

**EASA Media Anthropology Network  
e-Workshop (Part 2)**

**“Using anthropological theory  
to understand media forms and practices”**

**(15 – 20 December 2005)**

**<http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/events.htm>**

**Ursula Rao (Halle University)**  
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Dear all,

I would now like to open the floor now for the second e-session on „Using Anthropological Theory to Understand Media Forms and Practices“. In a way the discussion never stopped in between, so that there should be plenty of inputs for continuing the debate.

This final session will end on Tuesday (20.12.2005), 4 p.m. (middle European time)

So far I see two issues that have emerged as questions for further discussion:

**Anthropological theory:** The discussion so far has shown how anthropological theory has been used for the interpretation of media practices, especially ritual theory, theories of practice, arguments from linguistics and debates on cultural identity and ethnicity.

I invite you to continue this debate, with more statements on these issues and also other theories that have inspired the interpretation of media practices.

The second issue is a meta-debate about what is at the base of media-anthropology: a) a particular methodology and a theorizing that result from ‘deep involvement’ or b) an engagement with anthropological theory that opens up new ways to interpret observations about the way humans shape and interact with media technologies and products.

Both approaches to media anthropology make sense and they obviously overlap. I do not believe that we should start again a debate about how to define media anthropology or how to distinguish it from other disciplines. I rather think it would be very fruitful if people could share their own experiences about how in their own work they became aware of the way anthropological thoughts, practices, theories shaped their studies of mass media.

I myself would like to start by sharing two thoughts I had when going through the papers from Loughborough.

## Media and Ritual

Nick Couldrey’s paper took up several issues that emerged in the ritual-media exchange during the first e-session. For me this summary was extremely helpful and clarified some points. What intrigued me most: Nick Couldrey argues that ritual theories become relevant for the interpretation of media practices because of the tendency towards formalization that is effected through media (production and use) as well as a ‘pressure towards order in modernity and late modernity’. Thus, we need to take form into account in order to understand the consequences mass media have for the social (order). Here I was reminded of Humphrey and Laidlaw’s (1994) idea of ‘ritual commitment’. Ritual commitment means a particular attitude that is adopted by people when they conduct a ritual. It is a stance that is committed to tradition (or any other higher order) and the replication of this tradition (higher order). It is this stance that is important, more than the question whether the act actually resembled the imaginary ideal (which is never does, not even in the eyes of actors themselves). This formulation solves the question of when is a ritualized action a Ritual. Ritual is when redundancy (as an image, an idea) is seen as an essential part of the act by actors themselves and is made responsible for the effect of the practices (that is ritual). Form becomes paramount, something that was also emphasized by Rothenbuhler and Taghioff in the first e-session. In a way this is also relates back to the classical formulations by Moore and

Myerhoff, that ritual is about recreating a tradition, even if a ritual is conducted for the first time!

While in my own work on news-making practices I am very hesitant to use the term ritual I believe that this focus on form is extremely important. I discovered that local actors in India have learned strategies of how to use news, the spread of information through the newspaper, to fight petty fights, become eminent personalities, pressure for change, etc. What is important to them is the format. Information, statements change when they are circulated by the mass media. The issue is not (only) about circulation. It is rather the authority and authenticity the newspaper lends to claims, once they are reported in the newspaper (a medium that is thought to circulate important, relevant and true information). Being published in the newspapers issues / persons become important, no matter what the issues are. It is the format, and the ideals associated with this format, which makes newspapers very attractive and efficient as instruments for addressing local issues.

### Community and social field

John Postill engages with the idea of social field and discusses how electronic media contribute to the emerging of a new social field of local community building. I think this is an extremely interesting and relevant point that shows an important strength of an anthropological approach to media. John here connects the anthropological focus on social relations with questions of media technology. We learn that electronic media do not only create new trans-local ties but are used to create new local communities and thus change the way face-to-face interactions are organized, embedded, conceptualized.

I think John gives an elegantly combined answer to the question of how method and theory from anthropology can become relevant to the study of media. He uses anthropological theories that result from an intimate knowledge of social interactions in local fields. Using the method of deep involvement himself his focus is on practice and change. For me this is one of the key areas of anthropology, to understand how people manipulate relations through multiple media. It is fascinating to see how a medium that stereotypically is associated with long distance contacts (that are not face-to-face, or are even supposed to replace face-to-face relations) is used to restructure local relations and positions them in a new social field.

