

Comments on Eric W. Rothenbuhler's "Media Anthropology as a Field of Interdisciplinary Contact"

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I thank Eric for his fine essay, and moderator Sigurjon for inviting me to offer some comments. But first, some disclaimer and a brief note of my background. Although I had some formal training in anthropology in the early 1990s, and I have been interested in media studies since my student days, my professional work has been institutionally based in area studies (Southeast Asian/Indonesian). This will have obvious bearing on my comments.

I find Eric's paper both fascinating and instructive. Unfortunately, as a new and fairly inactive member of this mailing-list I am ill-equipped to relate his insights to the older postings of relevance. My apologies if my comments have in fact been discussed with elaboration in the past postings of the mailing-list. Eric's message is clear and it is presented in a friendly and yet effective and elegant style. The paper demonstrates the author's breadth of knowledge in both anthropology and media studies, as well as his depth of engagements with key issues in each. I enjoyed and learned so much from reading the essay, especially the first two sections: "What is Media Anthropology?" (pp. 2-5) and "What is the Promise of Media Anthropology?" (pp. 5-8). These sections can be very helpful for anyone new in the debate, and I suspect there are more than a few of them among first-time participants in the listservs e-seminar.

What intrigues me most from Eric's paper is his section "What are the controversies about media anthropology?" (pp. 9-17). My comments will focus on just this issue, and its immediately related questions. While I agree with his main points in this crucial section, in one fundamental aspect his views and perspective deserve further discussion. I suspect in his attempt to maximize clarity, or for the sake of convenience or for provoking a debate, Eric appears to have presented an oversimplified picture of anthropology as a discipline, and an overstatement of the discipline's distinctiveness from and contrasts to media studies. Such exposition is presented as a basis for Eric's defensive response to criticism from some unidentified anthropologists of the work in media anthropology by colleagues whose home bases are primarily in communication and media studies.

As someone whose work has largely been non-disciplinary, cross-disciplinary, and occasionally anti-disciplinary, I have no objection to Eric's argument "that media anthropology is and would most profitably continue to be a field of contact between two disciplines, rather than generating a new disciplinary frame of its own" (p. 1). I am sympathetic to his observation that "[a]nthropologists and communication scholars approach Media Anthropology from different directions with different histories and for different purposes. It is not only natural, but productive, that they would make differing choices of concepts, methods, and interpretations" (p.1).

Given the complexity and diversity that have developed in today's anthropology, it would be unnecessary or unfair to demand anyone from within let alone outside the discipline to give a comprehensive portrayal of the discipline in order to say anything about its productive contacts with other disciplines. I do not have the competence to offer such an account for this discussion myself, and I would not expect the same from an essay written by someone else for our discussion in this forum. Notwithstanding this, I did not expect a suggestion to the effect that anthropology is a discipline that aims primarily "to study indigenous communities of distant societies" (p. 11).

I admit I have not followed very closely the debates in the discipline since my graduation from the school of anthropology and worked as an area study specialist. But even a cursory observation of

the discipline is sufficient to convince me that the discipline has been so open and it has welcome an overwhelmingly rich and complex diversity, including a heavy dose of auto-criticism, that makes it more difficult to make a brief and quick portrayal of the discipline. Indeed some of the attractive attributes of anthropology are precisely its hybridity and fluid identity, making it less and less sensible or possible to draw a clear boundary where its farthest territory ends, and its next neighbour begins. (see footnote 1)

Since my student days in the 1990s, it was already obvious that the long history of the discipline's naivety in studying "others" had come to a close. A decade ago it was evident that the discipline had gone a long way from its colonial tradition of studying "indigenous communities of distant societies". Back in the late 1980s and early 1990s "self-reflexology" was in vogue in anthropology, and so were imported insights from post-structuralism, post-colonial studies, and the subaltern studies. Western anthropologists did serious ethnographic inquiries "at home". Surely, despite all these developments, even to this day one still occasionally encounters remnants and legacies of colonial anthropology across campuses and conferences. But I would be surprised if today an anthropologist would assume the continued existence of a "distinct societies and cultures" (p. 20), clearly bounded, free from the invasion of modernity without being ironic or appearing ridiculously laughable.

The recent development in anthropology did not take place purely voluntarily or a result of an internal dynamics within the discipline. Rather, it was prompted at least in part by the challenges from a growing number of academic and non-academic persons from those "indigenous communities of distant societies". These people and those they represent had previously existed in anthropology as little more than muted objects of analysis by distant observers who studied them with some degree of piety, contempt, romanticism or curiosity. The recent changes render the old and familiar "we-versus- they" trope in anthropology highly problematic and obsolete. The same is also true with Southeast Asian studies that began largely as a study of the region, its people and history by Western Europeans and later North Americans. (see footnote 2)

Eric's paper raises the question whether media anthropology is an exception, where adopting the old and colonial legacies of anthropology is both justified and arguably the best option for media and communication scholars. I am reluctant to suggest that this is exactly what Eric intends to argue, but many of his points border that line of thought.

I suspect Eric's line of argument is a consequence of his aim and strategy of writing a defence for media anthropology, and especially for the work in this area by communication and media scholars. "In this paper I want to focus on some criticisms by anthropologists of the work of communication and media scholars" (p. 9), he says. In particular, Eric wishes to respond to criticism from "its more traditional practitioners" (p. 9) that allege the work in media anthropology from "media studies often appear inadequate. The ethnographic work is often not rigorous enough. The theoretical work is often out of date" (p. 9). Unfortunately, and this is my main disappointment from Eric's otherwise fine essay, there is no specific cited examples of such criticism, their sources, their identified authors, and the contexts of relevance. So it is hard to assess their merits, and whether or not such criticism warrants a response.

