EASA Media Anthropology Network
e-Seminar Series

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

**E-Seminar on Sebastian Ureta's working paper
"Locating the TV:
Television placement and the reconfiguration of space
in low-income homes in Santiago, Chile"**

(20 – 27 June 2006)

John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)
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Dear All

The 12th EASA Media Anthropology Network e-seminar opens now and will run on this mailing list for a week, ending on Tuesday 27 June at 9 pm GMT.

The presenter is Sebastian Ureta, a sociologist at the Catholic University of Chile. Sebastian gained his PhD at the London School of Economics with a thesis supervised by Roger Silverstone. Today he is presenting a paper on TV practices in low-income households of Santiago de Chile.

The discussant will be Jo Helle-Valle who is a social anthropologist working for the National Institute for Consumer Research in Oslo, and has recently led a project on the domestication of digital ICTs in Norwegian homes. The paper is already online at

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

Apart from the paper's interest in its own right, the seminar will also allow us to engage with some of the questions that will be the focus of our Bristol workshop "Understanding Media Practices" this coming September, during the EASA conference. You will find a rationale and list of abstracts at

http://www.nomadit.co.uk/easa/easa06/easa06_panels.php?PanelID=27

Please make sure that your postings are brief and that they have a concise, informative subject line.

I look forward to an upbeat seminar with numerous postings to close this season. It's over to Jo Helle-Valle now for his comments.

John

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Discussant comments on Sebastian Ureta's paper "Locating the TV. Television placement and the reconfiguration of space in low-income homes in Santiago, Chile"

For the EASA Media Anthropology Network, June 2006 by
Jo Helle-Valle, SIFO, Norway.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork from a low-income neighbourhood in Santiago, Chile, Ureta presents an analysis of how the families he has gathered data from display their television sets in their homes, and how they relate to them. In my view the author operates with two analytical dimensions; one is distinguishing between three types of spaces in the household; ceremonial, functional and private places. These are used to expose the different kinds of

practical and ideological concerns that the television sets necessarily are linked to. Secondly, a distinction is made between the television set's symbolic and practical functions.

As I read the paper a common quality of the informants' relationships to their sets is ambivalence. In general, they all value their sets as symbolic objects, but are critical to how they disrupt ideal family life. As a symbol the TV is an almost necessary display of belonging to a social order - it "is a symbol of normality and social participation" (p. 7). On the other hand, as the informants' statements are presented most are highly critical to how television sets - as media - affect families as functional units.

First, in the ceremonial spaces of the household (normally the living room) the television always has a central position. This space (place?) can be characterised as semi-public - as it is the part of the home that is usually used to entertain visitors - and hence the set's symbolic function is important. It is described as being a monument or a fetish (p. 6). But there is a dissonance between the set's symbolic value and how it is valued as media. It is seen to disrupt what the interviewees consider to be good family life. (p. 9); the informants feel it is rude to let the TV be turned on if visitors arrive - it kills conversation and hence displays the family as a less than ideal social entity. Thus, the author concludes this discussion with stating that it is not valued as a practical object within the ceremonial spaces of the household.

In the functional spaces of the household (kitchen and bathroom) the TV apparently does not have an accepted place at all. As I read the paper this is foremost because of the practical qualities of the media; you can't do household chores while watching TV. Besides, this is a part of the apartment that is not considered to be 'public' and hence there is little need to display it as a symbol of belonging and normality vis a vis outsiders. Thus, the radio is the preferred ICT in this part of the household.

In the private spaces of the household (i.e. the bedrooms) there is again no need to use the TV as a 'monument' since it is normally not visibly accessible to outsiders. However, it seems to be a chosen site for TVs in many households - partly because of the wish to keep it out of the ceremonial part of the home, and partly because informants consider it to be a pleasant way to watch TV. However, there are also disadvantages to this positioning; it might affect the relationship between spouses negatively, and it might disrupt children's sleeping routines.

I like the paper, it is clear and structured, and there are some distinct analytical points in it. However, I wouldn't be an academic if I hadn't had anything critical to say. There are three points I want to raise - one about methodology, and two analytical that are not so much arguments against what is in the paper, as suggestions to how I think the whole research theme might be expanded.

1. Here and there in the paper Ureta mentions morality and it is evident from informants' statements as well as arguments presented that this is an underlying premise in the arguments: that ICT-use in the home is a highly moral issue. Informants talk about 'good family life', about talking with each other, etc. The author uses Domestication Research perspectives, and Roger Silverstone in particular, and it would in my opinion have been analytically rewarding to pick up his term 'the moral economy of the household'. For Silverstone a core point is that in order for ICTs to become domesticated they need to be practically and culturally accepted. Here the moral economy of the household comes in; it is a way of conceptualising the interplay of practical and moral issues that the domestication process entails. Silverstone and adversaries do, admittedly, not write much about what this morality consists of, but some clues are given; the home is the hearth of interpersonal, intimate (and hence existential)

concerns, and anything that have the potential to disrupt such concerns is automatically threatening. As I read the paper this is exactly what takes place in the studied households, and I believe that a more explicit treatment of what kind of moral concerns - founded in hegemonic family ideology - that are at stake here would give the paper an extra dimension. (Interestingly enough, in the latest publication by Silverstone I have read he suggests that it is precisely a more thorough study of the mores of family life that looks to him as a promising development of the Domestication Research perspective.)

2. This brings me to my second analytical point. As I and a colleague have argued in an article that will appear in New Media & Society in the near future, there is an unfortunate ambiguity in the analytical apparatus of Domestication Research - 'domestication' connote both a 'taming of the wild', and of bringing public objects into the private (the domestic). We have argued that the term should only retain the 'taming'-connotation because the idea that the home = private is ethnocentric and hence hinders us from using the term in societies where there is no clear private-public distinction and/or where the home is not necessarily unequivocally belonging to the private. And as I know next to nothing about Chilean society it would be useful for me to know more about what kind of ideology/mores that guides the actions of poor people in Santiago; is the resonance I feel when reading the paper based on common ideological stuff? In other words, a more explicit discussion on the mores that guide the actions and attitudes of the low-income people of Santiago would not only bring more clearly to light the premises that the discussions are based on but it would perhaps also open up for interesting comparisons of family ideologies across continents, cultures and classes.

