

**Media Anthropology Network  
European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)  
E-Seminar Series**

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

E-Seminar 41  
**Webcam and the Theory of Attainment**  
by  
**Daniel Miller and Jolynna Sinanan**  
(UCL)

Discussant  
**Daniel Taghioff**  
(Independent)

9 – 23 October 2012

**Stephen M. Lyon** ([s.m.lyon@durham.ac.uk](mailto:s.m.lyon@durham.ac.uk))

09.10.2012

Dear List,

Apologies for the slightly late start to the e-seminar. Please find below the comments from Daniel Taghioff to get us started. Just a reminder to anyone new to the e-seminars, we'll now ask the authors, Danny Miller or Jolynna Sinanan, to respond to Daniel's comments and then we'll open it up to the entire list.

Best,  
Steve

Paper:

Danny Miller's and Jolynna Sinanan's working paper for the EASA Media Anthropology Network's 41st e-Seminar "Webcam and the theory of attainment" (9-23 October 2012) can be accessed at:

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

**Daniel Taghioff's Discussant Comments:**

Danny is locating the debates on both human nature and on the determinant effect of technologies, particular media technologies, within the unfolding practices of life histories, and the modifications to both that these involve. This seems like a really solid approach to a series of longstanding debates.

As such, the theory of attainment seems like a valid vehicle for decentering and historicising notions of humanity, a welcome departure from dichotomy between radical deconstruction and stubborn essentialising, but the difficulty is that one is left wondering how far that vehicle can go, at least without examining the territory further.

The nature of the problem emerges once you examine Danny's contention that the new usage of technology is as much shaped by issues faced by humans in the savannas as by the newness of technology. Once that is said then there is an explanatory gap: If the theory is of attainment, of a constantly shifting set of human agencies (that then loop back to form and reform human subjectivities), what then provides continuity in all of this, all the way back to evolutionary time?

1) Is human subjectivity solely determined by the encounter between agency, technology and practice, or are their longer term [emergent] characteristics of being human and social which shape these encounters?

2) For instance, does the book go into how the agency of being able to use webcams and other forms of media, how this inflects their membership of what has been termed "communities of practice"?

Without getting hung up on the term, does the very day to day ebb and flow of activity and establishing membership in groups with shared goals enter into the analysis? (see Wenger's very interesting Doctoral thesis in the references, it touches on some interesting ideas about information and transparency also).

It seems valid to make this demand of Danny's explanatory frame, since the tone of what he is writing seems to be talking to towards the epochal in framing the use of webcams.

I would hold with this, and I am sure many others on this list would, since the combination of overseas travel, and keeping in touch with loved ones does often resolve around rather remarkable powers of Skype, and this is indeed now often definitive of the relationship between travel and intimacy in ways unimaginable even a decade or two ago. The relative accessibility of the technology means this is probably a widely held experience.

3) Indeed perhaps Danny might furnish us with a quick overview of Skype / Webcam usage, as a rough starting point to considering its social significance.

With such curiosity in mind, one looks forward to seeing the ethnographic material and analysis on offer, which may also go some way to answering the questions posed below.

However, to return to the theoretical, if we have a theory based mainly in notions of change and progress, indeed perhaps even a sort of theory of personal progress somewhat at the level of humans as collectively cyborg :), then perhaps what is key is to disaggregate the degrees and kinds of progress, attainment, and personal change involved, in order to be able to disentangle how continuity in change might work within this theoretical approach.

The horrible feature of change as an idea is that it's shifting core tends to blind one to how it is spread out, variegated, and overlapping / nested in both temporal and spatial terms:

Ironically change can become a locus of assumed unity and stasis very easily, through the implicit positing of assumed symmetries within and between types of change.

4) So I would ask Danny how he would unpack the notion of attainment to take into account how changes in what it is to be human are spread out.

This might range from notions of change in evolutionary time, to notions of epochal change, for instance in terms of shifting material practices over time, something explored in modes of production debates (see a non-deterministic take in references), to decadal changes in technological practices and so on, which is what tends to absorb us rather more these days.

4a) Indeed, to unfairly inject a note of my own interests, might not also environmental changes figure in this somewhere?

4b) I am not saying that any of these are necessary features of a theory of attainment, but really questioning how does a theory of attainment avoid implying some sort of hermetic theory of change at one locus?

5) How are personal / technological changes to be articulated within a wider set of contexts, and is that possible in both material and discursive terms?

Of course the main enquiry mode aimed at seems to be the ethnographic, with it's often rather immediate temporal frame, but perhaps such considerations might also help in disaggregating and unpacking the moment, something Danny seems interested in within this paper.

6) So, what steps did he and his co-researchers take to overcome the temporal immediacy of ethnography in a piece of research seeming to aim at tracing out some part of a slightly wider arc of social change? Did this help him in unpacking the material gathered?

At the moment, whilst the ethnographic detail provided in the paper allows a compelling comparison of two distinct life histories, a comparison which supports the thesis of performative subjectivities, I find it hard to locate this within a wider landscape of change or attainment.

7) Indeed, is this a necessary weakness of an theory aimed at supporting ethnographic approaches, with their short time frames, when that theory centres on changes?

To be slightly more provocative, Danny has had a great deal of success at disseminating his consistently well crafted research to a wide audience. This following on from some very in-depth work on consumption and branding.

8) So to provoke, gently, to what extent does he feel that the act of locating a narrative of change at the very attractive nexus of technology, intimacy and personal change is related to the requirements of publishers for a wider audience, and does he feel that there is a process of commodification going on in that? What is gained and what is lost in this process?

Which is not to be taken as only a provocation, obviously we all face questions of clarifying our work for a wider audience, and rendering it popular and persuasive (at least to some

extent) so perhaps Danny can take this also as an inquiry into the thought process of arriving at a compelling framing of his work, as well as an account of the decisions and compromises that go along with doing so.

9) Is it possible to disseminate widely a discussion on the decentered character of human / technological interaction in accessible terms?

References:

For non-deterministic accounts of modes of production debates:

Theory as History: Jairus Bannerjee

<http://goo.gl/mpUoR>

Wenger, Etienne: Towards a Theory of Cultural Transparency: Elements of a social discourse of the visible and invisible

<http://goo.gl/yU4wc>

**Daniel Taghioff** ([danieltaghioff@yahoo.com](mailto:danieltaghioff@yahoo.com))

09.10.2012

Dear List

And may I just add please read all mentions of "Danny" as "Danny and Jolynna", I had to write these responses fairly late at night, so my apologies to Jolynna for being careless with that.

**Stephen M. Lyon** ([s.m.lyon@durham.ac.uk](mailto:s.m.lyon@durham.ac.uk))

10.10.2012

**Danny Miller's Reply:**

I would like to thank Daniel for his comments. Some of these seem very sophisticated so I apologise if I haven't understood them all. I will answer alone since several of them seem addressed to me personally. There seem to be two main groups of comments. The first set of questions, up to 5) concern issues of temporality stretching all the way back to questions of human evolution. The second set of questions deal with issues of popularisation. I will seek to address both of these, though to be honest I wasn't quite sure how the latter relates to this particular essay. Some things I won't attempt to do here. A general survey of Skype usage appears, of course, in the book itself. While issue of climate change are addressed in another recent book Consumption and its Consequences.

