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E-Seminar 54
Notes on Workshop “Theorising Media and Conflict”

By
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Discussant
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Birgit Bräuchler (birgitbraeuchler@gmx.net)

Nov 10

Dear list,

I am happy to share my comments on John Postill's workshop report:

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

Reading the workshop outline and abstracts gave me a good impression of what the general themes were, but, as you know, without participating and observing yourself you miss out on the interesting details. Where some answers were given, many more questions were raised. First of all, however, I was impressed by the broad variety and the ground covered by the workshop contributions. It comprised conceptual work based, among others, on theories of power and communication, as well as empirically grounded research, which would be a good combination for a future publication project. From the notes I could not grasp though how balanced theory and empiricism were. I was fascinated by the contributions about the multi-sensorial dimension of media and conflict, including media aesthetics, the visual, sounds and emotions. Cyberspace as the extension of war space was discussed as well as the delicate issue of cybersecurity and the

increasing ‘militarization of private civil and social life’ (a good expression for what is going on in the field of digital data collection). Cybersecurity is commonly mostly conceptualised in a technical sense (i.e. hacking or destruction of computer infrastructure), taking ICT as potential weapons and as acts of war, which feeds well into security policies of states such as the US or certain policy research institutions in Singapore. It became clear at the workshop that issues of cybersecurity reach out far beyond the technical aspect of ICT, especially given the viral potential of social media that not only foster democratisation and participatory governance, but also racialisation and the enforcement or construction of group boundaries. And I could go on with other interesting themes dealt with at the workshop.

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

1) Conceptualising conflict and peace

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

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

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

communities (e.g. Marshall 2007). Is a meaningful delineation or definition of conflict possible for our purposes?

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

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

2) Conceptualising media

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

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

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

3) Media-centrism

The question is in how far we can avoid media-centrism when talking about media and conflict. I would certainly agree with workshop contributors emphasising that offline engagement with Internet actors is essential for an anthropologist's contextual approach. The same is true for other

media activities, be it TV, radio or newspaper reading. However, and this is interesting, with regards to online media there still seems to be the necessity to emphasise the interlinkage of the online and the offline, the 'real' and the 'virtual', categories that have been deconstructed years ago. These are questions that I was dealing with in the early 2000s when anthropological Internet studies were still in their infancy (Bräuchler 2005, 2013), questions that re-emerged when Tom Boellstorff published his study on *Second Life* (2008) and claimed that research on virtual worlds should in fact be restricted to online spaces as otherwise the researcher would add a perspective that the other players would never be able or would never want to adopt.

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

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

Birgit Bräuchler, Monash University

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Veronica Barassi (v.barassi@gold.ac.uk)

Nov 11

Dear All,

I would like to thank Birgit for her detailed and thought-provoking comments, and take the opportunity to open the discussion to all.

all best
Veronica

Gareth Bentley (gb13@soas.ac.uk)

Nov 11

Dear Veronica,

Having been a passive agent so far in the Medianthro seminars, can you tell me how you make a contribution? Do you just click on 'reply all' and your message goes out to all participants? My academic work is about media and conflict, so I hope I have something useful to say.

Thanks,
Gareth Bentley

Sahana Udupa (Udupa@mmg.mpg.de)

Nov 13

Thanks, John, for sharing the workshop report on a fascinating set of papers.

Birgit Bräuchler has raised very pertinent questions on conflict, mediation, mediatization and media-centricity.

I add briefly to the point on conflict that anthropology of media and conflict would make distinctive contribution if it critically engages development-policy discourses on conflict, post conflict and transition. Many media and conflict studies are rooted in this development-policy framework, concerned with actual situations of war, post-war recovery and 'transition' to democracy etc. As media anthropologists, I believe, we have an enormous opportunity to widen this discourse, and critically engage with assumptions that societies can 'transition' to 'normalcy' after meeting certain parameters of governance. To this end, themes such as suffering, memory, aesthetics and place-making are so important, just as new forms and norms of speech, gamification and anonymity (just to name a few) that are specific to the digital media environments today. Such a move will also take us away from a state centric analysis of conflict -

towards new 'sites' and experiences of conflicts. But then, how do we understand the difference between 'conflict' and 'contestation'?

It would also be fruitful to raise some key sociological categories - if it is conflict, is it about religion, ethnicity, race, language, gender or market and situate analysis of particular cases through them.

The phrase, 'digital mundane witnessing' is enormously interesting. Would anyone say more about this? I am writing a paper on a riot in India in which a viral video about violence against Muslims played an important role. It would be helpful to know more about 'witnessing' since a large part of new media's mediation appears to be in reconfiguring truth effects in conflict situations. Phenomenological perspectives seem very helpful here.

