The effects of media practices

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Abstract

In this paper I draw from the recent practice theory literature and from a range of empirical studies, including my own anthropological research in Malaysia and Spain, to discuss the effects of media-related practices in people's social worlds. I argue that these come in three main varieties –mediatising effects, worlding effects and derivative effects – and that this area is ripe for further media ethnographic work, so long as we overcome our customary aversion to the notion of media effects.

Keywords: media practices, media effects, social practice theory, social change, media anthropology, media ethnography

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The other day I told a colleague I was writing a paper on the effects of media practices. She looked at me as if she'd just seen the ghost of Vlad the Impaler.

'Don't go there,' she urged me. 'Do your digital activism thing instead.'

'Why?' I asked.

Shaking her head sadly, she explained that the notion of effects is crude and causally linear and cannot capture people's lived experience (or words to that effect).

I gave this idea of jumping ship some thought, but having calmed my nerves with a decent belt of Corona rum I decided to stay the course. After all, this media effects issue has bugged me for years. To quote King Gizzard & the Lizard Wizard: 'If not now, then when?'

But where to begin? It's not as if we media anthropologists had exactly paid much attention to the effects of media practices – or so it seemed to me until recently – precisely for the reasons noted by my spooked colleague. Most of us wouldn't want to be caught dead uttering the e-word, let alone in the title of a paper. We have metrics to massage, promotions to secure, mortgages to pay.

As it turns out, Nick Couldry's (2004) essay 'Theorising media as practice' is a good starting point (see also Bräuchler and Postill 2010). Couldry proposes practice theory as the new paradigm for media studies, a paradigm focused on 'media-oriented practices'. 'What, quite simply,' he asks, 'are people doing in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts?' (2004: 119). Although the new paradigm, adds Couldry, is meant to take media scholarship beyond its traditional focus on media institutions and media texts, we shouldn't abandon the fundamental question posed in the late 1940s by two pioneers of US mass communication research, Lazarsfeld and Merton (1969[1948]), namely:

> 'What are the effects of the existence of media in our society?' (quoted in Couldry 2004: 130).

In fact, writes Couldry at the very end of his piece, this is the question we must return to 'with all our theoretical energies'. Which suggests that the problem of media effects never really went away, not even among those of us with impeccable anti-positivist credentials.

In this paper, then, I wish to address this old question with all the energies I can muster in the middle of a global pandemic. Or rather, a slightly modified version of it. First, and in keeping with a practice approach, instead of 'media' in general I will examine *media-related practices* (or 'media practices' for short). Second, in the place of 'our society', with its tacit reference to American society, I will refer to *people's social worlds* wherever these may be; that is, to the hugely diverse social formations that media ethnographers like to study, including in 'out-of-the-way places' (Tsing 1993). So my tweaked question is:

What are the effects of the existence of media practices in people's social worlds?

I should clarify that by this I don't mean to suggest there are no other ways to study the effects of media-related practices. That would be silly. I'm only saying that this is but *one* promising question for ethnographers to pursue given that social worlds are our bread and butter. For one thing, as I discovered when researching this paper, we know far more about the topic than we like to think. It's just that we're still reluctant to call an effect an effect.

Worlds, practices, effects

Before delving into the literature, though, I must do some brief ground clearing around the three keywords in our question: social worlds, media practices and effects.

By *social worlds* I mean the kinds of social formations theorised by members of the Chicago School of Sociology form the 1930s onwards, most notably by Strauss (1978, 1982) and Becker (1982) (see Takhteyev 2012: 27). For Strauss (1978: 119), who follows Shibutani (1955), social worlds are typically held together not by formal membership or territorial demarcations but by 'the limits of effective communication'. Social worlds are enormously diverse in their character and scale. Some are large, others small; some are new, others old; some local, others translocal. In the United States alone, argues Strauss, these worlds range from 'opera, baseball, surfing, stamp collecting [and] country music' to 'homosexuality, politics, medicine, law, mathematics, science, Catholicism' and innumerable others (1978: 121). Far from being unchanging and sealed off from other worlds, most social worlds are characterised by 'tremendous fluidity' – they 'won't and can't stand still', argues Strauss (1978: 123).