I am also reluctant to expand on notions of structure and agency, which I am guessing are not particularly derived from our essay, so much as Daniel's own long term interests. I can say that the book deals more with how people in Trinidad quickly re-establish normativity and concerns for appropriate and inappropriate usage of this new technology. I suppose I feel that issues of cultural normativity are more expressive of an anthropological sensibility, while structure and agency aligns us more with certain sociological arguments, which are sometimes valuable but not always. While we don't use the word subjectivity, we do

examine, through Sunil and Jason, the way ideals are objectified in the lives and aspirations of individuals, and the book itself plays between such illustrations through individuals and different levels of generality.

To turn to the two main issues raised. There exists an extensive body of writing concerning the impact of new technologies, such as the use of stone tools, on human evolution. One significant strand follows from the writing of Leroi-Gourhan. But I think this is an entirely separate matter. Our essay should not be seen as related to such questions and is only concerned with the modern species of humanity and our relationship to changes in technology. Similarly there are some excellent writings associated with the historian Fernand Braudel concerning the different temporalities of change and development and the way shorter and longer term changes interact with each other.

Daniel implies that an ethnographic study remains within what he terms an 'immediate temporal frame' and fails to engage with the issues of continuity as against change. I see no reason for such pessimism with regard to ethnography. Actually much of our account examines the way webcam relates to specifically Trinidadian forms of sociality, which thereby implicates the long term history of this population, the formation of its practices and customs and the way these represent continuity imposed upon any new technology. This may implicate historical developments that stretch back to slavery or only from the recent oil boom. There are other approaches such as the idea of 're-mediation' used in media theory, which looks at how new media implicate older media. These might correspond more to medium-term temporalities. In short, I think ethnographically derived data, such as we employ, is entirely capable of integrating issues of temporality, history and continuity as part of its account of change. Ethnography has more of a problem with spatial variation, but the good news is that I have been given the resources to initiate a new project based on a seven country comparison which hopefully will, for once, address issues of comparison and difference that anthropologists seek to engage in, but rarely have the scope to do so.

The second set of questions are important because I think they suggest an attitude which has had really damaging consequences for contemporary anthropology including the anthropology of media - and while not particularly relevant to this essay - certainly need to be addressed. If you read the latter part of Daniel's discussion you can detect a possible distaste regarding my attempts in recent years at more popular writing. That is clear when it is suggested that this might follow my own research on topics such as consumption and branding implying that I have incorporated such practices into my own strategies of marketing. Certainly I have had many conversations in recent years from which I sense that academics are worried that popular writing might be a betrayal of a more pure, unsullied and necessarily more abstract core to anthropology.

By contrast I have increasingly come to view Bourdieu's work on academia as particularly pertinent to us. Since the 1970's I feel anthropology has retreated into a self-serving elitism that takes refuge in esoteric debate where discussion seems meaningful with respect to that specific terminology used but increasingly distanced from the grounded ethnography and language from which our understanding of the world is derived. I believe anthropology has extraordinary and original insights into the modern world, unrivalled by other disciplines, and it is incumbent upon us to make these as widely available to the largest population we can.

There are two kinds of populism involved here. When Daniel wonders about the potential popularity of the issues addressed in this essay I would suggest that if we had used terms such as 'post-human' or 'cyborgs', we would become part of an extremely popular debate because they appeal to all sort of fancy and speculative devices linked to science fiction and huge claims about fundamental changes in humanity as a result of recent technological developments. But we used none of these terms. By comparison, our language was I believe, tempered and modest and worked with notions of humanity we generally share. We tried to avoid that form of populism.

The populism of my recent publications is actually very different. It is about trying to write as clearly as possible in language, and through illustrations from people's lives, that can appeal to non-academics, who are not made to feel excluded from the discussion of our work. These days I am tending to work out more theoretical and abstract issues in journal articles, including our essay here, while using books to try and reach these wider audiences. So far from branding, I would hope that over the next few years that we move towards Open Access, and actually forgo royalties from our academic work. In short I favour a de-commodification of academic production so that our writings are freely available to the populations we study. I see this as a radical opposition to what has become an elitist structure that threatens to make anthropology irrelevant to most people. In short - Anthropologists of the world unite – you have nothing to lose but your obfuscations.

**Jens Kjaerulff** ([jk@socant.net](mailto:jk@socant.net))

10.10.2012

Dear Danny, Jolynna,

Great read, thanks for stepping up. What you here frame as a 'theory of attainment' amounts (I believe) to something akin to what has also been quite central in my work, though I frame things differently. Given your remark about not pulling punches to this draft, my comment concerns a way in which I think you could strengthen your pursuit. You may well disagree with my suggestion, but then I would still be curious about how you perceive your pursuit relative to the perspective I will here briefly try to outline.

I agree that what Miller and Slater framed as 'expansive realization' – what you now write of in terms of 'humanity as a project that is never complete' (p.3), and where new technologies fit in as a perceived resolution to experienced contradictions (ibid.) – is an exciting way of framing ICT embracement, not just in light of empirical evidence, but also because it opens up for relating such embracement to much broader practices of 'mediation' as you do suggest. But furthermore, it opens for situating such practices in terms of a dispersed but plentiful literature you do not really touch on, where 'contradictions and incompleteness' in your phrase, in different ways has been in focus as something like a fundamental human predicament. At least in my view (Kjaerulff 2010: 227), this predicament seems an important element in actually explaining an attraction of ICTs, and in turn their proliferation, from the kind of broader anthropological perspective which we clearly share in aiming for.

My suggestion is that you do more with this dimension. Specifically, rather than framing your approach in terms of a 'new' theory (p.3), I think your argument could be strengthened if you devoted more sustained attention by way of introduction, to developing the point that

your theoretical perspective at heart is anything but novel (despite the appeal of laying claim to a new theory, this seems to me the case – I am entirely with you on the 'cyborgs' in your reply to the discussant's comments). Rather, the novelty consists in bringing the wider theoretical perspective of 'incompleteness' to contexts of ICTs where, as yet, not much has been made of it – paradoxically, since engagements via ICTs (variously, e.g. for Facebook, webcams, teleworking, etc.) seem eminently suitable for confronting different versions of the said predicament, hence ICTs' attraction and proliferation (and in the wake, 'change' of all kinds, at the level of imagination, and otherwise).

There is clearly not one well delimited 'body' of literature or theory to refer to here, but I think your general argument ('theory') could be much stronger if you acknowledged more of the legacy, to make the case that these dynamics are ancient and still universal, even if the means and media are new. Empirically, Raymond Williams for example has traced this sort of dynamic back many centuries (as he observed, 'we use the contrast of country and city to ratify an unresolved division and conflict of impulses', 1973: 297). In terms of theory, I see elements going back to so-called American pragmatism and phenomenology at one level, at another to writings of Marx (see e.g. Miller 1998), and in more recent anthropological history it has been reflected in (e.g.) writings by associates of the so-called Manchester School of anthropology, and perhaps more famously by Bourdieu (and a good few more who are less famous). In the context of 'households', which you also touch on, Townsend (2002) for example, develops a perspective I believe resonates with the wider contours of what you seem to get at, extending from Bourdieu and Gluckman (see especially 1-4; 77-80). To cut a longer story short, I suggest that situating your approach in terms of broader theoretical legacies regarding the said predicament, would make your perspective more convincing, because it situates 'attainment' in a long established and prevalent context which makes brilliant sense of your argument. In fact, I think this route might also complement your ambition of 'revealing the mediated nature of the non-digital world' (p.2) very nicely (cf. Kjaerulff, under review).

