Discussant's Comments
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on

Media and Social Changing since 1979. Towards a diachronic ethnography of media and actual social changes.

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First I would like to thank Steve Lyon for inviting me to comment and John Postill for writing a stimulating paper to comment upon. I have several points to raise for general discussion which I include in a list rather than as a narrative.

1. Postill is essentially arguing for a historical anthropological approach toward media. While couched as a 'historical ethnography' or a 'multi-timed ethnography' effectively it echoes the call, which recurs in the discipline periodically, to be more historically minded. As someone who combines historical with ethnographic work I find this call entirely salutary. Ethnography has a presentist bias and history offers the sort of comparative perspective that anthropology strives for (albeit temporally organized rather than spatially). But Postill's desire is to use history to move away from amorphous descriptions of ongoing social change in order to delineate "actual social changes". Behind this, it seems to me, is a larger question. Identifying actual changes allows us to assess and track the effects of media and I wonder if Postill's ultimate interest is not history per se but understanding the power and influence of media? I would appreciate reading more of his thoughts on this partly because he also darkly warns of "the supposedly transformative power" of technologies. His use of the adverb seems to suggest he has little time for the idea that media are transformative yet one of the benefits of the methodology he devises, it seems to me, is that it would allow anthropologists to identify the effects of media on societies and individuals in discrete, observable, mappable ways. And Postill seems to see this as superior to the current situation of gesturing airily toward changes without actually specifying what they are or what the media's role in bringing them about actually is. After an insightful review of the anthropology of media literature, Postill states his goal is to be able to develop the 'biography' of a social change, that can map the beginning, middle period and completion of an actual social change and thus to assess the role of media in that change. This would fix what he sees is the "conceptual blindspot" of media anthropology's resistance to history.

2. I have no problems with the bold outlines of Postill's critique and indeed a historical dimension will always be enriching to anthropological analysis though, of course, not every intellectual project

needs one. I have some questions about how he conceives the details of his analysis. As Postill recognizes, on one level, all ethnography is historical. The 'graph' in ethnography, like that in the cinematograph and the phonograph - two technologies that emerged roughly at the same time as modern anthropology - points to the inscription and archiving process inherent to the field. While not analyzed 'historically' the nature of returning to one's field site or of reading the literature for a particular area always has the effect of introducing an historical dimension that is a common motif in anthropological works (think of Richard Werbner's Tears of the Dead or, more recently, T.O. Beidelman's The Culture of Colonialism). There is a way, then, in which history, or multi-timed ethnography creeps into all anthropological work.

More conceptually however, Postill is confident of his ability to delineate a social change and identify its beginning, middle period and completion. It would have been great to see an ethnographic example of this. As it is he uses a hypothetical one of a village made up of subsistence farmers that shifts to the point that all are engaged in wage labour. Here is "an actual social change", bounded and discrete, that one can use as a base for inquiring into media's role in this change. The advantage of the hypothetical, like any ideal type, is that it strips away noise in order to focus in on the elements that are key to analysis. The question that is raised for me is whether an 'actual' change can be conceptually separated off from the ongoing process of continuous changing as cleanly as Postill wants. I would like to read more of his ideas on this. In recent years scholars as diverse as Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze and Nigel Thrift have emphasized the nature of the social as an assemblage, a yoking together of heterogenous elements potentially spilling into many directions, constantly being made and unmade.

To elaborate on Postill's example, one could compare it to Taussig's study of social change in Colombia (The Devil and Commodity Fetishism) where a peasant society based on subsistence farming encounters and is transformed by the waged labour of capitalism and narrates this shift through a series of fantastic and demonic tales. This would appear to correspond to the sort of actual change Postill refers to. But, as William Roseberry argued, the subsistence farmers Taussig writes about were only engaged in subsistence farming because of their earlier involvement in a commodity culture (as slaves transported from Africa to the new world). Far from being wholly outside an expanding capitalism as Taussig argues, that capitalism was the condition of possibility of their existence as non-capitalist farmers. What appears to be an obvious 'beginning' in fact has a prior history so where does the beginning originate? Which beginning is to be selected and why? Because Postill uses a hypothetical he is free of this sort of messiness that would attend a real world example. Similarly, James Ferguson in Expectations of Modernity writes about African migrants who successfully made the transition from subsistence farming to urban waged labour. But then some of these migrants decide to go back to subsistence farming, while others do not. The 'end' point of Postil's change might not quite be the end but another turn in an ongoing process of mutation and change.

Postill cites Tim Ingold as a counter theorist to his own ideas, as someone who stresses that "humans exist in a perpetual state of 'becoming', forever a work in progress" but he does not fully assess the conceptual challenge Ingold's argument poses to his ability to delineate the biography of a social change. If society is ongoing, perpetually in transformation, how does one identify a clear

'birth' and a final 'end'? To be clear, I am not arguing that social change does not occur nor cannot be mapped and have my own questions about the work of Latour, Thrift and others. But their arguments do pose a question to Postill's model that could be addressed more head on. To my mind, the issue is that the identification of a social change is precisely that, an identification, an analytic act in which material phenomena are assessed by an analysts, outside observers, people undergoing transformative experiences, and others and reflexively identified as a change. While motivated by real world events, the 'beginning' of a social change is an act of categorization (made by informants, the analytic orientation of the anthropologist, her particular set of intellectual questions etc.) rather than something that exists out there in the world.

