Media Anthropology and Theory

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My thesis is that hitherto there have scarcely been real theoretical approaches in media anthropology which have shaped discourse within social anthropology or which have had an effect beyond it in Media and Communication Studies. On the other hand, the situation is different with respect to method: the ethnographic method has developed into a very important tool for media research. One could therefore say that the essential contribution of social anthropology to media research is in general ethnography. Ethnography, in turn, has influenced substantially new theoretical approaches in the social sciences and the humanities; actor-network theory (Latour/Woolgar/Law), for instance, would be inconceivable without fieldwork. In this example we can recognise that theory and practice in media anthropology are interlocked and can never be seen as separate.

Many neighbouring disciplines have applied ethnographic fieldwork in appropriately adapted form to their own subjects with considerable gain. From the point of view of social anthropology and with respect to the preservation of inner-disciplinary traditions, this 'foreign' application of ethnographic methods often seems somewhat strange. Not least, the closeness to Cultural Studies has in this respect led to worried discussions among social anthropologists, fearful that the casual and loose treatment of our methods poses a threat to the discipline and even the menace of foreign infiltration and a 'take over' from outside. All this alarm is noticeable in the whole field of social anthropology and not only in media anthropology, whose representatives (as far as I can tell) incline to see themselves rather as expressly oriented towards interdisciplinary approaches. And, in fact, media and communication researchers have recently shown a growing interest in media anthropology.

It is not easy to agree in interdisciplinary spheres about common points of emphasis. We are constantly faced by the fundamental difficulty of reaching an agreement about a common vocabulary. But this also holds for social anthropologists themselves from diverse national traditions. For example, cultural anthropologists in the USA emphasise the concept of 'culture', while British social anthropologists emphasise the concept of society (yes, still

today). On the other hand, theories that accent culture are often looked upon as merely idealist, symbolic, and at any rate not concerned with the 'really important' central questions. I have often observed the sort of misunderstandings that can arise from these differences in the discussions of our e-seminars – precisely in an open space that has been designed for the exchange between researchers from various professional traditions. These discussions frequently forget (in my view) that we have come too far in thought to permit ourselves to be trapped by these old stories: hasn't the clinging to a concept of society that is completely outdated and theoretically obsolete (because bound to heuristic ideas held by our forefathers) long been under criticism? Isn't it the same with the concept of culture? We might ask ourselves why there is so little sense of this criticism in our discussions, and why instead there are so many efforts to repair and rescue these concepts, to ignore the hints about the emperor's lacking clothes, and even to defend the cherished models against 'heretics'.

Another legacy that makes life for media anthropologists difficult is that of Critical Theory, which has its roots in the Frankfurt School. Cultural Studies and parts of traditional Media and Communication Studies have been substantially influenced by this theory. Worrying about these currents is the associated expressly political posture of being 'against' something. This something has many forms and cannot be grasped; it is symbolised, for example, in the 'culture industry' (Adorno/Horkheimer), in the handling of the powerful concept of the 'masses', in the analysis of power and domination through the media. It may also be found in the negative political critique of the media (for instance, by Bourdieu, whose criticism of the populism of television has itself become populist). At this point, it all becomes quite difficult, for theoretical positions mix with everyday concepts of media and the use of media, and further combine often enough with a good deal of media pessimism – for example, about the effect of media on groups which social anthropologists have classically studied, or with respect to research about 'youth' in Western societies.

Nevertheless, the effect of power and domination through the media remains the guiding focus – or at least ought to remain that. Yet precisely in this field the studies which draw on Critical Theory are strangely captive to an old stock of ideas. Important new approaches that promise to be more fruitful in these investigations are founded on Foucault's new version of the theory of power. Only thanks to this theory is it possible to leave the black box (Latour) of power theory and view it from outside so as then to address the question of what combinations power assumes when it is mediated through the media. How does power operate

through knowledge (through the contents of media, through the media themselves in all their aspects)? Here I should like to recall the media theory of the sociologist Niklas Luhmann, whose study on media begins with the memorable sentence: 'What we know about our society, what we know about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media' (1996: 9). He proceeds to explain that there is no such thing as an outside for the social scientist, no comfortable position from whose coign of vantage we could independently judge others, our objects of investigation. Luhmann thus criticises at the same time what he calls the *Essenzkosmos* – the 'cosmos of essences' – which, exactly as Latour's 'black box', gives us the illusion that we, but not the 'others', could grasp the really real. In the last 25 years, social anthropologists have discussed these questions intensely by opening their own position to ethnographic reflection. Works on media anthropology have mirrored this discussion.