3. Lastly, Ureta states that the paper is based on ethnographic methods (e.g; 'ethnographic fieldwork' in the abstract, 'ethnographic approach' on p. 4). This brings up something that I am sure that it is not only I who feel a bit uneasy about. I have conducted what might be called 'classic fieldwork' in Africa, and my professional upbringing has been one, long inculcation of the importance of doing proper fieldwork. So when I now have been gathering data on uses of ICTs in Norwegian homes I am very reluctant to use the word 'ethnography' about what I have been doing. As all who have been collecting data in homes in late-modern Western sociality know it is impossible to do what most(?) of us think ethnographic fieldwork should include: participant observation. I might be a purist, and I am certainly not going to attack Ureta for labelling this ethnography, but this paper is a suitable background for raising the issue. It is evident that 'media ethnography' has become a buzz-word in much media research, and serves an important rhetorical function; it is meant to signal a thorough knowledge about the everyday life of those we study. We can't of course claim exclusive ownership of the term but after I have encountered a couple of examples of shameless misuse of the term in various media research I believe that it is important that we - anthropologists studying media and media technology - should be a critical voice against the inflation of the term. My impression is that Ureta's research is based on interviews and visual data. In my view it is not much more one can get from such a private setting (without great designs that would require way more resources and time than most of us have), and careful and systematic analysis can indeed produce heaps of data from such sources. But my (open) question is; is it right to call this ethnographic methods?

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Many thanks, Jo. We'll have Sebastian's response to these comments now, and then the discussion will be open to all.

John

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Dear list,

First of all, I would like to thank Jo for taking the time to read and comment my paper.

In relation with the three points he raised, I would like to add some commentaries:

• In relation with the first point, I agree with Jo that the issue of morality crosses most of the analysis presented in my paper. Even if sometimes it was not completely clarified, the relationships between home spaces, television sets and its related practices were always the subject of moral evaluations by the members of the homes under study. What is at stake is the conflict between their traditional views about family life (communitarian in character and based on frequent oral communication among its members) and the model of family implicitly proposed by the practices related with television viewing, a more nuclear (and increasingly individual) kind of family in which the interactions are becoming mediated by the use of communication technologies, both in relation with their social environment and in relation with the communications among its members. I will definitely clarify this point in a latter version of the paper.

• I think that in the particular case under study the second meaning of the term domestication, "bringing public objects into the private (the domestic)" in Jo's words, is still valid for two main reasons. First, in relation with the specific contexts under study, everyday life of low-income city dwellers in Chile is still highly structured around the traditional spatial partitions of public and private spaces. Against a general urban context in which spatial mobility is becoming increasingly central, with the consequent blurring of clear distinctions between private and public, the families under study still use and perceive everyday spaces as clearly separated between public and private areas. For them the home is still the first and foremost area of intimacy and many of the conflicts with the use of television are also caused by the challenge that the use of the device represent to this clear distinction. Second, in relation with the specific technology under study, the study of television use in domestic settings is still very much defined by the process of bringing the device into the private spaces of the home. In clear contrast with mobile media technologies like mobile phones or laptops, television sets are still commonly immobile and located in particular settings, in this case the home. Even tough that the practice of the device causes certain disruption in the traditional public/private distinction, by bringing the "world inside the living room", the set is still

mostly "domesticated" in the traditional double sense of the word: the "taming of the wild" and the bringing of public objects inside the private.

• Finally, I have to acknowledge that, especially given my personal background in sociology, I maybe use a non orthodox definition of ethnography. From this perspective doing ethnography is much more a research spirit rather than the use of one or more particular research methodologies. This research spirit can involve the use of a variable range of qualitative methods (like in-depth interviews and observation as my research) and focuses on "the empirical study of the mundane practices through which interactive order is produced" (Flick 2002:23) as in this case are the practices related to the location of the television set. But I agree with Jo that if we take an anthropological definition of the concept I cannot say that my research is 100% a pure ethnography and maybe, for the sake of terminological clarity, I should avoid describing it as such in the paper.

Best wishes,

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With that response from Sebastian to Jo's comments, the discussion is now open to all on the list. Please send your comments or questions directly to <medianthro@easaonline.org> (that is, not to me), with a succinct subject that sums up your posting.

Many thanks

John

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On reading Sebastian's paper I was wondering about family history. The move from shanty town to tower blocs is mentioned a few times, but the diachronic dimension of the analysis seems underdeveloped. I'd be very interested to learn more from specific family histories about the early stages of what Silverstone et al (1994) call the 'objectification' of ICTs, ie. how the TV sets were first placed -- and possibly moved around -- in the 'geography of the home', another term used by Silverstone et al. Why did people in the early days of moving in decide to place their TV sets in certain parts of the flats and not others? What sorts of verbal and non-verbal exchanges took place? What would such a micro-historical approach reveal (and conceal) in contrast to the more synchronic approach presented in this paper? This must have been, after all, a momentus time in the family history.

My guess is that a careful reconstruction (through life historical questions) of these crucial turning points in the family histories would tell us a great deal about the constitution/emergence of those conflicting practices that Jo highlights in his very helpful

comments (There's an interesting recent book by Rantanen (2005) in which she compares and contrasts the family histories of domestic media down the generations with case studies from 3 very different countries).

John

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Silverstone, R., Hirsch, E. and Morley, D. 1994. Information and communication technologies and the moral economy of the household. In: Silverstone, R. and Hirsch, E. (eds.), Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces, London: Routledge.