Dr Sahana Udupa
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for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity
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Johanna Sumiala (johanna.sumiala@helsinki.fi)

Nov 15

Dear Sahana and the list,

Just a short note for Sahana on mundane digital witnessing. The original concept of mundane witnessing was to my knowledge first introduced by John Ellis. But he mainly discussed it in the context of TV. If you are interested in the topic of media witnessing I warmly recommend to have a look on an edited volume by Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski "Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication" (Palgrave 2009), it includes John Ellis' article "Mundane Witness".

I've been working on the concept of mundane digital witnessing for ex. in the context of school shootings and hope to develop this concept further in this upcoming volume Theorizing Media and Conflict edited by John and Philipp. In this piece the focus will be on Charlie Hebdo 2015.

with best,
Johanna Sumiala

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School of Communication, Media and Theatre
University of Tampere
Finland

Dear all,

continuing the thread on mundane digital witnessing

I would like to draw attention to the vernacular histories that might inform a seemingly universal format such as mundane witnessing. In my opinion, as anthropologists, it is important to show how particular forms of witnessing are informed by ideas of personhood; leader-subject interactions or state-citizen interactions; and narrative traditions. Mediatization of suffering is very often steered by aspirations for mediation (resolving a conflict; finding a solution); yet the possibility of political action draws on local repertoires and regimes of the visual and of public speech. These are all historical and cultural.

In the media context in which I work - postcolonial Kinshasa - witnessing about suffering triggered by a malfunctioning state has been informed by (a) Pentecostal-charismatic genres of witnessing; (b) NGO work; and last but not least (c) local aesthetics of mourning. These lead to particular aesthetics (images and sounds) and media genres. In Kinshasa, this has inspired a novel type of news reporting - 'la proximite' - the proximity report - which is embedded in TV journal broadcasts, and which can be viewed after news reports about the president, or negotiations between political actors. Some news channels - especially those that are closer to the political regime, such as the state channels and those owned by political leaders - tend not to broadcast that many proximity reports; TV stations that claim to 'speak for the people' make proximity reports the hallmark of their news broadcasts. Another TV station, Moliere TV, which does not have a news broadcast, shows the proximity reports in a one hour TV show - called 'Kin Makambo' (the problems of Kinshasa). Since more than 7 years, this is one of the most eagerly watched TV programs in Kinshasa.

Interestingly, it are often viewers who call the journalists and camera men to film a problem (e.g. no electricity in a neighborhood for more than three months; plague of youth violence; erosion threatening several houses; etc.). This also leads to a particular positioning of the media professional in society: in these contexts the media journalist is perceived and actively approached as someone who can fix problems, who has power because of his/her contacts with the political elite.

So, I want to emphasize here the fact that we should pay attention to the histories of communication and political particularities in which forms of digital witnessing are produced and circulate.

For those interested to learn more about the proximity reports - you can find some footage on youtube here:

-youth delinquents arrested because having beaten police men: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-2bmRDWYQQ> - here you have different actors of 'witnessing' - the delinquent himself (who here, denies); a male witness (who has accused the youth; and who has been threatened by the youth as well); a female witness (who speaks for her children; whose batteries of their phones

have been stolen; the thieves also entered in their house to steal and beat up people – she asks that she receives the goods of her children back); finally a police man witnesses about the group of delinquents and the difficulties the police experience when they want to arrest them -<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YKLaT3hg> - about the area Beaumarche in Kinshasa – which has become the most important space of Kinshasa’s nightlife and has turned into an immoral space – the voice over sketches the area and the problem (immorality, young girls spending their nights there, seducing men); the problem is confirmed by a witness, a man who lives in the area; followed by a young girl who confirms that she visits Beaumarche ‘commune de plaisir’; and an older woman who gives a historical account and complaints that in the past it was a good area

My article on witnessing in Kinshasa's media context was published here:

Katrien Pype (2011). Visual media and political communication: reporting about suffering in Kinshasa. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 49, pp 625-645.

doi:10.1017/S0022278X11000504.

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=8428972&fulltextType=RA&fileId=S0022278X11000504>

Further, I would highly recommend the volume edited by McLagan, M and McKee, Y, 2012, *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism* - MIT Press

-<http://www.amazon.com/Sensible-Politics-Culture-Nongovernmental-Activism/dp/1935408240>- authors come from different disciplinary backgrounds (some are artists/architects, etc.) and they all explore how visual culture (photographs, architecture, film etc.) is mobilized to gain public support and political influence.

