Media Anthropology Network
European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)
E-Seminar Series

http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars

E-Seminar 42
Media and social changing since 1979:
Towards a diachronic ethnography of media and actual social changes

by
John Postill
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Discussant
Brian Larkin
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04 December - 18 December 2012

Stephen M. Lyon (s.m.lyon@durham.ac.uk)	04.12.2012

Dear List,
I am delighted to kick off the 42nd Media Anthropology Network E-Seminar. We have a great paper and some great discussant comments to get us started. Just a quick reminder for all of us-- we'll start with the discussant's comments from Brian Larkin, pasted below and then when our author, John Postill, has had a chance to respond to these comments we'll open it up to the list. The e-seminar will stay open for two weeks (until 18 December) and then we'll get the transcript of the entire conversation posted online to the E-Seminars section of our website. For anyone who hasn't yet had a chance to download and read John's paper, I've included a link to it as well.

Best,
Steve

E-seminar 42: John Postill (RMIT): Media and social changing since 1979: Towards a diachronic ethnography of media and actual social changes.

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

Brian Larkin (Columbia U)

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.

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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

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(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 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.

John Postill   (jrpostill@gmail.com)   05.12.2012

Dear All

First of all many thanks to Steve Lyon for organising this session and to Brian Larkin for his painstaking review of my working paper – and in record time, too. I'd also like to thank all fellow organisers and participants at the two Media and Social Change meetings we've had to date (London 2011, Nanterre 2012) which have helped to shape the ideas presented in this paper. (More info here: http://mediasocialchange.net/).

Brian's comments are so rich and challenging that I'll probably spend the next decade mulling them over! But as we haven't got that sort of timescale, for now I'll try to respond briefly so that we can open the discussion to the list. For the sake of clarity, I'll follow Brian's 5-point scheme:

1. Brian starts by saying that I am 'essentially arguing for a historical anthropological approach toward media', albeit couched as a 'historical ethnography' or a 'multi-timed ethnography'. This is an intriguing observation, as I think it captures a tension in the paper between my original plans for it and the version that we're now

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discussing. Originally I was hoping to 'translate' the existing media ethnographic record from the early 1980s to the present into a world historical narrative of media-related change and continuity. The idea was both to world-historicise media anthropology and also to find out what anthropology had to contribute to our understanding of media and sociocultural change that US/UK-centred media studies were missing, following on from a debate I had with Mark Peterson a few years ago (Postill and Peterson 2009). This proved to be a mammoth task so I had to abandon it, but it is one that I think still needs to be undertaken, ideally in book form. As the EASA conference deadline loomed I turned towards conceptual and methodological issues, hence the emphasis in the paper on how to move beyond our current attention to media and 'social changing' (rather than 'actual social changes') by means of diachronic forms of ethnographic research and writing.

Brian wonders whether my 'ultimate interest is not history per se but understanding the power and influence of media' and remarks that I seem to have 'little time for the idea that media are transformative'. Yes, I am certainly interested in the power/influence of media, but always from a comparative (both historically and cross-culturally) perspective that does not privilege the North Atlantic region or the present day. As for the passage about the 'supposedly transformative power of new media' (top of p. 4), my intention there was not to settle the issue either way, but rather to point out that media anthropologists (myself included) will often use their ethnographic research to challenge epochal claims coming from more technophile quarters. I am with Sirpa Tenhunen (2008) on this one: the ethnographic critique of the grand claims, important as it is as a corrective, can have the unintended side-effect of exaggerating sociocultural continuity while downplaying the part played by new media in processes of social change, as shown in her ethnographic study of mobile phones and village sociality in West Bengal.

2. Brian asks whether 'an 'actual' change can be conceptually separated off from the ongoing process of continuous changing as cleanly as Postill wants', adding that authors such as Latour, Deleuze and Thrift have theorised 'the nature of the social as an assemblage' made of heterogeneous elements that is 'constantly being made and unmade'. Later on, he refers to Ingold's work and asks how one can identify a clear beginning and end to a given social change when 'society is ongoing, perpetually in transformation'. I have two reactions to this comment:

First, the approach that I am proposing is indeed compatible with some recent discussions of history and temporal heterogeneity inspired by Foucault, Deleuze and other theorists, including Pinney (also mentioned by Brian, see below). Thus, in the context of her anthropological work on cultural production, Georgina Born (2010: 195) writes: "Foucault offers clarity in elaborating difference as a methodological principle. He outlines three modalities of difference to be utilized when tracing

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genealogy. The first is synchronic: that we should assume the internal differentiation of dominant cultural formations, analysing both their regularities or coherence, and their dispersion. The second is diachronic: that we should trace the trajectory of such dominant cultural formations, assuming neither continuity nor discontinuity, nor a uniform rate of transformation; here we read the ethnographic material for its encapsulation of currents or dynamics of different temporal depth. The third is analytical: that in elucidating genealogy, we should effect 'a sort of multiplication or pluralization of causes ... a multiplication [that] means analysing an event according to the multiple processes that constitute it', leading to a 'polymorphism' of the elements brought into relation in the analysis, and of the domains of reference mobilized."

However, in making these connections to philosophy and social theory we need to take care not to fall into the abstract, general language that I take issue with in the paper ('the social', 'society is ongoing') that makes it very hard to conceive of actual social changes as finite processes open to biographical analysis. Societies may be ongoing, but that doesn't mean that all their internal and cross-border processes are. If we're going to take the notion of a social change seriously, this commits us to the transformative principle that social phenomena will sometimes mutate from a State A to a State B (or from a State E to a State F when analysing a series of social changes), e.g. a shift from slavery to emancipation, or a shift from market liberalism to state socialism and back (from A to B and back to A). Yet to quote Born again, we can never assume 'a uniform rate of transformation' (2010: 195) – some changes will be swift, others will take centuries.

Yes, I'm making it all sound very 'clean' and straightforward, but these are merely analytical approximations – models – of empirical actualities that will be invariably more messy on the ground. For instance, a person's life course can't always be easily divided into neat stages. At the same time, most people's lives do go through different phases, even if no two persons agree on their precise nature and duration. The challenge is how to research and chronicle both the changes and continuities in ways that shed light on that particular biosocial trajectory. I would argue that the same applies to complex social changes such as suburbanisation in region X or slave emancipation in nation-state Y.

Brian suggests that it would have been good to have in the paper an ethnographic example of an actual social change with a beginning, middle and end, besides the hypothetical example of the villagers who switched from subsistence farming to waged labour. In fact, I provide such an example when I draw from my ethnographic research in Malaysia to sketch a processual/biographical account of the suburbanisation of the Kuala Lumpur region as an actual social change. As I show in the paper, this process started in the 1970s and ended in the 2000s (ended in the sense

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that by the 2000s suburban domicile was the norm for middle-class families in the region). Different analysts will of course disagree over the details of such mass processes of social change, but this is no different from any other research question. Brian asks: 'Which beginning is to be selected and why?'. My answer is that this will depend on the question being asked and on the empirical evidence available. A researcher working in 2010s Kuala Lumpur who is interested in suburbanisation will have to assess the extant evidence on the early suburban settlers and devise a chronology that does justice to the existing data.

3. Brian finds that my delineation of media anthropology is too tight and that it may lead me to overlook anthropological work by Pinney, Messick, Keane and others whose work straddles more than one subfield but could provide us with great insights. This is a point well taken and I'm very grateful for those references from the anthropology of religion, art, etc. I've always taken a broad view of the anthropology of media and have been happy to include work from other subfields (insofar as they can be so easily separated) such as political anthropology, the anthropology of time or the anthropology of writing and literacy – or indeed from other disciplines. Of course, most texts belong to more than one subfield simultaneously, and it makes little sense to erect artificial boundaries. That said, for some purposes (for instance in my review of the subfield for this paper) it is useful, I think, to bring together a subfield's key texts and social formations, e.g. the four reference texts that were published in 2002-2005 or the Media Anthropology Network, as a way of weaving a coherent narrative that captures the main interests and trajectories of subfield practitioners. Academic subfields may be open and overlapping but that doesn't mean that they lack key sites of change and reproduction.

4. There is some disentangling to do in Brian's fourth comment. If I understand him correctly, he questions my opening gambit of '1979 marked a watershed in modern world history' for its implicit theory of history as a series of ruptures; a version of history 'divided up into discrete and separable periods'; in other words, a 'linear theory of history'. This tacit theory, for Brian, runs the risk of landing us in the idea of history as progress, an idea 'encoded both into the media technologies we study and the media theories we use to study them'. My response is as follows. The theory of history I'm proposing is dual in that it contains elements of both linearity and non-linearity. On the one hand, world historical time, like biographical time, flows forth. To paraphrase Alfred Gell (1992), historical time does not go round in circles, chasing its own tail; there is no biosocial return to a prior historical era or event. Universal clock-and-calendar time captures this beautifully, and only fictional characters such as Dr Who can time travel. On the other hand, world history unfolds along countless tortuous paths that can never be accurately predicted, and there is no simple progressive telos. (Incidentally, I'm thinking that we may be using 'linearity' to mean straight lines).