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Dear Sebastian, dear all,

I read the paper on "locating the TV" with great interest and I would like to offer a comment that connects to the third point in Jo's critique. The question of methodology.

John invited us to consider this session also as a rehearsal, beginning of debate on "Understanding Media Practices", which will take place during the EASA meet in September. It is at that point that I felt something was missing in the paper, namely reference to practice. How do people actually use the tv set? We learn interesting things about the placement of the television, which appears to be connected to its status as object and its role for relaxing. Sebastian tells us about why people feel the TV disrupts family live. We also learn about times when the TV is NOT used (when doing house chores). But when is the TV used and to what effect?

It is obvious that people have the TV not only as status symbol, but also to enjoy watching programs. In order to understand why and when people see television critically we also need to know, why, how and when they enjoy it. Does television only disrupt family life, or does it create new forums to meet (like this has been described by Mankekar 1999 and Abu-Lodgold 1995)?

I agree with Jo that what we are presented here could hardly pass as traditional ethnography. I also agree with him that we will not be able to do participant observation in the very traditional sense of the term in most media-related settings. However, there are ways to reinvent ethnography as participant observations also in such settings. We can do more than analyze visual data and conduct interviews. We can participate and observe even if this is possible only during particular times (e.g. when the family watches TV, see Mankekar's study as a good example of how television watching can be analyzed also in anthropological terms). John pointed out that it would be good to have more data about the family dynamics that goes into placing the tevision, the verbal exchanges, the practices, the frequency of shifting the tv set, etc.

I feel that the paper would gain depth, if these practices (of watching, placing, re-placing) would be discussed, since they appear to be essential for placement decisions and the social negotiations that create such decisions.

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Thanks Sebastian and Jo for giving the opportunity to continue our workinprogress discussions!

I agree with John on the necessity of a diachronic and comparative approach, specially on TV which is a "domesticated" artefact in most places of the world right now. For exemple, I did not undrestand very well from the paper, if these families have changed their "habitus" going from slums to flats or if it was the first time that they have a tv set of their own...

Also, I would like to discuss the defintion of tv practice "as a complex set of activities, sequences and operations that involve a diversity of actors in different moments of time and in different escenarios" may be it will be useful for defining other kind of practices, such as "internet practices" or it is too general to use as an operative definition at all....

Finally, I have liked the points of Jo about domesntication. I think that Silverston conceptualization of domestication as linked with moral orders is very useful, following the old advice of Mary Douglas about the connection of moral values with space-time- corporal categories and social order. This conflicting practices may be involve some kind of fight between "tradition" and "modernity"? TV sets are the image of the "consum revolution"!

I also agree that the idea of home= private space may be ethnocentric. The categories of the informants about home spaces are very interesting following that idea, because they show the conventions of family space distribution and signification, diferent from other countries, class, and historical periods.

I send you a little "divertimento" about a Spanish advertising comparing TV with somekind of "Internet for dulls" that did not succed in the marketplace! (but that shows the "family TV model")

chers, Elisenda

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At the risk of talking too much, and following from Ursula Rao's reference to practice theory and Elisenda on private/public boundaries, I was thinking about Sebastian's tacit positing of the tower bloc household as the key unit of analysis; perhaps in contrast to less privatised spaces back in the shanty town days (I probably did something similar with longhouse apartments in Postill 2003, come to think of it).

What if instead we took household practices, including TV- and radio-related practices, as being integral to a wider 'field of practices' (Schatzki 2001: 2) extending across the tower blocs and beyond? How was the total field of shanty town practices reproduced and transformed in the tower blocs? Were TV and radio sets key to this removal and its various changes and continuities? If so, in what ways? I would imagine that many previous ties of kinship and friendship were carried over to the new locale, whilst others were weakened or severed? In the Iban case, I found that TV sets indexed (not the same as symbolising, a notion favoured by Sebastian) the relative wealth and financial security of different households. One way of indexing and publicising this asymmetry was by passing on to poorer kin one's old TV set when buying a new one. Any such transactions in the Chilean field?

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I think John's comment on a field of practices is interesting. I think the 'domestication of TV' discussion is also very interesting and touches upon the issues John raises.

Clearly there are some boundaries in practice between TV viewing and other practices. These are boundaries set up within practice and perhaps discussed in people's every day lives. This is nothing new, it was mentioned in the paper.

However, what I am interested in is detail on how these boundaries were set up. Is it through open discussion, through tacit negotiations, via ascribing some practices as 'sacred' not to be invaded by TV etc...

The issue of historical shifts also bears on this: Where, when, how and by whom are the boundaries around TV viewing negotiated and changed, and how is TV linked to other practices, alongside it being defined from them?

It is a sense of the actual episodes where these 'definings' and 'linkings' take place that might make these issues easier to gain insight on, at least for a reader like me who has little experience of domestic ethnographies.

Daniel

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Dear list,

It is interesting that the relationship between television, time, and space is problematic to anthropologists. Perhaps they are so central (time and space) that we might find difficult to deal with them. Back in the 1980s, Susan Kent asked the following: if you are Navajo, living in a circular house, where do you put the television set? She asked the same question to a Spanish-American and a Euro-American sample. Because she wrote in the mood of that time (when media anthropology kick off), she was within the effects tradition (most of the research was applied anthropology by the way). The answer may be a surprise: television viewing doesn't alter ethnic groups' basic patterns of the use of space (Thesis 1). Susan Kent in 1990 says that as a society becomes more socio-politically complex, its use of space becomes more segmented (Thesis 2).

Ureta today says something more: television viewing constitutes a place in itself, with its own time and space (Thesis 3), a place that competes and challenges the traditional use and meaning of time and space at home.

Maybe thesis 1 and 2 are not contradictory one another. But thesis 3 is a heavy contender. Do we have enough arguments and evidence to support it? Well, Ureta is trying to gives us those.