#### References:

- Kjaerulff, J. (2010): 'A Barthian Approach to Practice and Media: Internet Engagements among Teleworkers in Rural Denmark', in B. Brauchler & John. Postill, eds, *Theorising Media and Practice*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 213-231.
- Kjaerulff, J. (under review): 'The Corrosion of Character Revisited: Rethinking Uncertainty and Flexibility.' In Jens Kjaerulff (ed), *Flexible Capitalism. Exchange and Ambiguity at Work*. (submitted, Berghahn Books).
- Miller, D. (1998), Conclusion. *A Theory of Virtualism*. In James G. Carrier & Daniel Miller, (eds), *Virtualism. A New Political Economy*. Oxford and New York: Berg, pp. 187-215.
- Townsend, N. W. (2002): *The Package Deal. Marriage, Work, and Fatherhood in Men's lives*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Williams, R. (1973): *The Country and the City*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dear Daniel and Jolyanna,

Thanks for a very interesting and well-formulated paper! I have some brief comments and questions on your text. I will start with pointing out that I have not had the possibility to read your earlier publications, so maybe some of the things that I take up have already been discussed in them....

1. You start out by stating that the webcam has the potential to engage groups that have been resistant to the use of new media, as for example elderly. In my field, intellectuals in Kolkata, this transition happened in the end of the 90ties beginning of 2000, with the advent of email. Among my informants highly skilled migration and education abroad is common, as they themselves expressed it, almost every family in this category has someone in the Diaspora. Often the older generation remain in Kolkata, with one or some of the kids abroad, combined with a rigid family structure, where it is the duty of the eldest son to take care of the parents. When the first email service was started in Kolkata in the end of the 90ties, it was quickly embraced as a good means of communication, that made it easy and fast to keep contact, in contrary to phone and letters. It also happened that the children came "out there", placed a computer in parents' homes, and taught them how to use it, to be able to keep in touch with them. This was of course not the only use of Internet, but email was one of the major drives for people to get on to it. (Andersson K B 2000, 2011)

2. Regarding your part on the sense of place, location and the home and diaspora:

Rosa Tsargoruous (2004) has a nice piece on websites and new technologies as "Diasporic medias" (maybe you are already familiar with it?). She states that Diasporas are imagined communities and diaspora identities are formed at the intersection of connectivity and cultural reinvention and reconstruction. Diaspora websites form spaces of communication where the discourses of Diasporic identity is negotiated and constructed. They are "spaces of communication where remote localities and their experiences come together and become synchronised into complex landscapes characterised by multidimensionality and multiplicity of flows". (Tsagarousianou, R, 2004, p. 61- 62) I elaborate a bit myself on this notion of Diapsoric medias in relation to the notion of home in my e-seminar paper "The Online Durga" (EASA Meidanthro e-seminar series, nr 19, 2007)

I simply think that this resonates well with your statements in this part, e.g. p 6 "we should start to think of new media as places as within which people in some sense live, a third place distinct from the two off-line locations"

3. My third point is loose, and maybe a bit off from your paper, but your central point and discussion on mediation and attainment makes me reflect on earlier discussions in media studies and anthropology. For example the McLuhan – Kittler debate on media and content, Hannertz' (1992) states that "The message is formed by the character of the media" and for example Appadurai, Korom Mills (1991) discuss communications and media and their impact on cultural forms, putting forward that when the form for the cultural reproduction change,

the cultural form and tradition change. This is not one of my fields of expertise and more of a hunch from my side, but still, I would like to get your reflections on it!

All the best  
Kerstin B Andersson

PhD in Social anthropology from University of Gothenburg, Sweden

**Jolynna Sinanan** ([sinananj@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:sinananj@unimelb.edu.au))

12.10.12

### **Response to Kerstin:**

Dear Kerstin,

Thank you very much for your response and discussion.

Your points are valid especially regarding families living abroad, where children take on responsibilities to support their parents given the obligations within family structures you describe.

We suggest that the elderly in our field site in a small, rural town are in a similar position, where they have children and other relatives abroad. However, from our findings so far, while some of the informants aged 60 and above are using email, for others, women especially, (and one of our key informants was aged 80) who are more limited in mobility and largely stay at home, embraced webcam more readily than say email, because of the visibility and real time communication it allowed. We would be enthusiastic to hear from others who have other points to offer on how the elderly describe their uses of different platforms to stay in touch with loved ones as well.

Thank you for your comments on 'diasporic medias'. Again, we have largely localized our discussion to our findings in this town, where interestingly, diaspora is experienced more as relatives moving and living abroad and to other parts of the country. One of the themes we are also looking at is how webcam brings into visibility the aspirations associated with 'moving away' and retaining a sense of home by those who are 'staying behind'. For example, a concern that came out and is reflected in cases like Jason's, is that families living within Trinidad (especially parents) want to know that children are making the most of the opportunities where they're living (in terms of succeeding in work, study, etc) but still keep a strong sense of 'who they are' as Trinidadians, which comes out over webcam where parents try to gauge as much of the child's life 'offline' as they can through an 'online' medium.

We have also been thinking about debates in media studies and anthropology, but so far, are working from an approach that suggests that instead of media reframing or changing communications, kinship as the foundations of anthropology is perhaps more resonant here. While the McLuhan - Kittler debate on media and content that you describe is one that everyone would want to bear in mind, actually, we would argue that the changes in media are themselves mediated by continuities in kinship and social relations. In our work, these continuities seem more like the heart of what we are studying, as in some ways it has always been for anthropologists. For example, you can think of webcam and 'always on' as this kind of third space where couples live together, but from the point of view of the couple, this feels

more like a continuity in their relationship where the media overcomes the problem of separation.

Thanks again for your discussion.

Jolynna Sinanan

**Danny Miller** ([daniel.miller1132@gmail.com](mailto:daniel.miller1132@gmail.com))

12.10.2012

### **Response to Jens:**

Dear Jens

We would very much like to thank Jens for his very helpful intervention, and to start by saying we are entirely on the same side. Indeed we might wish to put the critical case more strongly. Other things being equal, anthropologists should remain disdainful of people who go around proclaiming that they possess this or that new theory of whatever. Other things being equal anthropologists should be even more disdainful if such people fail to acknowledge the scholarly forbears upon which that theory is built or even worse fail to acknowledge that actually the ideas they proclaim have already been sufficiently spelt out by prior scholars, so that this is really just a reinvention of the wheel. On both counts the immediate response to our claim should be to at least try and dismiss it.

So why, given that we share this conservatism and caution should we nevertheless talk about a theory of attainment? The first is because it seems essential. The main response to new technologies remains today the claim that these remove us from an earlier more authentic humanity.

Turkle's book *\*Alone Together\**, which is as clear an example of such an argument as we have seen for a while, is likely to be far far more popular and influential than anything we have to say because it accords so fully with this fundamental belief. And it was the publication of that book which helped to confirm that we really do need to create some opposition based on a clear unequivocal refusal to accept the version of being human that is implicated there. We really do need an alternative idea of what it means to be human that would not lead to the same conclusions.