Some issues/questions for debate:

a. why is there such an emphasis on the 'mundane' in 'mundane digital witnessing'? My experience - again in Kinshasa - is that in religious circles, there is also witnessing about the 'mundane' (as in non-spiritual?) performed by believers and religious leaders. It seems to me that there are is much interesting material 'out there' in the digital world that crosses the analytical boundaries of the mundane and the sacred, which beg to be studied and to expose novel forms of political action; new dynamics in the so-called secular world; and related to that emergent types of engagement and responsibility.

b. problem of accusing – in the first footage mentioned above, about the violent youth, it becomes clear that the media are filming and broadcasting a narrative report of the events before the accused has been able to defend him/herself. In a society like Kinshasa where justice is not accessible to many, viewers who call the media professionals actually call them to intervene actually because they want to correct society; the media professionals who produce the proximity report – which is so popular – has never been taken to court for reasons of privacy infliction. Yet, it is clear that media witnessing not only speaks about suffering but often also accuses (very often in order to shame); these public forms of accusation might be problematic in some contexts, while they are not in other contexts. I would be very much interested in learning about the afterlives of “mundane digital witnessing” – the witnessing is indeed one action in a chain of social interactions.

best,
Katrien

Philipp Budka (ph.budka@philbu.net)

Nov 16

Dear All,

Even though I am not familiar with the concept of "mundane witnessing", I think that "the mundane" stands here more for "the everyday", "the normal", "the ordinary". Like when we are talking about the mundane use of digital media technologies, such as youtubing, downloading, streaming, gambling or facebooking, in contrast to "special" or "specific" ICT usage (practices) such as online learning or telemedicine (e.g. Budka 2015, Horst 2012, Sandvig 2012). And this - if I am correct - doesn't necessary exclude "the sacred" or "the spiritual". But maybe someone more familiar with the concept can elaborate on that.

Thank you all for the interesting contributions so far and I am looking forward to a continuing vivid discussion.

Best,
Philipp

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Birgit Bräuchler (birgitbraeuchler@gmx.net)

Nov 16

Dear all,

I know that this is not directly related to comments on witnessing etc., but thought I need to bring it up as it fits well into our seminar theme.

I attended a seminar last Friday on Social Media and conflict. It was mainly about the Australian Military's use (or ignorance of) social media. It was interesting to see how little they so far engage with the issue and they seem to be pretty much at a loss given the extensive use of social media by Daesh & Co.

This morning I was reading the news about 'Anonymous' declaring war against IS and starting one of its biggest cyberattacks ever.

Would be great to hear your thoughts about this. We could easily relate this to issues I brought up in my introductory comments on how to define conflict, how to avoid media-centrism, etc.

Best
Birgit

Peter Hervik (peter.hervik@gmail.com)

Nov 18

Dear All

Brächler argued that we need to tap into the legacies of the field of anthropology and its historical treatment of the concept of conflict. While I do not disagree on this, the interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary contact field of media-anthropology may find some relevant inspiration from an another more obvious area, when it comes to tightening up of the author's use of the concept of conflict. Or, rather the empirical approach to conflict and some vocabulary that goes with it. Namely, the interdisciplinary field of Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) that includes studies on for instance how media, policy and war go together, how information warfare and war games relate, and different forms of visual analysis of iconic images. All of these were present to some degree at the Vienna workshop. Even if these PACS studies to some degree been dominated by a state-oriented Political Science and its top-down approaches, then PACSA (the EASA network) and sites like the new journals "Conflict and Society" have some important contributions to make at the level of empirical data-gathering on conflict and the framing of conflict.

More consistency could be applied to how we handle the social media during war and violent conflict. A basic starting point for empirical conflict analysis could be There are many manuals with basic questions. In fact, they are basic questions yet not always dealt with in many of the papers presented. Who are the primary and secondary actors of a given conflict? Who are the spoilers? What is the conflict about? What interests, power bases and resources involved? What kind of conflict is it? How is the conflict played out? In all of these questions the news media and popular media plays a crucial and integral role.

Questions need of course to be discussed and developed for the specific conflict, but it does seem they can fairly easy be applied to both the inter-personal and community level as well as larger conflicts involving war and information warfare.

br,
Peter Hervik

Theresa Conner (tessconner@me.com)

Nov 18

Birgit,

Is this seminar online - was it posted anywhere? It would be wonderful to view the seminar content.

Best,
Tess

John Postill (jrpostill@gmail.com)

Nov 21

I agree with Birgit about the importance of revisiting the long history of anthropological studies of - and through - conflict. For example, methodologically I've always found the old Manchester School 'follow the conflict' motto very helpful as a way of exploring some of the complex, messy ways in which media actors and technologies get entangled when struggling over an issue, and how these entanglements change across sites (both online and offline) over time.