Ureta, writing in the mood of our time, is not a functionalist researcher. Therefore, the effects question must be seem old to him. He goes for meaning. Take the following example: "television has to permanently fight to retain its place at home and its location constitutes one of the many fields over which these fights take place".

As Helle-Valle said, I will give another proposal, just for the fun of our always interesting list (based on my chapter for Media Anthropology's book).

First, anthropologists have documented that there are not culture-specific designs for the television set. The television set is not made to be accepted for a given culture. This is not the case with radio. In Zambia (Spitulnik, 1998), the radio set "Saucepan Special" was designed by the Ever Ready Company of London to popularize African radio listening during the 1950s. It was constructed over a saucepan and painted blue because that color does not have negative associations in African society (according to the Rhodesian colonial officials of that time).

Second, the television set is that its use is not culturally specific. This means that in every culture in which television is present, people most often use the television set to watch television. This may seem obvious, but it is not. No society worships the television set. No society builds a ceremonial place for the television set inside or outside of the house. I am not saying that particular individuals, in many societies, always follow this pattern (artists have used the television set for great works of art, indeed, and some people build great houses with home theaters in mind), but so far, anthropologists have found no culture that systematically uses the television set to built fences, for example. Societies universally use the cultural artifact for the same and only purpose of watching television programming. Individual use is quite diverse, of course.

Third, the television set is accepted for every culture. The first papers in mass media anthropology highlight this idea, which can be described as the cultural preconditions that allow the mass media to find a place in a given culture to the degree that said culture already had a place for them. In other words, the mass media have to be relevant to the host culture if they are to make sense or have meaning. The mass media do not have intrinsic meanings but resonate in a given culture; that is, it is the host culture that accepts or rejects the mass media. Certain conditions therein make possible the relationship. Therefore, mass media is culturally dependent on resonance conditions. The important question to ask here is: On which resonance conditions are mass media culturally dependent? In my view, time is the shared cultural mechanism of mass media. I argue that cultures use television precisely as they use time. This is possible because time is the common structure between mass media and culture. If this is correct, then we can understand why television is so easily used by world cultures: People use television as they have always used time. There is nothing new to learn. Television already had a structural place in human society. Barbara Adam (1994) distinguishes four dimensions in the perception of time: clock time, timing, temporality, and tempo. Consider timing. Anthropological studies show that television viewing punctuates time. In other words, cultures use television as "when-time": the moment in which certain activities have to occur (eat, sleep, gather, etc.). Television is thus perceived as timing (a mode in which time is perceived around the world). The argument is as follows: If time is timing, and television is time, then television is timing. The explanation: Cross-culturally, television is timing because timing is one of the cultural structures of time, and television shares this common structure with time.

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Susan DiGiacomo (University of Massachusetts, Amherst)

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Hello, all,

Thanks, first of all, to Sebastian for the opportunity to think together about another interesting paper.

I am intrigued by the last paragraph of Jo's comments because it raises the issue of what and where "the field" is in post-modern, post-industrial Western societies, how to do "participant-observation" in it, and what's "ethnographic" about the resulting analysis. If "the field" is a space of difference where Otherness is discovered, a place located far from "home", which is where we write up (and publish) our ethnography, then I think a great many of us could not pass the "proper fieldwork" test. Sebastian's response – conceding that his paper is based on a "non-orthodox definition of ethnography" and that "if we take an anthropological definition of the concept I cannot say that my research is 100% a pure ethnography and maybe, for the sake of terminological clarity, I should avoid describing it as such in the paper" – does not seem to get us very far in thinking about this.

"Purity" is not a feature of the cultural worlds we do research in, either in our own society or in another, nor is it a very useful standard for methodological rigor. We would, I think, be better served by a concept of "the field" as a practice, as deliberate and stylized dislocation. Ethnography is decentering; it renders the familiar strange, and the strange familiar, and in this sense the questions Elisenda raises – is it ethnocentric to equate "home" with "private space"? have these families changed their "habitus" in moving from slums to apartments? is this the first time they have had a TV of their own? – are relevant for the ethnographic work of contextualizing television set placement and TV watching practices.

All the best,

Susan

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Dear all,

First of all I World like to thank you all for reading my paper; it's a great opportunity to me that my paper is subject of this kind of attention and analysis. Thank you for this!

I would like to briefly comment in some of the issues that appeared:

- In relation with Ursula comments, as I said in the introduction of the paper the option for studying the practice of locating the TV set, against the traditionally-studied practice of "viewing" was a conscious one. After looking over all the material that I collected in relation with television in the light of the literature on the subject I decided that viewing, though central to understand the place of TV on everyday life, has been over-studied on the analysis of the place that this technology have on the life of people. I really feel that I didn't have anything new to say about the subject, so I prefer to focus my attention in other practices

related to the TV, as placement, that appeared as much more interesting in the case under study.

- In relation with Elisenda (and also Ursula's) comments the first thing that I should mention is that this paper is based on a chapter of my PhD, so I think there's a need for more contextual information about my subjects, especially in relation with their former living conditions before moving to the housing estate and the place that TV sets used to occupy there. In short answer to you questions I have to add that the movement to the housing estate represents for them definitely a change of habitus, at least in terms of its relation with their surround social and spatial environment. Also the do have TV sets before the move to the housing state, the new factor is not the presence of the device but the division between different home space (ceremonial-functional-private) that was quite strange in their former houses.

- In relation with John comments, the subject of my whole thesis (that I dream to publish as a book one day) is almost exactly what he's talking about: how their field of practices related to media use (especially TV, radio and mobile phones) changed with their movement to the housing estate, especially in relation with the change in the spatial dimensions of their everyday lives.