Having created this we certainly did look for precedents. A colleague at UCL Ludovic Coupaye who teaches the course of technology has been feeding us literature that he hoped would be precedents for what we were trying to say. But so far none of them turned out to be on much the same lines. There is a parallel debate around human evolution but that is quite a different question. We are of course steeped in the reading of Bourdieu – a formative influence. But try as we might we simply cannot find in any of his work an attempt to create this alternative view of a latent humanity that is realised by developments in technology.

There may be some distant links, for example, the idea that a technology resolves a contradiction in a prior period. Indeed you could argue that was even true of the sort of dialectical history developed under Marxism, and reflected in the quote you give us from Williams. We will acknowledge these in the future. But this would only be one part of the argument we are trying to make with regard to new media technologies. Instead the tendency is to either see new media as removing us from humanity through additional mediation, or

something that thereby changes humanity into the post-human cyborg etc. So we just can't find the passages and arguments in Bourdieu, Williams etc. that would relieve us of the obligation to create this theory.

So we would like to issue a challenge to Jens and indeed to anyone else, please help us locate these precedents and claims, so that if we do indeed retain these claims there is at least a proper scholarly acknowledgment of their forebears. Where precisely and in what manner have these points been made? If a seminar can become a collective attempt to critically appraise the kind of claims we have made and help us either remove them, retain them, or refine them, then it would be a valuable asset for us all.

Regards  
Danny

**Susan O'Donnell** ([susanodo@unb.ca](mailto:susanodo@unb.ca))

12.12.2012

Hi Jolynna,

You asked about research on how older people are using technologies to stay in touch with loved ones. See our recent case study article about older citizens and video technologies in the Journal of Community Informatics:

<http://ci-journal.net/index.php/ciej/article/view/697>

Regards,  
Susan  
University of New Brunswick

**Jens Kjaerulff** ([jk@socant.net](mailto:jk@socant.net))

13.10.12

**Response to Danny:**

Dear Danny,

I am glad you found my intervention worth engaging, though let me say at once I find the matter difficult to discuss. In the present context, rhetoric of novelty was not really my main concern or critique (you seem to devote a fair amount of your response to this dimension alone).

Rather, my concern is to propose that for the sake of strengthening your argument, it might be worth while situating it in terms of a wider but dispersed literature that I believe does tie in with what you engage, especially in light of the broadly conceived anthropological perspective in terms of which you think 'mediation' (e.g. citing Goffman and Munn).

Conceiving similarly broadly of what you here call 'latent humanity', in order to argue that this predicament or aspiration is also discernible more broadly (in conjunction with mediation and technology), is what I propose could make a stronger case for what you pursue in contexts of ICTs (where I agree the perspective is quite novel as I said in my first mail). Put

simply, ICTs are so appealing from this perspective, because they appear eminently suited for something humanity has already pursued far and wide for a long time, by other means. Turned around, being concerned with seeing us-selves as others do it (pp.4-5 in your paper) – I am simply not convinced that web cams are quite the historically unique untainted technical fix in this regard, that you seem to suggest.

The difficulty of course has to do with how to get a handle on these matters. Arguments, concepts and other subtleties can be read in different ways, and it is easy to talk past one another in discussions.

Here 'Latent humanity ... realized through technology', is my point of departure.

As for 'latency', I mentioned Bourdieu simply because he has become somewhat of an icon for the idea that exchange and social life more widely has a 'temporal' dimension, entailing elements of uncertainty which he famously used as leverage for his move 'from rules to strategies'. As I read what you are attempting, Bourdieu's effort on this particular account could be framed as containing elements along the lines you are after (dispositions, consumption, and such). But I am actually not a big fan of Bourdieu, I think this latency effectively drowns in 'blissful structuralism', not to mention in his intricate rhetoric. The thing is however, Bourdieu was not in fact the first to grapple with this dimension, never mind his iconic status. It has plenty of precedents, also within the broader literature on 'exchange'.

It was in this spirit I also alluded to American pragmatism and phenomenology (e.g. Dewey 1929, see Whyte 2002), which incidentally was a notable inspiration for Goffman's 'Frame Analysis' that you cite (see that book's introduction). In an earlier context you have used Gell's work on art, in a discussion of web sites. Gell's inspiration from C.S. Peirce (via the notion of abduction) may be worth while contemplating too from this strand (regarding your argument about web cams, see e.g. his discussion of South Asian material in chapter 7 of *Art and Agency* (Gell 1998)). I suggested the sources in my last mail haphazardly, not to say, 'there you have your theory of latent humanity ... realized by developments in technology', but rather to say, there you may have some elements towards situating such a theory in terms of a broader perspective, if you want to frame your argument that way, which I suggest may be a good idea.

As for the 'technology' part, I think a problem similar to that with 'media' applies: you have to search and think beyond these terms to find and make the gems. From what you describe about the 'Digital Anthropology' volume (which I look forward to read), you surely would be capable of making the leap of abstraction regarding 'technology' in other contexts of 'human latency', if you thought it worth while to frame your argument as I suggest. In my own published work to date have drawn particular inspiration from Fredrik Barth, whose books on ritual practice in PNG and on life in Bali more broadly I find very rich in terms of thinking what I sense you are getting at (see my references to Barth in Kjaerulff 2010, cited in my last mail, and in these works, not least his discussion of his concept of 'concerns'; as for your challenge to me to spell out 'where precisely and in what manner' the points have been made, may I humbly refer you to this piece of mine as one crude starting point, though it was written for a different context). A main overarching trope Barth uses to develop the conjunction of you call latency and technology (as I read it), is that of 'knowledge', which in a broad anthropological sense clearly involves both technology and technique, even for so-called 'neolithic peoples' in PNG. Dare I add that a problem I have encountered, is that many

colleagues are so steeped in prevailing conventions about Barth as the arch-proponent of 'homo economicus' that they rarely take interest in (or impart much insight on) what Barth has actually written in his more recent work (and/or, they don't see how this could possibly be relevant for understanding ICTs). From this different perspective, I am quite familiar with the kind of 'fundamental beliefs' you describe regarding Turkle - may I wish you good luck with your quest on this account. As a result of this experience, but also for intellectual reasons, I have long realized I need to look for inspiration elsewhere. Among other things my sight is currently set on literature on 'money' (e.g. Graeber 2001, Maurer 2006), which might also be of interest in terms of what I have suggested, to add an even more a frivolous idea.

This smattering of thoughts and citations may, or may not, be just what you hoped for. The bottom line in my intervention is, evidently there is going to be a measure of novelty to what you do, certainly in terms of ICTs, but also in terms of the kind of broader perspective I have suggested, should you decide to embrace it and do the work. The gain I see is in terms of framing your argument in a broader-based anthropology, allowing you to claim ancient links as an even more sublime prize than entire novelty. At least I find that route more convincing, and I sense that is also direction you pursue as far as 'media' are concerned. Evidently I have a lot of thinking, reading and writing to do on these things, I would be pleased to keep the exchange going.

