

EASA Media Anthropology Network
e-Workshop on Digital and Media Anthropology¹
via the Network's [mailing list](#)
28 September - 12 October 2010
<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/events>

Postill, John - J.Postill at shu.ac.uk

Tue Sep 28 02:22:28 PDT 2010

Dear All

Welcome to our e-workshop on digital and media anthropology!

As I said in a previous announcement, we thought it would be interesting to continue on this mailing list the face-to-face conversations we had during the recent EASA conference in Maynooth (Ireland). So from now until Tuesday 12 Oct we'll be holding an informal e-workshop right here on some of the key questions arising from both sessions. The idea is not so much to review what was said and omitted in Maynooth but rather to take some of the questions that were left hanging in the air at the conference and use them as a way of thinking collaboratively about issues of interest to people on this list.

I'll now give you a brief overview of two of those EASA panels, namely the media anthropology [1] and the digital anthropology [2] panel, followed by a set of suggested questions for further discussion, with many thanks to Philipp Budka, Heather Horst, Daniel Miller and Mark A. Peterson for their invaluable feedback and to all of you who participated in the panels (see also numbered links below).

The aim of the media anthropology panel (convened by Philipp Budka and myself) was to explore 'a crucial aspect of mediated practice, namely its rewards (cf. Warde 2005). As contemporary social worlds become ever more media-saturated [...] questions arise about the considerable amounts of time and money that many individuals and groups appear to spend using, learning, sharing and making all kinds of media technologies [...]'. This issue comes at a time when both in the news media and in popular scholarship we constantly hear stories about the dangers and abuses associated with 'new media' (e.g. Facebook, computer games and virtual worlds) and, more rarely, about their emancipatory possibilities (e.g. of Twitter, Wikipedia, mobiles...). Paper presenters addressed this question of media rewards through a wide range of empirical examples, including mobile phones in poor countries, computer game modifiers (aka 'modders'), Silicon Valley families and their digital practices, amateur photographers, activist bloggers, cultural heritage content creation, Bollywood tweets, indigenous online music, radio production in Benin and ethnographic film-making.

The digital anthropology panel [2], co-convened by Heather Horst and Daniel Miller, was held the following day. The call for papers asked the following: 'How can anthropology contribute to an understanding of the impact of new digital technologies? This session explores topics ranging from how digital technologies become part of everyday life to their role in the development of new infrastructures within both commerce and the state'. In this case, the ethnographic examples included

¹ We are very grateful to Julian Hopkins (Monash University) for transcribing this session.

digital music production, hackers, location-aware objects, digital technologies in Muslim Southeast Asia, cultural websites in Tanzania, mobiles and theft in Mozambique, mobiles and activism in India, Web 2.0 and immigrants in Ireland, Spanish bloggers, and a digital archive in Aboriginal Australia. According to the conveners, these papers were organised into a morning period devoted to issues arising from 'a more self-conscious sense of becoming a digital world' and an afternoon session 'directed more towards the wider field of anthropology'.

I can't do justice here to the richness of the materials presented at the conference. Instead I'll merely suggest a few issues raised during or after the presentations that stretch across both panels and that we may want to talk about in the coming two weeks:

1. As Mark A. Peterson commented via email apropos the first panel, there seems to be an interesting tension between what Alan Warde (2005) calls the intrinsic vs. the extrinsic rewards of a practice, e.g. radio production, game modding or ethnographic film-making, that is between the pleasure and enjoyment of performing a given practice in its own right and the external rewards (money, prestige, fame...) that may derive from it. Perhaps we could explore this tension further. Under conditions of swift socio-technical change, when specialist domains of (digital) practice are in a state of flux, how do digital practitioners navigate and shape the 'rewardscapes' available to them?

2. Kerstin Andersson wondered about the usefulness of this 'rewards of practice' approach to media ethnographic research. Do we really need it? If so, what for? Tentative answers included: Yes, it allows you to explore what people actually do with (digital) media, especially young people, beyond the current obsession with how wasteful and dangerous these technologies are (Horst). Yes, you can follow the practices (Ardevol et al) and the practitioners (Osorio and Postill) with an open mind and see where they take you.

3. Daniel Miller proposed at both panels the new term 'polymedia' (see also his blog post with Mirca Madianou [5]). As the cost of new media for millions of people around the world continues to drop, Miller and Madianou see the emergence of 'an unprecedented media ecology which [...] makes the social and moral aspects of media choice increasingly significant at the expense of the technological constraints and affordances'. For many, the emphasis has shifted from 'the constraints and affordances vis a vis a particular medium to an emphasis upon the social and emotional consequences of choosing between a plurality of media. The mere situation of polymedia changes the relationship between communication technology and society'.

4. A number of papers, especially in the digital anthropology panel, explored the materiality of digital practices. The intriguing notion of 'digital materiality' could be discussed further? How does it relate to ongoing discussions in cultural studies and elsewhere about the political economy of digital labour?

You are all now most welcome to post your thoughts directly to the list, i.e. to medianthro at easaonline.org (if your post doesn't get through to the list, please let me know off-list before reposting!).

To keep the flow of posts steady but manageable, I suggest we aim for 3 to 6 posts per day max. and that no single participant posts more than 4 times in total.

May the workshop begin!

John

Useful links:

- [1] Media anthro panel: <http://bit.ly/bNgFxG>
- [2] Digital anthro panel: <http://bit.ly/cs0Nli>
- [3] Philipp Budka's conference report: <http://bit.ly/bPIB7e>
- [4] Heather Horst and Daniel Miller's conference report: <http://bit.ly/cTdtoG>
- [5] Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller, Polymedia, Material Culture blog, <http://bit.ly/cXrvpf>

Reference cited:

Warde, A. 2005. Consumption and theories of practice, *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5: 131-53.

Lane DeNicola - denicola at alum.rpi.edu

Tue Sep 28 11:05:17 PDT 2010

Many thanks to John for organizing this inter-panel e-workshop and summarizing what was a head-spinning array of papers!

I'll refrain from repeating the introduction I posted ~sixteen months ago:

<http://lists.easaonline.org/private.cgi/medianthro-easaonline.org/2009/001995.html>

Rather than aiming for completeness (or something) and trying to enumerate all the questions/observations/follow-ups I had from these sessions right off the bat, I'll just pick one out of the very large bunch. It's a consideration I have heard explicitly if only perennally, and it's one I found myself returning to at several moments during some of the talks in Maynooth (even where it wasn't really central to the talk) but I'd just like to add some cumulative pressure to foreground it as central.

I could coarsely refer to it as the open/proprietary distinction. More explicitly, I'm referring to "open source" (as in FOSS, open data formats, open standards/protocols, etc.), but also more generally to related but distinct phenomena/practices bearing appellations with the "open" prefix (e.g. hardware, licensing, publishing, government, etc.). To a large degree, this distinction has principally served (within anthropological discourse) in describing the self-identifications or discursive postures assumed by our subject communities; typically they are either "hackers" who advocate the use of open source <whatever> (or at least they care about the distinction) or they are media/technology users who don't care about the distinction or aren't aware of it.

Occasionally, a concern of some researchers with that distinction (particularly in terms of researchers' own praxis) gets cast as an externality or as one of the many slippery markers between scholarship and advocacy, and as a result we (anthropologists) usually remain agnostic. I want to tentatively advance a set of intermingled claims: 1) for the anthropology of media and digital culture, a sensitivity to the open/proprietary distinction is unavoidably central, 2) researchers' tools and interfaces shape what we observe and produce (writing and photography being the obvious examples), and the open/proprietary distinction has come crucially into play with digital tools/interfaces, and

finally 3) given the global landscape of media control and technology regulation, the open/proprietary distinction amounts to a question of research ethics.

Each of these claims could use enough elaboration to push me past my contribution constraints, so for now I mostly just wanted to throw them into the hopper of interests, but it often seems a bit too easy to assume that if those we study never really talk about the open/proprietary aspects of the media or technology they use, it's not especially important in depicting their worldview. This strikes me a little like saying the followers of John Frum never really talked about the "colonized/colonizer" distinction, so it's not important to understanding the flag-raising ceremonies on Vanuatu. It seems more a question of translation, i.e. how the enunciations of informants transcode or sublimate what "we" would label "open vs. proprietary." This seems quite relevant to the question of how "digital practitioners navigate and shape the 'rewardsapes' available to them."

Think I'll stop there for the moment...

'Polymedia' thread

Mirca Madianou – mm577 at cam.ac.uk

Tue Sep 28 08:22:57 PDT 2010

Dear list,

Although, unfortunately, I was not present at the EASA conference, I would like to add a few thoughts on 'polymedia' which John Postill highlighted in his earlier overview. Together with Danny Miller we came up with this new term because we felt that we were lacking a word to describe the new media environment of multi-platform communication. To give you some context: in the past three years we have been researching the consequences of new communication technologies on transnational family relationships asking how do migrants who are separated from their children, or their partners, maintain long distant relationships and care for each other at a distance?

We have been working with Filipino migrant mothers in the UK and their left-behind children in the Philippines as well as UK/Trinidadian transnational families and have a number of articles in press and a book entitled 'Technologies of Love: migration and the polymedia revolution' in preparation.

When we begun our fieldwork three years ago transnational family communication was often mainly centred around one technology (mobile phone, or the internet), or even one platform (say texting, or email) each with their own affordances and limitations. It was often possible to see the consequences of that particular type of communication on the relationships in question. However, gradually, and certainly over the past couple of years, we noticed a shift towards a situation of multiple-platform communication. Relationships, increasingly, do not depend on one particular medium, but on a plurality of media and platforms which supplement each other and can help overcome the shortcomings of a particular medium or platform. People can also take advantage of these different communicative opportunities in order to control the relationship. So, for example, if they want to avoid confrontation they don't call but send an email and so on. This has made us extend our focus to the social and emotional consequences of choosing between a plurality of media and platforms (rather than simply examining the particular features and affordances of each particular medium and technology).

Although we recognize that this new environment of communicative opportunities is not yet a reality for everyone, we do argue that it represents a qualitative shift in the way technologies mediate relationships. This is why we felt the need to invent a new term to allow us to describe the situation. Although media ecology could be an alternative, we felt it was too neutral and we needed a term to emphasize the *plurality* and *proliferation* of media. Multimedia, on the other hand, is now an established term with a very different meaning (a situation where several different forms of media are being used simultaneously and in direct relationship to each other, for instance using instant messaging on social networking sites) and would be, therefore, confusing to use that term. Multi-channel, or multi-platform might be closer to what we wish to describe although choosing either would force us to either prioritize 'platform' or 'channel' when in fact our findings suggest that such technological hierarchies are not particularly meaningful to users. This why we propose 'polymedia' as a new term to describe this new emerging environment of proliferating communicative opportunities.

(For those interested see further discussion here: <http://blogs.nyu.edu/projects/materialworld/2010/09/polymedia.html>)

I'd be interested in hearing other members' thoughts – both by those present at EASA, but also those working on similar themes.