- In relation with Daniel comments, I think that they were two key issues in relation with the boundaries relating TV location and use: the first was the apparent, for the subjects under study, "naturalness" of the boundaries. For them home spaces appeared as "naturally" linked with certain practised, practices that were disrupted by the use of the TV, but not by its presence as part of the material culture of the house. The second issue of boundaries is in relation with the education of their children. Commonly the location and use of the TV sets appeared for parents as a key arena in which they can teach their sons and daughters about the "correct" use of home spaces

- In relation with Francisco comments, I agree with him that timing, along with spacing, is one of the key issues related with television-related practices. As can be seen throughout my paper (but especially in relation with children usage) the practice of watching the TV is commonly resisted not on the grounds that its content appeared as inappropriate for family members, but more often because it easily disrupts the traditional time-schedule of the home, especially in relation with the times of sleeping.

- Finally I agree with Susan that we cannot look for "purity" in the practice of ethnography in contemporary societies. Especially in relation with the constant flows of people, objects and symbolic communications characteristic of our societies is every day more difficult to find places in which we could truly be distant from our own background and certainly this was not my intention during the fieldwork for my thesis. What I was looking for it wasn't to gain some sort of "objectivity" in relation with my subjects, the members of these families. What I was looking for was only to gain access to their privacy, to the intimate way in which they deal with technologies in their everyday live practices.

Best,

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Thank you very much for those responses, Francisco! And thanks, too, to all other participants.

There's still plenty of time left for a second round of questions and comments, including short queries and follow-ups. As ever, the lines are open over the weekend and we'll be closing the seminar on Tuesday at 9 pm GMT.

John

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On the question of TV and practice, may I suggest that we distinguish, following Barry Barnes (2001), between practice and habit? Barnes defines practices as 'socially recognized forms of activity, done on the basis of what members [of a collective] learn from others, and capable of being done well or badly, correctly or incorrectly' (2001: 19). He gives the example of acupuncture: it is a practice that, unlike a habit, can be 'enacted well or badly'. I suggest this has two main implications for the study of media practices:

1.   Watching TV does not, in itself, necessarily constitute a practice. Unless it entails socially recognised, embodied skills it can be better described as a habit. For instance, if a newish group of friends regularly meet to watch the World Cup together and gradually develop better commentary skills in competition and cooperation with one another, we can speak of an emergent practice of TV commentary. Mark Hobart has written a lot about this kind of TV practice among Balinese.

2.   Placing a TV set upon moving into a new dwelling is, I suggest, neither a practice nor a habit. Rather it is an unremarked upon *action* that is integral to the practice of furnishing a new dwelling. TV sets are seen today as an essential component of a dwelling's furnishings. A modern home would be incomplete without a telly, a point made I think by one of Sebastian's interviewees.

John

Barnes, B. (2001) 'Practice as collective action', in The practice turn in contemporary theory. T. R. Schatzki, K. Knorr-Cetina and E. von Savigny (eds), 17–28. London: Routledge.

Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)
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Dear

The former discussion of time set off a memory for me. It was of the year 2000 celebrations. I remember watching the fireworks going off around the world, televised as a 24 hour event as each city passed a timeline. I remember thinking that this was a festival of Global Time: A closure around one idea of time globally, one calendar, one moment shared, every body on the same planetary moment for a day, at least as it was presented (we don't know who ignored the Millenium.)

Television was integral to this construction of a global moment. I would like to ask are there smaller moments that were constructed with TV in the homes he saw? How does this relate to how other senses of moment, co-presence or community are mediated in the home? Is this a part of the domestication of TV?

Daniel

Christa Salamandra (City University of New York)
CHRISTA.SALAMANDRA@lehman.cuny.edu

But doesn't television watching always involve "socially recognised, embodied skills," those of visual and cultural literacy?

Christa Salamandra
Assistant Professor
Department of Anthropology
Lehman College, City University of New York

Nick Couldry (LSE)
N.Couldry@lse.ac.uk

I agree with John Postill's comment just now.

In fact in recent research with media colleagues at LSE I have found 'practice theory' very useful in making sense of the highly heteroegeneous but still recognisable practice of following the public world through media, what in our research we have called 'public connection'. (www.publicconnection.org).

I found particularly useful Theodor Schatzki's distinction between 'integrative' and 'dispersed' practices. The latter (for example, the practice of 'describing') , unlike the former (for example, 'swimming'), have no specific rules but they are nonetheless understood as part of the same broad type of activity. It is when specific habits of media consumption are understood as part of a wider practice that they become most interesting.

(I've written more about this generally in 'Theorising Media as Practice' , Social Semiotics 14(2): 115-132 (2004) and there will be more detail about it in a forthcoming book for Palgrave on the public connection project.)

I also agree with John that Mark Hobart's work on Bali is very important here

best

Nick Couldry

Reference

T. Schatzki (1999) Social Practices Cambridge UP.

Susan DiGiacomo (University of Massachusetts, Amherst)
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Hello, all,

Christa's comment prompts me to ask what we mean when we talk about "visual literacy." This question arises out of my experience with using films (of many kinds) in my anthropology classes in the US. We might expect that American college students, particularly those at selective private colleges, having grown up with TV and video and computer games, would be in a position to analyze a visual narrative with some sophistication. What I found, though, is that many of them appeared to watch films in exactly the same way they read the books and articles I assigned: if a printed text is just one word after another, a visual "text" is just one image after another. Like so many other domains of experience, reading books and "reading" TV or film seems to have been reduced to one more form of consumption, and if this is the case, we should perhaps ask whether the concept of literacy has undergone a degree of inflation.

Susan

Christa Salamandra (City University of New York)
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I don't take visual literacy to mean analytic sophistication in an academic sense. Surely our students have a culturally specific take on visual material, based on shared understandings and cultural know-how, rendering their viewing a practice rather than a habit?

Christa Salamandra
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Although I share Susan's frustration at the waning of literacy of all sorts among our students!

