

**Media Anthropology Network
European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)
Discussions**

Discussion
Media Futures

Introductory Text
Debora Lanzeni

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/mailing-list>

February 5-19, 2014

Veronica Barassi <v.barassi@gold.ac.uk>

February 5th 2014

Dear List,

I am delighted to open our second informal discussion. This is in anticipation to our 45th E-seminar, which will be opening on the 25th of February.

As you might have noticed the EASA Media Anthropology Network is organizing a panel on "Media futures: media anthropology of, for and through the notion of 'future'" at the EASA 2014 Conference in Tallinn, Estonia (<http://www.nomadit.co.uk/easa/easa2014/panels.php5?PanelID=3070>).

We would like to take this opportunity to pre-discuss the main aspects of this panel via the Media Anthropology Network mailing list. On the one hand because we think that this is an interesting topic for the anthropology of media and its future(s); on the other hand because we would like to encourage participation of the list members to the conference panel. So in the next two weeks, from 5-19 February, we invite you to discuss with us the "future turn" in media anthropology and its consequences.??

One of the three panel convenors Elisenda Ardèvol, Philipp Budka and Debora Lanzeni will send out an introductory text on this topic to start the discussion. Please feel free to participate and share your experiences!

Veronica

Debora Lanzeni <dlanzeni@gmail.com>

February 5th 2014

Dear List,

It is with great pleasure that I am sending you our thoughts for our second informal discussion.

Please feel free to contribute to the debate with ideas, thoughts and suggestions. Your feedback is very important.

Thank you very much.

Elisenda, Philipp and Debora-

Constellation of Media Futures

In the last decade, the 'future' appears as a renewed bias in many social sciences and media studies works. Concretely, in media studies, this fact is related with the significance of the futuristic imaginary in media contents analysis (movies, TV, music, etc.), the advent of digital technologies and its utopias/dystopias, and the academic concern in participatory new media phenomena and social change to grasp new media phenomenon. In addition, the current tendency in media studies to no longer be object-centred (Parikka, 2012) allows scholars to take into account imaginaries, visions and desires as part of the 'actual' media. These trends point out the importance of conceptualizing media in their connection to today's meaningful notions of 'future' in order to better understand contemporary media and their past and present transformations.

The notion of 'future' acquires many meanings in the various disciplines that study media. Furthermore, future is conceptualized, theorized and utilized in differing ways. There are two big conceptual constructions that are playing central roles in the articulations of academic discourses about media-futures. First, the most complex and promising, is the dyadic articulation of Future as a "meaning-giving device" which is associated with technological development. Second, the less explored and most controversial, is forecasting the future based on the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, rather than explain our past or interpret our present, taking the future as an analytical goal (Boellstorff, 2014).

The concept of future in the first construction has been mainly mobilized in order to study imagined futures and their historical, political and social conditions; how futuristic imaginaries configure the way we see current technologies; how designers and techies are making the 'future' through their creative practices and which utopias and dystopias are related with digital media nowadays. All these questions focus on the present. This perspective questions the actual conditions of meaning production and departs from the notion of 'future' to open new possibilities from the present scenario. Therefore, our workshop at the EASA 2014 conference aims at understanding how future operates/acts in the construction of meanings, as part of practices, as a goal in the present, as a vector in the development of media, as a descriptor of hegemonic discourses, and so on. For instance, media archaeology scholars pointed out that by looking at how the 'future' was imagined in the past we could understand the present media. They suggest that the

histories of media are "media imagined related" (Parikka, 2012), which means that contemporary media are seen as a result, among other things, of other imagined media that were never realized but their "imaginary" still remains in the design. Future visions project on and act out economic, social and moral values in order to delineate the pathways to improve our life, design our technology, resist and modify the social conventions, innovate and create (English-Lueck, 2000).

Another trend of this 'futuristic turn' is based on the idea that we can predict possible futures based on ethnographic fieldwork, as well as other qualitative and quantitative methods. In this perspective media and social research are understood as a way to explain and produce predictions or anticipatory foresights. As Daniel Miller in a blog post about Facebook, explains how he sees the future of this social medium based on the present, as illuminated by ethnographic data. This points to the well-known debate recently highlighted by Boellstorff (2014) between natural and social science or the positivist vs. constructivism drives to explain/predict and interpret/comprehend.

We would like to bring this debate about future notions to the list in order to gear up the Media Anthropology Network workshop on media futures to be held at the EASA Biennial Conference next August.