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The (implicit) theory of history as merely a series of ruptures is problematic, I agree with Brian, and I do not subscribe to it. In my working theory of history, ruptures are important (e.g. wars, revolutions, natural disasters, financial crashes), but they are not the only game in town. There are also gradual social changes, as well as social continuities. For example, the 9/11 attacks constituted a historical rupture in that they ushered in a new period of US foreign policy and militarism that had huge global consequences, including for the fields of news media production. So it is legitimate, in my view, to speak of a before-and-after September 11th – as long as we don't attempt to explain everything under the rubric of Bush's 'War on Terror'. A great many other societal processes were under way around the globe at the same time (in the 2000s) – some were derailed or aborted by the War on Terror, others were strongly influenced by it, still other processes were hardly affected.

5. Brian concludes by saying that 'Postill has laid out a methodology for a historical ethnography of media in society'. Here I would add a qualification: while a world historical anthropology of media is indeed a long-term project that I am passionate about, the more specific aim of this paper is to start a conversation about the urgent need to distinguish between (a) media and 'social changing' and (b) media and actual social changes. Brian has very deftly pointed at some of the methodological and conceptual difficulties of operationalizing this new distinction, but I stand by the paper's concluding point. Namely: if we are serious about the study of media and actual social changes, we must rethink our current conceptual language and methodology. This applies not only to media anthropology, but also to all other media and communication studies that focus on the present and near future.

Many thanks to Brian once again, and I look forward to further comments and questions from the floor!

John

References

Born, Georgina (2010) The Social and the Aesthetic: For a Post-Bourdieuian Theory of Cultural Production', Cultural Sociology 4(2): 171-208.

For all other references cited, see the working paper:
http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars

Roxana Morosanu (roxana.morosanu@gmail.com**)** 05.12.2012

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Thank you John for an interesting paper!

The questions that I will raise are mainly linked to an opportunity of debating (that these online seminars bring) and they are not critiques of your paper, which I found provocative and timely.

So, although I'm addressing the questions to you, I would appreciate any other comments and thoughts that the list members might want to share on these topics.

1. Starting from one of Brian's comments, I would put on a conspicuously reflexive hat and ask: what would legitimate an anthropologist to say what it is and what it's not an 'actual' social change (in a society different than its own)? Would it be enough to borrow 'authority' from other sister disciplines that might have 'recorded' changes by using quantitative means? If we can distinguish 'actual' changes only post-event (after they have been 'accomplished') then we need to be aware that what are presented as changes have been constructed as changes in accordance to the present preferred self-narration. A processual approach would make the anthropological enterprise more (how?) 'scientific'/ 'systematic'. But why and for whom would we need to sound more 'systematic'? Ultimately, how would an 'anthropological' processual approach be different from processual approaches from other social sciences disciplines (and from good journalism)?

2. I would like to know more about how you understand the concept of culture. In this paper it appeared as a 'national historical' approach. But I think that the way we deal with the concept of culture poses a broader challenge to how we might be able or not to see 'change'. The 'traditional' way in which anthropology explains the world is by stressing cultural continuity (which can be identified in various papers previously presented as part of the list's online seminars). Would we need to overcome this 'tradition' in order to be able to see 'change' or we don't need to because cultural continuity is much more important than provisional changes anyway? Thank you again for your paper (and thank you to Brian for his challenging comments) and please understand my 'idealism' through my PhD student status
:)

Toate cele bune,
Roxana

Jens Kjaerulff (jk@socant.net)   06.12.2012

Thank you for this paper, John. It may not surprise you that there is a good deal I agree with in it. I also find the literature review useful.

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I prepared some comments after I read your paper. However our discussant, Brian Larkin, raised the basic point I concentrated on so much better than I had managed, in addition to several other points which I think are simply brilliant. Rarely have I enjoyed a discussant's comments so much, thank you for an outstanding job, Brian!

The downside now is, I feel a bit short of things to say. But I have decided to forward some of what I originally wrote, partly because it is more concise than Brian's response, and partly because I tie in with some of your conceptual framework and literature in a different way than Brian:

1) Maybe you overstate the distinction between what you call 'changing' and 'actual change'. I think the way you present it at least, entails a risk of substituting what you call 'imminentism' with a kind of positivism that needs to be better reflected if it is to advance an anthropological understanding of change, or media's place in it. As I see it, the very notion of change inherently entails a measure of abstraction which is not adequately confronted in your take on 'actual change' here. But I think there are elements in your paper which may go some way to accommodate that, see the following two points.

2) I believe you misrepresent Gell's book on time, e.g. the way you use the quote you bring from its conclusion (1992: 315 - note how the very paragraph ends, from which you take the quote: 'On the other hand, most of what is "out there" is simply unknown, never observed, never described, never thought about, never set down on paper. That ought to be sufficient' (ibid.)). The temporal position you adopt seems to amount to a hardcore 'B-series' one, as Gell calls it. But that is not Gell's own position, as you appear to imply. Rather, Gell calls his own a 'moderate B-series' position (e.g. p. 153), and it is in fact much closer to phenomenology than you seem to acknowledge (e.g. see 1992: 328). A position closer to Gell's own might have some bearing on your conception of 'actual change'.

3) Given how you invoke 'process and models', and emphasize actual changes 'out there' as an empirical corrective for our models (pp.6-7), I cannot help myself, Fredrik Barth's work springs to mind. These are simply the hallmarks of his work. He has actually also attended to history, see e.g. his monograph on Sohar (1983: 191, ff). However what I want to say here is, a key theme in his later body of work is 'variation', which he explores in close tandem with change. This is a way to 'complicate' both 'actual change' as you call it, and the notion of change itself. What above all is interesting here I think, is not so much Barth's answers in their own right, as much as the (different) ways he has attempted to confront the complexity of change and continuity this way, both theoretically and in terms of empirical approach. So I suggest thinking about variation together with change might be of interest to you. In

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any case, it is on this account I think you could strengthen this paper. Whether or not you look to Barth, if you retain the framing of your approach in terms of 'process and models', I think you ought at least to position it relative to his work. You kindly cite my own book, given its particular approach to change in the context of 'media', but in terms of its approach to change, it owes much to Barth.

John Postill   (jrpostill@gmail.com)   07.12.2012

Many thanks for those questions, Roxana!

1. There are a lot of questions packed into your first numbered paragraph, so I'm not sure I'll be able to address them all in one go. In the paper I suggest that there's no need to wait for a process of social change to run its course to be able to apply a processual/biographical analysis to it. To illustrate this point I present the example of what I call a 'mature' process of social change, namely the secularisation of morality in post-Franco Spain (the old man died in 1975, so this is a process that's been under way for over 35 years now). Under this broad theme the researcher will find a great deal of diversity, contradictory accounts, backtracks, ephemeral assemblages, etc, but also an undeniable trend towards the mainstreaming of secular norms, values and practices resisted by the Catholic church (gender equality, abortion, divorce, same-sex marriage, etc.) that can be aptly summed up in one word: secularisation. One key site to study this process diachronically is the mainstream media.

Who is has the legitimate authority to theorise these sorts of social changes? Well, in anthropological practice we typically theorise about the social worlds we investigate in conversation (and sometimes debate) with our research participants, as well as with students, colleagues and authors from different fields. It's a form of authorial triangulation: us, our research participants and the relevant academic constituency. However, ultimately it is the researcher/scholar who takes responsibility for his or her own texts. I don't quite see why this would be any different with the 'actual social changes' approach I'm proposing?

2. On the question of cultural continuity vs. change, I think most of us would agree that you need to understand both without any prior commitment to either (easier said than done, of course). I would add to this that one thing the Manchester School of anthropology already showed back in the 1950s (through ethnographic-historical studies in Central and Southern Africa) is that 'total fields of social relations' (Epstein 1957) change unevenly. For instance, when doing fieldwork in the Copperbelt mining region of northern Rhodesia, Epstein found that some areas of local life (e.g. labour relations) had changed rapidly in previous years, while others had done so much more slowly (e.g marriage customs). I found similarly uneven processes of change when

researching internet localisation in suburban Kuala Lumpur in the early 2000s, e.g. the issue of bringing back local elections hadn't moved for many years, whilst the ecumenical fight against crime (supported by all manner of actors across the government vs. non-government divide) had experienced rapid socio-technological change, including mobile technologies to share crime alerts 'in real time'. More details on our Media and Social Change site:
http://mediasocialchange.net/2011/06/03/the-unevenness-of-social-change/

I've got to go now, but will respond to Jens' question in a few hours' time.

All the best from Melbourne

John

Mark Pedelty (pedeltmh@umn.edu)   07.12.2012

Hi John and All,

Enjoyed the paper, John. Cogent argument and clear writing, as always.

I am going to resist the temptation to post another long statement/question given the thorough feedback Brian raised and thoughtful exchange that has already taken place.

Your daring use of "actual" in the title got me thinking about purpose. There is an underlying assumption that theorising change matters. I agree, but would also like to hear more about why and how theorising change matter, and for what (and whose) purposes? I am perhaps most interested in the "how," as in "How do we convert our theoretical dialogues into contributions that might potentially do some small good in the world?" Don't want to shove you into meta territory or make you talk around the topic, but am very interested to see how the points you've raised in the paper become "actualized" (to awkwardly borrow a term). As participant observers, for example, we tend to learn first hand about the limits of individual action/engagement/agency when studying social change; at least I know that I have found making music in local environmental movements a very humbling, yet productive and telling, form of participant observation. Therefore, this is not one of those finger-pointing activist's "why don't we do something" questions, but partly a question in regard to the role of our roles as theorists of social change in that which we study.