Christa Salamandra

Assistant Professor
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Susan DiGiacomo (University of Massachusetts, Amherst)
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I truly don't know; for me, this is an open question, but I tend to think that TV watching is more a habit for them than anything else...and that this may be favored by the kinds of (culturally specific) habit-forming programming they watch. I remember being told by a student that a favorite way to unwind after taking exams or writing term papers was to sit staring for hours at MTV. I am sure that they could identify the performers in the music videos, and probably associate them with other similarly packaged consumer products aimed at their age group. What are the shared understandings and cultural knowledge involved here? I don't know, apart from a broadly shared cultural model, a "metaphor we live by", that reaches far beyond the sphere of the mass media: life is commerce, an endless succession of consumer experiences.

Susan

Mark Peterson (Miami University)
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I need some clarification before I can agree with Francisco's assertion that:

"No society worships the television set. No society builds a ceremonial place for the television set inside or outside of the house"; as part of a general argument that the television is primarily a unifunctional artifact (socially, not individually speaking).

The Kayapo make use of both television cameras and sets in recording and passing on ritual knowledge to their children, according to Terrence Turner's work. Ritual specialists in Benin may likewise make video recording and viewing essential components of their practices (Gore 1998). While people may not build shrines to worship televisions, Andrew Lyon's describes ways in which people use household shrines as models for building shrines to hold television sets. John Postill has shown that working TV sets can end up as grave goods--their ritual role as a status and personal object superseding their value as household viewing artifacts.

While I know of no documented cases where people worship television different ways. People have certainly worshipped THROUGH the television. When the TV epic the "Ramayana" was played in India in the 1980s in India, many people used the TV as a way to do darshan, a form of puja (worship) through viewing. I know of households where people treated the TV very much like a god--they invited the God to "be seated in it", bedecked it with flowers, burnt incense, then watched the show. That it became just a TV suitable for watching other programs on afterward does not mean it is not a religious artifact, because many Hindus treat not-electronic representations of the gods in similar ways. Whiule you are worshipping it, it is god; when you are done,. it is just a piece of clay or stone or metal. This was not just an idiosyncratic response because the news media were full of stories about this

at the time (I have references somewhare but not in an electronic format). In 1992 I attended what the BJP leaders advertised as an "electronic Ramlila" in Malviya Nagar which was the same television series projected onto a large screen

It seems to me that Francisco's assertions require empirical investigation. I suspect the social, ritual and cultural life of media technologies would prove very fruitful.

Mark Allen Peterson
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Miami University

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Turner, Terrence. 1991. Representing, Resisting, Rethinking: Historical Transformation of Kayapo Culture and Anthropological Consciousness. In The History of Anthropology: Colonial Situations, ed. George W. Stocking, Jr. Pp. 285-313. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

_____. 1992a. Defiant Images: The Kayapo Appropriation of Video. Anthropology Today 8(6): 5-16.

_____. 1992b. The Kayapo on Television: An Anthropological Viewing. Visual Anthropology Review 8(1): 107-112.

Francisco Osorio (University of Chile)
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My reply to Mark Peterson is the following:

I agree with Mark that more empirical research needs to be done, although I think my proposal is correct (of course) because so far, in every society we have documented using television, what they value most is culture, not the television set, and culture today is transmitted through television, alongside other media. Because they value culture, they can accept this "box" into their lifes (social and religious), which is given by other characteristic of television: it already has a structural place in society. And this is because, I think, the uses of time came into the equation to complete the whole picture.

Another comment: I want Mark Peterson's library on media anthropology, he knows everything! That's a great job.

Francisco Osorio
Anthropology Department

University of Chile

Francisco Osorio (University of Chile)
fosorio@uchile.cl

Dear list,

Daniel Taghioff's questions are difficult to answer, which is great, but we may confirm, again, the premise that anthropology has all the concepts and methods needed to understand media (now comes a list: media practices, media phenomena, media effects, media habits, media discourse, a long etc.). It seems a contradiction, but is not. Although we notice that we are improving our arguments through this list (optimist), we already know that key concepts can be used to understand media. For example, what Daniel says about global time may well be understand through the media events research tradition. Although Elihu Katz is a sociologist, his research use anthropological concepts to propose an explanation of media events. (Mihai is the person you may ask for it). Someone said in another discussion that we used to be afraid of television as an object of study. Perhaps we still are.

Francisco Osorio
Anthropology Department
University of Chile

Gabriela Vargas-Cetina (University of Buenos Aires)
gabyvargasc@prodigy.net.mx

I have to say that in my house my husband and I have a "tv room" where all there is is the Wega tv, some 500 dvds, our some 800 cds and our multimedia equipment (two vcrs, three dvd players, one cd player, our multimedia receiver and the satellite tv unit). We also have a bookshelf covering a whole wall, full of novels on the top part and of DVDs on the bottom half. We worship in our own way the classical films and directors we love (Tarkovsky, Fellini, Lynch, Cronenberg, Zubieta and many others, including the early Cohen brothers), by watching them over and over. If our tv room isn't some kind of shrine to mass entertainment, I don't know what a shrine could be. Perhaps it is a secular shrine, but a shrine nonetheless.

Gabriela Vargas-Cetina

Mark Peterson (Miami University)
petersm2@muohio.edu

Both babies are asleep. Let me see if I can respond quickly before one wakes up...

Perhaps what is dividing Francisco and I is a definition of culture. I do NOT see culture as something transmitted (or even transmittable) through television. Culture is meaningful action generated by people using symbolic (and hence social) resources. (Actually, "culture"

is a heuristic device used by anthropologists for talking about collective human meaning making, but I'll take that as understood).

As I see it, television transmits sets of representations -- texts -- which are interesting as cultural artifacts; that is, as symbolic constructions created by some group of people for an imagined audience at some defined time and place (Ruby has a great definition of this but I don't have my notes here).

The process of entextualizing symbols for television is also a cultural activity, of course, and so are the practices of viewing (and interpreting) it. Francisco's claim "what they value most is culture, not the television set, and culture today is transmitted through television, alongside other media" sounds very much to me like the work of Lee Drummond, Denis Duclos and other "post-structuralist" anthropologists. While I love Drummmond's book American Dreamtime," I am troubled by his assumptions that the setting and context of movie or TV viewing are irrelevant to the cultural meaning of the text. To me, there COULD be something profoundly different about viewing at the theater versus at home, on a big screen versus a small screen and so forth. Whether there is or not is a matter for investigation.