- Which media futures are in dispute?
- Which futures are embedded in digital media content, design and practices?
- How are images of the future interwoven with media regarding space, materiality, the sensory, sociality and intimacy?
- How do media futures change over time and cross-culturally?

Imaginary brings coherence where there might be none, and this might be good way to analyze the dreams world promised by contemporary media-technological discourses, whether in terms of their role in social relations (being always connected, across distances, and time, as in so many mobile media discourses) or as a source of endless "gratification" – instant delivery of dream content in a post- broadcast culture of on-demand (Parikka, 2012:46).

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

February 6th 2014

Dear List,

This is a most interesting and promising discussion topic. As a side remark, I think there is some connection to the topic of "change" from the last e-seminar, which has not been completely settled.

But maybe by talking about the media-anthropological options of talking about the "future", and the bridges between the "now" and the "then" (as difficult and constructivist these notions appear), we may be able to specify more what makes the future different from the present, and hence gain a better understanding of what change means in the field of media usage and behaviour.

One apparent factor in the future of technology, and hence the future of the media, is the aspect of the "potential" of media usage. In other words, the needs of a community in regards of media may be mapped on the actual usage of media. Some users of media in communities will realize that their actual needs go beyond the usability of the media devices at hand. This is the point where innovation takes place, and inventions extend the potential of the media at hand, which has been argued by Cassirer in the field of technology in general.

The mapping of media usage on the scope of media needs opens up perspectives on:

- Forecasting media change (what might/is likely in the future?)
- Defining needs (what is absent in the realm of media?)
- Exploring substitute solutions (what do people actually use if they need to expand the present state of the art of media?)

All of these, and possibly other questions, address the area of usage, which can be researched empirically. Possible extrapolations on the future of media may be examined ex post facto.

These are just some spontaneous thoughts of mine in this rather informal discussion.

Best,

Guido

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Elisenda Ardèvol <eardevol@uoc.edu>

February 8th 2014

First of all, thanks Guido for opening the floor with your compelling thoughts.

I agree that this debate has multiple connections with the latest discussion about change and how do we understand "future" in the process of social change and/or in terms of temporality.

I also appreciate that you bring the case to the empirical ground and put into a particular context the question of how we deal with the notion of "future" in the case of "media usage and behavior". But I am not sure if you are referring to the Human-Computer Interaction field or addressing the question of user's innovation, or neither of this!

Any case, it is very suggesting the way you introduce the notion of "media usage" linked to "users of media in communities", and I think that it could be interesting to further develop, because, on the one hand, it expands the debate about users' appropriation of media in unexpected or innovative ways and the classical debate about domestication of technology (Berker, Hartman, et al. 2005; Hirsch and Silverstone, 1995). On the other hand, it resonates with the idea that users are everyday innovators and that they play a role in shaping digital media technologies (Haddon, Mante et al., 2005). Moreover, from that standpoint, it can be said that ethnography may be useful for "mapping" users needs, expectancies and spontaneous solutions regarding media and so, it can be a tool not only for forecasting media change, but also for helping designers to produce the actual changes in media technology for matching user's needs.

Finally, the notion of "communities of usage" may go far beyond the idea of an individual user and the division between users and designers, producers and consumers. The question then, is to what extend "communities of usage" are participating in design processes and can become "experts" (Basset, 2013) in the technology development arena and if when talking about "communities of usage" we are only considering "users" as "consumers" or we are thinking otherwise...

Have a nice weekend!

Elisenda

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Philipp Budka <ph.budka@philbu.net>

February 11th 2014

Dear List,

Some quick thoughts on media (anthropology) futures:

I think that anthropology's strength in the debate about media technologies, their relevance, “impact” and future, is to de-centre these technologies. In contrast to tendencies in media / technology studies the centre of anthropological analysis and research has always been the human being and its socio-cultural relations. Anthropologists therefore have developed conceptual tools and methodological approaches that centres around the human being and being human. Ethnographic fieldwork, for example, is about to capture the attention of more and more media / technology researchers.

But since socio-cultural relations are increasingly enabled and mediated through technologies, as non-human actants, to use Latour's notion for instance, media technologies have been integrated into anthropological/ethnographic research. I think that anthropology can learn a lot in this respect from science and technology studies, particularly SCOT (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_construction_of_technology).

The focus on the human subject remains important because as we know – and history has shown – media technologies come and go.