Leaving aside the 'tremendous fluidity' Trumpian hyperbole, Strauss was clearly onto something here. Of particular relevance to our discussion are his intertwined points about change and methodology. The notion of social world, he suggests, can help researchers with the perennial problem of how to understand change by tracking concrete changes within bounded, yet porous, domains of social life. For instance, a serious scholar researching the world of professional tennis would have no choice but to consider its 'explosive' growth in the 1970s (Strauss 1978: 126). To do so, she'd have to combine synchronic methods such as interviews and participant observation with diachronic ones like archival research. Studies of social worlds, says Strauss, make us attentive to their history – to their past, present, and future. Is the world we are investigating 'evolving, disintegrating, splintering, collaborating, coalescing?' (1978: 127).

In my comparative study of 'nerd politics' in Barcelona, Jakarta and other locales (Postill 2018), I was able to marry Strauss' social worlds with Sewell's (2005) conceptual trinity of events, trends and routines (or 'practices', in my renaming). This allowed me to write a

history of nerd politics from its modest West Berlin birth in the early 1980s to its global diffusion and splintering into four 'subworlds' (Strauss 1978: 121) – data activism, digital rights, social protest and formal politics – in subsequent decades, each domain exhibiting its own local features (Postill 2018: 170).

One criticism sometimes levelled at the notion of social world is that it suffers from 'substantial vagueness' (Takhteyev 2012: 28). I see this vagueness as a strength, since it allows researchers to bring under its remit a great variety of social formations while avoiding the normative idealism of the notion of 'community' or the spurious quantifiability of 'networks' so beloved by certain internet scholars (Postill 2008). Moreover, there's nothing stopping us from specifying the kind of world we are talking about. In fact, it is often good practice to do so. Is this world I'm describing an organisation, a market, a village, a private club, a virtual game, an affinity space, a Facebook group, or none of the above?

Next on our list is the concept of *media practices*. As just noted, I use this term as a convenient shorthand for 'media-related practices' (Hobart 2010). In his response to Couldry's call for a practice paradigm, the media anthropologist Mark Hobart argues that the notion of media-related practices is more open-ended than Couldry's 'media-oriented practices' in that it doesn't limit itself to the study of 'more or less institutionalised aspects of production and distribution' (Hobart 2010: 67). For Hobart, media-related practices can refer to anything from negotiating the purchase of a home computer to preparing supper in time for the family's favourite soap opera to making a video clip on one's phone (2010: 63). He defines social practices as 'recognised, complex forms of social activity and articulation, through with agents set out to maintain or change themselves, others and the world around them under varying conditions' (2010: 63) and finds that Couldry's reliance on Schatzki's (1996) notion of practices as 'organised nexuses of activities' downplays people's agency[i].

My response to this debate is simple: there's no need to choose between the two terms. In an ever more mediated world, we need more, not less, conceptual vocabulary in order to map the social terrain we are investigating. Thus we can use 'media-related' as the umbrella qualifier while retaining 'media-oriented', 'media-based', 'media-dependent' and cognate terms in our research lexicons as more specific qualifiers. For instance, watching television is doubtless a media-related practice, yet it is also a media-oriented – as well as a media-dependent – practice; to state the obvious, without a TV-enabled device we cannot watch television.

Finally, to the controversial notion of *effects.* In most existing overviews, the study of media effects is associated exclusively with US mass communication research, although the role attributed to social vs. psychological effects in this tradition will differ from one reviewer to the next. For instance, Couldry (2004: 116) writes that this tradition has always focused on 'problems of large-scale social effects'. By contrast, Livingstone (1997) follows Katz (1980, 1987) in describing the history of this field as an oscillation between paradigms centred either on individual or social effects, that is, between a psychological and a sociological paradigm.