All best,

Mirca Madianou

Mark Deuze – mdeuze at indiana.edu

Tue Sep 28 09:08:02 PDT 2010

thanks to John for extending the conference debate to the list. as always, inspiring contributions everywhere! awesome. here some early thoughts triggered by John and Mirca's posts.

Mirca's suggestion of thinking about/researching/conceptualizing people's engagement with media as "polymedia" is a cool attempt to tame the multiplicity of contemporary media.

the concept and its explication reminds me of this quote:

"To make a meaningful study of the use of the media, it is necessary to take different media into consideration, the media ensemble which everyone deals with today."

which comes from a translated essay of Hermann Bausinger, published in *Media Culture & Society* 6 (1984).

another remark I'd like to make is that our colleagues in the social sciences have quite rigorous and empirically rich models and theories for measuring and differentiating both multiple and singular media use – and generally speaking, statistical regression models are useful tools to parse out how such behavior can be addressed empirically.

this not to be skeptical about the introduction of a new term, nor to question its validity; but rather to note that for many decades scholars more or less similarly advocated a grounding of study of people and their media in an awareness of (and respect for) the generally messy and often inconsistent ways in which people use and are immersed in multiple media (at the same time).

a couple of years ago the researchers of the Middletown Media Studies coincidentally suggested to talk about "concurrent media exposure" instead of "media multitasking", and their argument follows a similar premise.

a second note could therefore be that such polymedia immersion is not a property of today's media (or 'new'/digital media), but of media in general. in other words: media in people's lives are always already emblematic, ecological, concurrent, multiplicitous, and (thus) polymedial. perhaps that essential state of affairs has only now become more remarkable to us?

the third comment would be that save for Mirca and Daniel's work, and that of relatively few others, there does not seem to be that much concrete following up of these suggestions.

for me, the mistake often made is to consider media as separate from people/nature. for example, Sean Cubitt speaks of 'ecomedia' in this context, and we also have the concept of 'biomedia' (from Eugene Thacker a.o.).

my own contribution would be to talk about living in, rather than with, media – which amounts to the 'media life' concept. the potential advantage here is that it relieves us from the need to distinguish between media, or to focus on how people choose or differentiate between media – or to think about any difference between (experience, communication and meaning in) media and non-media altogether.

(ps: a working paper on media life is available here:
<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/3764>)

in an interview with Wired magazine in 1997, film director David Cronenberg was asked whether he embraces or abhors technology. Cronenberg answered that "technology is not the name-less other. Technology 'R' Us: to embrace technology is to embrace, and face, ourselves. This we must do, and fearlessly."

it think media scholars (anthropologists and anyone else) should do the same – Media 'R' Us – and that is what i am reading in Mirca's excellent proposal.

looking forward to the e-workshop!

cheers,

Mark.

Sarah Pink – S.Pink at lboro.ac.uk

Tue Sep 28 11:44:18 PDT 2010

This is developing into a really interesting and already diverse discussion. At this stage I don't want to complicate it more, but I want to start to think about the relationships between the questions John has asked

My own paper, which as I wasn't at the conference I didn't present was about the rewards of media practices when used as part of anthropological research practice (as any visual anthropologist will recognise there is a complex history there). But the discussion now has made me think about how the practices of anthropologists involve multiple media, which become interrelated in complex ways as we produce knowledge.

I think however there is another question here, which is concerned with what we select as our route to knowledge: practice theorists take practices as their fundamental unit of analysis. If we are to take a practice focus then we are following the practices. This is an interesting approach because it allows us to identify a particular activity/set of activities and focus on them. Yet this is of course the limitation of a practice approach, in that it gives priority to practices. One way to counter this is to understand practices as being part of wider ecologies (practice theorists do find various ways to situate practices) and to also approach research about media and practices from other angles. There are two other

approaches being discussed in this workshop, I think. One involves taking media as the starting point, and looking at how social relations and more are constituted around the use of media (perhaps different and interrelated media). The other approach (John's point 4) is about the materiality of media. This approach invites us to follow the material culture of media as it moves (well that is how I would interpret it). Combining an approach that focuses on practices with one that follows the materials associated with that practice can offer us more than one route to understanding the same question.

There is also a common issue shared between media and practice approaches: Danny and Mirca are proposing that we need an approach or concept relating to 'polymedia' in order to cope with a context where media are used in ways that are simultaneous to each other, interwoven with each other etc. Surely the practice approach can have the same problem, in that practices are not practiced in isolation. For example putting the TV on and making a cup of tea to have while you watch the tv are not separate practices that are done in isolation from each other, but rather the way each is shaped is contingent on the other. Practices are just as 'poly', interdependent and interwoven with each other as media. It might sound like I am writing about 'multi-tasking', but this is not exactly what I mean, because it is not about trying to do more than one thing at a time, it is rather that the things we do are not separate enough for us to be able to do them separately anyway. Yes of course you can watch tv without having a cup of tea, but you will surely be doing it in relation to something else, and that might well be another media practice (eg waiting to make a phone call until after the sit-com has finished, or pausing the internet tv channel while you make the phone call).

These are just some first thoughts, but I hope they might help us to think about the wider ecologies in which (poly) media, practices, socialities and materialities are being 'lived through'

Daniel Taghioff - danieltaghioff at yahoo.com

Wed Sep 29 03:09:55 PDT 2010

Hi there.

I too was sad to miss the session. I would like to pick up on the points by Kerstin, Sara and Mirca here.

One of the reasons my both practices and media are inter-related is their very materiality, this is why traces of one "thing" encounter another, if there were no material imminence there would be no relations, either across space or time. In other words these approaches that Sarah outlines, and it is important to examine the differences this brings out by treating them as distinct, also necessarily imply one another.

Now, the Poly-media idea is also referencing this inter-penetration, but it is showing an interesting dynamic where the differences in media types is shifting towards a situation where these differences are less significant (though still present) and that the argument is that this allows the emergence of a different kind of Media Practice.

I think such a process of emergence (rather than the out-come, which one can, of course alienate and circulate as "polymedia", possibly usefully so) is what is so interesting, because the shifts in how

practices inter-penetrate is so revealing, of how new "assemblages" or "entities" or "practices" come about.

Now this particular shift actually supports in many ways what Kestin is saying. If the type of Media is becoming less distinct in the practices concerned, then surely to discuss the "rewards" of "media" fails on two counts. The first is the narrow conception of reward that Kerstin points out, and the second is that this is about "media", which I keep harping on about.

Now what is particularly interesting here is that Danny and Mirca seem to be studying something that is very much about "self-making" along existential lines, that might be seen as uniting approaches as diverse as structuralism to more recent communities of practice type approaches: Where the becoming and self-understanding is a driving force possibly as determinate of material practices, as survival and "mode of production" might be of people's sense of self.

Now if this is indeed a shift to a situation where this existential element (the maintenance of close personal relationships) is a strong element, and having worked with Filipinos in the UK, this is very tied up to their materiality also, but most certainly can over-determine it (why are they here? they are making money, but often to send back home to family, whom they are thus distant from, but why don't they keep more of the money, etc...)

To pick up again, if this existential element is strong, then "rewards" is a slightly odd framework for the reasons Kerstin points out, and so is "media" because it frames materia as mainly an object with an internal logic, and so obscures, in an odd way, the way in which media actually "mediate", and how this can shift not just from an internal shift in any one object (one example of "media" for example) but a shift in either the range of media objects there, or the relations being mediated, but more crucially in the emergence that comes from the interplay of such.

So how then to separate "action" and "reward" or for that matter "object" from "relation". It is for these reasons that attention to the emergence of forms, both existential and material, is so important.

Daniel

Mirca Madianou - m m 577 at cam.ac.uk

Thu Sep 30 08:59:11 PDT 2010

thanks to all contributors for an interesting discussion so far (and as always to John who initiated the debate!)

Just wanted to follow up some of the earlier helpful comments especially those by Mark and Sarah. Polymedia is not intended as a 'new' way of looking at the messy, or parallel way in which new media are used. I couldn't agree more that there is already an extensive literature on this which provides us with analytical tools to understand such processes (of how we live *with*, or *in* media). Polymedia is not so much about describing and understanding practice and concurrent, or parallel usage, but about the digital media available and the communicative opportunities they engender. So for example: in the past a migrant mother from the Philippines would mainly, or solely, rely on letters to communicate with her children. There were many benefits in letter communication but also many disadvantages, including the time lag in communication which translated into specific

types of consequences for the long-distance relationships in question. Then the (mobile) telephone was introduced which opened up some opportunities, but which also had its own disadvantages (cost being one of them). Today we are gradually seeing a shift to a situation when a long-distance relationship can benefit from a wider array of technologies/media/platforms. Therefore a migrant mother (assuming she and her left-behind family have access to the internet) can choose a telephone conversation for emotional satisfaction, an email for giving detailed instructions for practical matters, skype for helping with homework, social networking for context (among other things), and texting for coordinating all the above. All these platforms/ media/ technologies constitute a new, emerging communicative environment which we call polymedia. In short, polymedia is a term that aims to describe this plural media environment rather than practices. I am very happy to continue referring to 'practices' in relation to 'polymedia'. Needless to say, polymedia are only emerging and I couldn't agree more with Paula that in some parts of the world very far from being a reality. And, certainly, it is not meant to replace any existing term -we just felt it was helping us describe and understand the above situation. Thanks again for all the comments, I am looking forward to continuing the various threads of discussion (not just this theme!).

Mirca

sally -saa26 at kent.ac.uk

Thu Sep 30 21:38:39 PDT 2010

Okay, I'm chiming in here.

Back in the "Days of Yore," we referred to multiple media sources as ..."Multimedia." Meaning, media that was not only delivered "glued together" in one source, but that multiple sources were integrated in the communication. Multimedia from different sources was called "Multimedia from different sources." The term for the creation of a Multimedia production was "New Media."

Why is Polymedia (and I have been using that term myself for some time having never seen the blog post about its "creation.") different from Multimedia?

Does it give it more classification? More clarification?

For me, I use it in the sense of poly--and love its double word play with polyester--in how it layers over mono and examines relabeling old terms with what is currently contemporary.

But...why differentiate?

Is "Multimedia" meaning types of media that are combined and "Polymedia" just meaning that there are many?

Not a new term--or one solely coming from one source (I've been using it for some time, as I mentioned. The fact that the term is coming up in the Zeitgeist--this, in itself is interesting.)

Are the people talking about "Polymedia" as a descriptor--did those people participate in "New Media" during the days of "Multimedia"--or are they trying to redefine or carve out a new place to explore within, outside or around Multimedia?

If we go to the store and there are lots of choices of cereal, and then people give us cereal, and then we get a sample of cereal in the mail, is it PolyCereal?

I'm not trying to be unkind, just really wanting to understand the definition of the term.

If you are not specifically talking about the media itself, but the communication, why isn't it being called "Poly Communication," "Poly Channel Communication," "Multi Communication" or "Multi Channel Communication" ?