I remember quite well, when I began to work on topics related to “the internet” about 15 years ago and colleagues asked me why I am doing this because this form of communication / interaction obviously has no relevance to mankind and hence the discipline of anthropology. Well, now it has. And people keep asking me if I can imagine a world without “the internet” and digital services such as Facebook, e-mail or twitter. And my answer is yes. I admit that internet technologies are so deeply integrated into many societies and personal connections that it seems almost impossible to live, work or study without these technologies. But I think we can learn a lot about the contemporary digital technologies if we imagine a future without them.

To summarise very briefly: media anthropology has a future when it doesn't get caught in the trap of over-centralising media technologies. A problem, I think internet / social media studies / research / etc. is about to face. If not now, then in the near future.

Best,

Philipp

John Postill <jrpostill@gmail.com>

February 12th 2014

Taking off from Philipp's parting reference to the near future, I'd like to say one or two things about what media anthropological research could contribute to the forecasting of the near future (I'll leave the much tougher mid- and distant future out of the discussion for now).

It occurs to me that it may be an interesting exercise as researchers to reflect on what near-future predictions we and our research participants have got right and wrong in the past. For instance, those of us involved in the build-up towards the 15 May 2011 marches across Spain calling for 'real democracy now' were pretty confident that these would take place. We could see the campaign gaining momentum week by week. How well attended they would be was anyone's guess, but most of us thought it was highly likely that demonstrations would happen in many Spanish cities precisely on that date, for these were "scheduled" events.

By contrast, the Tahrir-inspired occupation of Puerta del Sol and other main squares across Spain following the marches was not only unscheduled, it also came as a big surprise to the organisers of the marches, as they did to the mainstream media and the general population. As far as I can tell, the occupations hadn't been forecast. Most of us got it wrong.

When the Occupy movement kicked off in New York City that September, this came as much less of a surprise to those of us involved with Spanish activists than it did to the mainstream media in the US. After all, it had been foretold for some time on Twitter (a transnational hub not just of information but also of activist agenda-setting and public-making) and other web platforms, as well as in face-to-face meetings. The Spanish experience was now seen as a template for things to come elsewhere. A classic self-fulfilling prophecy (but only for those in the know).

So it occurs to me that one area of research we may want to pursue anthropologically is the media dimensions of past and future self-fulfilling prophecies. Perhaps there's already a literature on this question?

John

Amparo Lasén Diaz <alasen@cps.ucm.es>

February 12th 2014

Hello,

Great idea, a reference that come to my mind is Richard Grusin's notion of pre-mediation.

The logic of premediation relates to how socially networked media mediates the future before it becomes present, focusing on affects of anticipation and connectivity, fears, hopes and so on. Grusin draws mostly on examples from commercial or big media coverage, but I'm sure it can be useful to think about other kind of media practices and experiences as well.

Here is an interview with the author about this:

<http://wordpress.anti-thesis.net/projects/texts/premediation.pdf>

All the best

Amparo Lasén

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

February 16th 2014

Hello all,

The discussion, to which I will not be able to contribute all too much due to other tasks that keep me from writing, goes into interesting directions. Let me react to some of your ideas:

Elisenda put forward the question whether "future of media devices", in my understanding, refers to the Human-Computer Interaction field or addresses the question of user's innovation, or neither of this.

Well, I think I should like to combine my answer to this question with a remark to Philipp's statement:

The focus on the human subject remains important because as we know – and history has shown – media technologies come and go.

I remember quite well, when I began to work on topics related to “the internet” about 15 years ago and colleagues asked me why I am doing this because this form of communication / interaction obviously has no relevance to mankind and hence the discipline of anthropology. Well, now it has. And people keep asking me if I can imagine a world without “the internet” and digital services such as Facebook, e-mail or twitter. And my answer is yes. I admit that internet technologies are so deeply integrated into many societies and personal connections that it seems almost impossible to live, work or study without these technologies. But I think we can learn a lot about the contemporary digital technologies if we imagine a future without them.

To summarise very briefly: media anthropology has a future when it doesn't get caught in the trap of over-centralising media technologies. A problem, I think internet / social media studies / research / etc. is about to face. If not now, then in the near future.”

Very much so! The pitfalls of media research are manifold, but two of the most dangerous

notions, to my mind, are:

a) "Media = Technology". This equation, narrowing media studies down to, for the most part, looking into the developments of things such as printing, circuits, and airwaves, harbours enormous dangers for anybody beyond media studies undertaking research (or theorizing) on its basis.