To this I would add the need to also scan and (re)read the media anthropological literature in search of research and theorising that seldom comes under the rubric of 'media and conflict' but can nonetheless be still useful today. For instance, a quick scan through Ginsburg et al's (2002) *Media Worlds* reader reveals existing work by Abu-Lughod on the mediation of inter-generational conflicts via soap operas in 1980s Egypt, Mandel's discussion of conflicts related to the making of the first Kazakhstani soap opera in the post-Soviet era, Ginsburg's research on indigenous media and the documentation of conflict in white settler societies, McLagan's account of the Tibetan movement and its Western media backers, and so on. These late twentieth century works invite us to explore both continuities and changes found across different kinds of media-related conflict in recent decades.

John

Reference

Ginsburg, F. D., Abu-Lughod, L., & Larkin, B. (2002). **Media worlds: Anthropology on new terrain**. Univ of California Press.

Mark Hobart (mark.hobart@gmail.com)

Nov 21

Might I link John's reminder of the epistemological role of conflict in anthropology to Matti's comments about the risks of confusing simulacra with actuality?

My impression is that the discussion so far tends to identify conflict with overt physical or verbal violence, as negative, problematic and disruptive to some normal – presumably balanced, relatively conflict-free – state of affairs. Such a presupposition is problematic on two scores. First, it fails to engage with arguments that treat contradiction, conflict and antagonism as inescapably, and even productively, part of complex societies, which I take to be John's point. Second, it risks conflating occasions when differences are articulated publicly as conflict with all the disagreements, differences of power, wealth and position, potential oppression and so on, which remain unarticulated or have been disarticulated. While Gluckmann could perhaps overlook these latter, it is difficult for anthropologists interested in media to do so without

ignoring the whole issue of articulation. In other words: who gets to represent what as what to whom on what occasion for what purpose? I take it that this was Matti's point in highlighting the risk of 'basing serious policy decisions on a kind of a simulacrum: research that is based on previous research that is based on previous research that is based on previous research – with nothing necessarily to anchor it down to the messy world of anthropological practice'. Deploying anthropologists' singular expertise requires, however, taking a critical approach to conflict not as self-evident but as an outcome of practices of articulation.

Best

Gareth Bentley (gb13@soas.ac.uk)

Nov 21

I would agree with Mark's point up to a point, that the cultural anthropological turn, certainly towards media and conflict, is the central question, the aporia of politics itself. Mediaanthropological discourse (pace Foucault) is not an error, illusion, alienated consciousness or ideology, but the actual precariousness of human truth itself and how it traumatically propagates itself.

But there is something traumatically repetitive in media anthropological discourse towards old binaries of human as either mechanical object or subjective irrational agent, as either immanent or transcendent. There is also a displacement in some of the discourse so far of the complex political human on to media technology, especially digital technology, a commodity fetishisation of social media that fits all too easily an uncritical capitalist technological teleological ideological unconscious. At the same time, there appears to be a persistent desire to deny the traumatic mimetic function of all life forms, not exclusively human, but all biological life forms as living media themselves, whose artificial/authentic experience is immediate, not an academic 'objective' category of 'media'. What about the mimetic faculty? Human agency is constrained by historically conditioned, mass mediated binaries of us and them, but still insists on creating its own virtual reality, simulacra.

For me and my work on journalistic agency, this truthfulness is not only the anthropological turn, but the subjective turn of complex human political communicative experience. For some, truth is interrupted by false objectivity and, for others, objectivity is interrupted by false subjective political truth. But we are all convergently and divergently affirming, denying, interrupting and ignoring each other using 'social' media right now, are we not?

Brett Frederick Dwyer (Brett.Dwyer@cdu.edu.au)

Nov 22

The problem here is one of perspective - I think Matti raised it in relation to my question about his proposition that anthropologists could counter 'moral panics'. We could run for Government as well! I certainly do not see that as my role. I do, however, see a role for media anthropologists in, for instance, deconstructing claims to knowledge and control and mediation of narratives - especially in the context where the usual means of knowing about the world is via the media.

With respect to the current state of affairs with IS/Daesh - it is clear, 'the West' hasn't got a clue

what to do and getting them together with the Russia, China, Israel and other Islamic states for a way forward is an incredibly difficult problem full of obstacles and dangers. But it is an extremely difficult problem to solve and wide spread conflict is a distinct possibility - people are being killed. Europe and Islam have been biting at each other for centuries and there seems to be no reason to suspect that will somehow cease in the next decade or so. I raise this not as rhetoric but to emphasise that U.S. policy focuses on U.S. interests - as it probably should, and its interest will be in conflict at some level with those of Europe - as is borne out with respect to Internet policy, for instance.