3. The issue of categorization also emerges when it come to delineating what a sub-field of the anthropology of media is. Postill provides a useful summary of movements in the field and having co-written such a review myself I can recognize the lineaments of what he is describing. Yet, again, I am far less confident than he of what this sub-field now consists of. The social and technological shifts that gave rise to the anthropology of media in the first place has meant that media technologies have become of interest in all sorts of anthropological subfields where much excellent work is being conducted and few of these scholars might see themselves as involved with the anthropology of media. Postill's identification of a 'conceptual blindspot' in the historical anthropology of media is, to my mind, partly because his bounding of the field excises other work that might usefully be included within it that does indeed engage in some of the diachronic analysis he desires. Take Chris Pinney's work on chromolithography. I am unsure if this counts as the 'anthropology of art' or the 'anthropology of media' or something else but in Photos of the Gods Pinney lays out a historical genealogy of aesthetics and politics as they are mediated through popular calendar art. Images, in his analysis, are productive of (as well as enabling the prevention of) religious and political change. Brinkley Messick's The Calligraphic State while presumably belonging to the anthropology of Islam or religion provides an analysis of an 'actual' social change in the shift from calligraphic modes of storing and transmitting religious knowledge to those marked by print Islam. In calligraphic Yemen, students go to the houses of their teachers, they sit at their teacher's feet displaying publicly the habitus of deference and politeness required of this setting. In print Yemen, students go to school, sit at desks, read from printed texts separated from the memory and body of the person who wrote them and, no doubt, display the same indifference to their teachers of so many of our students. Webb Keane (linguistic anthropology? Anthropology of religion?) in his Christian Moderns analyzes the encounter of animist Marapu followers in Indonesia with Dutch protestantism arguing it represents a shift in practices of mediation. He identifies a series of oppositions: repetition versus invention, social conformity versus individual agency, beliefs in the animacy of objects versus the rejection as of that animacy as fetish. And he traces how, as with many mission situations, this encounter was unequal and productive over time of shifts from one side of the opposition to the other. All of these represent 'actual' social change. It may be for some that Keane writing about language and ritual, Messick writing about memorization and print and Pinney, writing about popular print art, do not count as the anthropology of media. But to my mind they do and the ordering of the subfield is better off expanding to take into account the rich work in science and technology studies, linguistic anthropology, religion and elsewhere whose insights are extremely productive for the analysis of media. This makes compiling a review of the literature and unwieldy and difficult task. I have no answer to that one. But I lean toward

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thinking it better to create the problem rather than tighten the boundaries of the sub-field so the problem doesn't exist.

I have been exploring some of these questions in my own recent work on the rise of new Islamic movements in Nigeria and their use of media. I argue that the way anthropologists have conceived of new religious movements, particularly in Africa and particularly in the case of Islam, often depends upon a medial base. While these scholars often see themselves as having nothing to do with an anthropology of media, I argue that one cannot understand contemporary religious revival without taking media into account. Sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly scholars writing about new Islamic movements define those movements not just by theology and practice but by the media forms they use and which constitute them. Many studies of Islamic reformism - John Bowen's separation of 'modernist' from 'traditionalist' Muslims in Muslims Through Discourse, Louis Brenner's division of 'modernist' from 'esoteric' movements in Controlling Knowledge… and Dale Eickelman's examination of the role of print in transforming religious identity - argue that shifts in media are constitutive of religious change. All use practices of storing and transmitting data as core to what constitute religious movements. But of these only Eickelman can be said to formally engage in analyzing media. Nevertheless, it is distinctive that none of them can engage in the analysis of religion without taking into account the media forms that shape religious practice.

4. One of the reasons for this affinity between analyses of religious change and studies of media is that both rest implicitly on ideas of rupture. Postill begins his article with the sentence "1979 marked a watershed in modern world history". Yet 1979 can only be a watershed in history if one conceives of history as divided up into discrete and separable periods. Which begs the further question of what constitutes the organizing principle separating one period from another? It is extraordinarily difficult to separate our conception of media from ruptural theories of history such as these because we are so hard-wired to think of technologies in this way. Conceptions of society as marked by orality, literacy, print, mechanical, electronic and digital ages partake in this narrative and while the anthropological critique of determinist ideas of literacy is of longstanding no amount of critique seems to dent the powerful ideological belief in technology as he arbiter of progress that is at large all over the world. I am not suggesting that Postill advocates such a linear theory of history, indeed he disavows it, but I am arguing that history as progress is encoded both into the media technologies we study and the media theories we use to study them. An historical approach to media would do well to factor this in to our assessment as history is engineered into the objects of media as well as being produced by the methodology we use to analyze them.

5. Postill has laid out a methodology for a historical ethnography of media in society. I would claim that such historical ethnographies can be found in anthropology if we open our borders of what constitutes an anthropology of media. Yet I fundamentally agree with his assertion that more are needed. How they are carried out, what differing notions of history they invoke and explore, remains to be determined. But the effort is an admirable one.