-Sally

Mark Deuze - mdeuze at indiana.edu

Thu Oct 7 06:53:24 PDT 2010

dear all,

just a brief FYI following up on our ongoing debate about terminology, conceptualization, theory-building and research praxis regarding people's message engagement with/immersion in multiple media, the latest issue of The Information Society has a wonderful piece on the very same topic by Thorsten Quandt and Thilo von Pape. details below. they opt for the concept of a 'mediatope', emphasizing the significance of place in media use and domestication.

cheers, Mark.

INFO

Published in: journal The Information Society, Volume 26, Issue 5 October 2010, pages 330 - 345

Living in the Mediatope: A Multimethod Study on the Evolution of Media Technologies in the Domestic Environment

Authors: Thorsten Quandt; Thilo von Papea

Abstract

Domestication is a productive concept for analyzing the sense-making processes behind the integration of media technologies into everyday life. However, researchers have yet to take advantage of the full heuristic potential of this metaphor. So far, most studies have focused on single devices and employed qualitative methods, mainly case studies, to generate insights into the process of domestication. The authors suggest broadening of perspective to the overall domestic ecology within which media cohabit and compete. Toward this goal, they conducted a large-scale multimethod study involving observations and interviews in 100 households, thereby analyzing not only the "birth" of individual media devices into households, but also examined how these devices reside in certain "mediatopes" (media environments), how they compete as different media "species," and how they change their social and spatial positions during their lifecycle. More generally, the study demonstrates how to apply domestication research to the topography of a domestic media environment that is complementary to the ethnographical descriptions that have dominated the literature thus far.

Cathy Greenhalgh -c.greenhalgh at lcc.arts.ac.uk

Tue Sep 28 08:33:09 PDT 2010

Dear list

An interesting proposition, but is it the term the users (industry, net traffic) use? Multiple platform communication is often defined as Interactive Social Media around Journalism, Media, TV departments?

Cathy

Peterson, Mark Allen Dr. -petersm2 at muohio.edu

Tue Sep 28 08:57:06 PDT 2010

I think the point of coining it is to have an analytical vocabulary that differs from that of the people in the industry who are our informants, hosts and colleague-practitioners.

Mark Allen Peterson

Cathy Greenhalgh -c.greenhalgh at lcc.arts.ac.uk

Tue Sep 28 08:59:11 PDT 2010

Mark

I guess I'll soon be polymediatized then... must be the start of term.

Cathy

Matthew Bernius - mbernius at gmail.com

Tue Sep 28 09:24:17 PDT 2010

Mirca wrote:

*> Although media ecology could be an alternative, we felt it was too neutral and we needed a term to emphasize the *plurality* and *proliferation* of media. Multimedia, on the other hand, is now an established term with a very different meaning (a situation where several different forms of media are being used simultaneously and in direct relationship to each other, for instance using instant messaging on social networking sites) and would be, therefore, confusing to use that term.*

I've engaged in a short email discussion with Daniel Miller after he posted an overview of Polymedia to the mailing list of the Association of Internet Researchers. Some of the, on list push back he received was specifically about Polymedia doing the same work as Media Ecology/Ecosystem.

After thinking and playing with Polymedia for a bit, I think it has a few distinct advantages over Media Ecosystem, especially in terms of anthropological analysis. In particular, it side steps a lot of the baggage that comes with associating a natural sciences metaphor with a human/culturally constructed space. This is an important step for a number of reasons. First it helps to denaturalize, and culturally situate, the constellations (and assemblages) of media communication tools. It also helps avoid the "diffuse" sense of dynamic equilibrium that often is associated with media ecosystems (that the system, rather than the users of the system, reacts to the introduction of a new medium or mediating technology).

Plus I also think the phrase "polymedia economy" (as opposed to media ecosystem) just sounds better, and in my mind truer to the specific types of considerations and choices that our interlocutors use.

- Matt

Cathy Greenhalgh - c.greenhalgh at lcc.arts.ac.uk

Tue Sep 28 09:32:58 PDT 2010

Dear List

Does anyone have an alternative term for New Media? We all need help on that, 'new media' being at least ten years old...

Cathy

Matthew Bernius - mbernius at gmail.com

Tue Sep 28 09:48:21 PDT 2010

It seems to me that that Polymedia's avoidance of temporal terms (as in NEW media) in its linguistic construction makes it a useful term. I've found in my own research that asking my interlocutors questions about New Media is really useful as a way to get to understanding their conceptions of "new vs old" and the (re)invention of online forms. But using it as a term to academically "gloss" concepts within a paper is fraught with the problems that you point out. Using Polymedia side steps those issues.

Julian Hopkins - j at julianhopkins.net

Wed Sep 29 02:35:54 PDT 2010

Hi All, and thanks for the opportunity to participate in an extension of the August workshops.

I was very interested to see the proposed concept of polymedia, as it overlaps with something I am considering for my (ongoing) thesis. While thinking about how to include blogging into the body of work on media, I noticed that blogs don't quite fit into either 'narrow-' or 'broad-casting' models, so I tentatively called it 'polycasting' - a concept which sees bloggers as "nomadic media producers and consumers who cluster around a multiplicity of productive sites, or articulatory nodes, bridging the gap between private and public identities, and articulating discursive flows of meaning" (which is how I wrote it then, though I will probably revise this).

Personal bloggers (who are the majority of bloggers) will produce content that is aimed at a wide audience (e.g. a comment on some current news item, a complaint about service in a shop); and they

will also write posts that are directed at a narrow audience (i.e. their friends, usually; how bloggers imagine their audience is relevant here, and David Brake's thesis is illuminating in this regard - <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/25535/>). In practice, each single post may become 'broadcast' (for some reason it gets taken up and spreads across a wide and varied audience), or it may be 'narrowcast' (if, as usually happens, a specialised audience reads it). The potential of each blog post varies, depending on a number of contingent factors such as search engine visibility, take-up by other media, and recirculation by other online actors (bloggers, tweeters, on Facebook, etc.)

In addition, most bloggers read blogs, and often contribute to other blogs' content by commenting. They also use Twitter, MSN, email, Facebook, etc. to communicate with each other and to promote their blog. The ways in which they use them do vary in meaning, as Miller & Madianou argue, and may also bleed across - for example when a blogger posts extracts of an MSN conversation on his/her blog, or when blog posts appear on Facebook.

What struck me was the way in which the blogger/commenter/tweeter/facebooker - i.e. the human agent - is able to simultaneously be at many different positions in the production and consumption processes, and how the ultimate product online is potentially able to engage with different assemblages in multiple manners, none of which can be tied down to a particular technology, actor, or actant. The rhizome of causal relations is cast about in different forms and is approachable from all directions, intersecting multidimensional assemblages in many ways; reaching across time (asynchronous), space, and various 'scapes' (culture, media, economic, etc.).

Perhaps polycasting could be seen as the process, or a labelling of the dynamic causal relations that make up the assemblage that is polymedia at any point in time? It strikes me that 'polymedia' may be interpreted as a somewhat static concept (though I'm sure it's not meant that way), whereas 'polycasting' incorporates the creation of relations, the movement of differences, that form the complex assemblages that Miller & Madianou portray.

I'd be very interested to get any feedback on these thoughts. As you will have noticed, I'm also exploring a Deleuzian approach, and I'd be happy to have any difficulties with my analysis pointed out.

Thanks, Julian

Daniel - d.miller at ucl.ac.uk

Thu Sep 30 09:26:44 PDT 2010

Just two more cents on Polymedia. The point of the term is not to replace other terms, but to describe an unprecedented situation which since it did not exist had no term.

It may help to explain why Mirca and I came up with polymedia to note that the reason had as much to do with changes in pricing over the last few years as with the rise of different new media. Because if the term is to have any profundity from a social science perspective it has to refer also to the changes in the sociality associated with media use.

The situation of Polymedia is reached when you judge that another person has chosen to communicate using one media rather than another for reasons other than cost or technology, because those constraints have diminished. At that point you start to read things into their choice that inform you about persons not technologies. You surmise that they have selected the medium that is right for messages of love, or that prevents arguments, or that makes this a cold practical message, or that is intended for relatives rather than friends, or is female rather than male, or that means they don't want to engage with you for very long, or that they don't care if it takes a while for you to respond, or that gives them power over you. If polymedia is to more than a helpful semantic development then it should pertain to what is at stage for us in social science which is the social consequences of these developments. Of course such readings were always the case, but they were heavily overlaid by issues of cost and technology, and of course most people are yet to reach the full potential of polymedia, but the degree of change over the last couple of years is surely sufficient to deserve acknowledgment

Danny

Wasson, Christina - cwasson at unt.edu

Thu Sep 30 09:35:46 PDT 2010

I am glad that Danny brought this up again...

On Sep 30, 2010, at 11:26 A M, Daniel wrote:

> ... *You surmise that they have selected the medium that is right for messages of love, or that prevents arguments, or that makes this a cold practical message, or that is intended for relatives rather than friends, or is female rather than male, or that means they don't want to engage with you for very long, or that they don't care if it takes a while for you to respond, or that gives them power over you...*

The choice of media is something I have been curious about... as far as I know it was first explored by Daft and Lengel in 1984 as a matter of "task-technology fit," and I seem to remember that their position was critiqued as being too deterministic... but I am not an expert on this, and am hoping that others can provide more information about the history of research on why people choose a particular medium for a particular message!

Peace, Christina

Dan Perkel - dperkel at ischool.berkeley.edu

Thu Sep 30 10:36:40 PDT 2010

Hello all,

I have been intrigued by the discussion of polymedia since I saw the blog post a week or two ago and some initial discussions about it on other email lists.

This is a very helpful point of clarification because it puts a stake in the ground. As a thought experiment: I think if we are to take the polymedia concept very seriously as a concept, then rather than say it is "unprecedented" now we may want to (a) assume for argument's sake that it is describing something for which there are not good terms, but then (b) consider how, when, and which conditions people in different places, times, cultures, societies (insert your own word here...) first found themselves in a situation of polymedia. It seems that there is something very new that Danny and Mirca have seen in the media use and communication that they have observed in their situations. It seems that the term may not apply to some of the conditions on the ground in Tanzania (based on prior comments on this list).

So what about other places? Is a situation of Polymedia new in the United States for example? From a personal--and non-scholarly--point of view, I have seen friends and family either wrestle with the choices of which media to use in which situation, or more typically, choose some medium and deal with the destructive consequences of that choice only after the fact, often never even realizing that had they picked up the phone rather than emailed or posted on a Facebook wall things may have gotten differently. (As a side point, this also raises the question about whether or not we should distinguish these situations based on if and when actors in the situation questioned the media or realized its role in the conflict at all.)

That being said, and again, from a non-scholarly point of view, I have good memories of divisive debates about whether or not it was appropriate to relay some important news to someone--such as a break-up, to use the example from Gershon's recent book that Danny and Mirca see as a good example of the use of the term--over the land-line phone, from some else's home phone, via a letter, via a note in the classroom, in person, through friends, etc. (I'm even guessing that some of these "memories" were my friends' memories or even from television or film in the 1980s.)