An anthropological perspective is just as likely to emphasize the position of one side to the detriment of the other side within whatever polity it is practiced. You can't produce an ethnography of all parties in the one document - we are normally constrained to produce an ethnography about those whom we work with. When do anthropologist become ethicists declaring who is morally right and who is morally wrong?

I also want to voice my opposition to the use of the term 'white-settler societies' - I think I have here before. As a white Australian I find the term derogatory and simplistic and it fails to recognise the complexity and particularity of Australian society.

Brett

Brett F. Dwyer

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Matti Pohjonen (matti.pohjonen@gmail.com)

Nov 24

Hi Brett,

Thank you for the comments again!

Maybe I could re-frame what I wanted to say the following way: anthropological research can perhaps counter moral panics (and not anthropologists) taking this way the spotlight of the anthropologists having to take too strong a moral or political stance. Anthropological research can thus serve (and we seem to agree on this) a kind of a demystifying or moderating function by looking at what people actually do with media rather than take the representations and common sense myths for granted.

This said, however, I would also be hesitant in seeing my research separate from the assemblages and networks of power it is connected to. Research that does not involve itself in political debates just taps into different assemblages and networks of power. You say:

*An anthropological perspective is just as likely to emphasize the position of one side to the

detriment of the other side within whatever polity it is practiced. You can't produce an ethnography of all parties in the one document - we are normally constrained to produce an ethnography about those whom we work with. When do anthropologists become ethicists declaring who is morally right and who is morally wrong*?

This is also why I would be very sceptical of the claim that anthropology – and this was what the whole Writing Culture debate was about for me – should not take a stance. Or perhaps said differently: if research cannot be separated from the networks of power involved in how knowledge is produced, this stance has always-already been given to us whether we want it or not. It is pre-given because of our subject positions in the societies we live in.

So in my mind how one chooses to use this is simply a pragmatic choice one makes, that is, how one thinks is best to navigate the networks of power one is connected to. For me there is really no judgement here, no right or wrong, or really anything even ethical or moral.

But this diverges from debates on media and conflict.

Veronica Barassi (v.barassi@gold.ac.uk)

Nov 24

Dear All,

We have decided to extend the seminar for another week. I will close the seminar on Tuesday the 1st of December at 12pm GMT.

all best
Veronica

Dr Veronica Barassi
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John Postill (jrpostill@gmail.com)

Nov 24

Going back to the question of media and conflict, I think the Paris or Beirut attacks and similarly complex 'media events' lend themselves to collaborative analysis that is beyond the reach of any single researcher.

It may even be an idea - which I tentatively float here, but do feel free to disagree -- to organise the entire edited volume *Theorising Media and Conflict* around a single case study, so that the whole analysis is greater than the sum of its parts. Thus we can already begin to see the relevance of a number of perspectives brought to the Vienna workshop as well as to this e-seminar to a prospective collaborative analysis of the Paris attacks, e.g.

* How existing identity boundaries are reinforced by these heavily mediated events (Oren Livio),

e.g. high-profile new atheists like Sam Harris or Richard Dawkins find further evidence for their repeated warnings about the threat to Western civilisation of Islamist ideology; critics of US foreign policy like Greenwald blame America and its allies, etc. (this is also about articulation, see below).

* The militarisation and securitisation of the internet post-9/11 by both state and non-state actors (Victoria Bernal), see for instance Anonymous' declaration of war against ISIS following the Paris attacks which includes taking down thousands of pro-ISIS Twitter accounts (a development currently being discussed by Gabriella Coleman and others over at the hackademia list).

* The sound and music of digitally mediated conflict (Matt Sumera), e.g. widely shared footage of how the gunfire interrupted the rock concert in Paris to the initial bafflement of the band, presumably soon remixed and distributed in highly diverse ways by both pro- and anti-ISIS social media creators.

* Digital witnessing (Johanna Sumiala, Minttu Tikka and Katja Valasviki) and sharing of the events, similar to what we saw in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attacks and ten years on from the 2005 London bombings which marked, according to some media scholars, the beginning of citizens' mobile phone coverage of such incidents, later relayed by the mainstream media.

* The question of articulation, or 'who gets to represent what* as* what to whom on what occasion for what purpose?' (Mark Hobart) - which cuts across all other dimensions listed above and should be, as Mark says, central to our media anthropological concerns.

And so on...

Tulay Atay-Avsar (atayavsar@gmail.com)

Nov 24

Dear all

Due to my tight schedule I only have been reading you but could not be contributing. Having said that I would recommend including Ankara bombing within your discussion.