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13.10.2012

#### **Comment on Danny's Response to Jens:**

Not sure the 'latent humanity' perspective is the most helpful. The analogy in historical literature for the grand claims made about 'new technology' is the claims made at different times for the 'effect' of literacy; from Goody and Watt, through Ong, Olson etc authors have argued that the development of particular orthographies, or of print technologies had grand effects on human reasoning etc. The alternative, social practice view, avoids putting the emphasis on the 'technology' itself and instead sees the social practices associated with

different mixes and modes as the issue that researchers - especially anthropologists but also historians – should focus upon. Here we can look, for instance, at what happened when the printing press technology in Europe was added to the available resources for representing written sources; it was not that technology which ‘altered’ humanity but the social uses to which it was put that had the kinds of effects researchers are interested in – making written texts available to a wider audience for instance, moving it beyond the religious, monastic institutions etc This approach maybe links to the Bourdieu perspective alluded to by various writers in the present discussion and certainly to recent analyses of Bourdieu and Literacy (cf Grenfell et. al. 2012), which exactly call upon the analysis of habitus/ field to explore how different people’s engagement with written language affects their location in social hierarchies.

Brian V. Street

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14.10.2012

### **Comment on Jolynna’s Response to Kerstin:**

Thanks to all concerned for the great conversation so far. In response to Kerstin, Jolynna wrote:

"... we would argue that the changes in media are themselves mediated by continuities in kinship and social relations. In our work, these continuities seem more like the heart of what we are studying, as in some ways it has always been for anthropologists. For example, you can think of webcam and 'always on' as this kind of third space where couples live together, but from the point of view of the couple, this feels more like a continuity in their relationship where the media overcomes the problem of separation."

I'm just wondering about this stated need to choose between a focus on continuities and not changes when researching webcam (and other newish media). Surely we should study both? What I mean is that the routine use of skype by dispersed families is both a form of change and continuity. The beauty of an ethnographic approach - especially if it comes with an explicit diachronic dimension - is that it can shed light on the specificities of this change/continuity duality in a given setting. While webcam may help to reaffirm family relations in Trinidad, we can assume that its wide adoption will also contribute to a range of unforeseeable (micro)changes that a follow-up study would be able to gauge.

Also, I think the notion of 'attainment' as discussed so far may contain an ambiguity in need of clarification - perhaps a potentially useful ambiguity. On the one hand, it seems to refer to the attainment of a latent aspiration or dream hitherto unfulfilled, i.e. to a historical innovation.

On the other, it refers to the return to a prior social arrangement, e.g. the ability of families to once again interact in real time (albeit telematically).

John

**Response to Jolynna:**

Dear Danny and Jolynna,

Thanks for your answers, Jolynna, and some brief comments on them

Regarding my first point: Since you base your statement of the importance of the webcam on the argument that this media has targeted groups that are reluctant to the use of new media and the fact that it focus on close relations, I find the factual base important. I would like to push my point forward by asking you if you have checked out / made any comparative studies regarding the situation when ICT- email was introduced in your field?

I also want to insist a bit on my second point. You put forward that your studies on the webcam led to a reflection on place, locality and the notion of home, that the webcam destabilizes, reconstruct the concept and experience of home and (as quoted earlier) that “we should start to think of new as places within which people in some sense live. A third place distinct from the two off-line locations”. The point that I want to convey is that, according to my point of view, the same ideas has been put forward on a theoretical level by Tsaragorious (2004) and you can find some of it in my working paper “The Online Durga”. I also think that for example notions as “virtual communities”, “digital diasporas” give further indications on it...

Finally a brief comment tagging on to Brian’s post; For example Arunachalam (2000) states that the digital revolution is the fourth information revolution in human history. The first one was the invention of writing 5-6 thousand years back. The second consist of the advent of the written book around 1300 BC. In 1450 AD the printing press was introduced. This constitutes the third information revolution. The fourth information revolution consists of the new information and communication technologies.

Best Kerstin

Thanks again to Jens, Brian, John and Kerstin who have certainly helped us to deeper this discussion. Several points:-

1) Just to clarify to Brian that we have no intention of making claims for webcam analogous with the developments in literacy discussed by Goody and Ong. The proper analogy might be with the whole digital revolution. Something like webcam might have incremental significance as part of this but no more than that. Webcam should be seen as one new media amongst many.

Appreciating the entire range and the differences in social usage was precisely the point of Danny’s last e-seminar in this series on the topic of polymedia (with Mirca Madianou). One of the key points about polymedia as opposed to multi-media was the way this incorporates

issues of power, control and hierarchy. These become part of the judgment as to which media people have chosen to use in any given instance.

2) So why, nevertheless, talk about the human and authentic sociality? Well in the same way that we criticised obfuscation we feel that our analytical debates in anthropology should remain cognizant of the popular discussions that we encounter ethnographically. It's not just Turkle talking about a loss of humanity, it's a very popular conception, as are speculations about the cognitive or health effects of new media. Ginsburg's informants (in the new *Digital Anthropology* book) speak of finally becoming human in the eyes of others, and we meet elderly people on the wrong side of the digital divide who experience a sense that they have lost some human capacity when young people can't understand their refusal to engage. We strongly dislike the way people are disenfranchised by such a discourse and our insistence upon the integrity of being human in relation to new technology is in part thereby a kind of political semantics intended to convey an equality of respect for all our informants whether they do or do not employ a technology. Like Jens we would feel it's an ethnographic observation that a new media can be seen as pre-empted which helps make it normative within months of its availability.

3) Jens points helpfully to a more subtle discussion than these broad brush issues. That a consideration of Bourdieu and other forebears allows more nuance as to ideas of disposition and propensity with respect to persons. A similar argument about propensity is found in the popular term 'affordance' as applied to new media. Webb Keane would be an excellent guide to the re-use of Peirce in this respect.

There are of course differences, Danny has been writing recently about normativity. By contrast given the reference to Barth's work in PNG and Bourdieu's critique of the rule our guess is that Jens is trying to encompass more contingent and varied responses. So, we might lean more to Simmel, for example, on money. But we hugely admire Maurer and the other sources you cite, and entirely agree that one should deepen these debates, acknowledging the trajectories behind them.

4) We agree with John about continuity and change, this was simply a response to a prior question. We also agree that the term attainment has helpful ambiguities. It can refer to past or future developments. But the reason for adopting the word is the implied sense of imminence. As opposed to viewing new media as something that have diminished, opposed or joined with humanity as in terms such as cyborg, the work attainment suggests that they speak to our inherent capacities. A point we will develop in the details of our book.

5) In response to Kerstin, this is part of a long-term study of new media in Trinidad, with the first fieldwork in 1999 observing the arrival of each new technology such as email. We don't have quantitative work, and we don't study targeting. With an ethnographic focus we are observing how media fit into people's lives more generally rather than seeking out new media. At present we can say for Trinidad, Jolynna noticed many cases of elderly people who first become involved with computers through seeing the potential of webcam for communicating with family abroad. We can't say if this is the case anywhere else. Similarly the idea of virtual communities is nothing new, but we will show how 'always-on' webcam lead to a kind of domestic co-presence which is a rather different kind of third space.