Incidentally, Asian studies has frequently been challenged by questions which are not very different from those that Eric mentions with reference to media anthropology. At stake is no less than the area studies' legitimate existence as a special major degree granting unit within a university, especially at a time of financial stringency. The nature, aims, and quality of such criticism vary, and one needs to deal with the specific to offer a proper response. Since the Cold War ended, Southeast Asian studies

(as a child of the War) has found itself standing feebly on an increasingly shaky ground. Understandably, many colleagues in area studies become hyper-sensitive to criticism. Some of them develop a sieged mentality, exaggerating the real or potential threats and hostility from the traditional and more established disciplines. I hope I have misread the final sections of Eric's paper, but I sense similar sentiments there.

Not only has Eric explicitly deployed the we-versus-they dichotomy, or what he calls "a structured pair of oppositions" (p. 11) to describe the supposedly distinct interests and activities of anthropology and those of communication and media studies. At length Eric describes and justifies the rationales for the latter scholars' special interest in the older work of the former, pertaining to theories of myth, story, symbol, hero, or icon (p.14). He believes that many anthropologies ("they") have failed to understand the needs and interests, and thus failed to appreciate the merits, of scholars in communication and media studies ("us"). He objects to "their" unfair and invalid criticism, demands, and imposition of "their" standards on "our" presumably separate and equally sovereign territory and preferred practice. He warns that "attempts to discipline Media Anthropology will either fail or bleed the territory of its vitality" (p. 1).

As much as I am sympathetic to Eric's plea, I am sorry to hear that Eric has not seen more friendly responses from contemporary anthropologists than those already discussed in his paper to the media anthropological work by scholars from communication and media studies. Could it be that this is a result of his narrow definition of anthropology and anthropologists, focusing mainly or exclusively on those he describes as "traditional practitioners" (p. 9) of the discipline? In case my earlier reference to area studies has appeared to be distraction to the issue at hand, let me add one more note below.

In the past two decades or so, Asian studies has been reinvigorated by a new wave of interests in the robust production, circulation, and consumption of popular culture. This is immediately related to the dramatic growth of the media industry in the region. One major region in the production of these contemporary cultures (particularly music and television dramas) is East Asia (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong). Another major area of production is India, especially in music and film. Although Southeast Asia has not been a major producer in comparison to those two, its over half a billion people constitute the major consumers of those products from both East and South Asia. Significantly to our concerns, the newly industrialized Southeast Asia is also home of the cosmopolitan professionals and global capitalists who are also strongly religious.

Indonesia is currently dubbed both the world's largest Muslim-populated nation and the world's third liberal democracy, where election campaigns are heavily infused with sorcery (Bubant 2006). The current president (Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono) won the election in 2004 after singing in the final contest of Indonesian Idol, and has since released two music albums. Indonesia is also home of the world's largest Buddhist temple (Borobudur) and host of the world's largest jazz festival (Li 2008), and where horror and supernatural themes are the most popular genre of television drama series and feature films (Heeren 2007). This is a world where collective interests supersede those of individuals, and where one's social status, political and economic opportunities are significantly determined by one's family background.

Unsurprisingly, Routledge has established a list of publication series devoted specifically to the study of contemporary Asia, including its vibrant media and culture. Asia opens widely a new set of intellectual opportunities and challenges for open-minded anthropologists and communication/media studies scholars (and many others) to explore new questions and address issues, not least those raised by Eric. But this opportunity is lost if we retain the narrow and

increasingly obsolete conception of anthropology as a discipline that concentrates on a study of non-industrial nations or isolated villages, with distinct culture on one hand. And on the other hand media and communication studies are conceptualized mainly as disciplines devoted to the analysis of secular societies, with “a culture that values rationality above all things” (p. 6) and “where the individual reigns supreme” (p. 21). Asian anthropologists and Asian media scholars (just as anthropologists of Asia and media scholars of Asia) can easily identify neither with “we” nor “they” in Eric’s dichotomous intellectual world.

Changes in anthropology, as changes in history elsewhere, do not necessarily represent a progression for the better. Many old texts in anthropology (as in other disciplines) have demonstrated that their merits stand the test of time. Many of these old texts do not emphasize or reduce non-western, non-industrial people and histories as distinct and isolated. There is no reason why contemporary anthropologists (or communication and media studies scholars for that matter), should not seriously adopt insights from these older texts, and prefer to engage with them instead of the more recent work.

The real issue is not what materials one uses or their disciplinary or temporal origins. The issue is what one will do with these selected sources and materials in one’s own work, and how this will produce something innovative and effective that will contribute something significant to the broader communities of scholars across disciplines, and non-scholars alike. Unless proven otherwise, I remain unconvinced that recuperating “a structured pair of oppositions” (p. 19) -- with or without a “wink” such as Eric’s -- between anthropology and communication/media studies is one strategy that will bring more advantages than disadvantages to media anthropology. Despite this minor difference in approaches, I share Eric’s vision that “media anthropology will grow richer, more varied, and more productive to the extent we maintain that somewhat less organized, less disciplined approach” (p. 22).

Notes

1. The work of Clifford and Marcus (1986) that Eric cites, but also others that he does not cite such as Clifford (1988); Kahn (1989, 2001a, b); Ortner (2000); Paley (2002); and Scheper-Hughes (1995) illustrate the point. Given the time and space constraints (Eric’s paper reached my mailbox when I was half a globe away from my home base, attending a hectic series of conference panels), I can only drop a few references of relevance that came to mind, purely for illustrative purposes that should also make my bias more explicit. Being conscious of potentially misrepresenting the broader picture of today’s anthropology, I am hesitant to mention my random selection of references in the main body of my comments. I will be happy to try to elaborate if subsequent postings demand me to do so with further reference details.

2. See Bowen (2000); Chou and Houben (2006); and Heryanto (2007).

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