At any rate, it is crucial to bear in mind that media effects have never been the exclusive preserve of US mass communication research. In fact, scholars from *all* media research traditions, not least media ethnography, have always written about media effects, albeit often obliquely or euphemistically. For instance, following ethnographic research in Mozambique, Igreja (2015) rejects the idea that violent films have had negative effects on young viewers in that country. Instead, he argues that these films can 'enhance ongoing processes of self-assertion among young people in unpredictable ways' (2015: 678). Yet isn't this enhancing, according to Igreja himself, (partly) the effect of repeated film viewing? The fact that these processes are often messy, open-ended and unpredictable doesn't mean that certain media-

related practices have no effect on them. Likewise, Straus (2007) contends that the ethnic violence that swept Rwanda in 1994 was not triggered by hateful radio broadcasts, as commonly assumed. Rather the broadcasts 'emboldened hard-liners … and reinforced face-to-face mobilization, which helped those who advocated violence … assert dominance and carry out the genocide'. But aren't these verbs (embolden, reinforce, help, assert) signalling precisely some of the effects of listening to the radio in 1994 Rwanda? Again, the effects of a (media) practice might be indirect, murky and hard to ascertain but that's no reason to ignore them or write them off as too complex to investigate (Postill 2020)[ii].

This much is clear: for years we have debated ad nauseam media effects in general, but we are yet to discuss the effects of media *practices*, precisely the conversation the present paper hopes to trigger. For this reason, throughout the piece I'll be referring not to the effects of radio, television or software, but rather to the effects of listening to the radio, watching television or coding. The giveaway is in the handy English suffix '-ing'.

Mediatising effects

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that we media ethnographers have a lot to say about the effects of media practices, which I believe we do (if only we'd stop avoiding the e-word). If that's the case, how can we begin to grapple with this vast question? How do we take stock of what we already know about such effects? For lack of a better plan, I'd like to propose a working heuristic consisting of *mediatising effects*, *worlding effects* and *derivative effects* in order to begin to mine the rich media ethnographic literature and open up new lines of investigation.

Let us consider the mediatising effects first. The concept of 'mediatisation' may not be pretty (you should see its German sibling) but it has gained much traction in recent years (Postill and Peterson in press). Originally it referred to the long-term historical process whereby a 'media logic' was said to have diffused across the modern world, colonising virtually every social world. In recent years it has been put to shorter-term uses, including ethnographic ones (see Couldry and Hepp 2013, Hepp et al 2015). Here I am adjectivising ('mediatising') this unlovely term to capture the process whereby a new media practice affects a social world. I am proposing the term 'mediatising effects' to refer to the effects of media-related practices on social worlds that began their life courses untouched, or barely touched, by modern media such as radio, television, mobile phones or the internet. For instance, a village in a remote area of the global South, a field of practice rooted in the pre-modern age, or a centuries-old institution like the Catholic Church or the university.

In media anthropology and related fields, these processes have been typically studied in connection to the advent of television in a (semi-)rural area of a developing country. Anthropologists often became interested in this topic when their informants literally turned their backs on them to watch television (e.g. Adra 1996, Hobart 2000, Miller 1992). Mark Hobart, for example, has written about the mediatising effects (my term, not his) of watching television on the island of Bali, Indonesia, where he has conducted fieldwork for decades – a process that began in the early 1990s.

> Television viewing changed [Balinese] domestic and public activities in several ways. Some are familiar from studies of family viewing (e.g., Morley 1986; Lull 1990), like the impact of television watching on domestic routines including new kinds of power relations around choices of viewing. Village food stalls mostly went out of business except for the few that installed television, while public sets in village halls became the site for raucous humour and searing commentary on broadcast politics. Women's arduous daily routines were enlivened by listening, if not always watching, television,

> and new kinds of working relationships emerged. The number of witchcraft accusations plummeted, as people developed other concerns. The impact upon agricultural and industrial labour patterns was complex. Television viewing has come to affect many aspects of rural and urban social life (Hobart 2010: 67-68).