There are, I guess, three elements that bother me about Francisco's asumption of television (media technology) neutrality.

1) Television technologies are embedded in cultural processes--they are what Brian Pfaffenberger (writing about computers) calls sociotechnical relations". Bigger TV sets, newer TV sets, plasma screens, media rooms etc., etc. are part of a matrix of social relations. Status, prestation, class, gender and other social activities and categories are all part of why particular viewers use one technology over another. These are cultural issues. In Kathmandu, Liecthy says the choice between theatergoing and videowatching expreses class. In some Muslim countries, gender relations are expressed and constructed through such a distinction. (And look at Spitulnik's work on radio in Zambia!)

2) Television viewing is often embedded in larger cultural units of action--one watches TV as part of a "date," "veging out", cooking, eating. In Mankekar's book, women talk about what they are watching very differently when they are "family viewing" with the father/husband and when they are preparing the family meal together without a male presence.

3) Steve Caton has pointed out that Lawrence of Arabia was designed for a special screen technology. The director and technical crew put enormous efort into creating a movie that would be projected so large that no one could ever watch it passively; they would need to move their heads to take in the full panorama. We cannot viw on television the movie Lean made--the screen is too small. If I watch the same movie on a two-inch portable TV screen, a 6-inch portable DVD screen, my 8.5x11" laptop screen, etc.--does the physical difference affect the meaning of the text?

As a regular assignment in my media class I have students do a mini-ethnography of a site of media reception. They are required to attend to the cultural definition of the scene, the physical setting, the participants, their objectives and actions, the technologies, norms of behavior and interpretation, and what textual genres (if any) are tied to the activity. They often come up with an interesting array of social functions taking place and cultural meanings being expressed which are sometimes related to the text and sometimes not.

I am skeptical therefore of claims of media neutrality. The television

Aargh. Baby crying. Wife and teens in Boston. You'll have to imagine the conclusion for yourselves. Sorry.

Mark Allen Peterson

Richard Davis (The University of Western Australia)
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Hi All,

To add to Peterson's comments tv watching and tv content as culturally embedded:

In principle I do not disagree with Peterson's arguments but I think there is value in taking note of Baudrillard's argument that the rate and volume of media is so relentlessly high that the original symbolic meanings of media (particularly visual) escapes the intentions of their creators to take on new meanings in concert with surrounding representations. In other words, in relation to mass media we humans may not create meaning in media, it may be created by symbols (representations, cultural texts, call them what you will) coming into contact with other symbols thereby creating new unintended meanings.

What intrigues me about this argument is the redundancy of culture as a practice or idea and the provocation it poses to reception studies that places great emphasis on local, contextual factors mediating original symbolic intentions. Ie, perhaps there is little or no 'culture' being transmitted through the tv, just collections of meanings created in juxtaposition with other media representations.

What would this do to an anthropology of media deeply committed to localism?

Regards Richard

--
Dr Richard Davis
Anthropology and Sociology School of Social and Cultural Studies
The University of Western Australia

John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)
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> But doesn't television watching always involve "socially recognised,
> embodied skills," those of visual and cultural literacy?
> Christa Salamandra

In my posting regarding media practices vs. media habits, I should have added the last part of Barnes' working definition of practice, namely his point that practices, unlike habits, are 'capable of being done well or badly, correctly or incorrectly' (2001: 19). It is in this sense that I spoke of 'embodied skills'.

Perhaps a more clear instance of a media habit is the daily action (for many people) of switching on the TV set. This can hardly be called a media practice, in that it requires very little skill and allows for virtually no technical elaboration. Whilst there are no TV on-switching virtuosi, there are by contrast practitioners who make a living out of TV commentary, e.g. retired tennis players.

John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)
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Dear all

The e-seminar closes tonight (Tuesday) at 9 pm GMT; you're all very welcome to post brief concluding remarks on Sebastian Ureta's paper and the issues it has raised.

Many thanks

John

Jo Helle-Valle (National Institute for Consumer Research, Norway)
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Dear all

To pick up on the last contribution, and rewind from there:

Davis writes:
"What intrigues me about this argument [Baudrillard's] is the redundancy of culture as a practice or idea and the provocation it poses to reception studies that places great emphasis on local, contextual factors mediating original symbolic intentions. Ie, perhaps there is little or no 'culture' being transmitted through the tv, just collections of meanings created in juxtaposition with other media representations. What would this do to an anthropology of media deeply committed to localism?"

In my opinion 'culture' doesn't rule out the relevance and importance of 'local, contextual factors' - or vice versa. That is, as long as one does not go along with structuralists' idea about culture. The advantage with Domestication Research is that it is a perspective that takes seriously the importance of the immediate setting in which media consumption takes place. It points to the fact (at least I treat it as a fact) that people use ICTs in a very different way at home compared to e.g. the office or when being together with friends (like Peterson argues). Imagine; a father who sits with his children accidentally zaps to a channel where they are showing porn. I gather that all of us would assume that he would act negatively/defensively/aggressively - this is unsuitable for children, and hence for family sociality. However, the same man might be in an all-male setting and watching the same porn film with ethusiasm. Now, one might explain this by saying that he is obliged to react negatively together with his childen - that he 'really' likes watching porn. The problem with such an explanation is that one might in principle turn it around and say that he only pretends

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when he's together with his friends. I think it is much more analytically rewarding if the situation is seen as being context-dependent; different contexts provide not only different ways of 'reading' a text, but also different evaluative frameworks for assessing the media consumption he is part of. And this, I think, is closely linked to the terms habitus, hexis and embodyment. (And wouldn't that make Postill's distinction between practice and habit problematic? Because such a perspective would blur the differences between cognition, competence and evaluation. And by the way: to turn on the tv is not an 'innocent', outside good-or-bad thing; for some turning on the tv might feel a bit like the person with an alcohol problem who takes a drink when he actually had decided not to drink that day.)