Which, brings me to the question of whether or not there is actual scholarship from decades past (because my personal anecdotes really don't get us very far!) that would shed light on whether or not people found themselves in situations in the past that we might describe as a situation of polymedia if understood in the proper historical context.

To sum up my central point: The term polymedia itself seems extremely useful. This is because it will focus our attention, as Danny and Mirca argue, to emotional and moral questions of media uses in new ways, ways that were either ignored before or not brought together in ways that would be productive. The term's utility, however, declines if we try to see it as something as universally unprecedented "now."

Regards,

Dan

Guido Ipsen - guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de

Thu Sep 30 11:25:01 PDT 2010

Even though it seems less honourable than piling hints at sources on to another, I feel compelled to reduce the discussion about media, polymedia seems the hot word now, to the immediate. Keep low profile.

Using media means to watch. To listen. Sometimes it means to use more irregular channels of communication, depending on the sophistication of technologies applied.

But in essence, making use of a medium means to turn it into something you like to call a polymedium. A sheet of paper, or, if you allow for the very basics, a handful of clay will suffice (Polyclay can be so powerful).

Please beware of constructing a hype about flashy screens and –seemingly –global connectivity. In the end, all that media users do is consume the amount of information their cognitive system allows them to share in a given period of time, or do the reverse in sending messages.

Also, a scrap of paper and a piece of charcoal might be much more versatile than the iPhone once there is no plug... .

Christmas, Salina –salina.christmas.09 at ucl.ac.uk

Thu Sep 30 15:51:29 PDT 2010

But we creative folks love the hype surrounding objects. The more flashy the object, the more alive the device is, the better.

We even have an event dedicated to hyping up the objects we make. We call it The London Design Festival. All we do is get excited over the things we make (like a frame which does absolutely nothing useful <http://tinyurl.com/2wnazvd> and this chair which doesn't even let you sit up straight <http://tinyurl.com/37go2es>) and then we go to other partners' events and get excited over their objects –whether they make sense or not. The point is, objects get people talking and moving. Some even make you happy. Only once a year we can openly geek like this and make a pomp and ceremony on the back of our objects.

In fact, talking about 'polyclay', the most fascinating media I encountered at the festival was a 3 M temporary 'stick-on' paint, on which the entrance sign for one of the events, 'Tent', was written on. You stick this sheet of paint on the brickwall of the Truman Brewery with a blow torch, like a massive Post-It note, and voila, you get a new look for your front door. The Samsung tablet was nice, but this was ace.

But this is where I am not –to borrow someone's phrase here – "agnostic", anthropologically. You know which side I am on. I have to say my aim of studying material culture at UCL is so I can understand a few things about 'people and their objects', in particular, digital objects. To go far, a creative can't rely on skills alone; he also needs knowledge. Anthropology informs my creativity well, and I am so very grateful for it.

I do, however, found Guido's observation about the folks that failed to be excited by the "dead" 3G device very informative.

Ah, I used up three of my four emails for this workshop. Will be taking down notes only from now on.

Daniel - d.miller at ucl.ac.uk

Fri Oct 1 00:33:28 PDT 2010

Obviously you want to get to other topics, so I promise not to post on polymedia again whatever the responses, but just to say to Sally the reason we cant use multimedia is even through technically it might have been available to mean the same as polymedia, I would think it clear enough that the term has already been universally adopted to mean something else. People talk every day of multimedia presentations by which they mean the simultaneous use of several media and the technical relationship between them e.g. sound and visuals. That is now established, so one cant ask the word multimedia to lose those connotations and stand for what we mean by polymedia.

LabelKantoor - kantoor at neuf.fr

Fri Oct 1 01:12:10 PDT 2010

I use the term multiple media to indicate the use of various media on a parallel basis, for example in my work with the Ovahimba : film, video, sound, drawing, text, photography, and use the term multimedia to indicate the use of various media in a single presentation such as an exhibition or other.

Rina

Mark Pedelty - pedeltmh at umn.edu

Fri Oct 1 11:17:17 PDT 2010

Dear Colleagues,

This conversation concerning media ecology, digital materiality, and polymedia/multimedia is interesting. I'd argue against calling this "ecological." That term is often employed in such a way that it neither references ecological analysis in any meaningful sense nor adds to the attempted new articulation. Take "music ecology," the term as used there is far removed from its useful purpose. An ecological understanding is not just holistic and immediately "environmental" in the sense of a performance context, but literally about material flows, relationships, and systems analysis. That is not to valorize such an approach as inviolable, it is just one among many, and in terms of cultural understandings must be supplemented with some sort of semiotic analysis to be useful. However, when "ecology" is borrowed to simply mean any holistic and contextual analysis--materially measured or not--both the concept and attempted field of understanding both suffer. That is the case in music ecology, which often fails to be ecological in any meaningful sense. That has caused problems in trying to develop a new "ecomusicology" that takes materiality, embodied practice, and environmental and human stakes seriously. In other words, I would vote against calling this new orientation ecological. It does not really capture the goals well as I understand them.

Many on the list might be aware of the parallel discussion that has been going on in the world of "virtual ethnography," first articulated by Christine Hine. Having attended an event on the topic in Amsterdam many years ago, I too was struck by the need to consider the embodied and even material practices of digital existence as that topic was being taken up by other disciplines. Other anthropologists at the event had the same reaction. When presented with avatar-like abstractions in terms of theory, it is often our tendency to want to interrogate assumptions made within the world of the medium in a deeper, semiotic sense as well as examining lived (albeit "virtual") contexts enveloping and intersecting with what other disciplines might artificially abstract as "virtual" (as if all our existence is not in some ways virtual; ritual studies have understood the deadly serious nature of cultural fantasy for quite a long time). As anthropologists we tend to bring, at the same time, a more phenomenologically grounded understanding of existence (people in particular places) as well as a more semiotic approach to understanding the world as a creative act. Perhaps that is part of what we are all attempting to do here, bring a sense of the ethnographic presence to realms of study that are often artificially segregated from the rest of our existence as human beings? The idea that we are not floating minds in the online ether, but bodies sitting at computers, people whose entire existence is inflected with intertextual inflections from various virtual realities? How does the electronic prosthesis change what it means to be human? How is it an extension of past prosthetics and ways of being human? I asked that question back at the Hamburg Media Anthropology School a decade ago, but am still not certain how far I have advanced in my understanding of those central questions. Sitting at the intersecting margins of several media studies disciplines, it seems to me that we are all still in Plato's cave when it comes to digital existence, looking for more synthetic theory and methodology than any disciplinary tradition can offer. Anthropologists have a great deal to lend to virtual ethnography, clearly. For example, most of the ethnographic studies of video games to date seem to have been completed by non-Anthropologists, and it shows. While disciplinary distinctions mean little to me, and a few of the video game ethnographies are excellent (TL Taylor's *Play Between Worlds* is one of the first and still one of the best), it does seem that our ethnographic sensibilities and

cultural theory would contribute a great deal to the "virtual ethnography" discussion going on in parallel within (New) Media Studies.

As for polymedia, I would love to hear more. For one thing, virtual media methodologies have been heavily visual. Just as "textual" analysis applied to all media betrays our print proclivities, the tendency to deal with visual imagery to the exclusion of sound shows that we take a somewhat cinematic perspective to our online and virtual studies (e.g., video games). If polymedia is a way to think about the holistic and integrated sensorium of all-encompassing digital media, that sounds intriguing. Frankly, from a very practical perspective, I think that to develop a truly critical media literacy among ourselves, students, and publics, we need to go far beyond the surface, denotative level where most such discussions stop (obvious stereotypes, etc.). Holistic media anthropology, no matter how we name it, could contribute a great deal to that discussion.

Sorry about the long post, and thanks for all of your fascinating insights.

Mark

Birgit Braeuchler – birgitbraeuchler at gmx.net

Tue Oct 5 02:54:25 PDT 2010

Dear all,

Many thanks for the quite stimulating discussion so far.

What I keep on wondering when listening to the discussions on polymedia (or whatever term you want to use and I do agree with some of the objections raised) is how to deal with it methodologically. Some of the issues at stake are, of course, the much debated notion of multi-sited ethnography. But another major issue at stake is, as I see it, how to actually research polymedia, how to translate "participant observation" into that sort of contexts, how to "participate" in mobile phone conversations, letters, and other media contexts (intimate or more public) mentioned throughout our discussion. I still remember our debates about the relationship of the online and the offline when conducting internet research; a debate that luckily seems to be outdated by now. But I think we are facing many more of that kind of challenges when we get involved in other media worlds and these challenges are doubled and tripled in polymedia contexts.

Without being able to go into detail, I wanted to drop this note and look forward to some feedback of those of you involved in that kind of research.

Many thanks,

Birgit

Erkan Saka - sakaerka at gmail.com

Tue Oct 5 05:26:18 PDT 2010

Dear Birgit, I think all possible methodological questions related to polymedia might also be asked for any contemporary media research at the moment. I believe we already live and research through contexts that polymedia situations already exist (by this short reply I feel self-relief as there are no new methodological issues added to already existing tons of questions:)

Erkan

Philipp Budka - ph.budka at philbu.net

Wed Oct 6 01:08:50 PDT 2010

Dear List,

I am sending this text on behalf of Danny Miller:

DIGITAL ANTHROPOLOGY OR MEDIA ANTHROPOLOGY --WHO GIVES A F/!X?

It may seem odd and probably hypocritical that having just posted about polymedia I now suggest that the terminology really doesn't matter very much. But while occasionally semantics are helpful as in this case in making an intellectual point, which was the idea with polymedia, generally I feel talking about media or digital or cyber or anthropology etc etc may be anything but helpful. It is true that this whole debates is based on their being two workshops at EASA one called digital anthropology and one called media anthropology. The media workshop included presentations on how people transform computer games, another on user generated content plus a paper by Heather Horst one of the organisers of the digital anthropology workshop, about the impact of digital media on family

relations. Meanwhile the digital anthropology workshop included two papers on mobile phones that might equally have been termed media anthropology.

Even at the conference there was the start of what could potentially be a negative argument as to whether one should favour one or the other. Individuals who seemed about to describe themselves as digital anthropologists or media anthropologists with a slight overtone of 'as opposed to'. This is written to pre-empt and ideally to help prevent us wasting a whole load of time on something that many of us feel would be an entirely fruitless debate. A debate about whether we should be called media or digital anthropologists.

