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E-Seminar 54

Theorising Media and Conflict

Discussant Comments by
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First of all thanks to John and Philipp for inviting me to this post-workshop seminar on Media and Conflict. Unfortunately I could myself not attend the workshop in Vienna. So I am happy to still have the opportunity to get involved in the conversations and discussions held in Vienna via this online seminar. However, this also means that my comments are not based on 'participatory observation', but on John's and Eva's workshop notes that were also circulated on this list. It is a great idea to make use of this platform to continue the discussion, but also broaden it by involving the list.

Reading the workshop outline and abstracts gave me a good impression of what the general themes were, but, as you know, without participating and observing yourself you miss out on the interesting details. Where some answers were given, many more questions were raised. First of all, however, I was impressed by the broad variety and the ground covered by the workshop contributions. It comprised conceptual work based, among others, on theories of power and communication, as well as empirically grounded research, which would be a good combination for a future publication project. From the notes I could not grasp though how balanced theory and empiricism were. I was fascinated by the contributions about the multi-sensorial dimension of media and conflict, including media aesthetics, the visual, sounds and emotions. Cyberspace as the extension of war space was discussed as well as the delicate issue of cybersecurity and the increasing 'militarization of private civil and social life' (a good expression for what is going on in the field of digital data collection). Cybersecurity is commonly mostly conceptualised in a technical sense (i.e. hacking or destruction of computer infrastructure), taking ICT as potential weapons and as acts of war, which feeds well into security policies of states such as the US or certain policy research institutions in Singapore. It became clear at the workshop that issues of cybersecurity reach out far beyond the technical aspect of ICT, especially given the viral potential of social media that not only foster democratisation and participatory governance, but also racialisation and the enforcement or construction of group boundaries. And I could go on with other interesting themes dealt with at the workshop.

I will here pull out three issues that came to my mind when going through the workshop notes that might be of more general interest for discussion and for the volume to be: 1) the conceptualisation of conflict and peace, 2) the conceptualisation of media, and 3) media-centrism.

1) Conceptualising conflict and peace

Given that conflict is one of the long-standing and established fields in anthropological theory formation, research and history, I think we have to engage in a more in-depth discussion on what 'conflict' actually is for our purposes. It is essential to raise awareness of and draw on that tradition, if we want to make an essentially anthropological contribution to the interdisciplinary field of media studies in general, and media and conflict in particular. What I picked up from the notes, such issues were touched in the final round of discussion and key concepts of conflict studies such as violence, trauma and suffering were collected. However this did not result in a shared analysis and understanding of what conflict is and means to us as anthropologists. How to conceptualise it for our debate on media and conflict?

In contrast to other disciplines, anthropologists from an early stage onwards were keen on emphasising that humans are neither inherently aggressive (see e.g. Mead 2000, Montagu 1994) nor that conflict is something inherently bad, a state of emergency that is produced by exceptional circumstances. Anthropologists found that conflict is pretty much part of everyday life, although conflict and conflict resolution can take very different shapes and scales, depending on which actors and collectivities on what levels get involved (see e.g. Eckert 2004, Elwert 1999, Gluckman 1955, 1963). As anthropologists we should certainly acknowledge our discipline's legacy and explore how it plays into current conflict dynamics and how to develop these concepts and approaches further. We might end up finding this a fruitful exercise. However, we may also find out that a substantial break with these ideas is needed in order to understand what is going on in and around the mediascapes we observe and participate in. In any case, it will certainly help us to be more explicit about our ideas about media and conflict and about what contributions anthropology can make to that field of study.

Most workshop contributions seem to have focused on conflict as rather exceptional than quotidian, as something disruptive and destructive. Is that the notion of conflict we have in mind when we talk about media and conflict? Shall we think about a more inclusive notion of conflict? Just think of the earlier debates in cyberanthropology on so-called flame wars (see e.g. Dery 1993) or ethnographies on the daily lives of online communities (e.g. Marshall 2007). Is a meaningful delineation or definition of conflict possible for our purposes?

In the Vienna workshop, the ambivalent role of media (their destructive and their constructive side), media as warmongers and as bridge-builders, was clearly acknowledged, often in a rather implicit way though by dealing with revolutions or social movements that are meant to fight against structural violence (rather than add to or talk about more direct forms of violence). As I have been engaged in conflict and peace research over the last 15 years, among others looking at the ambivalence and the transformative potential of media (Bräuchler 2011), yet another question came to my mind: What about peace? Can we talk about conflict without having peace in mind and, the other way around, can we conceptualise peace without having conflict in mind? Even if we talk about media's potential for peacebuilding (and peace journalism is just one of the many possibilities), conflict still seems to be the major focus. At least one contribution (Israel/Palestine) was focussing on the reconciliatory potential of (social) media, but only to find out that it was not really peace that media users were aiming at but the enforcement of group boundaries. So I have been asking myself where media's contribution to peacebuilding could be and whether talk about (media and) peace still needs to be legitimised by the occurrence of conflict and violence. Obviously, images of conflict and war sell better than peaceful and harmonious impressions of post-conflict societies.

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The other two issues I will deal with in a very brief manner:

2) Conceptualising media

What do we mean when we talk about media – a question that has been raised more than once in our mailing list? As with the conceptualisation of conflict, I think we have to, at least, briefly deal with it to build a stronger foundation for our discussion on media and conflict. Some contributions were dealing with TV or newspaper, but in most cases there was a clear focus on Internet and new/social media. So the question is whether this is representative of a more general contemporary media usage or rather of current interests and research foci in academia? What media do we actually aim and claim to look at? This question does not imply that we should single out certain media, to the contrary, as media convergence (Jenkins 2008) has become inherent part of our mediascapes and our media usage.

In this context (and talking about mediated or mediatised conflict) I suggest that we also make connection to ongoing discussion on concepts such as mediation and mediatisation, each one of them triggering varying interpretations and implications (Couldry 2008, Eisenlohr 2011, Hepp 2013, Hepp, Hjarvard & Lundby 2010).

Closely related to this is the issue of media-centrism.

3) Media-centrism

The question is in how far we can avoid media-centrism when talking about media and conflict. I would certainly agree with workshop contributors emphasising that offline engagement with Internet actors is essential for an anthropologist's contextual approach. The same is true for other media activities, be it TV, radio or newspaper reading. However, and this is interesting, with regards to online media there still seems to be the necessity to emphasise the interlinkage of the online and the offline, the 'real' and the 'virtual', categories that have been deconstructed years ago. These are questions that I was dealing with in the early 2000s when anthropological Internet studies were still in its infancy (Bräuchler 2005, 2013), questions that re-emerged when Tom Boellstorff published his study on Second Life (2008) and claimed that research on virtual worlds should in fact be restricted to online spaces as otherwise the researcher would add a perspective that the other players would never be able or would never want to adopt.

To keep this to the point, the main question is, I guess, in how far we can avoid media-centrism buy taking media as a window to look through on certain conflict and peace dynamics, and ensure a proper contextualisation of our media perspectives on conflicts.

I look forward to your toughts on these and related issues!

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