Thanks so much for your paper and this dialogue. I will take my answer off the air. :)

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Sahana Udupa (sahana_udupa1@yahoo.co.in)   08.12.2012

Thanks to Postill for a brilliant, provocative piece. His arguments are entirely convincing. After all one cannot be satisfied only with work-in-progress reports. The comments/questions I list here are in the spirit of having a healthy discussion and get more from a clear thinker like Postill.

1. Postill's call for a longer timeline in media ethnographies is very timely. Many media anthropological studies appear to be so overwhelmed by the changes on the ground that taking a historical approach becomes almost unfeasible. To add to the practical problems, there are influential theories privileging flux and indeterminacy that make any definitive statement on society (as change or structure) a bit too ambitious or even erroneous. Having said that, it is still difficult to take Postill's argument on social change as a process with clear chronology – a definite beginning and an end. Brian's comments and Postil's response brilliantly debate this problem. Postill's central argument is fully convincing - that we need to consider social changes in definite time periods while exploring media practices in the present. In my study on Indian news media I show how caste practices, among other factors, shape news cultures in contemporary urban India. Going back in time helped this analysis significantly. Caste practices among journalists I observed on the field had a much longer lineage. Archival research revealed fascinating details about the role of journalists in the non-Brahmin movement (movement against the dominance of upper caste Brahmins) in the early decades of the twentieth century in colonial South India (Udupa 2010, 2012).

However, I approached them not as a 'finite' social change available for biographical analysis but as 'critical episodes' which continue to influence news practices. Sketching these critical episodes biographically will no doubt deepen our analysis. I see the benefits of shifting the approach from the much ambitious claims on 'actual social changes' to 'critical episodes' – episodes that are critical for our analysis and more easily open to biographical analysis. This can also perhaps partly solve the problem of relying on the theory of history as a series of ruptures.

2. We get a sense that the distinction he draws between social change and social changing is as much about scale as it is about time. Social changing refers to the micro (context) and mature social change to the macro (context). This is close to what media anthropologists like Abu-Lughod demonstrate so well in their multicontextual analysis of media practice, and the productive ways in which an ethnographer could move from micro to macro and back. In that case, there is no tension between understanding social changing and social change – at least not as strong as Postill would want us to believe.

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3. There are two parts in the problem posed by Postill: i. 'media', ii. 'social change/changing'. The two parts are linked by 'and'/'in relation to'. His paper and his responses brilliantly advance the argument on the second part but little on the first and even less on the middle term linking the two. I go back to Brian's question on how Postill would see the relation between media and social change (or the 'power' of media). How does a change in perspective from social changing to social change help us to understand media better? Will it take us further from the 'media effects' paradigm in media studies?

4. Does Postill find Raymond Williams' schema of emergent, residual and dominant useful for this discussion?

Udupa. S. 2012. 'News Media and Contention over 'the Local' in Urban India'. American Ethnologist 39 (4): 820-835.

John Postill　　(jrpostill@gmail.com)　　　　　　　　　　　　08.12.2012

Thanks for your comments and questions, Jens.

1) You write: "…the very notion of change inherently entails a measure of abstraction which is not adequately confronted in your take on 'actual change' here."

I agree with the first half of this statement, namely with the idea that the notion of change *in the singular* is highly abstract. This is why in the paper I use either (a) the plural *changes* in the phrase 'actual social changes' or (b) the singular 'an actual social change'. I deliberately avoid the general form 'change' which, as I say somewhere in the paper, can be as mind-boggling a term as culture or society. This allows me to give concrete examples of actual social changes such as the suburbanisation of the Kuala Lumpur region (1970s-2000s) or the secularisation of morality in post-Franco Spain (1970s-ongoing).

2) You say I 'misrepresent Gell's book on time' (1992).

I wasn't really attempting to represent his book; that would have required much more than a passing reference. I was only using a quote from Gell's book to illustrate the fact that both historical and biographical time are non-recursive, i.e. irreversible. There is no returning to a previous life or era.

I haven't got Gell's book handy, but I seem to recall he uses B-series time to refer to objective, historical, periodical time and A-series time to describe subjective,

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phenomenological, presentist time (do correct me if I'm wrong). In which case, my own position - not made clear in the paper – is that we need to take them both into account when studying people's understandings and uses of chronometric media such as clocks, watches, TVs or mobiles.

Perhaps the reason why I come across as a B-series type in the paper is that I think it's important that we don't paint ourselves into a phenomenological corner in which all that matters is the 'lived experience' of our research participants, as if that lived experience didn't contain a heavy dose of objective, clock-and-calendar media time. Whilst objective and subjective time are usefully separated for analytical purposes, in daily practice they are sometimes mixed ("See you at eight-ish – or whenever you feel like it"), at other times contrasted ("I can't believe it's actually a 3-hour film, it went so quickly!"). The languages of objective and subjective time co-exist in a manner of diglossia, and media are integral to this dialectic.

During fieldwork among the Iban, an indigenous people of Sarawak (Borneo) in 1996-8 - and briefly in 2001- I found that people's rounds of activities were mediated by clock-and-calendar time via the school, the office, the timber camp, the oil rig, the farm radio, the family TV, etc. There was no 'indigenous time' to repair to outside the ubiquitous time of the Malaysian state and market in which Sarawakian Iban are both fully immersed and active participants (their Iban brethren across the border are equally immersed in the Indonesian timesphere). And yet the anthropology of time prefers to romanticise 'non-Western time' by downplaying the daily and festive uses of clocks, calendars, radios, mobiles and other chronomedia by people around the world (Postill 2002).

But I'm not sure I understand what you mean by Gell's 'moderate B-series position' and how it can help me develop the project of media and actual social changes?

3) I appreciate your elaboration on Barth's work; it will be very useful when revising the paper for publication. That said, I'm wondering whether he is writing about actual social changes in the plural as researchable processes (the focus of my paper) or, once again, about 'change' and 'continuity' in very general societal terms – in which case I fear his approach could be part of the problem, not the solution.

John

Jens Kjaerulff (jk@socant.net)   08.12.2012

Thank you the reply, John.

As to what you ask in return:

1) The core problem I probe, is with your very distinction change/actual social changes. I respectfully object: the latter does imply an act of abstraction too - holding up A and B, to claim 'actual social changes' (rather than social apples and pears, pure and simple). It is this which I think you need to confront and reflect on more carefully and explicitly. It is much the same point Brian Larkin raised, see especially the last paragraph under item 2) in his opening comments. As it stands, I have a problem buying this distinction, even though I feel your intent with it is very worth while.

What I add then (to what Brian wrote), is the suggestion that you might work around this particular problem with some of what is already in your paper: Gell, and (in effect, almost) Barth. One thing I trust they share, is a discontent with the 'phenomenological corner' you are weary of, and like you, they want to exceed it.

2) Gell is quite explicit about this, yet he draws at considerable length on Husserl to develop his own theory of time cognition, which I see as the core project of that book, arguably somewhat overlooked in substance because of the book's complexity. I have an article under review where I develop this at length, at a later point you are welcome to read it. Part of what is confusing is that Gell greatly labours the objective (B-series) fact, not of 'changes' as you call it, but of the world not standing still so to speak (as you know I like to put it with Weber, the 'meaningless infinity of the world process'). Essentially, this fact is his point of departure for exploring how we (analysts and people at large) arrive at perceiving and operating in terms of 'time', via clocks and otherwise. Hence his self-declared 'moderate' B-series position. It is a stance for exploring nothing less than the ontology of 'time' (which I believe is reflected in the paragraph you quote, as a whole that is). It is that kind (if not that extent) of ontological reflection - in your case on 'changes', of the kind you put in the plural, rather than time per se, though the two are obviously related - that I think would put the empirical approach you very reasonably propose, on a stronger footing.

3) Barth in effect does something similar, though his approach is different, i.e. in the first instance empirical. Much like you, he has little patience for 'change and continuity in very general societal terms', as you put it. Indeed he is at pains to approach the matter as 'researchable processes', as you write. This is what his conception of 'naturalism' is all about (for a shortcut, see e.g. my chapter in Brauchler's and your volume, 2010). Like, as I quote you here, I could almost be quoting Barth himself. But through doing so, he keenly reflects on the conceptual apparatus involved, and it is here the notion of 'variation' comes in, to complicate notions of change and continuity. So one might say, while he emphasizes actual empirical processes like you, he is keenly attentive the question 'process of what?'. Likewise, as with Gell and yourself, Barth emphasizes the significance of a world 'out

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there' quite apart from our subjective bubbles, as a thing to come to terms with, both analytically and for people at large (again, see my chapter in your edited volume for a shortcut in this regard).

Jens Kjaerulff (jk@socant.net)   09.12.2012

I got my last mail sent off without addressing the obvious question you also ask John: how what I propose can help the project you propose, regarding media.

I acknowledge I am close to having spent my share of 'air wave', so let me simply say I think one thing a more sustained ontological reflection on 'actual social changes' can do, with or without the authors I propose, is to advance an appreciation of medias 'actual' place in them (in principle, anything's actual place in them). To cite two concrete examples of historical work that may be obscure to this audience, I see Herman Ooms' book 'Tokugawa Ideology' (1985, Princeton U press) as an interesting example of a historian who engages in this kind of reflection (if in different terms). He concentrates on how neo-confucianism became installed as the ideology of the Feudal Shogunate state emerging on the Japanese archipelago around 1600, and the place of writings of confucianist scholars in it, among other things. The other (historical) example I will mention here is the anthropologist Susan Gal's work on more recent historical language practices in Hungary, and the way she takes issue with Benedict Anderson's famous idea of 'actual social change' (as John has it), i.e. the homogenizing impact of nation states (and their extensions such as print media) on language. None of them use Gell or Barth, yet I see them both as exemplifying the general point I have tried to make.