Its result is the hermeneutic prejudice that only through the change/innovation of technology, a change/innovation in mediation as a cognitive-communicative event will occur. In other words: enlightenment came about "because of" the printing press. Trivialization of art (I'd like to tell Benjamin one or two things about his concept of "art") came into being "because of" mass-medialization. Protest movements start "because of" mobile media. The hermeneutic bias of explaining social events, or developments, by the sheer availability of technology turns a blind eye on the creativity potential that human beings are able to muster once their needs - and here I refer to Elisenda, who correctly focuses on this aspect - are challenged. The need to mediate some message, or cognition, in a given situation will not be hindered by the absence of a certain technology. The essential question is: Whatever will a human being make use of "in order to mediate something to somebody else" once the need occurs? It may be great for the survivors of earthquakes to be able to use mobile phones to tell search parties where to look for them. But a stone and a piece of metal to create a noise will do the job, too (admittedly, this is no example with empirical potential).

b) "The future must show some 'progress'", i.e., its nature is in itself technologically positivist (this, for some weird reason, meaning that somewhat more sophisticated apparatus will replace outdated ones). In some fields of media studies, for example, the notions of "forgetting", "decay", or "collapse" simply do not exist. However, developments in the future (or in the present) may very well prove that old technologies will replace new technologies if the users' needs in the given situations warrant it, without creating regression. One example are the small, local, "old-fashioned" radio stations that mushroomed in countries struck by quakes such as Japan:

Japan possesses some of the most advanced media and telecommunications infrastructure in the world, and Japanese citizens are major users of the internet and social media networks. But that technology did not cover the information needs of the community. Instead, community radio, local newspapers, newsletters – in some instances, hand written newsletters – and word of mouth played a key role in providing lifesaving information for communities. Radio was consistently ranked the most useful source of information by disaster-affected communities. (Online: <http://www.internews.org/our-stories/project-updates/new-report-examines-role-communications-disastrous-2011-earthquake-japan>)

So, all in all, trying to contribute to the forecasting issue, I should debate any attempt of drafting whatever as yet unknown technologies, or devices, would be able to cover humanities fictional needs in a fictitious future. We should leave this to science fiction. History shows that human communities have been confronted with similar problems and scenarios again and again; albeit under varying circumstances. Forecasting therefore

should rather resemble a process of assembling data known from empirically assessed situations, from real communities, and its mapping on possible, similar situations under the influence of potential changes in the social, political, or scientific fields (to name but a few). I think I am being realistic in such an endeavour, as the immense work of anthropologists in studying communities and publishing their findings has created a database that can be exploited for the programme. Following up John's idea of assessing forecasting failures, from developments of mediation needs of the past, it may be possible to sketch limits and checks for this anthropological forecasting method.

However, I think that even before anything else, we need to agree on what we are talking about, once more. For me, media and mediation go far beyond the limits of media technology. I hope that by sketching these ideas I have been able to clarify more what I mean by "potential", too. The potential of a given item, or material, or idea to function as a "medium" for a community in a given situation is not a limited resource, but it varies from situation to situation. From our knowledge of situations, we may be able to shed some light on what items, ideas, or technologies, may have some potential of fulfilling mediation needs of communities in the future.

All the best,

Guido

Joseph Oduro-Frimpong <josh60@siu.edu>

February 16th 2014

For me, media and mediation go far beyond the limits of media technology.

Guido, thanks for sharing this current thinking which seems not to have completely seeped into media [anthropology] studies. Definitely our understanding of media and mediation should not be limited to traditional mass media formats but any medium (e.g. obituary posters, vehicle inscriptions, candles, talismans) through which information conveyed.

Cheers,
Frimpong

Philipp Budka <ph.budka@philbu.net>

February 17th 2014

Dear Guido, Dear List,

Thanks for your comments.

I agree that is problematic to equate media with technology, but particularly in respect to mediation I find it useful to underline the technological aspect of media and communication. This way it is easier to think beyond the pure content of a medium or message and the producer-user dichotomy by including, for instance, the physical and/or

sensorial aspects of media, such as infrastructure, ecology, environment, etc. I am therefore in favour of using the term “media technologies” which I find covers the most relevant aspects of media anthropology: technologically mediated communication. We had an interesting discussion about the definition and the meaning of media anthropology and the relevance of mediation right at the beginning of our network and over this very mailing list in 2005 (see: <http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/mailling-list>). Dominic Boyer (2012) refers to this discussion in his proposal of an anthropology of (social) mediation that goes beyond communication media.