Dear Danny and Jolynna,

Thanks for an intriguing paper. I've been enjoying the comments and conversations thus far. My primary comment or question doesn't follow immediately from other comments, so I'll direct this right to you as authors. I will say in passing, though, that I appreciate the caution you share with Jens about the novelty of your theory. Also, in reference to John Postill's comment, it's true that we should not blind ourselves to moments of real change that something like a technology can register; however, I think you are right on in highlighting how un-novel these technologies are. I think the "other hand" of change is a given in the superheated rhetoric from journalists and tech gurus, and in the process of critiquing existing literature and positioning yourselves and your research, you will highlight the sound and worthwhile ideas that this perspective raises while toning down the excitement or even fatalism that tends to accompany it.

My observation has to do with the few paragraphs you commit to what will be your "first substantive chapter" (p. 4). I find it odd that a discussion about this communication technology, the prime feature of which seems to be its ability to bring other people into our view, should begin with how it lets us see ourselves. As an expatriate, I use Skype frequently and find the little box of me more a distraction than anything else. Emphasis-wise, it's smaller than the big image of the other, and I often get rid of it entirely so I can focus on the person I'm talking with. Why would you start a discussion with what is at best a secondary element of the technology? Surely what interests people when they choose to make use of webcam is the ability to \_see others\_, or more narcissistically to be seen by the other. Perhaps the use of webcam for recording one's self to broadcast, say on YouTube - a more static, unidirectional use - could open up that as a priority. But the real-time conversation seems to have other priorities which demand exploration first.

I wonder how these observations about seeing the self came up in your discussions during your fieldwork: was it something your participants remarked on to a significant degree? Did this self-consciousness surface in a grounded kind of way, or is this instead something you as analysts have observed and want to scrutinise or theorise, regardless of whether the participants remarked on it? As with other comments, this may be more satisfactorily addressed in the book, but I'm curious to hear your or others' thoughts.

Best,  
Michael

Michael Munnik  
PhD Student  
University of Edinburgh

"So we would like to issue a challenge to Jens and indeed to anyone else, please help us locate these precedents and claims, so that if we do indeed retain these claims there is at least a proper scholarly acknowledgment of their forebears. Where precisely and in what manner have these points been made?"

I'm surprised no mention has been made of Tom Boellstorff's "Coming of Age in Second Life" (2008). Although a very different focus, he devotes much of the first 3 chapters to arguing for the position that culture has always been mediated. Indeed, he dusts off the Greek idea of "techne" to make his case. Different focus, perhaps; but a similar sentiment driving both works, especially concerning new media as places "within which people in some sense live" (p. 6, your paper).

John

- Tom Boellstorff "Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human" (Princeton: PUP 2008)

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15.10.2012

To John's suggestion, I would add Sherry Turkle's ALONE TOGETHER (Basic Books, 2011). Turkle smartly considers the need to be connected (to feel connected) and its implications for the changing technological landscape.

The work of Andrew Feenberg, an philosopher of technology, may also be interesting in regards to this question.

Hope this helps!  
Peter

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16.10.2012

Thanks to Danny and Jolynna for these clarifications. I am pasting in a quote from a colleague in the US, D Leu, who I think captures many of the issues we are discussing.

Brian

Whilst 'new technologies do play a central role in how modes are made available, configured and accessed', nevertheless 'the texts that circulated in the world and interactions between people have always been multimodal' and 'the extent to which it has been extended by digital technologies' is itself a research question and cannot be pre-supposed 'The new literacies of the Internet and other ICTs are not just new today, they will be newer tomorrow, even newer next week and continuously renewed as new technologies for literacy regularly appear, requiring even newer literacies to be able to use them effectively to read, acquire information, learn and communicate. Of course, literacy has always changed as technologies for literacy have changed'. (Leu, 2006, p. 13)

## Second Discussant Intervention:

Dear Danny, Jolyanna and List

The response from Danny and the subsequent comments have been very revealing, and make a lot more sense of how the work in question is framed and mediated.

Danny was reluctant to respond to questions about agency, which in many ways is a slightly disaggregated way of talking about power, and this is not surprising given the way that his approach is set up.

The first thing to note is that Danny assumes that any mention of agency (and thus presumably of power, since one cannot really separate these notions out) must necessarily be accompanied by a discussion of structure. This was nowhere to be seen in my questions:

“1) Is human subjectivity solely determined by the encounter between agency, technology and practice, or are their longer term [emergent] characteristics of being human and social which shape these encounters?

2) For instance, does the book go into how the agency of being able to use webcams and other forms of media, how this inflects their membership of what has been termed "communities of practice"?”

And so must reflect the somewhat overused debate in Anthropology where discussions of power are dismissed because they somehow reflect a monolithic view of society, this being an extension of the post-Berlin-wall triumphalism that dismissed all Marxist thought as monolithic (one of my favourite theorists Laclau, being, sadly, implicated in this).

However, if one pauses to think, why must agency be accompanied by structure, is this a necessary feature of the conceptual language? Or is it merely an obstacle to thinking through power, an obstacle, incidentally, linked to a certain way of naturalising the material world as consisting of objects, a subtle form of productivism. Since I don't want to make this all about my interests I will not develop this argument fully here, but merely note how it crops up in Danny and Jolyanna's framing of Attainment Theory:

One can see this at work in their formulation of how everything is equally cultured or mediated:

“This is entirely antithetical to what anthropological theory actually stands for. In the discipline of anthropology all people are equally cultural, that is the products of objectification.”

Note firstly here the emphasis on the outcome of commodification / objectification. People can only be equal if in some way or another they are some stable object upon which chains of equivalence can be drawn. But more often than that, this stable object is “produced” by the

agency trying to equate and group people, it is articulated if you like, rather than just being naturally there.

This raises a problem with the above formulation, illustrated by Danny's somewhat hegemonising\* reluctance to discuss agency, and rather to focus on normativity. The problem is that looking at the product of objectification exclusively, obscures how cultural objects come into being, how they are articulated, and how this is shot through with power relations and agency, and how this is implicated with control over the material world.

\*(That being more "Anthropological", what of equality now? I would say this is hegemonising precisely because an emphasis on questions of agency, of questions of the completed vs the processual are staples in Anthropology. From Latour to Graeber, to Mosse, to Hobart, to Anthropological critiques of commons theorisation to Mark Poster's discussions of productivism, these issues have been unpacked across Anthropology in general and within the Anthropology of Media in particular, so why is "Structure and Agency" now somehow "[merely?] sociological".)

This line of critique is somewhat from a classic Marxist type of perspective. Marxism is actually more coherent when you avoid focussing on products, after all Marx's political economy was a critique of the implications of commodification and the mystifications that accompanied this. Rather return to looking at the power-driven dynamics of how things are formed: a focus on production rather than consumption if you like, a sort of return, but without the productivism.

\*(i.e. not structure, which implies fixed forms, but substance which implies material endurance, but not necessarily fixed forms, an early distinction in materialist debates - see Collingwood.)