I will back off on that note, there have been other very interesting questions raised. I would like to hear John's take for example, on Mark Pedelty's excellent question of why and how theorising change(s) matters ....

Thanks again for raising this excellent topic for discussion, John.

Jens

Francisco Osorio (fosoriog@msn.com)   09.12.2012

Dear list, although the discussion happens in our present continuous, they remain published as working papers in the media anthropology network website. As such, we can read 41 e-seminars (this is the 42nd) and very few are as brave as this one. John Postill is arguing against some gurus and established ideas or trends in anthropology

and for that John will be on the spot for some time. The very same concept of media anthropology has been put into question in our e-seminars, as well as any main concept trying to be defined. In that context, John is really a provoking thinker.

I agree with previous comments that some parts would need some clarifications, for example, the methodological aspects on the section 'the biography of an actual social change', but his main proposal is really compelling: the distinction between social change and social changing. I want to clarify one point: he says it is a distinction he did not originally make (either John is taking the concept from someone else or he did not make it in his previous fieldwork).

So, what the distinction teach us? Why would be useful for analysis? What's the advantage of social change instead of social changing? John says if he would have had that concept in his Malaysia fieldwork, he could have said something different. What is it? That part it is difficult for me the grasp now (my fault not John's) but there are two good ideas in that section of the paper. 1) Diachronic processes were not really such: a 1999 to 2009 sounds diachronic but it fades compare to mass suburbanisation of the Kuala Lumpur region from the 1970s (early phase) to the 2000s (terminal phase). 2) The second idea is that time sometimes works as a ubiquitous code: the structure of sociocultural change may be different from what we want it to be.

Francisco Osorio

Department of Anthropology

University of Chile

John Postill   (jrpostill@gmail.com)   10.12.2012

Hi Mark

You ask why and how theorising change matters, and especially how we may go about translating our theoretical conversations beyond academia. Another great question!

I think there are two convergent trends that are crucially important; first, the proliferation of social and mobile media with hundreds of millions of citizens now routinely producing and 'sharing' digital contents has opened up new spaces for academic knowledge; second, what I'm provisionally calling 'the mainstreaming of nerd politics', i.e. the myriad daily interactions taking place via Twitter and other

platforms reaching across specialist fields (software, blogging, journalism, politics, entertainment, academia, etc.) in which what used to be nerdy/geeky issues around internet freedom, digital commons, representative democracy, and indeed social change/changing, are much more widely theorised and discussed.

I saw this convergence taking off in a big way while doing fieldwork into digital media and activism in Barcelona in 2010-2011. Spain's Indignados (15M) movement and its offspring, the Occupy movement, are products of this extraordinary convergence, and there is much more to come as we face new global and national crises in the years ahead.

I see a strong demand not only on Twitter, but also Facebook, YouTube, blogs, other platforms as well as offline, for clearly presented theoretical ideas about economics, politics, climate change, and so on, that can translated into formats that will make them more accessible. See, for instance, the YouTube RSA Animate "Crises of Capitalism" in which David Harvey's ideas about socioeconomic change are translated into a series of drawings: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOP2V_np2c0 (This academic video has been viewed nearly 2 million times.)

But it's crucial that we don't leave the theorisation of media and change to the big media gurus with the literary agents; it's a conversation that we can all be part of, not only to challenge the grand utopian and dystopian claims, but also to develop more robust alternative theories based on comparative empirical research. I'm hoping that my working paper and this session, along with the other meetings we've had and are planning, can be a small contribution in this direction.

How to do it? A quick, non-comprehensive list could include:

* Blog posts in the Media and Social Change site that are then shared via Twitter, Facebook, mailing lists, etc.
* Quick Facebook notes to our FB friends
* YouTube, Prezi and similar presentations
* Contributions to the collective blog Savage Minds
* Developing new media change concepts outside the current paradigms

etc etc

Best

Sally (saa26@kent.ac.uk)   10.12.2012

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I'm going to preface this by stating that I am a new scholar.

I enjoyed reading the paper and found it very interesting.

That said, I do have a question:

How successfully can this proposed method be forecasted into the future as well, for the future looking back doing research on the past which is our current present? (Sorry, there really isn't a better way to phrase it.)

In going back to the past, which we need to do according to the argument, how much can be determined using the amount of media that is available?

It's easier now to look back because the media records didn't really get as intense, dense and hard to read as they are at this point in time, and will be going forward. Before the Internet really got rolling, and to some extent, it's first few years, the availability in media of what was happening was sort of finite.

What we have now is a condition by which nearly everyone could hypothetically be a reporter and to some extent, is.

Meaning that "citizen journalism" and the amount of data it creates in itself is beyond overwhelming.

Because we are in this present, it doesn't seem to amount to something that matters so much as we can still look backwards, but in 30 years or so, scholars "looking back" are going to have a mess. If they have anything. The other problem is running archives that will keep all of this knowledge/information/data. What's kept might not be what is common understanding, so there is that angle, too. Downed servers or letting domains expire (and their drives with them) as Brewster Kahle so eloquently put, are the "library fires" of our age.

Even if the data does survive, currently there aren't good tools to mine, interpret and understand the media now and the danger in the medium of computers is that the frameworks they impose to create tools for interpretation and mining, have limitations. Unless AI gets better. It might.

Can this proposed method be projected into the future and if so, how might it be able to be managed for future scholars who will be looking back through a very very very very big pile of data?

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Speaking of challenging questions, Sahana poses a fresh set of them:

1. Re: the temporality of my proposal, I'm not suggesting that the focus on media and actual social changes will be relevant to all research projects, including your study of present-day news cultures in urban India. To reiterate my main point, I am saying that researchers who frame their question around 'media and social change' could do worse than identify a researchable social change and use a processual (stage-by-stage) approach to reconstruct it, combining ethnographic and historical research. If I were studying contemporary news practices in, say, urban Indonesia, I probably wouldn't adopt the approach proposed in the paper *unless my focus was an actual social change* related to present-day news practices, e.g. the patchy democratisation of Indonesian public life since 1998. When you say that 'caste practices among journalists I observed on the field had a much longer lineage' this suggests to me a very interesting case of media historical continuity, which is an entirely different question. I'm reminded here of Krause's (2011) recent historical analysis of the uneven career of reporting as the paradigmatic practice in US journalism since the 1890s.

You also write: "… it is still difficult to take Postill's argument on social change as a process with clear chronology – a definite beginning and an end". As I said earlier in the session, the best we can do is approximations, rough estimates, interpretations of the empirical evidence – seldom will we find ready-made beginnings and ends waiting to be plucked out of the flux of history. So if you're interested in the origins of car-dependent suburbs as the Malaysian middle-class norm, you know you're not going to find them in the 18th or 19th century. This is likely to be a post-War phenomenon, which is indeed when the existing literature suggests the first such suburbs were built. When we lived in a Kuala Lumpur suburb in 2003-2004, some people were amazed that we didn't have a family car and sometimes had to catch a bus. Only poor immigrants fitted that category, not middle-class 'expats'.

2. I can see that my distinction between social change and social changing may lend itself to the interpretation that social change refers to the macro- and social changing to the micro-level of analysis. However, my intention was to draw attention to our unreflective, customary use of the present continuous (the -ing form) in media anthropology and neighbouring (sub)fields. I think reframing it as a micro vs. macro contrast would muddle things. In principle, there is no logical necessity for such a correlation. For example, a researcher can decide whether to describe the same phenomenon (e.g. the caste dimension of news media production in urban India) in the present continuous, present simple and/or in the past simple. This choice of tense is far from innocent, though. It will have huge consequences for the analysis not

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because a micro present will be swallowed up by a macro past, but because choosing the present continuous is a very effective way of de-historicising the analysis.

3. You ask about the power of media in my proposed approach, which I agree is an issue I have left unanswered, namely: 'How does a change in perspective from social changing to social change help us to understand media better?', taking us beyond 'the media effects paradigm in media studies'. Once again, I should stress that I'm proposing we turn our attention not to social change in general (a mind-boggling notion) but rather to media and *actual social changes*. One advantage of this approach is that you would have to grant media producers and users historical agency, i.e. the analysis would only work if you had variously positioned historical agents (both media professionals and non-professionals) struggling for or against that broad process of change. No process of change ever goes unchallenged, and as media scholars we would want to know who supported and resisted the change *through which media* and with what consequences, e.g. the struggle for and against apartheid in South Africa. A post-Bourdieu field-theoretical analysis could be useful here, but with fields understood as dynamic domains of cooperation and struggle subject to abrupt fluctuations in their personnel, boundaries and media ensembles (Postill forthcoming).

4. 'Does Postill find Raymond Williams' schema of emergent, residual and dominant useful for this discussion?'

I'm not familiar with this schema, would you mind elaborating?

Many thanks!