I have written several times on what I have called 'semantic pedantics' (e.g. the book *Stuff*). Part of the early confusion between natural science and social science was a belief that we too would be well served by the precise and consistent definitions required in natural science. It took a while for the more qualitative social sciences to take on board Wittgenstein's observations about language and realise that actually we were much better served by a semantics that understood its dependence upon context and diversity, because we are not natural scientists and there was little to be gained by emulating them. In establishing a new programme in Digital Anthropology at UCL we saw this move as direct continuity with our highly successful programme in Material Culture whose ethos is laid out in the introduction to the first issue of *The Journal of Material Culture* written by myself and Chris Tilley. We have always argued that anyone who found it helpful to describe what they were doing as material culture studies, was thereby in effect doing material culture studies. That there was no desire to become an empire, to exclude anyone or to establish a clear sub-discipline. The point was merely to help people with similar interests to have a place they could identify with and be identified with if and when it suited them. This ethos has served us very well, making material culture a socially pleasant place to work and providing the freedom for the production of eclectic but often cutting edge anthropology

I would argue this point both more generally. After all academics are supposed to value work that is both original and intelligent. It must surely follow that a first class PhD student or academic may come up with something that is so original and intelligent that it just doesn't fit any established academic category. We can't really see it as conventional media or conventional anthropology but that is because of its originality -we can't see it as conventional anything else. Surely we should have the flexibility and respect for original insight to welcome such work rather than dismiss it because it doesn't fit. So there is a principle against making semantics a burden and constraint rather than a facilitator.

Within that ethos there is nothing to stop someone defining what they mean by a word such as digital or media or anthropology for either their purposes or wider purposes. Indeed I suggested during the conference that the word digital would traditionally have been associated with base line 2. That is ultimately anything that is created out of binary code, as opposed to the base line 10 of the decimal. But I also noted there are people who associate themselves with the trajectory that comes from cybernetics, whose roots are in systems theory, which has no logical connection with the idea of digital as base line 2 or binary code. I have not the least desire to waste time over which is the 'better' definition.

So what then should we say about the relationship between digital and media anthropology? I think we should let the content of EASA speak to this. There were indeed papers that could equally have been given in either a workshop called media anthropology or one called digital anthropology. It

seems a fair predication that from now on this will always be the case, for which reason academics working in those areas will always want to be up to date with both sets of research. But there were also a number of papers given in the digital anthropology session that probably have no interest in being called media or in following debates in media anthropology. For example, there was a paper on the conflict between hackers and related activists and the church of scientology. There was another on spimes and location. On the other hand I have just sent in a paper for publication written (together with Mirca Madianou) about letters and cassettes exchanged between Filipina mothers and their left-behind children. That is certainly media anthropology but in no sense digital anthropology.

I think we should also be similarly relaxed about the word anthropology. Most disciplinary conflicts arise because of the infrastructures of academia and fights over resources and power. We can't stop these, but we don't have to facilitate them. As it happens, I only work with students who conduct what might be termed classic 'minimum of one year participatory' ethnography. But within material culture there are people working on museum issues or archaeological issues or aesthetic issues who may not be based in ethnographic traditions and may not care too much whether they are called anthropologists or not, but do strongly identify with our material culture section within a department of anthropology. But then we also have biological anthropologists who in many respects are the diametric opposite of social anthropologists and yet everyone seems happy to consider them anthropologists. As far as I can tell this list-serve works for many people who are not working as anthropologists and who have been made welcome regardless.

We founded the degree in digital anthropology at UCL partly because we felt it was inevitable that digital anthropology would come into existence and actually become quite a major aspect of anthropology. The reason lies outside the academic world in transformations that are obvious and evident. In our introduction Heather Horst and myself made suggestions that pertain to possible macro consequences of an overarching digital development. But we also looked to the legacy of ethnography, development, and diversity that is part of the ethnographic heritage. By the same token media anthropology is now very well developed, in part thanks to this excellent list-serve and there is no reason to think other than it too will grow both in its own right, and also in its shared future as most media becomes also digital. But ultimately there is only one real point to this comment, which is to urge you not to waste time worrying too much about which is which. I suggest we should aim to get our reputations from the quality of our work, not the label.

-Polymedia thread ends-

- 'Rewards of media' thread -

Kerstin B Andersson -tinni.andersson at telia.com

Wed Sep 29 02:13:00 PDT 2010

Hi everyone!

John, you are provoking me and I think that I should elaborate my point a bit!

> 2. Kerstin Andersson wondered about the usefulness of this 'rewards > of practice' approach to media ethnographic research. Do we really > need it? If so, what for?

My questioning of the "rewards of practice" approach in media anthropology was mainly directed to the concept of "reward". In my reading the use of reward implies a "means to end" rationality; i.e. a person use a certain mean with the purpose to achieve a certain goal and I think that this approach is a bit reductionist, reality is just not this simple. Practices often include irrational, unintentional, casual acts and activities and might as well be motivated by emotions, desires, intuition, incidents, unforeseen occurrences or maybe be totally unmotivated. My own preferences in issues regarding practice are for example more in line with a phenomenological approach and Kapferer's "ontology" than a Weberian instrumental rationality. So I simply think that it would be more useful to discuss implications and outcomes of media practice, also including the irrational, unwanted, unexpected matters included in it. And I think that Elisenda Ardèvol et al's presentations illustrated this quite well ...

All the best Kerstin

Elisenda Ardèvol -eardevol at gmail.com Wed Sep 29 04:58:27 PDT 2010

Hi!

Thanks John for putting both Maynooth sessions altogether and all contributors that highlighted cut-edging topics for discussion! :-)

From my point of view, the discussion about the "rewards of the media" is relevant because it connects with social actors worries about creativity and authorship, and with an extended corpus of work around user content production and creative industries, another question is how we theorize and do research about this, which is, I think, the discussion point. So, I would like to centre the discussion here on the first and second topic proposed in the opening email.

Mark A. Peterson summarizes Warde suggesting approach to practices pointing to the tension between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in practices, and most of the literature I have been reading is also fixed in this polarization. As we presented in our paper, Banks and Potts, for example, say that user's productive practices are usually explained as based either on non-market, non-pecuniary motivation derived from an Internet economy of gift culture -as intrinsic motivations well primed with communitarian spirit-, or as based on extrinsic incentives or rewards -looking for lucrative rewards and following the corporate, commercial and the rules of a market economy-. But in most of these approaches, motivation is "inside" the subject -taken a psychological or a rational subject homo

oeconomicus approach. What Warde proposes is to understand intrinsic and extrinsic related to practices, instead of "subjective" motivations. This is a very interesting turning-point from a cultural analysis perspective. Moreover, Warde suggests then, that motivations and rewards –as doings and sayings– are part of the practices, and need to be understood in terms of practice engagements (not as subject intrinsic or extrinsic motivations). What puzzles me a little bit is that he seems to maintain the intrinsic/extrinsic division but in practices, when it can be said that both poles are part of the constitutive process of the practices. It can make sense.

What our fieldwork is suggesting –we are now involved in a project on creative practices and industries– is that, on one hand, the individuals expressed motivations for engaging creative practices are diverse and vary through time and through practice engagement, as Kerstin said, and we showed in our paper. On the other, that the tension between these two poles is expressed when conflicting practices are at stake. That is, when the nature of the practice itself is discussed among users –the tension between amateur and professional photographers–, or the tension among users and creative industries that want to take benefit of determinate users' practices –as in the case of modders that "work for free" in developing videogame extensions–. So, what is interesting is how practices are constituted and defined by users, not only in relation to the know-how of the practices, but also in relation to desires, purposes, motivations, rewards, etc. that the practice of that practice entails. By doing so.... it could be said, taking Bourdieu notion of field (following Postill approach to field theory), the field of "media", or the field of "photography" or the field of "art and creative industries" is sustained, reshaped and contested, among other things... But I think I am gone too far... anyway, I tried to present an example of how practices theory may be useful –or not– for understanding media 'rewards' and how digital practitioners navigate and shape the 'rewardscales'.

Cheers, Elisenda

Banks, J., & Potts, J. (2010). Co-creating games: a co-evolutionary analysis. *New Media Society*, 12(2), 253–270. Postill, J. Localizing the internet beyond communities and networks. *New Media & Society* June 2008 10: 413–431. Warde, A. Consumption and Theories of Practice. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 131–153 (2005)

Postill, John – J.Postill at shu.ac.uk

Mon Oct 4 04:07:07 PDT 2010

Dear All

Many thanks for that first round of e-workshop contributions. A reminder: we still have another 8 days to continue the conversation!

On the subject of (digital) media practices and their rewards, and adding briefly to Elisenda's response to Kerstin, I don't see this approach as committing you to a rational or reductionist model of human endeavour. In fact, I see it as an alternative to existing rationalist approaches that are still widely used in the study of media and ICTs. For instance, in the field of ICTs for development a growing number of researchers are precisely trying to escape the entrapments of a rational-actor, cost/benefit understanding of mobile phone adoption in poor countries. (Less discussed, but still around, are uses-and-gratifications models of mobile adoption). As Francisco Osorio and I suggested in our Maynooth presentation, by keeping an open mind about the actual and reported rewards of mobile-related

practices we hope we can help to broaden out this research area beyond narrowly economicist and functionalist explanations.

Briefly, on the relationship between field theory and the rewards of practice (see Elisenda's earlier post), it's important to recall that the notion of rewards is central to that of field. After all, a field is often understood to be a domain of practice in which variously positioned social agents compete and cooperate over the same public *rewards* and prizes (see Martin 2003). Just as fields are internally differentiated, so are the rewards to be found at the various field 'stations' (i.e. the sites of regular practice and interaction), e.g. the rewards that go with academic blogging are quite different from those of academic publishing.

John

Reference

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Jens Kjaerulff -jk at socant.net

Fri Oct 8 13:13:32 PDT 2010

I think 'Rewards' is a very interesting take, and regret I could not make it to Maynooth.

I was wondering if anyone had given thought to how the wide literature on 'value' (e.g. Graeber 2001, Myers 2001, Putnam 2002, Sykes 2009), might complement an enquiry cast in terms of 'rewards'?

In retrospect, I wish I had been better familiar with this literature when I wrote the monograph published earlier this year entitled 'Internet and Change' (Kjaerulff 2010):

<http://www.internetandchange.com/>

There are several reasons for this, but among them it seems to open for an exciting comparative scope, and for a different kind of enquiry than what the old and unproductive 'rational-actor/cultural-clone' discussion seems to allow for (I don't think today's practice theory has moved this discussion much beyond where it was in the 1970s in economic anthropology and the debates on pros and cons of transactionalism).

In the latter regard, I think a value perspective (Barth 1993) did help me tackle the question of what motivates *informal* telework (i.e. working from home via internet), the practice of which is conspicuously widespread relative to formalized teleworking. But I very clearly only scratched the surface, and wish I had been better familiar with the literature on value.

Hence the question about whether 'rewards' have been thought along such lines...?

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Myers, F. (ed) 2001: *The Empire of Things. Regimes of Value and Material Culture*, School of American Research Press, Santa Fe

Kjaerulff, J. 2010: *Internet and Change*, Intervention Press, Høejebjerg

Putnam, H. 2002: *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA

Sykes, K. (ed) 2009: *Ethnographies of Moral Reasoning*, Palgrave, New York

Kerstin B Andersson - tinni.andersson at telia.com

Fri Oct 8 05:42:22 PDT 2010

Hi everyone,

A brief response to Elisende's and John's comments concerning field theories and practice...