I also find Guido's reference to the role of community radio in post-earthquake Japan very useful in respect to the (effective) utilization of media and the relevance of new media technologies. During my own fieldwork on internet technologies and services in Northwestern Ontario, Canada, I quickly learned that community media, such as local radio or regional newspapers have been used in this remote region since the 1970s (e.g. Budka 2009). Thus, in aiming to connect people and communities, new digital media technologies have not been “new”. They actually have been building on “old” media and their agenda to enable communication. And despite the continuous distribution and implementation of digital media and ICTs that are now used in all possible societal areas (e.g. Fiser & Clement 2012) – from education to medicine – and their promising potential to support concrete problem solving in this remote and isolated region, radio is still considered as maybe the most basic communication tool or device within the communities. Everywhere you go you find people listening to the radio.

It is not only used to listen to music, but also to communicate important information – from weather reports and snow conditions to temporary closing of public building – and not that important messages about the last fishing derby or the upcoming bingo tournament for instance. And it seems to me that community radio's relevance in this area will not change in the near future.

Thanks and all the best,

Philipp

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Fiser, A., Clement, A. 2012. A historical account of the Kuh-ke-nah Network: broadband deployment in a remote Canadian Aboriginal telecommunications context. In A. Clement, et al. (eds.), *Connecting Canadians: investigations in Community Informatics*, pp. 237-

Dear Philipp, all,

A few quick thoughts too to add to the discussion, first on media/mediation, then on futures. First, I too have found discussions here tremendously helpful, including Brian Larkin's response to Postill in Dec 2012, in my efforts to think media and mediation beyond narrowly defined technologies of mass or electronic media. (Here I am also drawing on Rosalind Morris's lectures and published works [see Morris 2000, 2009], and my fieldwork with spirit trance and exorcisms in Morocco--exorcisms recorded for YouTube for example [see Spadola 2014]). Thinking most broadly I've come to define a /medium/ as "any structure of communicative possibility," including kinship and ritual structures (Morris, personal comm). /Mediation/ for me is the particular and unique enactment or performance—in short the repetition—of (mediating) structures that risks always transforming the mediums and the actors. /Communication/, whether as connection or mobility, for me focuses on practical transformation. Finally, technology is any extension of a corporeal capacity that also transforms the body: i.e. that produces a novel origin. Might such a definition include language? The body itself? Certainly, Mauss (1973, p. 75) refers to bodies as humans' "first and most natural instrument." Thus, following Philipp, we may want to focus our definition of media technologies, and with that consider technologies' breadth, including its originary prosthetic qualities.

Re futures in light of the definition of medium as "possibility": I would emphasize that, following Derrida (1988), a medium also rests on "iterability" -- repeatability or citability -- which is to say, on the promise of a future mediation the control of which is always uncertain. In this sense mediation rests on the possibility of a future.

Thanks very much,

Emilio

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Philipp Budka <ph.budka@philbu.net>

February 19th 2014

Dear Emilio, Dear List,

Thank you Emilio for your comment and thoughts on mediation and futures.

I would like to remind you all that today is the last day of this informal discussion on media (anthropology) and futures. So please use this remaining hours to add to the discussion, pose your questions or report on your experience in this area of media anthropology research.

Thank you very much,

Philipp

Veronica Barassi <vbarassi@gold.ac.uk>

February 19th 2014

Dear All,

Thank you for your contributions to this informal discussion on media (anthropology) futures, and apologies if I haven't been able to offer my support.

Following Phillip's email this is just a reminder that the seminar will close today at 00:00 GMT, so please do send your final comments.

All the best

Veronica

Elisenda Ardèvol <eardevol@uoc.edu>

February 19th 2014

Josep Fontana, a very well known historian in Barcelona, published at the end of the last year "The future is a foreign country" evoking Lowenthal's famous book about the past. Fontana's point of view is that in the current crisis of the welfare state, what we see is that the social achievements in terms of freedom, citizenship and equality have turned out to be more fragile than expected and that we cannot take actual social changes as of the "old future" and the need to re-imagine the future. The future emerges then as something in dispute, as a strange land, as "otherness"... and as a renewed object of study which revivals the conversation between historians and anthropologists (see the key debate in

Ingold's book, 1996). Then, how do we study the future? One answer, of course, is doing it ethnographically (as anthropologists do) and a privileged field site is media at large.