John

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John Postill   (jrpostill@gmail.com)   11.12.2012

Hi Jens and All

There's a lot of useful further reading in your two most recent posts for which I am thankful, Jens. You wrote:

1. "The core problem [...] is with your very distinction change/actual social changes. I respectfully object: the latter does imply an act of abstraction too - holding up A and B, to claim 'actual social changes' (rather than social apples and pears, pure and simple)."

There's always an element of abstraction in this kind of discussion, yet I would still argue that my threefold move of (i) pluralising the phrase, (ii) adding the modifier 'actual' and (iii) throwing in a series of examples for good measure (apartheid in South Africa, democratisation in Indonesia, etc.) makes the object of study much more tangible and concrete than if we had remained hovering around the polysemic term 'social change'.

Take the uses of media as part of the struggle for and against apartheid in South Africa as a research topic (which I guess must have been well studied by now) - an example I introduced in an earlier post. You can't get much more concrete than that. Apartheid was introduced as official policy soon after the Second World War, although its roots are of course much deeper. So the A of this inquiry could well be - for sound historical reasons – 1948 or thereabouts, when the new apartheid law was passed. And the B of the inquiry could well be its scrapping in 1990. These are just provisional parameters, placeholders to get the inquiry under way; the researcher will have to eventually decide how and why to frame the chosen change, and how to conceptualise its processual form. Of course, racial segregation still goes on in South Africa (and elsewhere), but post-apartheid it took on new forms, new qualities that diachronic ethnographers are well positioned to study on the ground.

2) I'll take your second point about Alfred Gell's anthropology of time as a comment rather than a question, and as a welcome invitation for me to read up on Gell.

3) You write that Barth is 'keenly attentive the question 'process of what?'. So am I. Through the various examples from Malaysia, Spain, South Africa, etc, I am specifying unique processes of mediated social change under very different cultural and technological circumstances. The twin questions I'm asking repeat themselves over and over again, like gags in the TV series Little Britain, namely (a) How and why did this social change come to happen? (b) What part, if any, did media play in its collective life course?

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Best

John

Stephen M. Lyon (s.m.lyon@durham.ac.uk)   11.12.2012

Dear List,
I think you'll all agree that we've had some great comments and questions this past week. Tis is just a reminder that we have just reached the halfway point of our e-seminar so there is still time to raise a few more points before we wrap things up. In particular, I think it would be very nice to hear from a few of the many lurkers on the list, but the non-lurkers are, of course, also very welcome to contribute as well :).

Thanks
Steve

John Postill   (jrpostill@gmail.com)   12.12.2012

Yes, the notion of 'social changing' "es de mi cosecha", as we would say in Spanish (= it's my own coinage, I didn't 'borrow' it).
Francisco Osorio wrote:

> So, what [does] the distinction [between social change and social
> changing] teach us? Why would be useful for analysis? What's the advantage
> of social change instead of social changing? John says if he would have had
> that concept in his Malaysia fieldwork, he could have said something
> different. What is it?
>
I thought I had already covered this in the paper and in the responses so far. To reiterate: the distinction is between *actual social changes* (not social change in general) and social changing. I believe it's a useful distinction because it highlights our customary reliance on the present continuous to describe media practices and media agents in ahistorical ways. As I argue in the conclusion, the present continuous is fine to capture a fleeting historical moment, but not so fine if we're trying to track a process of mediated change as it unfolded over time.

Had I come up with the concept of 'actual social changes' while studying local internet activism in suburban Kuala Lumpur, I would've perhaps placed this contemporary form of digital practice at the intersection of two or more media-related changes in this metropolitan region, e.g. (1)

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suburbanisation (1970s-2000s), (b) digitisation (1980s-ongoing).

Thanks for those questions!

John Postill   (jrpostill@gmail.com)   12.12.2012

Sally asks a two-part question (I've added in the numbers):

>[1] Can this proposed method be projected into the future and if so, [2]
> how might it be able to be managed for future scholars who will be looking
> back through a very very very very big pile of data?

[1] Yes, I hope the approach I'm proposing (namely, using diachronic ethnography techniques to study media and actual social changes) can be projected into the future. For example, earlier I declared an interest in what I call 'the mainstreaming of nerd politics'. This is an emergent process of change whereby issues that 6 or 7 years ago were the preserve of geeks, hackers, bloggers, online journalists, Wikipedians, digital ethnographers and other 'tech nerds' are now becoming (oops, sorry, I was about to slip into the present continuous) *have now become* more mainstream.

A well known moment was the release in November 2010 by Wikileaks and a number of mainstream news media organisations (NYT, Guardian, El Pais, etc) of over 200,000 US State Dept cables. Less well known are the earlier activities of Julian Assange and fellow information activists from Germany, Iceland and elsewhere which eventually led to significant changes to Icelandic legislation in favour of freedom of information**, or the strong connections between information/internet activists and the Indignados and Occupy movements.

But it's not just geeks and nerds who create and 'share' digital contents in support of a shift towards greater internet freedoms, political and financial transparency, 'distributed' forms of democratic participation, etc. I think what's new about this phenomenon is that it has reached broader, more mainstream, less tecchie constituencies, including academics who not long ago would've boasted of being technophobes.

So one could design and conduct a diachronic ethnography - or ethnohistory - that looked at the past, present and future of this process of socio-political change - if indeed it can be described as such (which remains to be seen). In other words, you don't simply go off to do fieldwork in Reykjavik or Barcelona or Bangalore to see 'what's emerging' during fieldwork but also to write a collective biography of this

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shift, with special attention to its media aspects. As Brian Larkin points out, this sort of thing has already been done in anthropology, but more studies are needed within media anthro broadly defined.

[2] I'll come to this later, other duties beckon!

John

** Re: Iceland, see a terrific Swedish documentary on Wikileaks here, esp. from min.16:45: http:// <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvmfOaZ34Pk> www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvmfOaZ34Pk 16:45-22:24 6:45-22:24

John Postill (jrpostill@gmail.com)   13.12.2012

I haven't yet replied to the second part of Sally's question:

[1] Can this proposed method be projected into the future and if so, [2] how might it be able to be managed for future scholars who will be looking back through a very very very very big pile of data?

This is an important issue that we're only now beginning to grapple with in media, comm and internet studies, as far I can tell.

A couple of months ago the contrast between 'Big Data' and ethnographic approaches to internet research was discussed at the Assoc of Internet Researchers (AoIR) conf in Salford, UK - see, for instance, Tom Boellstorff's spirited defence of the ethnographic method. Anthropologists, he suggested, are no strangers to 'big data', see https://www.conftool.com/aoir-ir13/index.php?page=browseSessions&form_session=42.

More recently Mark Andrejevic presented on Big Data here at RMIT in Melbourne where we're setting up a Digital Ethnography Research Centre. I'm copying both Tom and Mark in case they want to add a comment or two on this issue.

My own guiding principle is that while we should play to our ethnographic strengths as anthros, it's also important not to fall into methodological chauvinism. As Tim Ingold put it some time ago, "Anthropology is not ethnography". I see little point in deciding beforehand which methodological approach to adopt when broaching a new research question. If someone said to me, "I want to do an ethnography of ....", my immediate response would be "First of all, what do you want to find out?". Only after

we know what the question is does it make sense to decide on the most adequate set of methods, incl. 'Big Data' methods.

Sally (saa26@kent.ac.uk)   13.12.2012

Hi John,

Thank you for your thoughtful replies.

My concern was mainly with regard to the approach you seemed to be advocating in your paper.

If you are advocating "looking back" --- then as we go forward, "looking back" is going to be abig data mess. Even if one didn't want to do a full ethnography, it will still be way messier than it is now to look back and my point was asking whether or not that aspect had factored into what you are suggesting as an approach.

The thing is, is that that future of messiness is pretty much going to happen really, really soon.

Obviously, I, and likely many others on this list including you, are well aware of the unsolved issues of big data.

That said, it would be nice to see you address a bit of the future data issues in the current approach, at least so we know you are considering the implications.

Thank you for forwarding this to Mark and Tom. Perhaps they could also shed some light here on what is currently being considered.

Tom Boellstorff (tboellst@uci.edu)   13.12.2012

Hello John! Very quickly - the point is absolutely not methodological chauvinism - we are all "mixed methods" now in terms of drawing on multiple methods. The issue is we live in a wider world. In that wider world quantitative methods often get ranked over ethnographic ones. So you have quant researchers like Bloomfield talking about "the death of ethnographic methods," not the reverse. We talk about this in the handbook (http://press.princeton.edu/titles/9882.html) and many other people have been raising these issues too - you probably know the attached boyd and Crawford piece, but just in case… okay, gotta run! Take care and talk to you soon - All the best, Tom

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Paula Uimonen (paula@net4dev.se)   14.12.2012

Hello John,

Thanks for sharing your paper, as well as the interesting discussion on research methods that Tom forwarded to you. As an anthropologist currently working in a computer and systems sciences department, I do appreciate Tom's point about the low ranking of ethnographic methods in the wider world, while gratefully recognizing his own efforts in crafting a place for anthropology in virtual research. I do not think that anthropologists should simply yield to contemporary Big Data and the like pressures, for example by disassociating anthropology from ethnography (a line of thought that I fail to see how one could pursue in earnest), or by being totally open to what ever research method may suit our questions. I firmly believe that one of the lasting values of anthropology is ethnography. Without it, we might as well abandon our disciplinary lineage. At a time when ethnography is a) discarded as trivial by more quantitative displines or b) considered pretty cool by some quantitative researchers who associate it with talking to a few people in real life over a beer or two, while media coverage about digital media continues to be polemic and hyperbolic (some of us followed debates over a decade ago about the revolutionary impact of the internet, now recast in social media hype), we need the kind of ethnographically grounded research that media anthropology is, or should be all about.