To get a handle on the evacuation of power and agency in the specific brand of materialism that seems to underpin this more recent theory of attainment, it seems to me that you need to go back to Danny's earlier work, since the theoretical discussion is merely implied in much of the presented paper. Taking the introduction to Danny's earlier work on Materiality, one finds a very revealing paragraph:

"To appreciate the significance of these rather abstract ideas, it is worth reflecting upon that common story about the Emperor who has no clothes. Because in many respects the gist of Keane's argument is that we also need to finally acknowledge that the clothes have no emperor. We assume that to study texture and cloth is by default to study symbols, representations and surfaces of society and subjects. In an older social anthropology clothes are commonly signs of social relations. Anything else would be a fetishism of them as objects. But as he shows, if you strip away the clothing, you find no such 'thing' as society or social relations lurking inside. The clothing did not stand for the person, rather there was an integral phenomenon which was the clothing/person. This same point is then generalised into a critique of what he sees as a misguided rendition of semiotics itself. Just as clothes are not a cover for subjects or society, the 'sign' is not necessarily a vicarious representative of society. In one blow we eliminate not just the emperor but also our status as mere 'subjects'. The reason is simple. These material forms constituted and were not just superficial cover for that which they created in part through their enclosing, and giving shape. The subject is the

product of the same act of objectification that creates the clothing. A woman who habitually wears saris as compared to one who wears western clothing or a shalwar kamiz, is not just a person wearing a sari. Because the dynamism and demands of the sari may transform everything from the manner in which she encounters other people to her sense of what it is to be modern or rational (Banerjee and Miller 2003). Social relations exist in and through our material worlds that often act in entirely unexpected ways that cannot be traced back to some clear sense of will or intention.” (Emphasis added by me).

[http://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/people/academic\\_staff/d\\_miller/mil-8](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/people/academic_staff/d_miller/mil-8)

So Danny embarks on his account of how materialism must mean that the clothes (appearances / manifest substances) must have no Emperor (overall emergent agency or power, which could of course be a complex agent, though this is sidestepped) by citing a classic Anthropological critique of essences - if you strip away the clothes you find no such “thing” as society.

And here is the error, if something is not a “thing” in the simple sense (a functional or structural entity) then does it necessarily lack substance, coherence and continuity via organising dynamics shot through with power? Is there necessarily no Emperor? That conclusion, ironically, is only tenable if your position is to fetishize things and then deny that, to be “post-things” if you like, but what if by focussing on things and products, you are missing key organising processes and dynamics?

Are these key processes and dynamics thus to be only located around things? As Danny puts it, is it the demands of the Sari that operate? One appreciates the Latourian move to correct, via the application of “symmetry”, the denial of substance, and substantial contingency, as a limit condition of agency. One also appreciates the move towards “mediation” that entails from that. But is it so impossible to exercise power, so difficult for things to go according to plan, that mediation must only be material, that agency only attached to things, that there be no Emperor at all? This seems like an imbalance, one that effectively denies power and agency by obfuscating processes and focussing on products and objects as the ontological starting point.

In this light, I would urge Danny to revisit questions of agency, and particularly of how agency is materially (and to some extent contingently) situated, as a way of approaching norm formation. To do so might allow a fuller analysis of power and how it operates at various scales, not merely transactionally.

This is a very dense response, so I am going to skip forward somewhat to Danny’s comments about populism. Let me quote what I like first, because there is an awful lot to like about the article presented, and also the type of approach Danny usually takes:

“There are two kinds of populism involved here. When Daniel wonders about the potential popularity of the issues addressed in this essay I would suggest that if we had used terms such as ‘post-human’ or ‘cyborgs’, we would become part of an extremely popular debate because they appeal to all sort of fancy and speculative devices linked to science fiction and huge claims about fundamental changes in humanity as a result of recent technological developments. But we used none of these terms. By comparison, our language was I believe,

tempered and modest and worked with notions of humanity we generally share. We tried to avoid that form of populism.”

Yes, and this is a real strength, the result is an accessible approach that is nourishing, that provides plenty of food for thought. It is hard to dispute that using clear language is a social good. But it is also important to keep some balance and see that there is another side to the push towards clarity which is tied with an imperative towards having “wider impact”. One should stop and note something here: Hegemony is not always negative and coercive: Power can express itself through the provision of goods, productively. A push towards clear writing can be a good thing, can be part of a political economy with coercive aspects, and part of a hegemony, all at the same time. The point being this coming discussion is really not meant as an attack on the piece of work presented, nor on the track record of those presenting, but is an attempt to generate reflection on the wider situation of the work within an academic political economic moment, and a set of hegemonic discourses within that.

Having said that, to establish that this is not a general exercise in hand-waving, and that this commentary relates to the article presented, and also to try and address a level of mythologising of what I said in the response, here is my original question to Danny:

“So to provoke, gently, to what extent does he feel that the act of locating a narrative of change at the very attractive nexus of technology, intimacy and personal change is related to the requirements of publishers for a wider audience, and does he feel that there is a process of commodification going on in that? What is gained and what is lost in this process?”

So this question very much has something to do with the article: I am asking if he chose the themes of the research with a popular audience in mind. I do not feel this is an outrageous question, nor that it betrays a ill-founded distaste for plain speaking. Many of us have put book bids together, we all know that publishers are concerned with potential readership. Would any of us, having studied marketing and branding in depth, attempt to close off this part of our mind, Zaphod Beeblebrox style, when putting together an idea for a book? This assertion seems more science fiction than any narrative on Cyborgs.

Since the response is framed as an interpolation of my intentions, I wish to clarify them. What I was attempting to express, perhaps clumsily, was a genuine tension. Like anyone else, I want my work to be read, understood and to some extent liked. At the same time, I think that an overwhelming emphasis on clarity - and research impact - can lead to an emphasis on objectifying ones own material, as if it were a series of neat, clear textualised objects that were in operation, and this can lead to a sort of mythologising.

As Barthes framed the term, the messy and complex history of a person or thing can be rendered as a bit player in another, power driven, narrative, and it's own complexity and underdetermination reduced to a sign in another agency's story. Given that there is a strong bias towards objectification-as-an-outcome present in the article and Danny's wider work, and it would seem this leads to an obfuscation of power and [complex] agency, I would say this danger is especially apparent for the approach taken.

Indeed one could argue that in order to engage with materiality, and practice, one needs to embrace the complex, the multiple and the messy and under-determined, or risk lapsing into a

subtle form of symbolic idealism. These are the dangers of being pushed towards an accessible academic product, via the return on investment model being imposed on academia via neo-liberal reforms.

One can find this emphasis on the multiple on contemporary Marxist-related theory, such as the work on Alain Badiou. He points out that singularity is a feature of discourse, an outcome of attempting to present things coherently, and he argues this point via set theory. Without going to far into this, the corollary of this is that the material and substantial is necessarily multiple and complex, and so often under-determined, an insight supported by most of contemporary natural science, with its emphasis on entropy, complexity, stochastic / statistical models of physical laws, emergence, non-linear dynamics and so on.

There is a more precise pedigree for this line of thought within Anthropology and in particular the Anthropology of Media. Mark Hobart's debate with Nik Couldry, both here and in the edited volume that span off from this list, points out the dangers of de-radicalising practice theories by imputing stable and clear objects in practice as a foundational starting point. The underdetermined character of material practices is key to avoid the subtle naturalisation of objects within practice, again taking the focus away from the power-related dynamics that often drive their formation.

I do not think, incidentally, that worrying about these issues is merely a matter of obfuscation. The need to engage with materialism is increasing greatly, and Danny has of course contributed greatly to this within Anthropology already. But if one misses the point about an engagement with materiality necessarily meaning an engagement with complexity and underdetermination as imminent and implicated with agency and power, then one ends up in a subtle form of rationalism, Descartes (the concept) before the horse (the, admittedly complex, driving dynamics).