Since I'm using a modified version of Bourdieu's field concept in my own work on Kolkata intellectuals, I thought that I should elaborate a bit on the concept. Bourdieu's notion of field includes a dispositional theory of action. He proposes a structuralist reinterpretation of Weber's analysis, rational actor theory and instrumental rationality. The social arena is a multidimensional space differentiated into relatively autonomous distinct fields ordered into a system of difference, as a structured space of networks or configurations between dominant and subordinated positions. The actors strive after maximising material or symbolic profit through strategic acts. The choices and preferences that they make in a field are structured by the doxa and specific dispositions, habitus, which becomes inscribed in a particular form of embodiment, and separates or distinguishes them towards others.

As for myself, I'm more aligning to a modified version of Bourdieu's field concept put forward by Eyerman (1994). Eyerman contextualises the notion field and inserts the determining factors of historical construction of the field and actors as acting subjects. The field is constructed by individual actors involved in a creative process. The historical context and living tradition affects their identity, role and position. I also think that a phenomenological method and Kapferer's (1989, 1997) concept of ontology has the potential to sensitise and refine the analysis further. Kapferer's analysis combines a phenomenological approach with situational analysis and the extended case method. The aim is to render "the logic of practices or the chaotic structures formed in everyday routine and not so routine activity ... practice in all its lived messiness ..."

Kerstin

- 'Rewards of media' thread ends -

-‘Digital materiality’ thread-

Christmas, Salina – salina.christmas.09 at ucl.ac.uk

Wed Sep 29 04:18:16 PDT 2010

Hello,

I am interested in point no 4 in Mr Postill's introductory email, on 'digital materiality'. I understood that spimes were covered as a topic at the Digital Anthropology seminar. It's a pity I couldn't come to EASA because we had another event to organise in September.

During the London Design Festival event at UCL last Friday, we had the Samsung Galaxy Tablet, said to be the rival to iPad, presented to the public for the first time ever. The person presenting the device, a former UCL medical student, develops healthcare services using 3G mobile platform (ie smartphone).

Now this was that happened: because of the poor 3G connectivity, the device failed to launch into a video call to a doctor in Dublin. The room, filled with digital creatives and developers, went silent. The device failed to ignite any excitement, despite the speaker's convincing digital display of the snazzy touchscreen, apps, patient records and so on.

However, the moment 3G connection was finally made and the touchscreen launched into a video 'window', the audience got excited and responded favourably by asking questions (this is the video – when that thing finally works. It starts the MSF web editor talking a bit about his web efforts). <http://www.sojournposse.com/?p=3207>

At anthropology lectures, we are told how the physical form of an art operates as an agent that allows us to presuppose a concept in our mind. For example, the statue of a goddess made of stone puts ideas in someone's head that a) the statue is a real goddess, not just a representation; b) makes his brain imagine things like myths and so on; and thus, c) gets him into gear to do some action.

Though I am not an expert on Alfred Gell, I saw (by borrowing his lenses) that with a mobile device, the hardware (or physical form) alone isn't enough for a person to assume the concept or idea of what the device should do. It's the digital connectivity, something quite 'immaterial', that counts. That radiofrequency connectivity which the mobile device offers is actually the agent that gets a person to think: oh, I can do face-to-face interaction with this Samsung tablet. That connectivity gets the hardware behaving as if it's a 'living object', and thus, encourages the user into taking the appropriate action with the device.

My anthropological knowledge is fairly limited, having arrived at (digital) anthropology recently. My schooling was largely polytechnic, I'm afraid.

I would very much appreciate it if anyone here who knows more about digital materiality, spimes, softerials, rapid prototyping et al to share what they learn, or research, on these 'living digital objects'. My fellow digital craftsmen would appreciate getting useful points of reference to inspire our works.

Apart from making objects, we like to try to make the objects 'alive'. We devised a Greek-speaking chair a 3D installation last year. Very low-tech. My curator and I got the idea to do this after I told him

about the lecture Prof Miller gave on 'frames', and after our Digital Anthropology tutor made us read 'Remediation'. We can make objects, but what we need are ideas, so please share them.

Thank you.

Salina M Sc Digital Anthropology

Paula Uimonen - paula at net4dev.se

Thu Sep 30 00:46:58 PDT 2010

Hello, As one of the presenters at the digital anthropology workshop I am delighted by this follow up e-workshop, and I would like to thank John, Philip, Daniel, Heather and others for their efforts in organizing it. The richness of the discussions is indicative of a growing interest in digital anthropology, a disciplinary orientation that I for one like to link to media and visual anthropology in particular.

As for the discussions so far, I too have some cautions about 'digital materiality'. Although the materiality of digital media is of great interest, there is a risk that it diverts our focus away from other equally important dimensions. As Salina pointed out, 'connectivity' plays a crucial role in people's engagement with digital media, and in addition to being quite immaterial (we can see mobile towers but not the actual networks that enable data transfer), it is also very 'translocal', which in itself raises all kinds of empirical and analytical challenges. Related to this is the whole question of 'mediation'. Even Gell was not so interested in art objects per se, but the social relations they mediate, thus building on Mauss' theories of gift exchange, which he considered to be the "exemplary, prototypical, 'anthropological' theory" (1998: 9). If anything, Gell was headed in the direction of seeing art objects as persons, distributed in social networks. As a social anthropologist, I tend to focus on digitally mediated social relations, and while the materiality of digital media is an important dimension in my work, my focus remains on the people who engage with media. I always thought Nokia's "connecting people" was the most apt slogan that the media business has produced so far. In tracing the various connections people make by way of digital media I am of course interested in their practices, but also their perceptions. And this is yet another, rather immaterial dimension of digital media, namely 'culture', in the sense of systems or flows of meaning, distributed in social networks.

As for the analytical concept 'polymedia', although we didn't really discuss this at the EASA workshop, it seems to have a lot of potential, and I look forward to more responses on this list, especially from our media colleagues. One thought that keeps nagging me is the risk of falling prey to all the hype about 'convergence' that has been around for quite a while. Media convergence is a reality, but the hype around it deserves some caution, just like we should be cautious with the hype about the social media/web 2.0 'revolution'. I would also like to see that a concept aimed at capturing the variety of platforms and practices of digital media takes non-digital media into account, since in countries like Tanzania where I do my research digital media is just a small portion of people's media engagements, and an even smaller portion of their social engagements, although their cultural understandings and expectations of digital media are rather astonishing.

Look forward to the rest of the e-seminar.

Paula

Guido Ipsen – guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de

Thu Sep 30 01:55:23 PDT 2010

Hello everybody,

In the years of the hypertext "hype", I had opportunity to add a critical bit to the overwhelming discourse of the day that mystified digital media. In my PhD dissertation I argued that there is not merely the division between materiality of a medium and the conceptualisation thereof. There is more to it, namely a quite diversified layering both on the side of materiality and of concept, added by a third branch, which is practice.

By deconstructing what is generally called a "medium" in this way, I was able to show that there is a set of aspects of media usage which is quite stable, for example the basics of cognition concerned with media, and a basic set of usages, or "ends" to the media, if you prefer to call them that way. (We should really avoid quarreling about terms and concentrate on the concepts, a point that media scholars tend to ignore more often than not)

One example: In essence, our mind makes sense of a book page just as it does of a digital mobile device screen. However, the layering of the materiality of the device is more complex than that of the book. The device, e.g., makes use of different tools for saving, organising, and presenting contents. This includes both hardware and software. Besides, whether software or wireless connection are "immaterial" is off the point. To a physicist, both the plastic of the device's casing and the electronic pulses that make up the software as well as the wavelengths that are wireless communication ARE material. I follow this point, arguing that a "medium" cannot possibly be immaterial, or virtual. It must exist in space-time, therefore is never virtual.

Now, on the other end of the layering is the conceptualisation of the medium, i.e., "what happens in the mind". In my understanding, this is where virtualisation takes place. Surprisingly we find that aspects of "virtual" can therefore be found both in so-called analogue media such as "ordinary" books, and in modern digital devices.

"Connectivity" thus is an aspect of media which, on the material side, is merely one aspect of the functionality, just like the fact that a book should be bound, or show characters in sequential order. After all, a mobile device without connectivity loses its very medial essence. An audience not intrigued by a canvas and a palette of oil colours will probably freak out at the sight of the Mona Lisa. In other words: Screen, buttons, plastic casing, a lit screen, etc., are not enough to represent the digital device, as on the function layer "connectivity" must exist BECAUSE this layer finds itself mirrored on a layer of conceptualised function in the mind of the user.

Why now is practice so important? Should not the materiality and its conceptualisation suffice for a decent model? Well, such an assumption would put the medium into an a priori state: A medium, according to such understanding, is AS IS. However, as I have shown elsewhere, media practice equals individual experience with media. It is simply impossible to conceptualise a medium beyond the point of direct or indirect experience through practice (indirect experience occurs through education and learning, for example. I need not have worked a wireless phone in order to understand what it does. It suffices that somebody tells me about it).

The audience that was not excited about the "dead" wireless device as reported by Salina therefore had a clear conceptualisation through practice.

So much for now,

best,

Guido

Christmas, Salina - salina.christmas.09 at ucl.ac.uk

Thu Sep 30 05:29:52 PDT 2010

Thank you, Guido, Paula. I am taking down notes as I am reading these.

Anybody else want to share what they observe of digital materiality? A very new(ish) topic, this, so we could be reading a 'world first' of observations in this e-workshop.

Salina

Mark Deuze - mdeuze at indiana.edu

Thu Sep 30 06:49:44 PDT 2010

re: digital materiality, it may be helpful to revisit Heidegger's work, esp. his distinction between ready-to-hand and present-to-hand technologies, as well as his concerns about bringing forth the truth through technology (not by a wholesale rejection nor uncritical embrace of it) - see for example his "On the question of technology" (<http://www.english.hawaii.edu/criticalink/heidegger/index.html>).

generally speaking, the works of Friedrich Kittler are perhaps the most deliberate (and far-reaching) attempts to explore a distinct materiality of media - as in all that remains of people is what can be stored in databases. he specifically questions our blindness to an ontology of media - and traces this blindness back to the origins of (western) philosophy (see for example: <http://hydra.humanities.uci.edu/kittler/kittlertxt.html>).

the journal Criticism had a special issue on media's materiality in 2004, featuring yet another attempt to introduce a new concept to cover the complexity and capture the material-immaterial binary of media/life relationships: "materia media", coined by Cannon Schmitt.

imho the materiality/immateriality of media/society and human/machine relationships is a false dichotomy obscuring our analyses.

as Nicholas Garnham warned us, we tend to fetishize media in our scholarly work - we often cant help it. i cant. but we need to forcefully move beyond such temptations - and should not wait until media break down (i.e. connections fail, software crashes) to ask questions of what is the matter with it.

Matthew Bernius - mbernius at gmail.com

Thu Sep 30 09:30:48 PDT 2010

I have lots of thoughts on digital materiality, but need more time to put them together.