Still, I find it hard to follow the discussion on social change and diachronic ethnography. To some of us, Internet research has always been about social change, not least when it comes to the highly dynamic relation between media and globalization (e.g. Appadurai 1996, Escobar 1994, Hannerz 1996, Uimonen 2001). And anthropology has long been concerned with processes, not least when addressing questions of cultural complexity in contemporary society through various types of macro-anthropology (e.g. Hannerz 1992). One of the theoretical contributions of anthropology has been to show with great ethnographic detail that progress is not linear (eg. Ferguson 1999, Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, 2006, see also Latour 2010), thus challenging dominant views of social change entailing a clear-cut transformation from A to B. As for covering longer periods of time in our ethnography, a good deal of work is already taking place. In my recent research (Uimonen 2012), I thought I was engaged in longitudinal fieldwork (2002-2009), only to realize that there are more senior anthropologists who have engaged with their field sites for three decades! And when I anchored my analysis of digital media and intercultural interaction at an arts college in Tanzania in the very early days of independence in the 1960s, I did so by combining interviews with older informants with earlier scholarly analyses, something anthropologists have done for decades. Meanwhile, although I recognize myself as one of those scholars who has felt the time

pressures of doing research in a highly dynamic field, by now media anthropology, including the strand of digital anthropology that I identify myself with, has produced some work that one can rely on to cover earlier developments in our field sites (e.g. Uimonen 2001, 2003 on Internet in Malaysia). And as more and more of us take advantage of web-based publishing tools, our research will hopefully be more widely available to others as well, e.g. http://www.innovativeethnographies.net/digitaldrama

Paula Uimonen
Associate Professor
Stockholm University

Katherine Martineau (kbmartin@umich.edu)   14.12.2012

Dear seminar-followers:

John Postill's paper proposes that media anthropologists should study "an actual social change" rather than "social changing", in my understanding, in part because it allows us to talk to broader/popular media theorists and in part because "social changing" is not theoretically rigorous (e.g., it suffers from "an undiagnosed condition we could call 'imminentism'" p. 5). Reading the paper in this way, I have a few questions/comments:

1: The first step in accepting John's proposal for the study of "an actual social change" is accepting that most work is not already sufficiently doing this. From my reading, John finds current methodological practice indexed by (and perhaps constructed or constrained by?) habitual English verb tenses. I would like to know more about how John understands this relationship between methodology and linguistic representations in existing anthropological practice. Does the present progressive necessarily mean that one is not studying "an actual social change"? I'm not trying to reduce his argument, but rather to suggest that describing his understanding of this relationship between methodology and representation -- both as it already exists and as it could/should exist -- would help clarify the distinctions at the heart of his argument -- those between "an actual social change" and the social "changing" we are otherwise studying.

2: (A comment) Following on that, I would love to see fully explored the (actual) rhetorical use of the present progressive in ethnographic texts through examples. Indeed, while "Media and Social Changing" felt to me like the heart of the paper (or at least the first half of the paper's argument), it was only one page long. A full discussion of existing practice would allow an exploration of what is occluded and enabled by such language, and it would also allow a full comparison between current

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practice and John's envisioned methods/representational practices. I think I could be convinced that anthropologists are working with imprecise, implicit theories of "changing" even while we talk sophisticated theories of power and history, but I would want to see the critical evidence from anthropologists' texts. In a book-length project, it might also be useful to consider the genealogy of the present-progressive in English (and non-English?) anthropology, and what it indexes for its practitioners (-- was it adopted as a means for dealing with anxieties of temporal representation in the 70s/80s?).

3: Implicit in this critique of "changing" studies, it seems to me, is a theory of perception. Is it not possible to perceive "an actual social change" while it is ongoing? How far must one be, temporally (or socially?), to perceive something as "actual"? See, for example, the first paragraph of the conclusion. I'd like to suggest that this requirement of perceptual/interpretive distance may be an important qualitative difference between studying "an actual social change" and "changing" in John's essay.

I thank John, Brian Larkin, and the many commentators for the excellent discussion. It's rare I have the opportunity to read through an entire e-seminar and I'm delighted I got the chance with this one!

Katherine

Sarah Pink (sarah.pink@rmit.edu.au)   14.12.2012

Hi All
I have had a lot of discussions with John about media and social 'changing' already so I will not dwell on this much, my main point is to say something about the emerging discussion of media ethnography.

On social change/changing: there are a number of contemporary responses to the focus on what we might call broadly 'non-representational' approaches across the social sciences, which tend to concentrate on the ongoingness, flow, and everydayness of change as continuous. My own view is that these non-representational approaches and those that focus on the ongoingness of practical activity are very important ways of thinking about change. We had some in depth discussion of these in relation to Shaun Moores' seminar so I won't say much about these now but instead suggest people go back to that discussion for more depth. However such approaches are also particularly coherent with ethnographic research precisely because ethnography offers us ways to engage with everyday life as it is lived. That is applicable not only to research in anthropology or that labels itself 'anthropological' but across the 'ethnographic' disciplines in the social sciences and humanities (I will come back to

ethnography below).

The point that we need to look at big social changes is not necessarily incompatible with looking at ongoing change. However I think it is relevant to take the question of how these approaches seem to be getting pitched against each other to the question of how and why some non-representational approaches have emerged in relation to representational approaches to constructing history. In my view we need to keep in mind that they are seeking to produce rather different types of knowledge/ways of knowing about the world and about how it changes, and indeed that might be used for different types of analysis and to inform different types of debates. There is however a tension: in that the detail that emerges from work on the ongoingness of change can often indicate that the use of sweeping categories does not always fairly represent experiential realities. This does not mean that the latter are 'wrong' (although there is also a politics to this that needs to be attended to - and I would urge John to look at Doreen Massey's work on space and time in relation to this – the book is in physical reach). The point to me seems to be however that we need to use different approaches and categories to constructively challenge each other - and not to pitch against each other more or less valuable ways of doing research (and this point applies broadly to doing interdisciplinary work too).

I would also stress that while this discussion is raising some arguments regarding the defense of anthropology and anthropological ethnography, we need to be wary of seeking a disciplinary imperialism for anthropology. If anthropological ethnography is to be appreciated more broadly then I think we need to also have an openness to doing anthropology in ways that connect across disciplines and that attend to debates that have already been played out or had in our cognate disciplines, even if in different ways.

I think John is right to say that we should not fall into a situation where we advocate ethnography as a default methodology. Rather we need to consider where ethnography (anthropological ethnography) is particularly useful and make the case for this. Ethnography is part of the heritage of anthropology, but it is not the only thing that distinguishes it. For me one of the things that defines anthropology is the way that our work tends to be played out through theoretical-ethnographic dialogue. However such dialogues do not have to be between anthropological theory and ethnography but might also be with other types of research materials/knowledge/ways of knowing. Having said that, it seems to me that the focus on the ongoingness of the everyday is an obvious site for an ethnographic methodology. This is moreover a key context for engagement across disciplines; the interest in the ongoingness of everyday life, its flow, materiality, movement, perception and practice is not just the domain of anthropology or of anthropological ethnography. Indeed I would suggest that the increasing focus on the experience and practice of the everyday is in part responsible

for a growing interest in ethnographic approaches in disciplines beyond anthropology including in cultural studies, human geography and design research. My own work partly involves bringing media ethnography approaches to research fields where they have not conventionally been used. My own experience has been that a media ethnography approach that treats the ubiquity of digital media as one of the starting points for understanding everyday realities, brings a lot to research questions that might not be part of the conventional domain of media anthropology.

Sarah

John Postill   (jrpostill@gmail.com)   15.12.2012

Many thanks for your comments and further references, Paula, they are very welcome. I won't be able to respond to all of them, but at least I'd like to address your point about social change. You wrote:

"Still, I find it hard to follow the discussion on social change and diachronic ethnography. [...] One of the theoretical contributions of anthropology has been to show with great ethnographic detail that progress is not linear (eg. Ferguson 1999, Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, 2006, see also Latour 2010), thus challenging dominant views of social change entailing a clear-cut transformation from A to B".

As I said in the paper and in previous posts, it is precisely this received level of generalisation that I think we need to interrogate, i.e. our habit of referring to social change in very general terms. My proposal is not about social change in general, it's about how we have studied so far, and could study in future, media in relation to specific social changes. That is why I have given several examples of concrete social changes in specific cultural-historical contexts, so as to come down to earth, e.g. the ongoing secularisation of morality in Spain from the mid-1970s to the present.

I am suggesting that (a) we need to be specific about the media-related changes we study, (b) study them processually as collective biographies with a beginning, middle and (eventually, if still ongoing) an end, and (c) acknowledge that if we're going to talk about actual changes, there will have to be a transformation from an earlier state A to a subsequent state B. Saying that 'progress is not linear' - or indeed that 'progress is linear' - won't get us very far, in my view. We must get down to the business of giving and comparing examples of mediated social changes.