Yet we are also haunted by a further difficult concept form the legacy of Critical Theory: the masses. It is used, as Luhmann observes, to convey the unclearness of the numbers of people who use a specific medium and 'the technical means of multiplication for an extension of communication' (*ibid*., 10). Raymond Williams already rightly criticised the uncritical application of the concept of the masses in media research (Williams 1972-1958). He remarks that a group prejudice is always attached to the designation 'masses' which allows the researcher to raise himself above the others (that is, the masses) and innerly distance himself from them. 'The masses are the others', said Williams, and 'There are in fact no masses; there are only possibilities of viewing people as the masses' (1972: 359). He then criticises the research practice that makes other people into the masses and interprets them with the aid of a common phraseology. He proposes an investigation of this phraseology – and this programme has not, in my view, lost any of its validity today; it has only, unfortunately, been lost sight of. In spite of this, media anthropology is due for a coming to terms with the inheritance of Critical Theory and a sounding of the influence of that inheritance on its own theoretical work.

In my opinion, the attempt to grasp the immensity of the spread of media today from the perspective of media anthropology is faced by a dilemma. It concerns the gap that opens between the 'mass media' and ethnographic examples, where each example constitutes a butterfly in a precious collection. This gap is reflected in inadequate concepts of society and culture and the individual. For lack of a general theory, a lack which is now and then articulated, everyone tinkers alone for himself. As recent discussions in the e-seminars have

shown, there exits a great readiness to help oneself to the rich treasures of our predecessors. diffusionism, functionalism, structuralism, symbolic interactionism and many other concepts are retrieved from oblivion and the attempt is made to recycle and refurbish authors for present needs. I think this is dangerous and seldom successful, indeed quite simply impossible. To view media rituals in a classical way within the frame of the 1970's only leads us back into essentialisms, which for some time now have no longer seemed adequate in light of newer theories. This criticism has been voiced by Mark Hobart in, for instance, his brilliant attack on concepts of identity/ritual and their uncritical application (2005).

Naturally, I can understand the longing for coherence, for frameworks, for boundaries, for all those things that many promise themselves from a general theory. Yet the demands on such a general theory (*Rhizome*?) are very high. The question upon which we should reflect is what such a theory should deliver? Linked to this is the further question what things we have to carry on research about and how the corresponding perspective must be focussed through a fusion of theory and method.

My answer to this is to say: let things become as complicated as possible, work with a tool-kit of theories instead of hoping for salvation through some grand theory. This means that researchers will need the courage to open themselves to the complicated contexts which complicated theoretical approaches require. Even though I bear in mind the criticism that a researcher cannot after all study each and every aspect of media, it is still the duty of media anthropologists to reject reductionist approaches. Our thought has become more complicated and multi-levelled in recent years, and we must take this into account.

After theoretical work had for a long time been stuck between concepts of society and its opposite, the 'dude' (Thompson), the remote-controlled man, or its idealistic mirror image, there are now newer approaches which could surmount these antagonistic poles and be further developed within media anthropology. Here the actor/network theory offers itself, and in addition Foucault's conceptions of power, discourse and *gouvernementalité*. Processes, actions and performances are well-developed theoretical concepts that are at our disposal, together with theories about the genesis of complexes of desire and power.

Very important is anthropological fieldwork, for in the exactness of the description lies the theory. In media anthropology, fieldwork often appears as multi-sited ethnography; each case

requires self-reflection. Only this form of free-floating attention allows an open ethnographic process to arise, whose acquisition of data is essentially shaped by serendipity.

Combined with the idea of analysing media in context and of giving attention to content, production, appropriation and consumption, this is a respectable programme which should not frighten anyone. It will also become still more complicated when we attempt to think through further connections and relations and to construct theories about those between our interview partners (perhaps producers or users of indigenous media) and our own media worlds.

Hobart, Mark
2005 see documentation of the last e-seminar on theory

Williams, Raymond
1972 Gesellschaftstheorie als Begriffsgeschichte. München (Culture and Society 1780-1950. 1958)[1]