The central role of "future" is clear enough in media practices, policies and developments, and a serious problematized issue by media and social scientist scholars. See for example, the recent call for papers by Christian Fuchs to the "Media and Communication in and after the Global Capitalist Crisis: Renewal, Reform or Revolution?" Conference (on the list via John Postill and Débora Lanzeni) asking "How has the crisis affected the media and communication landscape in Europe and globally and what perspectives for the future of media and communications are there?" or the International Summer School in Politics of Near Futures: Possibilities, Prophecies, Prognoses that "interrogates historical and contemporary ways of making sense of the future and bringing ideas of worlds-to-come into the spheres of politics, science and cultural production." (on the list via Philipp Budka).

In this open debate we have been dealing with many suggesting propositions about media and future. Just to say a few, the Richard Grusin's notion of pre-mediation brought by Amparo Lasén, exploring the media production of futurities, or Guido Ipsen on media change and the communities of media usage and innovation. Media notions also have been explored, realizing that "media" is a complex notion that cannot be reduced to "technology", "communication" or "symbolic content", not even to "mediation", I shall say. Philipp Budka considered that "media anthropology" is not centered on media technologies (nor in objects or media-related-practices), but in human living. Thus, I must conclude, media (whatever it is) is part of the "livings" we are in. And so, I think, the challenging proposal of John Postill addressing the question of an area of research that we may want to pursue anthropologically is the media dimensions of past and future (self-fulfilling prophecies). Frimpong points to at least an important issue, from my point of view, which is the comparative and dialogic dimensions of anthropology and how media notions need to be cast in dialogue with "other ways" of thinking and doing things (or other arenas of doing and thinking things) that can bring light to our current discussion about media futures.

Call me naïve, but I would like to believe that what anthropology brings to this interdisciplinary debate are more questions, surprising connections and openness to possible answers.

For following the discussion and open it to the different queries, breadth and novelties that this topic raises, you are welcomed to participate at the workshop: Media futures: media anthropology of, for and through the notion of 'future' at the EASA Conference.

The call for papers is now open, closing on 27th February!
<http://www.nomadit.co.uk/easa/easa2014/panels.php5?PanelID=3070>

Yours,

Elisenda

References:

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Summer School 2014: Politics of Near Futures: Possibilities, Prophecies, Prognoses <http://www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/en/studies/summerschool.html>

Media and Communication in and after the Global Capitalist Crisis": ESA RN18 2014 Conference Call http://fuchs.uti.at/wp-content/RN18_2014.pdf

Sarah Pink <sarah.pink@rmit.edu.au>

February 19th 2014

Dear all

It has been interesting to read the discussion so far relating to media, anthropology and the future. I was involved with John around discussions of the question media anthropology and future as question for the network to consider, so wanted to point to some of the reasons why I think this is an interesting (and perhaps important) question for media anthropologists and media scholars generally to engage with.

My points below are questions to consider rather than answers; although they inform my own research agenda so I would say I have my own answers to them:

1. media anthropology and by implication media ethnography opens up ways of understanding what people do with media, in doing so it invites us to think about, and account for the future orientation of what people do with media. By this I do not mean to prescribe what we should research about. Rather I want to suggest that we might look for and account more for the ways that people's own accounts and performances of what they 'do' in the everyday of the present of research itself might also account for what they think they will do in the (not distant) future.

2. Media anthropology has some common interests with those very disciplines that are interested in media and media as it will be in the future – such as HCI research and design research more generally - what creative and critical role lie there for anthropologists? some anthropologists are already engaging with this area, but is there a wider role there for media anthropology scholarship?

3. How does media anthropology and/or digital anthropology connect with design anthropology. The latter being a part of anthropology that directly engages with a future orientation by connecting anthropology with a discipline that directly engages with future temporalities through its relationship with design practice and thinking.

4. In the 'impact' era where (at least in some national academic contexts) we are increasingly called on to produce research that has some impact and makes some intervention in the world. In this context do media anthropologists need/want to engage with the future? impact/intervention/design research brings together anthropology with the work of making change in the world, which makes a temporality beyond where we are now an inevitable part of our research. Surely a media anthropology of how the future is made, constituted and understood needs to be part of any engagement that media anthropologists have with this impact agenda.