That said, I think the notion of embodied experience in interaction with mediating technologies is always an important area to turn to.

The subject of Heidegger and breakdowns/ready at hand, made me think of two excellent books on AI that really deserve more consideration within media anthro circles. The first is Lucy Suchman's Human-Machine Reconfigurations: Plans and Situated Actions (<http://www.amazon.com/Human-Machine-Reconfigurations-Cognitive-Computational-Perspectives/dp/052167588X>) which does a very nice job of working with the process of creating technology and the ideologies and assumptions that become encoded into the experience (Diana Foresythe's work on this is worth looking at as well). The other book is Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores' short book Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation for Design (<http://www.amazon.com/Understanding-Computers-Cognition-Foundation-Design/dp/0201112973>), which smartly works with Heidegger to think about the limits of the simulation/replication of cognition.

- Matt

Professor G E M Born - gemb2 at cam.ac.uk

Thu Sep 30 09:44:44 PDT 2010

Dear list /debate,

... On digital materiality (following on from Matthew's comment):

... and don't forget Paul Dourish's book, Where the Action Is (MIT 2001), an influential attempt to bring phenomenological ideas and notions of embodiment into the HCI debate; see also Dourish's stuff on ubiquitous and embedded computing /media...

... and perhaps my own early papers, based on an ethnography of software research and development, on the materiality of software:

1996. '(Im)materiality and sociality: The dynamics of intellectual property in a computer software research culture', *Social Anthropology*, v. 4, n. 2, pp. 101-116.

1997. 'Computer software as a medium: Textuality, orality and sociality in an Artificial Intelligence research culture', in M. Banks and H. Morphy (eds.) *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*, pp.139-169. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.

best,

Georgie Born.

-‘Digital materiality’ thread ends-

-‘Cyberanthropology’ thread-

Philipp Budka –ph.budka at philbu.net

Tue Oct 5 02:52:33 PDT 2010

Dear List,

As I attended the digital anthropology workshop at the EASA conference in Maynooth, I was wondering what ever happened to cyberanthropology or the anthropology of cyberculture? In 1994 Escobar painted a very interesting and vivid picture how anthropology could contribute to the understanding of new technologies as society's transforming driving forces. His concept of cyberculture integrates not only techno- but also bio-socialities, such as genetic engineering, and their socio-cultural construction. Obviously inspired by science and technology studies, he is opening here a broad area of ethnographic research, similar to what Rabinow and Marcus (2008) termed "an anthropology of the contemporary".

Is digital anthropology now only narrowing the focus or does it leave out possible overlapping fields and questions?

Budka, Philipp, Kremser, Manfred. 2004. CyberAnthropology: Anthropology of CyberCulture. In: Khittel, Stefan, Plankensteiner, Barbara, Six-Hohenbalken, Maria (eds.): Contemporary issues in social and cultural anthropology: Perspectives and research activities from Austria. Pp. 213-226. Vienna: Löcker.

Escobar, Arturo. 1994. Welcome to Cyberia. Notes on the anthropology of cyberculture. In Current Anthropology, 35/3: 211-231.

Rabinow, Paul, Marcus, George E. (with Faubion, James D., Rees, Tobias) 2008. Designs for an anthropology of the contemporary. Durham: Duke University Press.

Alexander Knorr –alexander.knorr at vka.fak12.uni-muenchen.de

Tue Oct 5 14:36:19 PDT 2010

Am 05.10.2010 um 11:52 schrieb Philipp Budka:

> As I attended the digital anthropology workshop at the EASA conference in Maynooth, I was wondering what ever happened to cyberanthropology or the anthropology of cyberculture? In 1994 Escobar painted a very interesting and vivid picture how anthropology could contribute to the understanding of new technologies as society's transforming driving forces. His concept of cyberculture integrates not only techno- but also bio- socialities, such as genetic engineering, and their socio-cultural construction. Obviously inspired by science and technology studies, he is opening here a broad area of ethnographic research, similar to what Rabinow and Marcus (2008) termed "an anthropology of the contemporary".

Is digital anthropology now only narrowing the focus or does it leave out possible overlapping fields and questions?

Well said, Philipp. To emphasize the point, here is the English version of the workshop proposal I sent to the DGV for the 2011 conference in Vienna:

Cyberculture During the early 1960s 'cyberculture' was created as a political fighting word — supported by fear of the social consequences of the proliferation of complex technology, which accelerated significantly since the postwar period. 'Cyberculture' then meant the 'lifestyle' of a society affected by cybernetics, the science of communication and control in systems of whatever provenance. The terminus proved to be ephemeral and was forgotten during the 1970s, together with cybernetics itself. Under the impression of modern technology's influence on all aspects of life gaining ever more weight on a global scale, anthropologist Arturo Escobar in 1994 sketched a new concept of 'cyberculture' and invited our whole profession to belabour the field. But social and cultural anthropology to a certain degree neglected 'cyberculture,' just as the concept of 'culture.' Instead a multitude of authors, among them so prominent ones like Pierre Lévy, coming from a wide range of academic disciplines, appropriated the term 'cyberculture.' Thereby it suffered a bit of an inflation, became a buzzword. But more than ever an anthropological perspective appears promising, which has as its central focus the interrelationships between humans and complex technology. This is because the manifold manifestations of digital electronics and state-of-the-art technology in general decisively co-define our contemporary world. Around the globe these technologies have become parameters of human existence, have become aspects of the ideas and designs of how to cope with this existence, and even of the idea of human itself. A lot of which still has been Science Fiction not too long ago has become Lebenswirklichkeit: Individuals who never meet face-to-face not only collaborate, but are forming friendships lasting a lifetime — interacting via a plethora of Internet services they create new forms of community and society. At the polar circle Inuit precisely find their ways through night and ice by balancing satellite-data with patterns of snowdrift. In subsaharan Africa nearly nobody has a fixed line network connection, but a lot of people possess more than one cellphone. A South-African with legs of carbon-fibre runs the 400 metres so fast that he qualifies for the Olympics. In Japan elderly people do no more want to miss the presence of androids and in the Near East robots search suspects for explosives. Since about a decade the number of anthropological studies belabouring such topics is increasing, giving ample testimony of the fact, that our discipline since long has arrived in the here and now, and that it may well be more relevant than ever. Decidedly focussed on the presence, perspectives which can be subsumed under 'cyberculture' promise to generate knowledge and understanding in an anthropological sense. It is these perspectives to which the workshop is dedicated.

Best,

--alex

Jonathan Marshall – Jonathan.Marshall at uts.edu.au

Tue Oct 5 15:14:30 PDT 2010

My objections to the terms 'cyberanthropology' and 'cyborg anthropology' were pretty marked when I started doing fieldwork in the mid 90s, because the general trend of analysis, spurred on by these terms, was to write about the not-yet, the what could happen, the completely science-fictional as if it was 'the real' at this moment.

People would talk about seamless virtual reality and their inability to tell virtual life from 'real' life – really on the connections we had in the 90s, the stuttering graphics, the lag, the sentences broken in the middle, the drop outs.... People were excited about us being cyborgs (and perpetually quoting Schwarznegger's terminator, who was a robot to start with!) – again really? no one was plugged in as

far as i could tell and they still arn't, and almost nobody was part robot. Although Neuromancer was probably the most quoted text of the decade (perhaps only challenged by Dibble's rape in cyberspace), no one i know was having full sensory replacement or moving about by thinking about it, or hacking in quite the same way as characters in the sprawl, or having the same kinds of surgery (and hell most of them were middle class not street kids to start with). People were dreaming they could be anyone, online, and have any experience they wished, while taking their culture and expectations and cliches with them.

The sad thing was all this fantasy was largely not beng analysed as myth or fantasy, or being used to show that technology is not 'rational' but reverberates deep in our social-psyches, and perhaps shapes what we desire, or whatever. Analysts were being distracted by it from analysing what was actually happening online, the intricate social arrangements and conventions which grew up to deal with, precisely, the failures of seamless integration, the difficulties of integrating on and offline, the way people checked up on each other in their search for authenticity (rather than the free play of identity), the conventions around authenticity, how they traded and exchanged, and gained status and used that and their contacts offline etc etc. When it comes to cyborgasm, most people now are cyborgs in trivial ways (ie tool users), certainly not in ways resonant with the metaphor, which misleads.

So for me the terms reflected a total dead end - who knows now may be different, but i suspect not.

jon

LYON S.M. -s.m.lyon at durham.ac.uk

Tue Oct 5 15:31:44 PDT 2010

Excellent post! I'm not sure whether or not I entirely agree with Jon, but I enjoyed the direct way he reminds us that hyperbole is often lurking somewhere in the writings on technology and in the 1990s I would have thought this was particularly so. But I'm actually more interested in the question he poses at the end. Have things changed all that much now? British television occasionally likes to broadcast the most bizarre specimens of human behaviour (often from the US), and not too long back I saw some rather creepy show about people who become so immersed in SecondLife that the rest of their lives suffer rather remarkably. I think a healthy dose of skepticism about the editing processes in these shows is probably called for, but people do seem to be at home in adapting ICT to play a central role in part of their social worlds. Are people plugged in? I guess this depends on whether 'plugged in' requires a Matrix like, or Red Dwarf like total VR which the users can't tell from alternative settings.

I used to teach a module called CyberAnthropology but didn't intend to make such strong statements by the use of the term. I did it far more cynically in the hopes that students would find it interesting and sign up. But if I were to revive the module, I can't help but feel that the would be considerably more justification for the term now than 5 or 19 years ago.

Or am I succumbing to the media barrage which keeps telling me this is the case!??

Steve

Philipp Budka -ph.budka at philbu.net

Tue Oct 5 23:24:12 PDT 2010

Dear Elisenda, Steve, Jon, Alex and Matt,

Thank you all for your comments. The anthropology of cyberculture, for Escobar –besides cyborg-anthropology and "virtual world technologies" studies –one of three possible projects in relation to new technologies, of course was kind of taking a look in the future. By identifying possible areas of ethnographic research he developed quite a useful set of questions and domains of inquiry. With Kremser (2004), I was taking a look at these areas of research from an Austrian perspective 10 years later. We found that there were a couple of projects actually following these questions, may they be on the political economy of ICTs, the life of online social groups or communities or software production and sharing practices. So what actually can digital anthropology contribute to this already existing body of research? Do we need a new –better fitting, less scifi –term to describe and understand what is going on with digital media technologies? Personally, I am sympathising a bit with Elisenda who prefers talking about "media (technology) anthropology", when it comes to the socio-cultural relevance of media technologies.

Thanks and all the best,

Philipp

Paula Uimonen – paula at net4dev.se

Wed Oct 6 02:05:10 PDT 2010

Once upon a time i referred to my work in terms of 'cyberanthropology', primarily because at the time (mid- to late 1990s), 'cyberspace' was a common term floating around in academic as well as public discourses about the Internet, which was the topic of my research (more precisely the social dynamics of Internet development in developing countries, including a critical analysis of the utopian visions surrounding technological development in general). These days I refer to my work in terms of 'digital anthropology', partly because 'cyberspace' has gone out of fashion, but mostly because I like to broaden my gaze to include other digital media technologies. The term also seems to attract students, if the record number of participants in the MA course in digital anthropology that I am currently teaching is anything to go by.