Notice this media anthropologist's unapologetic use of direct effect terms like 'changed', 'impact' and 'to affect' as well as indirect effects formulations such as 'went out of business', 'became the site for', 'were enlivened by', 'emerged', and 'plummeted'. This kind of effects language is more common in the media ethnographic literature that we'd expect from the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, not least about our alleged disdain for the very notion of media effects, illustrated by my tale of entry. This excerpt shows the great comparative potential of a rereading of the media ethnographic record when approached from a mediatising effects angle, especially in places that were not yet 'media-saturated' at the time of fieldwork (Couldry 2004: 121), yet without neglecting media-rich domains where a new practical element has been added to the mix, e.g. smartphone photography in Barcelona (San Cornelio and Gómez-Cruz 2014) or the datafication of professional football in Germany (Schmidt 2017).

As Wilk (2002: 171) aptly puts it, media ethnographers have investigated 'the ways that television changes family life, daily routines, values, and attitudes when it enters new places'. This process is never straightforward, for incorporating new media technologies into the domestic sphere is bound to clash with the spatial, temporal and moral 'structuration'– to use Giddens' (1984) practice-theoretical notion – of the family unit (Silverstone et al 1992: 1-11). Thus, media historians found that in 1920s Australia radio sets were initially regarded as unwanted guests that 'timetabled family activities and challenged domestic rituals' (Johnson 1981: 167), not unlike today's networked computers and the tricky practice of teleworking (Kjaerulff 2010) – a phenomenon that has exploded, of course, during the Covid-19 era.

But can we really attribute mediatising effects to an individual media practice like watching television, listening to the radio or working remotely from home? Given how fuzzy and entangled media practices are in real life, isn't the very idea of separate media practices an academic fantasy (see Christensen and Røpke 2010, Hobart 2010)? Shouldn't we be concerned solely with 'media ecologies', 'mediascapes' or other holistic understandings of media? Indeed, the latest thinking in social practice theory places the locus of sociocultural change not in individual practices but rather in 'interconnected systems of practice' – what Hui, Schatzki and Shove (2017) call 'the nexus of practices'.

Once again, as with most things in social science, there's no need to make an either-or choice. It makes little sense to establish by fiat a single locus of change. As the Manchester School of Anthropology taught us long ago (e.g. Epstein 1958), sociocultural changes will typically have multiple loci. It follows that both individual (media) practices as well as 'constellations' (Hui et al 2017) of (media) practices can have mediatising effects. In other words, let's not be hasty to condemn individual media practices to our trash folders, for one never knows when they may come in handy.

A quick example from my own fieldwork among the Iban, an indigenous group of Sarawak, East Malaysia, will drive home this point. When television started to percolate into the Sarawak countryside in the 1980s, an American acquaintance of mine could not believe that an old Iban friend would ignore his attempts at chatting while a Bollywood film was on the box. He found this to be 'a glaring breach of traditional norms of longhouse hospitality' (Postill 2006: 158) (NB. a longhouse is a manner of 'village under one roof'). In reality, this was merely a case of people inventing new rules of etiquette around a new media practice, a

phenomenon that ethnographers have documented for a whole range of media forms, most recently for social media (see Miller et al 2016). By the time I carried out fieldwork in Sarawak, from 1996 to 1998, both radio listening and television viewing were integral to the daily rounds of practices among rural Iban:

> In Saribas Iban longhouses walls are […] thin and permeable to the human voice, yet during the day another familiar strand is woven into the invisible fabric that crosses through the thin walls and along the gallery: the voices and music from the radio. Together they web a distinctive kind of parochial temporality, the here-and-now of a hot, sleepy longhouse in the middle hours of the day (*ngela tengahari*). In the evening, this *ruai*-[communal gallery]based community of mediated and unmediated sounds moves back to the family rooms (*bilek*), where it disperses into clusters of loud electronic sounds and flickering lights that allow for little inter-*bilek* communication (Postill 2006: 164).

In rural Sarawak, both radio listening and television viewing have had combined mediatising effects that, along with those of other institutions (schooling, waged labour, migration, etc.), have 'modernised' and nationalised Iban longhouses, as Malaysia's successive leaders pursued ambitious nation-building policies (Postill 2006). In this context it makes perfect sense to speak of Hui et al's (2017) 'nexus of practices', but only as *one* significant locus of change.