Indeed one might stop and interrogate the power relations that lead to a one-sided debate on clarity and impact, which does not always take into account these dangers. Indeed it is important to note how close to a notion of "capacities" a theory of attainment is, and how Danny seems to use "capacities" as an anchor point in his introduction to his volume on materialities. If you remove the Emperor and deny complex agency, you would tend to see agency re-emerge as a somewhat materialised and individualised "thing" in other words "capacities". The pedigree behind "capacities" is transactionalist, so it is important to note that if you assert there is no Emperor, there is a clear and present danger of travelling down a transactionalist pathway.

Now given the notion of Capacities passed from Martha Nussbaum, to Amartya Sen, to the UN's Human Development framing of progress, then through Stephen Lukes's not so radical framings of power, to Anthony Giddens to the New Labour project based on aspiration and equality of opportunity. Given that "capacity building" became such a mantra that the department of education was put under the umbrella of "Human Resources" in both the UK and India. In other words given how closely the notion of "capacity" has been to the move to commodify human agency under neo-liberal "information society" style reforms, one might be very curious about the power-relations that have given rise to this very clear and communicable social object.

The recent student protests and writing from the left on the Neo-liberalisation indicates that academia is not a politics-free zone. The urge to populism has a pedigree within these debates on the neo-liberalisation of both academia and the media. Populisation at the BBC was very much about stopping a high minded paternalism, where middle class people talked to other middle class people via a sense of a mission to educate the public, and instead focussing the corporation on popular programming that had a big market.

Now, as in the debates on academia, there are merits to getting the BBC to get back in touch with it's audiences, but there are also dangers involved in this, and these are clearly also part of a wider political landscape to commercialise almost every area of life.

That Danny responds well to these incentives and produces good work within this framework should not be seen as a bad thing, but one might question the one-sided approach to populism as "a good thing" that was presented here, a more balanced debate needs to be had. Bear in mind Graeber's intervention, where he points out that in our current, highly productive age, despite popular mythology to the contrary, the amount of creativity has actually gone down, and you get an insight into the dangers involved in an excess of clarity too early on in the process of creating an academic product viable in our current intellectual markets.

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Garnham, N., 2000, 'Information Society' as theory or ideology, *Information, Communication & Society*, 3(2), pp. 139-52

A commentary on Human Capital, the Skills agenda and reforms in Education:

Callinicos, Alex. *Universities in a neoliberal world*. Bookmarks Publications, 2006.

<http://goo.gl/4Ao6i>

Graeber writing Journalistically, on creativity  
Of Flying Cars and the Declining Rate of Profit

<http://goo.gl/cvGy1>

I cannot face the paper trail on capacities, but Sen and Nusbaum's work, the UNDP Human Development Reports, Lukes' and Giddens work is all so popular as to be easy to find. The critiques thereof I cannot locate, but it is a standard unpacking of transactionalism at the heart of the debate. Power is productive yes, but in very complex ways.

Here is one interesting Anthropological Critique of Commons debates, which tracks this discussion reasonably well:

Bardhan, P.K. & Ray, I., 2008, The contested commons: conversations between economists and anthropologists, The contested commons : conversations between economists and anthropologists. Blackwell Pub., Malden, MA; Oxford, p.289

**Jolynna Sinanan** ([sinananj@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:sinananj@unimelb.edu.au))

22.10.2012

### **Response to Daniel:**

Dear Daniel,

You have now made it very clear that you have a problem with power and agency. Indeed you do. A really quite severe and rather unpleasant problem with power and agency. Your problem seems to be that I exist as an agent. It was bad enough that last time you completely failed to mention me, other than as an afterthought apology. But to now write a second response, in which myself and my contribution are essentially entirely absent is really quite impressive. My understanding of how seminars operate and indeed this one, if Danny and I can take the time to develop, research, write and post a paper to this forum, then there is an etiquette that suggests a reader might be expected to address that paper. Instead, you seem to have decided that this is merely an excuse for you to have a rant about Danny and whatever theoretical issues are keeping you awake at night. Danny has never suggested that he regards himself in the slightest as a more senior author. The only reason for the order of our names is that alphabetically, M appears before S. It is possible to overcome individualism in the creation of joint agency. Or at least we previously thought it was.

For this reason, we agree that from now on it is best if I respond alone to you. This is not easy since although I have had some exposure to Marxist and post-Marxist theory I find most of what you write incomprehensible. And where I do start to follow your chain of concept-dropping, your claims then jump widely to another set of terms that are linked, I would argue, at best, peripherally. It also seems that whatever objection you have to the clarity of Danny's writing (in this and other works) is not just theoretical. But my main response is this. If you really want and expect people to grace you with a response to your academic questions about

agency, I feel you really do need to deal with your deep problem over the more practical issues raised by the concepts of agency and power by trying your very best to see if you can't come to terms with the evidence that I am also an agent.

Jolynna

**Jolynna Sinanan** ([sinananj@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:sinananj@unimelb.edu.au))

22.10.2012

Thanks to all the last batch of commentators, especially those suggesting further readings. We are grateful and would take these on board, with the possible exception of Turkle, who we hoped we made clear represents pretty much the diametrically opposite stance from ourselves. The debate has helped give a much wider temporality to our discussion leading back historically and considering the future potentials which is much as we hoped.

Just to confirm, the little box doesn't dominate webcam conversation but we found it to be a profound and easily missed element that emerged from our discussions and we feel we are right to highlight.

We agree that new media as a place where people in some sense live is a salient theme in Boellstorff's 'Coming of Age in Second Life', but where we depart, is say from readings that are reflected in the case of Pavia in Chapter 5, where the virtual as a lived place allows for realization of how people see themselves in their actual lives. Our example of long-distance couples builds on a conclusion put forward by Miller and Madianoou in *New Media and Migration*, where a person has an idea of the person they are communicating with, of their 'mother' or their 'boyfriend' or their 'friend' and yet also they have an idea of how a mother or boyfriend or friend is supposed to be and act. The time spent together online, over webcam and indeed with 'always on' webcam, becomes the space where that relationship 'lives'.

We have used this medium we hope appropriately to trial some ideas, obviously we now have to complete the book and hopefully that in turn will gather further responses so that this dialogue itself can continue into the future.

Thanks to everyone for their help,

Danny and Jolynna

**Stephen M. Lyon** ([s.m.lyon@durham.ac.uk](mailto:s.m.lyon@durham.ac.uk))

24.10. 2012

Dear List,

Many thanks to Danny Miller, Jolynna Sinanan for providing a rich and useful paper for our discussions and to Daniel Taghioff for acting as discussant and raising a number of points which helped guide some of that discussion. The e-seminar is now officially closed (actually as of midnight last night).

The next e-seminar will take place from 27 November until 11 December and will be about a paper that many of us have had an early glimpse of at EASA-- our own John Postill's paper entitled, 'Media and social changing since 1979: towards a diachronic ethnography of media and actual social changes'.

Thanks to everyone who participated and to those of you who missed the deadline do be sure

to carry on the conversations at workshops and conferences and perhaps even on this list!

Best,  
Steve, Philipp and Nina

E-Seminar closed