While I agree that most media these days are digital, so one could subsume digital anthropology under media anthropology, I am also struggling with some differences. As indicated by the discussion over the last few days, some of the work one could classify under digital anthropology draws on science and technology rather than media studies, Kelty's (2008) "Two Bits" being one example. Media and technology are of course interrelated, thus 'media technologies', but they draw on slightly different scholarly traditions.

Thus I continue to use 'digital anthropology' as a label for the anthropology of the digital, with an understanding that it can include studies of technological development as well as media engagement, and a lot of other social and cultural phenomena one can relate to things digital. In my research I pay attention to everything from computers to cameras, but I tend to focus on Internet and mobile phones, which is also what my course zooms in on.

Sarah Pink – S.Pink at lboro.ac.uk

Wed Oct 6 02:23:23 PDT 2010

While not wanting to extend this discussion on terminology for too long ... I think there is an important point to keep in mind. The different terms that we use – cyber, virtual, digital, etc are also all attached to particular theoretical traditions in existing literatures. The usage of each term therefore has a particular intellectual trajectory and this is connected to our respective favouring of or objections to these terms. The most obvious example is the 'cyber' issue. This term became popular in the 1990s as part of a postmodern literature in which it was associated with all sorts of fantasies such as cyborgs, disembodied experiences on-line, fractured identities with no stable narratives etc etc. Since then much of that theoretical thrust has been departed from, and the term cyberanthropology (even though in the 1990s some anthropologists might well have been critical of some scholarship in that area from other disciplines) for me will always be associated with that historical-theoretical turn.

Possibly theoretical trends are becoming associated with 'digital' now – digital convergence, digital versus analogue etc, all start to come to mind. Will we at some point soon get to a moment where digital becomes a term that is no long descriptive given that so many everyday practices already involve digital media – but that instead starts being a term that reminds us of a particular stage in theoretical developments whereby the digital was implicated in new ways of theorising practice and experience?

What I am trying to say, and I hope is coming across, is that cyber, digital, virtual are not simply descriptive terms for experienced/empirical/virtual realities, but rather they have connotations beyond that, and these are in part associated with the theoretical and substantive scholarship that they have emerged in relation to: they are part of a history of ideas as much as part of a history of media

Sarah

Elisenda Ardvöl – eardevol at gmail.com

Tue Oct 5 04:44:08 PDT 2010

Yeah! Philipp I was wondering about the same questions....

I think that one problem with the term "cyberanthropology" is that it was very "popular" when scholars theorized about "cyberculture" as a new revolutionary culture or as a new cultural model, sometimes in evolutionary terms (see f.e. Pierre Levy or critics to that model like David Hakken). In those days "cyberculture" or "technoculture" embraces the digital and the bio.

At the same time, "Cyberculture" was limited to the studies of cultural forms in "Cyberspace" (see f.e. the division between Cultures of Internet and Internet as a Cultural artefact, proposed by Christine Hine). So, when the term "cyberspace" was questioned, and the notion of virtual communities became "old fashion", that means, when online ethnography was put into question (as a derivative reading from Miller and Slater's book), then... connective ethnography proposals emerged and cyberculture approaches went down (except perhaps with the revival of Boellstorff's Comming of age in Second Life).

Now... I think, we are talking about Digital Culture as a way to delimit a field of study related to the cultural forms and practices with and across digital media... but there is still a problem with the term "digital" and "media", because all media are today "digital" and there are digital objects that where not considered as media, but can act as media.

In that mess, I prefer to talk about "Media Anthropology" instead of "Digital Anthropology" or "Cyberanthropology". As I put the emphasis in "media", I take for granted or I take for included the "digital". So, from my point of view, the "digital" is included in media anthropology. I Think that "cyberanthropology" is much more complex and wider as it includes, as you said, biotechnologies. Another question is digital material culture... of course!

But I am not too sure, in fact, these are my shared doubts....

Elisenda

NATALIE HANSON -nataliehanson at mac.com

Tue Oct 5 08:08:32 PDT 2010

Hi all -

I have been a list member for some time, and have enjoyed reading the exchanges here - especially around the thoughtful and well-structured seminars A quick introduction before my reply - I am an anthropologist with a focus on workplace settings and work practices. Although my focus has not been on media, I have studied visual media and visual communication in my doctoral work and have found it quite relevant for my ongoing research and analysis. You can learn more about me at <http://www.nataliehanson.com> or <http://nataliehanson.wordpress.com>.

Funny enough, this topic also came up on a list that I manage called anthrodesign (<http://www.anthrodesign.com>), which explores the use of ethnographic methods (largely in) the business context. I am sorry for the brief reply here, but I wanted to offer something quickly while the discussion is still active ...

I would agree with the intimation below that cyberculture has become such a popular term that it doesn't have a clear meaning or boundary any more (at least for me). However, the term cyborg describes up interesting arenas for exploration, and is perhaps a more appropriate framing for cultural anthropologists. Cyborg Anthropology is based in Science and Technology Studies, and is about how the human evolves and even transforms in relation to technology of all kinds. As such, the cyborg orientation has much more to do with the body than with external factors alone.

I guest lectured on this a number of years ago, so for your information, here is what I used to assign for the required /recommended readings. The first few are in the order I'd recommend reading them - Escobar and Downey et al provide a great overview. If you're serious about learning more, I would also suggest the edited volume by Chris Hables Gray. The Haraway (in Recommended given the nature of the class I was teaching) is tough reading but is worthwhile if you can slog your way through it. There is a link to her Manifesto on the Stanford website here - <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Haraway/CyborgManifesto.html>. As this is no longer a focus area

for me, I don't know what the current literature is, but I would agree that this orientation has sort of fallen out of common use.

Best, Natalie

CYBORG ANTHROPOLOGY

Cyborg Anthropology is a theoretical approach in Science, Technology, and Society Studies (STS) in which the Anthropology of Visual Communication plays a significant part. The Escobar essay will help put Cyborg Anthropology in the context of STS, and the Downey et al. article will provide some more detail about what cyborg approach can bring to anthropology. The subsequent articles (Stone, Gusterson, Downey, Rapp) can be read in any order, each of them providing a cyborg perspective on different industries and worlds.

Required Readings:

Escobar, Arturo. 1994. Welcome to Cyberia: Notes on the Anthropology of Cyberculture. *Current Anthropology*, Volume 35, Number 3, pp. 211-28.

Downey, Gary, J. Dumit and Sarah Williams 1995 Cyborg Anthropology in *The Cyborg Handbook*, Chris Gray, editor. New York: Routledge, pp. 264-269.

Stone, Allucquere Rosanne. 1994. Will the Real Body Please Stand Up? Boundary Stories about Virtual Cultures in Cyberspace: First Steps. Edited by Michael Benedikt. Cambridge, MIT Press, pp. 81-113.

Gusterson, Hugh. 1995. Short Circuit: Watching Television with a Nuclear-Weapons Scientist in *The Cyborg Handbook*. Edited by Chris Gray. New York: Routledge, pp. 107-116.

Downey, Gary. 1995. Human Agency in CAD/CAM Technology in *The Cyborg Handbook*. Edited by Chris Gray. New York: Routledge, pp 363-370.

Rapp, Rayna. 1997. Real-time Fetus: The Role of Sonogram in the Age of Monitored Reproduction in *Cyborgs and Citadels: Anthropological Interventions in Emerging Sciences and Technologies*. School of American Research Press: Santa Fe, New Mexico, pp. 31-48.

Recommended readings:

Haraway, Donna 1993 A Cyborg Manifesto : Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century, in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*. New York: Routledge. p. 149-183

Nichols, Bill. 1996. The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems in *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*. Edited by Timothy Druckrey. Aperture.

Spiller, Neil. 2002. William Gibson_Neuromancer_1984 in *Cyber_Reader: Critical writings for the digital era*. New York: Phaidon Press Inc.

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Matthew Bernius - mbernius at gmail.com

Tue Oct 5 14:12:25 PDT 2010

"Cyber anthropology" seems to me a cautionary tale in looking at the wrong features of a phenomena. Fair or not, I think it became largely tied with the notion of anthropology in "cyberspace" (whatever happened to Cyberspace, btw). Typically, the only place where I see it still invoked is in the area of internet studies -- often by people who have limited traditional anthro experience.

Cyborg Anthro, as articulated by Dumit et. al, I personally think is a far more productive concept. That said, one can argue that the entire attention to cyborgs in academia (outside of Science and Technology Studies and certain wings of anthropology) is something that runs hot and cold. Donna Haraway, who while not the originator, definitely helped ground the entire line of inquiry, has herself moved onto the consideration of companion species.

- Matt

-‘Cyberanthropology’ thread ends-

-Concluding remarks-

Postill, John – J.Postill at shu.ac.uk

Sun Oct 10 14:27:26 PDT 2010

Dear All

A reminder that our e-workshop on digital and media anthropology ends this Tuesday at 9 pm GMT. This means we've still got time for a quick round of concluding remarks –including perhaps suggestions for future discussions.

John

Lane DeNicola – denicola at alum.rpi.edu

Tue Oct 12 12:48:40 PDT 2010

I've unfortunately had to listen in on the discussions from afar while riding the crest of the busy first weeks of term, but I can say quickly at least that I'd be interested in extended discussion on the subject of the professional review of academics working in this vein, wherever they might situate themselves within the media/digital culture constellation.

I've seen similar discussions elsewhere—for example, should/how could the creation of alternative analytic/expressive forms be incorporated into the professional review of academics working in these areas, in concert with the established metric of written articles published in peer-reviewed journals? This may in fact be a question with implications really for the academic enterprise as a whole, but certainly for those of us with a specific interest in contemporary media and information technologies, the degree to which we're able to engage with multiple publics outside of academe would seem to depend on how we answer the question.

Enjoyed hearing from everyone!

--L D

Postill, John – J.Postill at shu.ac.uk

Tue Oct 12 12:55:08 PDT 2010

Many thanks for that suggestion Lane, I agree this would be a topic worthy of discussion in a future session.

John

Postill, John – J.Postill at shu.ac.uk

Tue Oct 12 12:53:00 PDT 2010

Dear All

The digital and media anthropology e-workshop has now come to an end.

I'd like to thank once again Philipp Budka, Heather Horst, Daniel Miller and Mark A. Peterson for all their help before, during and after the EASA-Maynooth panels, and all of you who've made the effort to contribute to the lively exchanges we've had both face-to-face and via the mailing list.

As always with scheduled discussions on this list we'll have a PDF transcript of this session up on our website shortly. If you'd like to suggest a new topic or format for a future e-workshop (or indeed for other types of event) please drop me a line off-list.

Thanks!

John PS -Announcements about forthcoming e-seminars to follow within the next few days.

-Concluding remarks end-