Thus, it is not a question about in which situation he is pretending but a question about taking seriously the fact that people change with changing language-games. (Which brings up the enticing concept of 'dividual'!) However, it is simultaneously reasonable to assume that the various people-in-contexts are shaped by more general communicative frameworks - what one might call 'culture'. Thus, that is why I argued that it is analytically most rewarding to think of 'domestication' as pointing to processes of 'taming the wild', not about bringing things into the private sphere. Because 'the private sphere' - at least the way I relate to the term (based on Weber, Habermas) - indicate something that is historically unique; a socio-cultural construction - linked to Western? modernity - in which the distinction between the private and the public is fundamental.
For instance, according to the anthropologist Tanja Winther television viewing in a small village on Zanzibar was done inside family homes, but the majority of the audiences were non-household members. This means - I think - that there is a different cultural order when it comes to home/private than what is typical in e.g. Norway - where the bulk of tv-consumption is done only by family members (although not necessarily all of them together). And from this it also follows that the processes of domesticating media is different in the two countries/cultural traditions.

In other words; there are certain overarching cultural frames that contribute to the shaping of the settings we are part of when we consume media, but that is not the same as saying that we do not react radically different to media content in different social contexts (within the same cultural tradition). Thus, we need 'culture' (at least in its more post-modern, revised version) in order to grasp some often hidden, but nevertheless important premises for the actual, observable ways media are consumed. But we also need to include the local, immediate communicative context of the consumption. And it is here that ethnography comes in. It is true as Ursula Rao and Susan point out that 'ethnography' is not just about the specific technique of information gathering (participant observation), it also involves an analytical gaze and strategies; orientation towards practices, creating otherness, etc. Prolonged un- or semistructured interviews, combined with a keen eye for details in what is said, how it is said, what is not said and what goes on while people are talking + an analytical gaze that can bring to the fore those practices that are important for our anthropological goals, can give us rich data - i.e. data that will contribute to our understanding of what is actually involved in people's engagements with ICTs. But that should not prevent us from being critical to how some use the term media ethnography.

Jo Helle-Valle

Sebastian Ureta (Catholic University of Chile)
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Dear List,

First of all, I would like to thank everyone who participated in the debate about (and around) my paper. It has been a great opportunity for me to show publicly some of my work.

It seems to me that the main conclusion that we can get from the debate is that there is still plenty to do to develop a theory of media practices that allow us to study media usage in its specificity and its relations with the surrounding culture of the users. In doing this I think that the first task must be to delimit the concept of media practice from other concepts such as activity, habit or consumption. As we saw in most of the contributions to this e-seminar one of the main issues of disagreement were the place that the concept of practice occupies among the other concepts developed (or adopted) by anthropology, or in general social sciences, to understand the concrete place of media in everyday life.

There are also some relevant issues regarding methods. How should we study media practices? Can we talk (or think) about ethnography of media practices in contemporary societies or should we look for alternative methodological approaches?

Best wishes and thanks again for your interest.

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John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)
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Many thanks to Jo Helle-Valle and Sebastian Ureta for those concluding thoughts! Just to clarify my own position on media practices, I'd like to refer to Jo's remark:

>> > > [...] And by the way: to turn on the tv is not an 'innocent', outside
good-or-bad thing; for some turning on the tv might feel a bit like the person
with an alcohol problem who takes a drink when he actually had decided not to
drink that day.)
>> > >

I didn't mean to say that turning on the TV is an action that takes place in a moral void; no action ever does. Following Barnes' (2001) working definition of practice, I was stressing that the distinctive feature of practices vis-a-vis habits is that practices can be performed 'well or badly', not with reference to a moral framework (as in a good or evil deed) but rather to the embodied skills required for an accomplished execution. 'She's a good pianist' doesn't necessarily mean that 'She's a good person'.

Jo Helle-Valle (National Institute for Consumer Research, Norway)
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I see your point, a point I didn't think about, but I also believe that my original argument holds water; my point of view tries to overcome the old Decartian distinction between body and mind; because if one thinks of embodied mind and mindful bodies then it follows that there is no clear distinction between it being difficult to turn off the tv as a purely physical act, as opposed to the willful, morally motivated wish to actually turn off the tv in order to something else instead. If habit refers to purely physical acts it presupposes a distinction between mind and body.

Jo

John Postill (Sheffield Hallam University)
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Well, as they say in the media, I'm afraid that's all we've got time for tonight. Many, many thanks to Sebastian Ureta for his working paper, to Jo Helle-Valle for being our discussant, and to all of you who've participated.

I've just read quickly through all the postings and this is not exactly an easy seminar to sum up, but these are some of the threads I have managed to tease out:

* methodology: the difficulties of ethnographic research in modern households; ethnography as defamiliarisation; synchronic and diachronic research

* TV and the moral economy of the household: private and public spaces; how ethnocentric is the idea of household as private space?

* the ambiguous concept of (ICT) domestication

* time-space and domestic TV; TV viewing creates own place, own time-space; may clash with division of home space (ceremonial, functional, private spaces); parents using spatial boundaries to educate children on 'correct' use of home spaces; TV may undermine these efforts

* how culturally diverse is TV use? some seminar participants strongly divided on this one; perhaps no society worships TV sets but numerous documented uses of TV sets as religious artefacts

* conceptualising media practice; its definition; demarcation (eg vs. media habit, activity, habitus...); different types (eg integrative vs dispersed); as field; boundaries between TV viewing and other practices; relation to visual/cultural literacy

As usual, a PDF of the e-seminar will be on our website shortly. Also, an update on the Bristol workshop and network meeting to follow soon.

Best wishes

John