Again, this approach does not commit you to the idea that a 'transformation from A to B' will be, as you put it, 'clear-cut'. Most transformations will be hard to research, messy, unclear, ambiguous, open to debate - but that doesn't mean they are

unresearchable. Actual social changes are far too important to be left to social historians. For example, Spanish scholars may disagree about the timing, sequencing and media aspects of post-Franco secularisation, but I don't think many would dispute that there has been a major societal shift away from Catholic values and practices over the past 30+ years. (Meanwhile, other countries have seen shifts towards greater religiosity).

Jens Kjaerulff (jk@socant.net)   15.12.2012

Dear John, Seminar,

If I may be allowed a final post in this exciting seminar, I would like to invite John to offer a comment on where you see the place and scope of comparison in the approach you propose.

But let me begin somewhere else. As I look over the posts over the course of the seminar, I notice that you recurrently have taken issue with the notion of 'change in general', obviously as you saw it pertain in response to a good few comments. This reminds me of a key objective in the book you recently edited with Brauchler, 'Theorising Media and Practice'. If I am not mistaken, a main line of argument of that book was that there is a need to *theorise* the concept of practice, rather than a need for more empirical data on practice in its own right without a strong theoretical component.

It seems to me that exactly the same is the case with the concept of change. But I get a sense, to my slight surprise, that this is not what you are interested in advancing here. In my own chapter in the volume on practice, I indeed argued that a strong empirical grounding was needed to further theories of practice. With regard to change, we seem to share the empirical inclination, but I still wonder if you might want to confront the notion of change itself more head on than you have seemed willing to do in this seminar so far. After all, in speaking of 'change' at all (rather than, say, more random chronological 'development', even if it is confined geographically and chronologically between A and B in time), you do invoke a general concept, which I agree is much too casually tossed about, not only in writings concerned with media. As is the case with the notion of practice, I think it is really here that some focused *theoretical* work is much needed, and to this end I don't see how you can avoid engaging with the notion of change at some general level as a concept, even if I perfectly agree that the exercise should also be empirically grounded. I don't see how merely rejecting the concept as a general term, only to put it in the plural instead (acual social changes) substantially advances our understanding of change. Instead I think we need to confront the notion of change itself head on.

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This brings me to comparison. What I wrote in my earlier post to this seminar in terms of 'abstraction', could equally be cast in terms of comparison. In my lens, to see, or conceive of 'changes' in any shape or size, however concrete the examples you invoke, inherently entails comparison. As I see it, 1) comparison is simply at the heart of the very conception of change, and 2) comparison inherently entails an act of abstraction. That is what I think it is important to be reflexive about (indeed my book which you cite in the paper is an attempt to do just that, even though some reviews of it seem to have overlooked this in the forest of ethnography, despite the book's title, its abstract on the cover, and the many pages dealing with 'Barth', i.e. his theoretical work as it pertains to thinking about change).

Looking at the way you have raised the theme of comparison yourself, in the paper, and in the seminar, it seems that the most salient entities you suggest for comparison apart from the media themselves, are nation states, and perhaps more specifically dynamics related to policy. But given your emphasis on 'social' change, it would be interesting to hear more about the way you think 'social', in terms of comparison. Take for example, your Malaysian suburbanization and post-Franco secularization – how might they be compared to learn more (what?) about media and change? Or take the laundry list of interesting developments regarding new media in your reply to Mark Pedelty. While all these examples of chronological trajectory involving media may each be intriguing in their own right, how may one go about comparing their social dimensions to arrive at a more rigorous understanding of media and social change, of interest beyond just the immediate context of the chosen examples? Or, - casting the question more broadly yet - where do you see the place and scope of comparison in your approach to change?

Jens

John Postill   (jrpostill@gmail.com)   16.12.2012

Katherine Martineau wrote:

1: […] "From my reading, John finds current methodological practice indexed by (and perhaps constructed or constrained by?) habitual English verb tenses. I would like to know more about how John understands this relationship between methodology and linguistic representations in existing anthropological practice. Does the present progressive necessarily mean that one is not studying "an actual social change"?"

Thanks Katherine, a great question. I think I will need to clarify this issue in a revised

version of the paper. I am using the term 'ethnographic present continuous' (continuous = progressive) not in a strictly linguistic sense but rather as a variation on the well-established term 'ethnographic present'. I do so to argue that nowadays our temporal comfort zone (in social anthro, media studies and other fields) is that fuzzy region where the recent past, the present and the near future appear to merge. We feel comfortable writing about 'emergent' processes, ongoing life, work in progress, and so on. Linguistically the verb tenses may alternate in any given text, but epistemically many texts nowadays will inhabit this blurry zone. A good subgenre to explore this is the Call for Papers (CFP). Here is an anthropological example from a webpage that turned up when I Googled the phrase "cfp anthropology in recent years", but similar examples are common in new media studies, cultural studies, etc:

"Without idealizing, exaggerating, or demonizing them, it is certainly the case that information and communication technologies are transforming the world and its inhabitants. While these transformations are taking place with a rapidity that can make their ethnographic analysis seem impossible, the starting point of our conceptual framework is that it is not only feasible but imperative that we better understand the multiple and often-unexpected character of these transformations."

http://hastac.org/opportunities/cfp-technology-scale-and-difference-contemporary-anthropology

2: "[…] In a book-length project, it might also be useful to consider the genealogy of the present-progressive in English (and non-English?) anthropology, and what it indexes for its practitioners (-- was it adopted as a means for dealing with anxieties of temporal representation in the 70s/80s?)."

Following from my response above, I would rephrase this as a genealogy of the *ethnographic* present continuous (or progressive) as found not only inside monographs, but also in edited collections, CFPs, funding bids, etc. My hunch, too, is that we would find a discursive shift in the late 1970s/80s away from a preference for singular metaphors of structure, system, rupture, boundedness, linearity, etc. towards plural metaphors of practices, flows, continuities, blurs, emergences, etc. Temporal anxieties were only part of a much larger discursive shift. I have often experienced a resistance in media anthropology, cultural studies, media studies and related fields to metaphors of boundedness, rupture, discontinuity, linearity, etc. As you may have guessed, my own preference – and I'm certainly not alone here – is for an expanded conceptual lexicon that draws from both kinds of metaphor, i.e. not everything is flowing and unbounded, there are also disruptions, terminations, and so on. I don't think statements such as "Identity is always fluid and situated" are any more helpful than their opposites: "Identity is always fixed and non-situated". To put it colloquially, as the world becomes more complex we need all the vocab we can get.

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3: "Implicit in this critique of "changing" studies, it seems to me, is a theory of perception. Is it not possible to perceive "an actual social change" while it is ongoing? How far must one be, temporally (or socially?), to perceive something as "actual"?" Another tough one. It's late in Melbourne – will address it tomorrow (Monday).

Many thanks!

John Postill   (jrpostill@gmail.com)   17.12.2012

(Continued from previous post). Katherine also wrote:

3: "Implicit in this critique of "changing" studies, it seems to me, is a theory of perception. Is it not possible to perceive "an actual social change" while it is ongoing? How far must one be, temporally (or socially?), to perceive something as "actual"? [...]".

I would suggest that perceiving a social change while it is happening is like trying to clap with one hand (or weigh yourself only once to measure weight loss). In other words, it can't be done. At the very least, you would need to study the social change in question at two separate points in time, allowing a sufficient gap in between. How 'sufficient' will of course vary greatly from project to project, but for a social change to gain hold within a population I would expect at least a decade or two to go by.

Say you spend 18 months doing fieldwork in locale X and you perceive/observe a strong uptake of primary schooling among girls whose mothers were never allowed or encouraged to go to school. This could indicate an emergent social change (or be part of a wider social change) with potentially huge consequences. But I think you would need to revisit the site 10 and/or 20 years later to ascertain this. Technological change may be happening very quickly (albeit unevenly) but social change usually takes longer. This 'lag' is in itself an interesting issue to explore further.

I'm only thinking aloud here - keen to hear about others' experiences and empirical evidence on this matter.

John

John Postill   (jrpostill@gmail.com)   17.12.2012

Jens wrote:

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[a] " I get a sense, to my slight surprise, that this is not what you are interested in advancing here, [namely, theorising change]....I don't see how you can avoid engaging with the notion of change at some general level as a concept [...]"

But we have been theorising change all along, all of us in this session (even the lurkers have been busy theorising)! It's just that I've chosen to do so not deductively but inductively, via real and invented examples - ground-up theorising if you like. Briefly, these are some of the theoretical points I've made about social change so far in the paper and/or this seminar:

* It's distinct from social changing, for it entails a transformation, a shift from a state A to a state B (or E to F in the case of a series of changes)
* Social changes spread unevenly across a locale, field or territory, as Epstein (1957) found in the Copperbelt, see my Malaysian example re: new media echnologies and crime prevention.
* No social change ever goes unchallenged, there will always be resistance to it, e.g. pro- and anti-apartheid struggle
* Social changes take time to gain hold, at least one or two decades
...etc.

[b] "...[W]here do you see the place and scope of comparison in your approach to change?"

It's central to my proposed approach, see the final section of the paper for a sketch of comparison of digital media in policy and practice between three countries (South Korea, Brazil and Malaysia).

Because of the open-ended logic of ethnographic research, I find that post-hoc comparisons usually work best in our craft (Postill 2012). For example, in 2003 I went off to suburban Kuala Lumpur to study e-government and ethnicity and ended up studying middle-class internet activism instead. I had no particular interest in this topic before entering the field, yet that's where the action was and I followed it. On returning to the UK I found that internet scholars had reported similar forms of activism in other middle-class suburbs but in places as remote from Kuala Lumpur as Melbourne, Toronto, or Tel Aviv (Postill 2011). We could call this socio-technological change 'the digitisation of suburban politics', and it's plausible to assume that comparable processes are going on around the globe.