Sarah

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

February 19th 2014

In reply to Elisenda, and to Fontana, I should hope that the future really is merely a "foreign" country and not/The undiscovered country, from whose bourn/ /No traveller returns.../ If you get my meaning, because that would be sad for media anthropology in general and for the communities to be studied in particular.

My concluding thoughts are but a few sentences.

"Media technologies", proposed by Philipp, is much more precise than the general term "media", which is employed by some at the level of cognition, then again on the level of representation (in the mind), on the level of communication, and on the level of technologically supporting communication. In other words, if media anthropology concentrates on the study of the employment of media technology, it is located on the upper end of the field the opposite pole of which is occupied by media philosophy, or, to some extent, pragmatist semiotics.

This is an important decision to take, because the dimensions of either discipline need to be clear, so that fruitful interaction is possible. Sketching the future requires input from many disciplines, which should cooperate instead of compete.

As early as 2001, I have made clear that we need to define more precisely what "media" are, when the hype about the new media began and authors such as Bolter or Landow proposed that the new media would make a huge difference. Well, so they have, and to some extent, the fortunetellers of hypermedia have been right, but the new "republic of letters" (envisioned by Bolter) that brings forth freedom of speech everywhere, etc., remains a myth. So much for talking about the future of the media.

At that time I demanded that a difference be made between the general notion of media, or mediation, on an ideal, or cognitive level, and the "form" that is employed to realize these ideas. The form, in many instances, is substantiated by technology, but it does not have to be. A piece of architecture, an orally communicated poem, or what have you are examples for this fact. To some extent, from old and new media, constantly new forms are created, resulting in hybrid mediation everywhere.

Therefore, I do not argue that media anthropologists should make a decision whether they should study the usage of technological devices only. That would be a decision based on an artificial dichotomy: Behind the usage of technology, there are many communicative acts not based on technology. One has to accept the full range of communication, the negation of one of its aspects is counterproductive.

My concluding thought is, all in all, that we are dealing with a transdisciplinary field in which many voices must be heard, and where philosophy, cognition sciences, media studies, anthropology proper, linguistics, communication studies, history, and several other disciplines are at home. Whoever is at home somewhere may knock on your door sooner or later, because you are their neighbor. If they do, let them in.

Let's have a housewarming party.

Let's study the future!

Best,

Guido

Mark Pedelty <pedeltmh@umn.edu>

February 19th 2014

Hi All,

I second Emilio's point that this has been a very interesting and useful discussion.

I'd like to add one thought regarding the future of media ethnography in relation to media studies, more specifically. I believe the strength of media anthropology and ethnography, more specifically, is in the way we engage with actual practices, what Malinowski referred to as the "imponderabilia of daily life." We often catch that which is missed in more distanced methodologies (e.g., armchair textual analysis). Emilio's work in Morocco is an excellent example. It is truly about something "out there" in the world, work that results in meaningful theoretical frameworks vs. general/vague claims about media or media theorization in the abstract. Therefore, the one point that I am not completely on board with in Elisenda's otherwise compelling post is the following:

Call me naïve, but I would like to believe that what anthropology brings to this interdisciplinary debate are more questions, surprising connections and openness to possible answers.

Every media-related discipline brings that to the debate. Per the reliance on Derrida, etc., we see throughout these posts, we don't tend to bring meta-theoretical framing to the debate either. We bring serious, long term, holistic, participant-observation fieldwork to the debate. We should not take that for granted or forget that that is our primary contribution, or media anthropology will be as duplicative to the other media studies

disciplines as cultural studies has been, at times, in ignoring a rich history and present of anthropological theory.

Toward that same end, I am a bit bothered by the tendency to start all discussions like this by positing the straw man of media studies fields who supposedly assume "narrowly defined technologies of mass or electronic media," as Emilio and several contributors have asserted as the starting point for this discussion. Who are these incredibly narrow scholars? Do they really exist or is that simply a useful rhetorical device for making our works seem more carefully thought out (thus the constant "rethinking" titles), nuanced, and meaningful? The post structural turn has provided many benefits, but the rhetorical tendency toward bolstering ones arguments based on an assumed, non-thinking "other" is not one of them (Derrida and Foucault having been masters at that evasive rhetorical strategy). To plot out a better future, we need to have a more accurate and complex understanding of the past and present of media studies writ large, and our place therein. Mark Peterson's *Anthropology and Mass Communication* accomplished that goal extremely well. I believe, in the future, more of us need to follow Mark's example when characterizing media studies scholarship, in general, and media ethnography, more specifically.