On the other hand, it is still reasonable to argue that the individual, albeit fuzzy, media practice of watching television has had mediatising effects in rural Sarawak that are distinctive from those of, say, listening to the radio, reading school textbooks or speaking through the PA system during a longhouse event (Postill 2006: 102-105). For instance, in the mid-1990s, well before the advent of smartphones, radio listening helped to structure the everyday activities of women – who did most of the farming and housework – much more than those of men, whose time was already pre-structured by the demands of the waged workplace. In the evenings, though, it was watching television, not listening to the radio, that brought together all main segments of the longhouse population (women, men, the elderly and schoolchildren). It was primarily through the practice of watching television that family members jointly 'domesticated' the state's vision of a fully developed Malaysia by 2020. It was this media-related practice that had a profound effect on longhouse sociality, which in pre-television days had revolved around chatting (*berandau*) in the communal gallery (*ruai*). By the time I arrived in Sarawak in 1996, the more 'modernised' longhouses had little time for this form of evening conviviality, except during weddings, funerals and other large gatherings (Postill 2006).

In sum, when it comes to the effects of media practices – including their mediatising effects – we don't have to choose between being a practice lumper or a practice splitter. We can be either, or both, depending on the questions we're asking. Individual media practices will have distinctive, albeit hard to establish, effects; and so will congeries[iii] (if you like your metaphors messy) or constellations (if you prefer sociological neatness) of media-related practices.

Worlding effects

As we have just seen, new media practices can have the effect of changing an existing social world in significant ways. Some media practices, however, can also have the effect of (co-) creating *new* social worlds. I will call this complex phenomenon *the worlding effects of media practices*[iv]. Let's consider, by way of illustration, four different types of social world: an online virtual world, a professional field, an activist space and a recursive public. Despite

their notable differences, these are all worlds that owe their existence, evolution, and survival to the effects of media practices.

From June 2004 to January 2007 the anthropologist Tom Boellstorff 'lived' in the 3D virtual world Second Life as the avatar Tom Bukowski. His book *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008) describes in minute detail the daily practices and social relations of the local 'residents'. Boellstorff's aim is to account for inworld practices on their own terms, not as pale imitations of 'real life' practices. Contrary to tabloid reports of Second Life as a cesspit of consumerism and bizarre cybersex, he found that most residents were perfectly happy carrying out mundane practices such as building, weaving, chatting, dancing, flying or trading. Unlike ordinary communication media, argues Boellstorff, platforms like Second Life allow residents to craft 'complete new worlds that are in themselves places for human sociality' (Fontana 2009: 28). 'I cannot meet a lover inside a novel and invite friends for a wedding ceremony there', he writes, 'nor can I and a group of like-minded persons buy joint property inside a television program' (Boellstorff 2008: 237). In other words, Second Life was not born fully formed in some nerd's mum's basement. Rather it was the resident avatars who created this new world by developing virtual practices, the composite effect being the emergence and stabilisation of a subcultural web of norms and artefacts[v].

Boellstorff doesn't single out any particular practice as being key to the evolution of his chosen world. By contrast, Monika Krause (2012) does just that in her history of the field of modern journalism in the US. Drawing from a modified version of Bourdieu's field theory, she argues that the new media practice of reporting (or 'active news-gathering') became established in the 1860s and 1870s as American journalism emerged as an autonomous field with its own stakes. Contrary to what Bourdieu's theory would have predicted, she found no habitus or 'practical sense' shaping the entire field. While reporting is the field's defining practice, it is 'partly through supporting or undermining different practices that [field] agents compete and cooperate over the field's future' (Postill 2015: 55). By 'kicking the habitus' Krause paved the way for other field theorists wishing to produce more subtle descriptions of 'actual field practices' (2015: 55) and their worldmaking effects.