I say in the paper that nation-states make great units of comparison, but they are by no means the only prospective units. One can also compare suburbs, inner cities, city-states, market towns, etc, so long as we are comparing like with like.

Thanks!

John

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Elisenda Ardévol (eardevol@uoc.edu)   17.12.2012

Hi, all! Just a few words before closing the e-seminar!

I am very grateful to John Postill for this very exciting and trigging paper, but
especially, to all the colleagues that have commented it and have evolve amusing
ideas around this tangled topic!

As John said, we the lurkers have been very busy theorising about what does "social
change" *really* mean... and how media is involved in that kind of processes that we
call of "social change". Particularly, I think that the last contribution of Jens and
John's reply makes sense of some of the puzzling questions that have been put on the
table those days. As Sarah Pink noticed, we can study "social changing" as well as
"social change", but research questions and epistemological frameworks may differ
from one case to the other.

It is not a question of inductively or deductively define what "social change" is all
about, but to make explicit our common sense about social change and to realize, as
"good anthropologists" shall do, that we need to confront our emic perspectives with
our theoretical statements. Then, John's work is illuminating in a twofold way, as it
brings light to how we understand "social change" and how we understand
ethnographic work in relation to historical and diachronic approaches.

"Social change" as I understood *inductively* from the discussion that is going on, is
significantly different from "social transformations". It is a very broad concept, that is
at the same time, an emic category and an analyst "abstraction". So, it may be useful
to examine social processes that are perceived as "social change" by the people going
through them. What defines "social change" then is that people struggle for it or resist

to it by multiple ways. By doing so, they are defining -yes, present continuous, sorry, I like it!- the future they want and the past that they want to overcome. Even if historians examine past processes of social change, they will see that struggle going on in present continuous by the actors that were involve in then, and that's why -I think- this past can be "actualized" as present by new hopes of social change.

Thanks also to Stephen Lyon for make it possible!

Salina Christmas (salina@sojournposse.com)   18.12.2012

Thank you, John, for a good discussion. Some of the comments I struggle to follow (big words, long paragraphs, beyond my comprehension) but your proposal gives me some ideas as how to segment the list of players we are looking at for work.

I said 'players' because at the moment, I work for online gaming / mobile games. It does require crunching big numbers (big data?), looking at not just the key European language markets (all nine of them) but also other ethnicities and nationalities all over the world.

We deal with huge number of people. However, when it comes to fine-tuning the segmentation of our player lists, then when I find the qualitative (if not 'anthropology') comes in handy. We don't want to bombard 30,000 people with messages, and only 1,000 bother to heed them. Also, different ethnicities have different preferences with regards to the kind of games they like to socialise over. And then you have a splinter of people who like to play alone (the Solitaire crowd). They want to be spoken to differently, too.

Yes it's not 'activism', but I'm sure I'll apply to it to the proper cause once I learn what I have got to learn about games and gaming.

John marked my dissertation on the 70-something inhabitants that I looked at for this project on monitoring crack dealing using email communications. I wish this Medianthro discussion had taken place before the riots kicked off last year - I would have used a better approach to what I now see as a hastily concluded dissertation. My dilemma then: if this ethnography, well, I have too many informants. How can I fairly represent a sensitive topic with only using the anecdoes of less than 10 people? Well, that's done now.

Looking forward to hear more of your work. And thanks for using Malaysia as your fieldwork. I suppose an outsider can provide a fairer assessment than a native in some circumstances.

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Salina

Kerstin B. Andersson (tinni.andersson@telia.com)   18.12.2012

Hi John and evryone!

Thanks John for an interesting paper and excuse this late entrance into the discussion, as probably everyone else, I've had hands full, but since I find this very interesting, I want to submit a contribution. I have full understanding if it is too late to include it in the discussion.

According to my point of view, this very interesting paper and the abundance of interesting comments circulates around a lot of "big" ideas, history, time, ethnography, progress and change, culture and so on and it is impossible to go into everything here, even if I would enjoy very much to do it. Therefore, I will start with stating that I find several of Brian's comments highly relevant. Some "touchdowns" on some of them:

First, Brian states that the notion of media anthropology might be too narrowly defined in John's paper. This connects well with the last e- seminar and for example Brian Street's statement on literacy or Arunachalam's categorizing of the digital era as the fourth information revolution. As for my own studies on media in India, I ascribe factors as literacy, the introduction of the printing press in the 19th century, film and radio in the beginning of the 20th century etc. a role in processes of social and cultural change and the emergence of different ways of living and interpretations of daily life among my subjects (I don't want to use the term "new" as think that this is a questionable point). One reflection is that maybe it would be helpful to move beyond the focus on categories of media as such, TV, radio, ICT, in determining medias influence in social change / changings, and instead move to the notion of "information". Media as such don't provoke changes, but the content put forward in the media might do, and the ways that the different media transmit the content.

The second point relates to the notion of social "change", a change from A to B, which Brian questions. My reflection concerns how to determine the research area. What is it that is the nature and substance in the change that should be investigated? You give an example on transformation of a community from subsistence farming to wage labour as a defined and coherent area. First, this gives me the feeling that the research area is to be determined before the research, contradicting our very central anthropological concern of letting the fieldwork and the subjects determine our studies. Further, I have problems with finding a clear-cut start and end point in this.

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According to my point of view, a transition might be a really messy and entangled area, where a lot of different factors, ideas, and impulses interact.

Now to your central point; the development of "diachronic techniques that will allow us to study the life courses of actual social changes." According to my point of view, this is implicit in for example Kapferer's work and his statement that the past is constructed in the present, an approach that I develop on in my analysis of Kolkata intellectuals and intellectual history (with a Deleuzian twist). My analysis was not directly focussing on media, however it might give some useful ideas. Kapferer's point of departure is that the imagined reality of the past achieves its force through its construction in the present. The meaning of history is constituted in the present and present social and political processes, although it is experienced as if it flowed from the past. The methodological approach in my analysis of the intellectual history included extensive interviews with Kolkata intellectuals who had a significant position in or a close connection to the historical development. I included personal narratives, oral history, life stories. My aim with this approach was to give the meaningful experience of the historical period and historical events seen from the point of view of the subject. However, I didn't delimit the research area first, instead my goal was to "rend significance to events, actions, places and times emphasised in their telling and use them as grids, as locations that orient and structure their world and their past". (Andersson K. B. 2011)

My last point touches on the notion of change. You deny old-fashioned linear models of change and causality. This is an old discussion, turning from uni- linear and multi-linear models into post modern anything goes free-floating and more rhizomatic forms, and again I would like to refer to Kapferer, focussing on change and not specifically media, since I think that it might give a different point of view on it. Kapferer has his roots in the Manchester school and has developed the approach extensively and made it more dynamic. Kapferer takes his point of departure in the subjective realities of human construction; the way human beings form their realities and apprehend their world and life, "the virtualities of reality". The lived sites of the everyday world are formed in "the actualities of reality", a chaotic foci of diverse forces, a multiplicity of large-scale global forces and in micro-processes affecting the routine of life. It renders the logic of practices or the chaotic structures formed in everyday routine and not so routine activity. (1997, p. 179, 325-326) This is according to my point of view, a very good description of how change and transformations take place, and again something that I've used in my analysis of Kolkata intellectuals, combined with radical phenomenology. (Andersson K.B. 2011)

Some thoughts and ideas….

Thanks for a very interesting and wellrun e-seminar

Kerstin

Kerstin B Andersson, PhD in Social Anthropology

John Postill   (jrpostill@gmail.com)   18.12.2012

Dear All

I was hoping to respond to the remaining comments before the end of the e-seminar but it's 01:23 in the morning and I've run out of steam! Fortunately they were mostly comments and suggestions for further reading rather than questions, but my apologies for any questions that I may have left unanswered.

Many thanks to once again to Brian Larkin for his discussants' comments, to Steve Lyon for organising the session, to Philipp Budka for his website work and to all of you who've contributed comments or questions.

I should end by saying that Elisenda Ardevol, Sirpa Tenhunen and I are planning on taking the theme of "Media and social change" further through a publication arising from our various online and offline discussions to date, including this seminar - more news here in due course.

John

Stephen M. Lyon (s.m.lyon@durham.ac.uk)   18.12.2012

Dear All,
With this, I think we can safely wrap up the 42nd e-seminar of the Media Anthropology Network. Let me add my own thanks to those of John and extend them to John himself for providing such a rich paper and for being so on the ball with all of his responses to the very fruitful and entertaining discussion!

Also, just a quick note to say that we are always looking for volunteers to help with transcribing and preparing documents for the e-seminars. We have a full slate of papers for the remainder of the academic year, but we are also keen to bring in more people, so if you've got a paper that you might like to present in this forum please do get in touch. Or, if you would like to act as a discussant about someone else's paper, perhaps you could prompt that person to think about submitting a paper.

Finally, let me wish everyone a well deserved break. I don't know what you'll all be doing over the winter/summer holidays (depending on your hemisphere), but I hope it all goes very well and we return in the new year with renewed energy levels and enthusiasm for doing more great work.

Best,
Steve

E-Seminar closed