There is a rhetorical companion to the straw man intro: the vague theoretical outro. Once again, I'll pick on Emilio, because he strikes me as someone who has tended to avoid the very problem I am trying to identify, so hopefully he won't mind me gerrymandering through his very cogent post to draw out the two phrases I find problematic. I use Emilio here to make my point because it is a minor tick, to my way of thinking, at the edges of his very insightful main body of work. Emilio ends his post on this note:

I would emphasize that, following Derrida (1988), a medium also rests on "iterability" -- repeatability or citability -- which is to say, on the promise of a future mediation the control of which is always uncertain. In this sense mediation rests on the possibility of a future.

Criticizing Derrida, not Emilio, I would say that is an example of vague gesture substituting for actual insight. Perhaps fields do become too theoretically narrow, but they can also become useless in the other direction. I find Derrida's point about iteration oddly vague and totalizing at the same time, but I confess having that theoretical orientation toward much of his work. I am not saying that we must always be mired in cases, evidence, examples, etc., but we should avoid substituting theoretical genuflection for insight into actual media, mediation(s), audience, production, networks, systems, or whatever the object of study might be. As an anthropologist involved in areas of media studies where few anthropologists tread (communication studies, music), I find myself hoping that media anthropology will, in the future, continue to bring the world to scholarship in a way that does not always happen in other media studies disciplines. As media anthropology falls too far toward vague theorizing, it could lose its potential to say something truly new. Media anthropology has a distinct role to play, but only if we, as media anthropologists, have a better understanding of what other media studies fields contribute as well. I have found other fields neither narrow nor theoretically vacant, or at least no more so than media anthropology. My fear is that we run the risk of turning

claims about others' narrowness into actual projections if we don't ground our arguments in good ethnographic research, the likes of which is rarer outside of anthropology. Conversely, the only way we can claim theoretical distinction, as has been implied in a few posts, is by ignoring that the same theoretical discussions are happening across all media studies disciplines.

Elisenda and Emilio: please forgive my using those brief lines as the basis of my critique. I am a big fan, and only did so because I am in accord with 99% of what you write and know that you both are ok with collegial disagreement on this relatively minor point.

Thanks, everyone, for continuing to produce the most interesting e-seminars in academia. Cheers to John and Philipp for having produced such a vital brainchild.

Regards,

Mark

Peterson, Mark Allen. *Anthropology & mass communication: media and myth in the new millennium*. Berghahn Books, 2005.

John Postill <jrpostill@gmail.com>

February 12th 2014

A final thought on media ethnographic forecasting triggered by Mark Pedelty's remark:

[...] the strength of media anthropology and ethnography, more specifically, is in the way we engage with actual practices, what Malinowski referred to as the "imponderabilia of daily life".

I've done a bit of work on protest-related trends in Spain. This has got me thinking about vernacular forms of thinking and acting upon perceived trends. Trends are not the preserve of big data people, market analysts or fashion gurus; trend thinking seems to be ubiquitous, indeed integral to how we operate as a species.

Perhaps one of the forecasting jobs media ethnographers can undertake well is the qualitative study of subtle, 'below the radar' media-related trends that escape other forms of inquiry, including big data. These are sometimes trends perceived by research participants as deleterious, e.g. moral anxieties in areas where mobile phones have recently arrived about what young people may be up to on these devices. The ethnographer's job in this case would be not just to note these anxieties but also to study the actual mobile-related practices of young people.

Vernacular trend discourse and practice will often signal tangles of processes of change and continuity at grassroots level that can help us make, in collaboration with our research participants, some educated guesses about the near future. These guesses can have practical applications, e.g. in areas such as health, jobs or schooling.

John

Veronica Barassi <vbarassi@gold.ac.uk>

February 19th 2014

Dear All,

Thank you so much for this challenging discussion, which is now officially closed.

Despite I wasn't able to participate, I deeply enjoyed reading your thoughts and contributions, and it seems to me that there are still many issues to be discussed from our conceptualisation of media futures to our role as media ethnographers.

You are all welcome to participate to the Media Futures workshop at the EASA Conference. The call for papers is now open, closing on 27th February!

<http://www.nomadit.co.uk/easa/easa2014/panels.php5?PanelID=3070>

All the best

Veronica