Not all social worlds, though, are coterminous with a specialist field of practice like journalism, sociology, rock-climbing or possum removal. Some exist at the intersection of two or more fields. Take the fraught world of short-video-based (SVB) consumer activism in contemporary China (Yu 2021). Zizheng Yu sought to examine the working mechanisms behind the actions of Chinese SVB activists through an 'activist media practices' lens (Mattoni 2012, Mattoni and Trere 2014). He soon discovered that this form of political agency takes place at the intersection of four distinct fields, or subworlds (Strauss 1978), namely activism, journalism, business and government, each with its own set of key media practices. Thus, businesses wanting to minimise the effect of negative videos will hire 'ghost writers' to post glowing comments about the firm (Yu 2021: 10). Meanwhile the government officials tasked with monitoring this emerging space still struggle to perform the balancing act of keeping both the activists and the businesses happy (2021: 11-12). Yu's work is a timely corrective to both popular accounts about the supposedly runaway virality of today's media landscapes (e.g. Wasik 2009) and to overly simple portrayals of an all-powerful Chinese surveillance state where citizens have no outlets at all for their grievances (see Postill, Lasa and Zhang 2020). It also suggests that we need to pay closer attention to the dynamic feedback loops of effects and counter-effects (in this case, the effects on consumer activists of the business practice of ghost commenting) that characterise media-based worlds, yet without falling into the crude cybernetic functionalism of earlier communication models (see Couldry 2004: 123, Craig 1999).

My final example of the worlding effects of media practices comes from the realm of free software production (Kelty 2008, 2010). Earlier I mentioned Strauss' (1978) point about the study of social worlds requiring a combination of diachronic (i.e. historical) and synchronic methods. In his long-term study of free-software geeks, the anthropologist Chris Kelty likewise combined archival (mostly listservs) and ethnographic research. The result is the monograph *Two Bits* (2008) which tracks the trajectories of five geeky practices: sharing source code, conceptualising openness, applying copyright licenses, coordinating/ collaborating and 'the movement', i.e. the meta-practice of discussing the other four practices (Postill 2010a: 25). This dynamic nexus of practices drove the emergence and stabilisation of the free software world, which Kelty calls a 'recursive public'. He coined this term to describe a type of commons or public sphere in which 'geeks modify and maintain the very technological conditions (or infrastructure) of their own terms of discourse and existence' (Postill 2010b: 648). The free-software public, contends Kelty (2008), is held together not by a shared ideology but by the practices themselves. This echoes Couldry's point about Giddens' (1984) structuration theory positing that 'principles of order [can] both produce and be reproduced at the level of the practice itself (social order, in other words, is "recursively" present in practice and in the organisation of practice…)' (Couldry 2004: 124).

Taken together, these diverse worldmaking examples suggest that we have an arduous, but exciting, practice-theoretical task ahead of us: to trace the emergence of new social worlds driven by media practices that are crafted by the denizens themselves, not by some ghostly structure or system hovering above them (see Helle-Valle 2019, Hobart 2010).

Derivative effects

The free software case brings us nicely to the question of the derivative effects (or side effects) of media practices beyond their worlds of origin. I am borrowing the word 'derivative' from Kelty to address these kinds of epiphenomena. In his reflection on the wider uses of the recursive public concept (see above), Kelty (2008: 305) writes that he wouldn't wish it to be 'suddenly discovered everywhere, but [used] principally in tracking the transformation, proliferation, and differentiation of Free Software *and its derivatives'* (my emphasis).

This goal chimes with recent social practice theory. Thus Allison Hui (2017: 62-63) has investigated the 'chains of interactions' among practices through the case of passports in the digital era. She sees these chains as 'processes whereby inputs to one practice are transformed into outputs that may become inputs of another practice.' Often, such chains will be 'unintended or unanticipated by participants engaged in one or more of the interlinked practices'.

