. Maybe it is a way to point to the way in which, in places like the US, we live "within" media culture, so the characters of media texts, for example, can be thought of and discussed in ways not so different from the characters of more fleshy lives.

I can't read "media are culture" without analyzing both terms, though, without asking about types of media, types of situations, types of communication, aspects of culture, etc. For any given use of any given medium in any given social setting, we are also probably going to have to address organizational, technological, textual/artifactual, and audience-enacted characteristics simultaneously. For media scholars, the tendency to have the industrialized, for-profit, mass media of the US as the back of the mind, taken-for-granted object of analysis is strong. Their most obvious cultural characteristic is that they are massively large, industrial-strength, profit-motivated producers of culture. One use of anthropological thinking for media scholars, then, is to throw a different light on this phenomenon, to contrast these industries with other ways of organizing cultural resources in other social settings. But that is also an approach to "culture" very different from what I am guessing most anthropologists have in mind.

So we come back to Media Anthropology as a zone of engagement, a place where scholars of differing backgrounds, asking differing questions, and working on differing professional agendas meet each other. My bet is that our various borrowings, adaptations, misinterpretations, and partial understandings will be very productive.

Cheers,

Eric

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Dear All

I would like to thank you all for discussing so vividly my paper for me it was an wonderful experience and your feedback is more than useful.

It is obvious that we are facing an increasing expansion of media (if media 'is' or not the culture, is more a metaphysical discussion; I stressed the fact it seems to me that media offers now, in the process of the leaven of an identity and of a definition, the same frame as the concept of culture offered, a century ago, when anthropology designed its own definition). It is also obvious that numerous approaches to media and other mediated phenomena are possible and develops, including some rooted in or feeded by anthropological traditions or views ('lens'). If we all agree on these facts, we do not share the same unanimity in how can we interpret these evolutions.

It seems to me that the debate about media anthropology is/ speaks less about the 'rights' or the 'marginalization' of a new (interdisciplinary) discipline and more about our identity - not as media anthropologists, but as anthropologists or as media scholars. And generally as scholars.

One attitude is a theoretical 'laisser faire'. In its radical formulation (as stressed by Daniel or Mark) all evocation of 'old' delineations, concepts, typologies, paradigms are 'residuals' elements and a way of 'reproducing' a discourse condemned by its sins. So all discussion about and/or in the terms of 'classical' anthropology is suspect and suspected for resuscitating fearful ghosts. It looks as if the usage of such elements (as myth as a concept or cultural anthropology as a classificatory category) is an uncritical perpetuation of their previous frames which is not always the case. To take Daniel metaphor, if one 'institutionally has blood on his/her hands', this does not necessarily imply that: a) he or she has personally blood (shares and reproduce but his/her life and actions the ancestors' guiltiness); b) that blood is real; c) he or she cannot try to do that thing in a better, bloodless, way.

In a less radical formulation (as shared by Elisenda, Eric or Nick) this discussion is possible, but with the condition of: a) to renounce to use the 'old' idiom; b) to define fields of intersection and to find an acceptable name for them (mutual plundering, zones of engagement).

Another position warns against the risks of a perpetual 'laissez faire' and affirms the necessity of some delineation, under a critical scrutiny: it is a kind of skepticism that accepts the usage of existing terms and categories, but in a critical way and as a part of a pluralistic perspective (as seems to me expressed in the comments made by Debra, Sarah or Guido). And as almost everybody suggested it is always possible and challenging to have a discussion on the core set of questions that the anthropology of media ought to concentrate (in John's words)

I would like to remember you that we are not living (only) in a theoretical world. We are living in a world populated by (our) students, by academics and university officials, by editors, by governmental and private funders, etc. All of them use and need to use systems of classification, categories and sub-categories. To answer Debra's question: They care! In these practical world these borders between fields and disciplines exists and are lived by each of us. So from time to time we are asked (even if do not want to) what are we doing and what are we. My reflection started years ago from such a simple, shocking, question: what am I doing when interpreting media with anthropological (if only?) concepts such as myth and ritual? It

was a personal experience, because at the beginning of the `90, when my name began to be associated with journalism training, some scholars and journalists who knew my books published before `89, asked me: What are you doing there? You are an anthropologist not a journalist! At the end of the decade, when my studies on the anthropology of mass media began to be published in Romania, many of my colleagues asked me again: What are you doing there? You are a journalism professor, not an anthropologist!

I believe that for the sake of (if not more than) an indexical purpose we have 'to traverse the minefield'

Many thanks to all of you
Mihai

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Dear All,

This has been a very rich discussion. I wish to thank Mihai for volunteering the paper and for keeping up a dialogue with the various interlocutors. John asked me to add some final remarks before closing. Most of what I had to say has already been said. I don't have much to add in detail beyond my initial discussant's comments and Mark's later additions.

But briefly there are 3 things:
1. I will add support to my voice to Daniel's comment that "Mediation may well be integral to cultural practices in general, but the ways in which people experience their own participation in these mediations is crucial to any sense of 'culture' even a highly contingent one." This is an area of important work for all anthropology as well as media anthropology. Handled right, I think it's one big thing anthro brings to the table, besides ethnography and anthro-looking topics.
2. Some of the posters use media as a singular noun. This is misleads thinking. (I say more about this in my articles on the website.)
3. I think a workshop would be great and I like the earlier comment about doing it through case studies (i.e. not generalist talk). If it's an e-workshop I think we would be well served by thinking through the structure and ground rules in advance. Sometimes people jump in and out of the e-seminars without much continuity with previous postings. In general, this could be ok, and I wouldn't want to see an over-policing of how people participate, but at the same time, we might think of rules or mechanisms for creating a sustained interaction that is more like a discussion than a bulletin board.
I look forward to more of these discussions.

Best wishes,
Debra

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Dear list

Many thanks to Debra and Mihai for their concluding remarks. We still have until 4 pm CET for anyone wishing to add any final thoughts.

John

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To respond to the framing of radical as laissez faire.

Laissez faire is an economic metaphor that is based on allowing economic actors to operate freely, based on an unquestioned underlying economic equilibrium. It is not consistent with the type of critical approach, inquiring into things like Mihai's points a,b and C, that the 'radical' wing seems to be proposing.

Laissez faire did use an information based argument, in the form of Hayeks arguments about markets transmitting information better than centralised buerocracies. However Hayek's agents are individualised, and respond mainly to price information.

A radical anthropological approach would tend to posit agents as implicated in many forms of communication, and not necessarily on an individualised basis.

Laissez faire approaches tend to stress the precedence of underlying facts and transparent representation via information models, something less associated with the radical wing of this discussion.

That's why we need to look at our buried metaphors and communication models carefully.

Daniel

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Dear all

We have now come to the end of our 5th seminar. I would like to thank Mihai Coman for sharing and discussing his provocative paper with us, our discussant Debra Spitulnik for her thoughtful comments, and all of you for taking part in this seminar. As usual Philipp Budka will be uploading the seminar transcript onto the website shortly and he'll let us know when it's there.

Our next working paper will be by Elisenda Ardevol (Barcelona) on a Spanish online dating service. Please drop me a line (jpostill@usa.net) if you have any working papers you'd like to present from September onwards or any other ideas/suggestions regarding the network.

Best wishes

John

ps. We are still looking for contributors to the online annotated bibliography (see website), including doctoral theses and texts in languages other than English. Many thanks!