Best

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Matti Pohjonen (matti.pohjonen@gmail.com)

Nov 25

Hi John,

Let me second you on this. Even if I did not attend the workshops and do not want to speak too much out of context here, I think this is an excellent idea: either focusing on one singular event

(such as Paris or Beirut) or comparatively between two such rather different kinds of media events (with of course different levels and types of media coverage between them).

One interesting perspective to add here, perhaps, could be the "cultural translation" of these initial media representations to subsequent media representations in other parts of the world (whether this concerns this digital witnessing RTed, liked, shared and commented on other social media, to fake or unsubstantiated news used to convey a pre-existing narratives about terrorist attacks, to appropriation of this material for anti-refugee sentiment forums, to media commentary on how we should understand this abundant media coverage in the first place (or the lack of coverage where Beirut was concerned etc).

Cheers!

Matt Sumera (matt.sumera@gmail.com)

Nov 26

John, et. al.,

I really love this idea and am intrigued by the opportunity to take one event, which is itself an assemblage of a variety of intersecting networks, and explore it from multiple--potentially even contradictory--angles.

In particular, I am intrigued by how this approach could help open up existing notions of media, which currently tend to be limited to either mainstream print or televisual media or a variety of social and electronic media platforms. From my perspective, at least, we also need to account for a host of other media, not the least of which include song and music—here I'm thinking about the performance of John Lennon's "Imagine" in front of the Bataclan and the ways in which video of this performance circulated as a form of public grieving and affective suffering. Memes, profile pictures (with overlaid French flag), flyers and posters, graffiti, and other forms of (im)material culture that function to mediate the experience of the attacks could all be addressed.

Cheers,
Matt

Johanna Sumiala (johanna.sumiala@helsinki.fi)

Nov 25

Dear all,

Just a short note, I also warmly support the idea of focusing on one case and shedding light on it from a variety of analytical perspectives instead of having several different cases and related contexts.

best,
Johanna S.

Victoria Bernal (vbernal@uci.edu)

Nov 26

I like John's idea very much, too. We just have to be careful to situate the one event in the context of much broader discussions otherwise there is the risk of seeming too narrow in focus and/ or too topical on something current that may seem dated in the years ahead.

John Postill (jrpostill@gmail.com)

Nov 26

Many thanks for those suggestions about comparisons between media events and their cultural translations, Matti. I'm reminded here of earlier media anthropological work on how foreign TV shows and films are 'appropriated' in various cultural contexts.

I agree this could be very interesting. Just today I learned via a Facebook friend about how some Mexicans have responded to threats from ISIS through self-deprecating memes showing that Mexicans are not afraid to take them on (see also Belgium's cat memes during their recent state of emergency): <http://www.latintimes.com/isis-mexico-memes-twitter-reacts-threat-terrorist-group-355911>

Another possible angle is the question of perceived distance from, or proximity to, a mediated conflict. I was in Lima (Peru) during the Paris attacks and I remember a taxi driver telling me that they somehow felt closer, more threatening, than previous terrorist attacks of this kind, which felt remote. What (and who) makes some conflicts feel 'closer to home' than others in different contexts?

John

Sahana Udupa (Udupa@mmg.mpg.de)

Nov 26

Great point on "cultural translations", Matti and John.

Currently, images of Paris attacks, Syria, Afghanistan etc. are doing rounds on online media in India to delegitimize popular Bollywood actors (who happen to be Muslims) for their comments on intolerance in India.

Internet media's transnationalization of events and their cultural translations animate particular histories and animosities. The key effect is to provide new references for comparison. So, India is 'better' and 'more tolerant' than Syria or Bangladesh, or Paris as an example for what might happen, or Paris as Beirut now versus Beirut as Paris of the Middle East in the past etc., <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n23/adam-shatz/magical-thinking-about-isis>

Sahana Udupa

Theresa Conner (tessconner@me.com)

Nov 26

"What (and who) makes some conflicts feel 'closer to home' than others in different contexts?"

- Media systems and actors (Univision), that have a history and editorial processes in which 'who' gets to decide what to and not to show' in the contexts of visual representations of crises

and death has been 'wider/broader' than other outlets (CNN)

- Media audiences whose consumption of these types of attacks (whether via events in their own countries or other countries) can and do consider or empathize with an event (let's aim to understand how much our 'event' is or is not inter-related to how people experience conflict. If I view the Paris attack from Mexico (or Peru), I have different points of departure, especially if I'm in a 'conflict' zone, or "living" with conflict. I can add to this/explain.

- Media convergence. If one views news on conflict through distinct sources (online sites, television, social media) sources (say a Twitter user or a blogger that focuses on Oromoconflicts in Ethiopia; a journalist who's work has been on feticide in Mexico), cuts over to a specific conflict that is not necessarily 'outside' of his/her main topic.