I suspect Kelty would approve of this idea, as he ends his free software book with this cliffhanger: 'Free Software does not belong to geeks, and it is not the only form of becoming public, but it is one that will have a profound *structuring effect* on any forms that follow' (2008: 310, my emphasis.). As the deadline for this paper loomed, I asked Kelty via email what he meant by 'structuring effect'. The first line of his response gave me a fright: 'Only God knows', he wrote. Fortunately, he then explained that his aim was to communicate 'the relative autonomy of free software as an assemblage – as a public/object – that is not an ideology nor a form of property controlled or attached to particular human collectives, but designed to transcend their control.' Then came the clincher:

> As for the structuring effects – it's a kind of path dependence… it has literally become the infrastructure of the global IT system we have, but it has also structured people's understandings of freedom (Chris Kelty, personal communication, 14 January 2021).

By this he means that, for better or worse, free software has become 'the infrastructural sine qua non of social media platforms, Amazon web services, NSA surveillance tools, as much as it was part of Tor, or Occupy, or [Spain's] 15M movement' (ibid.). It is fitting, then, that Kelty's prescient book is subtitled 'The cultural significance of free software' – a polite, elegant way of saying 'the cultural *effects* of free software *practices*.'

So let's pair off Kelty's structuring effects and Hui's concatenated practices to follow some of the chains of effects arising, partly by design, from the practices of free software geeks.

In the final part of *Two Bits*, Kelty (2008) examines two non-software initiatives derived from free software ideals and practices, namely Connexions and Creative Commons. He was deeply immersed in the former as both a researcher and a practitioner, his role being to mediate between the worlds of software, copyright law and academia (Postill 2010b). The objective was to produce academic textbooks in the style of free software. After a lot of hard graft, the Connexions team succeeded in 'modulating' (i.e. adapting) all key free software practices, expect for the movement meta-practice – a discursive practice about the other four practices (see above). For this reason, no free textbook movement ever ensued (which is why most readers of this paper will have probably never heard of this project). One big hurdle facing the Connexions people, argues Kelty (2008: 270, 286, 300) was academics' struggle to accept the strange geeky idea that perpetual modifiability is integral to how knowledge is stabilised, in a manner similar to, say, Wikipedia.

While Connexions floundered on the rocks of academic atavism, Creative Commons (CC) flourished as a novel form of media activism. Founded in 2001 by the Harvard legal scholar Lawrence Lessig, it soon became a worldwide movement with far-reaching effects. Officially, CC is a global non-profit enabling 'the sharing and reuse of creativity and knowledge through the provision of free legal tools'[vi]. But this sober definition doesn't do justice to its phenomenal growth. Thus by 2006 there were about 150 million CC-licensed works around the globe. This figure had risen to 400 million in 2010, surpassing 1.2 billion in 2016. In 2015 alone, fourteen years after Lessig and his associates launched the movement, these 'copylefted' works were viewed more than 136 billion times (Postill 2018: 174).

At this fork in the road it may be useful, in order to grasp the CC phenomenon, to repurpose the well-known practice theory distinction between 'integrative' and 'dispersed' practices (Schatzki 1996). Integrative practices, some readers will recall, are those 'complex practices' that are 'found in and constitutive of particular domains of social life' (1996: 98), e.g. the social worlds of farming, free software, Second Life, or possum removal. By contrast, dispersed practices include 'describing … explaining, questioning, reporting, examining and imagining' (1996: 91) and can arise both within and across different social (sub)worlds.

By analogy, we can speak of the integrative vs. dispersed *effects* of media practices. It is safe to assume that CC licenses have had both kinds of effects. Imagine a new social movement that borrowed its practical templates, or 'schemas' (Sewell 1992), at least in part, from the CC movement. It would be a good example of CC practices having had an integrative effect on another social universe. Consider, in contrast, the casual online viewing of CC-licensed works. This will typically have weak, dispersed effects on a viewer's social world(s). For the sake of brevity, and in line with the social worlds theme of this paper, in the following paragraphs I will only discuss integrative effects, starting with a brief Spanish example.