There are now linkages in "conflict" that have been eroding for some time. This erosion has occurred (in spite of, because of?) distinct practices on what can/cannot be shown, by whom, and audiences' lived experiences/relationships to "conflict."

Tess

Theresa Conner (tessconner@me.com)

Nov 26

Meant "femicide" not feticide.

Brett Frederick Dwyer (Brett.Dwyer@cdu.edu.au)

Nov 27

Re your comment:

'There are now linkages in "conflict" that have been eroding for some time. This erosion has occurred (in spite of, because of?) distinct practices on what can/cannot be shown, by whom, and audiences' lived experiences/relationships to "conflict."

I am inclined to agree with you - though don't know if I read you correctly, correct me if i am wrong. My own experience in Vietnam is that in the production of online narratives, people will draw in linkages with stories, ideals, actions, which they see as fitting with the narrative they are producing. I would object to the notion that there is an overarching super narrative that binds all, or that there is a grand position which, will be marked out. But I don't think you are saying that. I think the "erosion" you are talking about is precisely what media anthropologists should concern themselves with.

Brett

Brett F. Dwyer

Building Red 5.8
Charles Darwin University
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Northern Territory 0909

A good example off the top of my head is

those paragons of conflict, "Anonymous" with the hacking of ISIS friendly Twitter accounts; I haven't read Coleman's stuff yet but hopefully will get around to it soon (this holidays), so if she has already spoken about these ideas then my apologies.

First, let's be clear, Anonymous cannot declare war. Declaring war is a complex phenomenon, which takes immense amounts of authority and organisation across many different levels of activity (Check for example the U.S. example with respect to Iraq). Anonymous, however collectivised, imagined, operated, manifested, does not possess this authority or organisation. Put another way, we can safely ignore them in that respect.

Anonymous does, however, possess the ability to integrate its own media productions, somewhat, with established and newer media, and does possess an ability to close online accounts - actually we all do. So Anonymous exists as a type of 'media facility' (I would resist the idea of them being a collective - that is their ideology is it not?) mainly for the organisation and dissemination of particular narratives, with the added 'bonus' of carrying out co-ordinated online attacks. This facility is appropriated in myriad different ways but ultimately it seems, it emerges with a particular agenda as distinct from others. I think high on its list are child pornography, Scientology, Isis, capitalism - (I think its anti-anthropology because it attacks social phenomena we anthropologists might find interesting to study - so maybe it is full of evolutionary psychologists). The point is that there is heaps of work to be done here finding context for the existence and machinations, focuses, positions, representations, cultural significance? all quite straight forward ethnographical questions. But then other more anthropological questions emerge as well

Brett.

Brett F. Dwyer

Building Red 5.8
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Brett,

We agree on several points.

A number of thoughts in my head that I didn't share. This position may narrow my lense...I'm a decolonialst thinker (Emma Perez, *The Decolonial Imaginary* (1999), Walter Mignolo, *Local*

Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking (2000), Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Bhikhu Parekh, The Decolonization of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power (1995). On (theorizing) media anthropology and conflict I am interested in how we might consider re-working “conflict”...this brings me back to John’s exchange with a taxi driver in Peru who expressed ‘closeness’ about the Paris attacks, and to associations (that perhaps have been invisible in media anthropology but are now an area of focus and visibility)??

I self-associated with the taxi driver (may not be valid at all), because I recall the newsreels of US television coverage on the hostage crisis at the Japanese embassy in 1996 by the MRTA. One cannot simply overlay this crisis onto the Paris attacks, but I worked in Peru at the time, so this crisis is a point of reference (one of urban conflict). I wonder what closeness the taxi driver was describing and (his?) indices - emotional, historical. Did the taxi driver index a public memory, and if so which?

If we are seeking to bring visibility to conflict in media anthropology, my position is that we can consider that which has largely been invisible, or disappeared - anyone who’s worked in conflict zones (in or not necessarily in a journalistic capacity), will have distinct associations. In this context, that which is being indexed is of great interest to me. On erosion (invisible to visible) this is media anthropology, and some of the media actors, editorial frameworks and audiences that I referenced.

I am asking that we place some of our gnosis (ways of knowing, concepts of truths) into question for this endeavor, as I believe you point out “authority.” The lenses through which I can credibly explore the Paris attacks are from decades in crisis zones (I’m baffled when I hear ‘this happens in x country, not here’), and a focus on decoloniality and power as areas that invite us to look at “conflict” in such a way that provokes us to revisit theory and method.

There is a French television show On n’est pas couche that symbolically changed its title to On set solidaire: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JQBBAGi5Q8><<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JQBBAGi5Q8>>

This show features artists - theorists, writers, musicians, and at times politicians who debate current events. If you are a French speaker the broadcast above that debates the Paris attack is a rich dialogue on conflict and public memory. Here I raise another set of issues that might interest us: conflict and the inception of “conflict” as public memory. September 11, July 7 and Paris were inter-related for some, while for others, Mumbai and Paris are inter-related. (I am in the latter).

Apologies if I’m all over the shop here Brett. I have to wrap up a chapter and I can hardly see what I’ve written at the moment.

Jo Helle-Valle (Jo.Helle-Valle@hioa.no)

Nov 29

Hi all

A very interesting discussion indeed. I just want to comment on two aspects that have come up.

First, John's 'floating' idea to organize the coming volume "around a single case study, so that the whole analysis is greater than the sum of its parts". I am sure that it has its advantages but to me it comes very close to assuming that one case can serve as a 'paradigm' - or represent a wider 'class' of cases. Generally I think we anthropologists have a rather laid-back relationship to the issue of generalisation. What class of conflicts should this one or two cases represent? In what ways? What would serve as critical factors for confirming such a (explicit or implicit) claim? For it seems that this is the idea - to say something about a wider class of events through one. If such a strategy is chosen the editors certainly have (or should have) a serious challenge in grounding this generalization.

The second point is to Brett - and seemingly a small one, but I think important: You say that Anonymous cannot declare a war. I think they have. What you're saying is that they are not in a position to declare what in international jural discourse is seen as, and accepted as a war declaration. But that is a special case. Certainly a declaration of war in the way they actually have done is a declaration with great social significance. It is a statement that has been spread all over the world, it is understood by most people as an aggressive position with the intent to inflict serious damage on ISIS and it has already had negative consequences for the latter (although I do not know how serious). But my point is really an ontological one, linked to later Wittgenstein philosophy: The meaning of words are always contextual and linked to power. There is no one, final, authoritative meaning of a word, the question is who is to be the master (to use Humpty Dumpty's phrasing) - i.e. who/what has the power to define the relevance and meaning of words (i.e. that give them social significance). The specific context of Anonymous' declaration makes it a perfectly relevant and very potent statement, irrespective of what the legal status of it may be.

Which brings me back to my first point: In some ways the Anonymous-event is an important part of the conflict but on the other hand it is different (non-violent first of all). What criteria will be used to ascertain whether this actor belongs to the issue discussed here? Does it share some fundamental traits with the other, related events? If yes, in what ways? An unsubstantiated generalising claim (explicit or implicit) will easily lead those who are going to say something about the wider class of events to a digital position of either inclusion or exclusion. While of course the only viable way of treating it is not to say yes or no but to discuss in what ways and to what extent it belongs to a category of events. It must be treated as an instance of events that are linked by 'family resemblance'; 'a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing' (again Wittgenstein) - the main point being that we cannot assume that there is a definite set of criteria that unite the class and we thus cannot a priori state membership to a class. (Which translates to the position that a one case-strategy is great if the question of generalisability is taken very seriously. But that such a discussion (in an introduction I gather) would most require bringing in other cases.)

Jo Helle-Valle

Birgit Bräuchler (birgitbraeuchler@gmx.net)

Nov 29

I am sharing Jo's concerns. Thinking that generally the idea of such a volume is great, I still ask myself were the ethnographic depth would be if all contributors would circle around one case.

Best
Birgit

Theresa Conner (tessconner@me.com)

Nov 29

Yes, there are problematics in taking a single case as an area of focus, however there will be distinct perspectives on this one case - particularly from ethnographic perspectives, and such a case invites an analysis of some of the issues that preceded it, became eroded or altered during it, and took form through it. Scholarly positions and research can be quite rich in these contexts. Some of these issues can span from multiculturalism to intelligence, journalistic practices to citizen journalism and its rise in major media outlets, responses to conflict (state, media, public memory, audience). Specific events have a way of heightening certain (and already complex) narratives and dialogues. I understand the challenges of not entering into a comparative analysis, but believe that this type of analysis could mean a return to our normative ways of engaging. So, I'm not wholly against multiple cases, but see promise in a diversity of scholarly views on a single case.

Veronica Barassi (v.barassi@gold.ac.uk)

Dec 1

Dear All,

I wish to thank everyone for participating to this lively seminar. A special thanks is of course directed to all the Media and Conflict conference team, and Birgit Bräuchler who has acted as discussant.

The seminar is now closed.

We will let you know when the transcripts will be available online.

Veronica

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John Postill (jrpostill@gmail.com)

Dec 1

Many thanks everyone for taking part, it's given us a lot to think about.

Sorry I didn't have time to respond to those final points made about whether or not to go for a single case study, as I was travelling, but they have been duly noted.