One famous beneficiary of CC's integrative effects was Spain's indignados (or 15M) movement. Like many participants in my 15M research, Stephane Grueso, a Madrid-based filmmaker, is a Creative Commons enthusiast. During the indignados' occupation of public squares across Spain in May-June 2011, Grueso was thrilled to see that protesters had made a

digital archive of the occupation. This was clear from a sign they had put up at Puerta del Sol square that read: 'Sol archive, creative commons license' (Postill 2018: 139). Another indignado, the computer geek turned politician Pablo Soto, later described the 15M movement as 'a copyleft-generating machine […] resulting from the collectivisation of the means of information' (2018: 139). Grueso himself has called 15M a 'copyleft revolution' (2018: 139). Similarly, the late 2010 Tunisian uprising that preceded 15M was partly coordinated by techno-political activists operating out of the site Nawaat.org, which published all its materials under a CC license (MacKinnon 2012: 22).

But the chain of practical effects running from free software to Creative Commons to the Tunisian and 15M movements doesn't end here. A few months after the Spanish protests, protesters in New York who'd been following closely events in Tunisia, Egypt and Spain launched Occupy Wall Street, with many of its templates 'borrowed' from those prior struggles. In turn, protesters in other localities extended the chain across North America, Britain, and beyond. Many commentators, myself included (Postill 2014), have noted the 'viral' character or today's protest movements, but we haven't paid enough heed to the fact that these movements are often *designed* by CC and other free-culture nerds to be replicated and 'remixed' (Postill 2018: 137). These efforts can sometimes – when certain social unrest conditions are met – result in long, digitally mediated chains of practical effects.

Conclusion

What are the effects, then, of the existence of media-related practices in people's social worlds? I argued that these come in three main forms: mediatising effects, worlding effects and derivative effects. On examining the latter set of effects, I also suggested that these can be further differentiated into dispersed vs. integrative effects. I then sketched a chain of integrative effects originating in the free software world to illustrate one possible application of this working concept.

I see the present paper as a first attempt at creating a heuristic around the effects of media practices that might generate interesting questions for future empirical and theoretical work. If nothing else, I hope to have demonstrated that there's no reason to fear the study of such effects. These are, I suggest, within our grasp as media ethnographers, as long as we are prepared to think diachronically (see Postill 2017) and 'follow the effects' wherever they may take us. In fact, one surprising discovery from my (re)reading of the media anthropology literature is that we know far more about this question than we think, although we have yet to synthesise our collective findings.

Perhaps it's time to rethink our obsession with the latest digital or datafication trend and adopt a more media historical outlook, at least some of the time. There is nothing wrong with (re)visiting the predigital media worlds of our academic forebears; for instance, through the sterling media anthropology reader *Media Worlds* (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002).

To further this line of enquiry, more epistemological and empirical groundwork is needed. Here are a few suggestions. First, we could develop a robust conceptual vocabulary that critically interrogates and builds on the working concepts I have just listed; or alternatively, that draws from different sources altogether. Second, we should reach a basic consensus on what counts as evidence that a given media practice (or set of practices) has had an effect on one or more social worlds, while rejecting the default position that media effects pose an insoluble problem. Third, we shouldn't limit ourselves to the 'ordering' effects of media practices (see Couldry 2004, Hobart 2010), like I have done in this paper for reasons of space and cohesion. There is much to be learned, too, from the *dis*ordering – or disruptive – effects of certain media practices. Finally, we could connect this line of research with relevant

literatures on practice theory and media and communication, e.g. with the considerable corpus of work on the effects of media framing (Druckman 2001, Scheufele 1999, Schuck and De Vreese 2006, Valentino et al 2001).

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Notes

[i] For a techno-political version of this argument see Kubitschko and Kannengießer (2017).
[ii] Studies that are explicit about the effects of social practices include Gehring and Dörfler (2019), Maller (2017), Nicolini et al (2004), and Sheehy and Feaver (2015).
[iii] On 'congeries' of practices, see Hobart (2010).
[iv] Two synonyms of worlding are 'worldmaking' and 'worldbuilding'.
[v] See Kennedy et al (2016) for a practice-theoretical analysis of the production of norms on the social media platforms Reddit and Facebook.
[vi] Quoted from https://creativecommons.org/faq/#about-cc.