### Reference:

Humphrey, Caroline und James Laidlaw. 1994. *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual. A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

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best

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**Elizabeth Bird (University of South Florida)**  
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Like everyone else, I've been struggling with the challenge to think about how anthropological theory is useful in the study of media. One thing that occurred to me was that there are at least two major theoretical trajectories here – those represented by social anthropology and cultural anthropology. I know these are no longer as distinct as they once were, but I do think if we see media as an element in the construction of society (social institutions etc.) we may well view them differently from the way we might view media as helping constitute culture.

For me, I started becoming interested (anthropologically) in media when I took a class years ago in anthropology of religion, and read Geertz, Turner, and Douglas, which were revelatory to me, as I was in a traditional British social anthropology program. This was the point at which I began to think of culture not as a static “thing,” but as constantly being in a state of creation, constituted through communicative acts, whether interpersonal or mediated (or both).

As I see it, cultural anthropology is about how people make meaning through communication. The very notion of culture has been rightly problematized, but I still believe that anthropology's core concept is culture, and that does give us a perspective that is centrally different from, say, a mass communication theorist who starts with the notion of mass media as an institution or a process, and moves out from there. I think generally anthropologists don't start with a focus on media per se, but with an interest in how cultural meaning is created, negotiated, and transformed – by people, hence the centrality of ethnography as a core method. And today, it is about power over meaning, and which people get to define it. The consequences of this are not theoretical – they have life and death implications.

But the ethnographic perspective is more than a method; it is also a theoretical orientation, because it takes the position that the complexity of culture cannot be understood through an analysis of structure alone. We have to see culture being “done” through communication. Inevitably, that now leads us into consideration of the media's role.

For instance, we could look at one of the terms that has been raised a lot in this discussion of media anthropology – myth. Although I was writing about media as myth almost 20 years ago, I became uncomfortable with the way scholarship in that area developed – partly because it began to seem very un-anthropological. We began to see a static, structural kind of approach to media texts, as if meaning was inscribed in them. Lule's book on myth and the news, strong as it is in many ways, is an example. He takes old, text-based ideas of myth that once were acceptable anthropology, and applies them to news. But after Geertz, Turner etc., we can't see myth like that. Rather, myth is a dynamic process, through which people debate and contest meaning – much more the way Keith Basso discusses the creation of identity and meaning through the living (and changing) myths and folklore of the Apache. The media are one terrain on which that struggle happens.

So contemporary anthropology seems to me all about how cultural meaning is constructed and contested, and this is true whether we're looking very locally or nationally/globally. A more bounded study, for instance, might be about how people use TV to create community, frame their thinking on an issue, or whatever. Anthropologists are also moving more and more into larger studies about, say, the struggle over abortion (as Faye Ginsburg did). Consideration of media becomes essential – but media in themselves are not the beginning point. At the AAA meetings a couple of weeks ago, George Lipsitz (who has always seemed to me a very anthropological kind of scholar) talked passionately about the crisis of meaning in U.S. culture – the struggle over who gets to define terms like “patriot,” “American,” “family values,” “poverty” etc. I think there's an important role for anthropological media studies in this – careful ethnographic work about how meanings are made and remade in an interplay between media texts and communication in everyday life.

So I believe anthropological theories about culture as a dynamic process of meaning-making – building on Geertz, Turner, Douglas, Marcus, Appadurai and others – are most important, coupled with an emphasis on ethnography as a guiding methodological perspective. And while traditional, bounded notions of holism may no longer be relevant, the concept is still significant -- as anthropologists, I think we essentially study media to understand culture, rather to understand media for their own sake.

Liz Bird

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**Nick Couldry (LSE)**  
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Dear all

I just wanted to pick up briefly on Ursula's helpful comments, which open up the discussion once more very well.

I agree that Humphrey and Laidlaw's ideas of ritual/isation and ritual commitment are a useful alternative formulation. Personally I'm a little uneasy when they identify the key extra ingredient that turns any act into a ritual as a 'conception of the action as a thing, encountered and perceived from the outside' (1994: 5). This seems to me to require the actors to have a particular 'mental content' when perhaps all they need is to perform an act whose communication, as Rappaport puts it (1999: 24) 'is not entirely encoded by the performers'. I see Rappaport's way of defining ritual as a little more open in this respect.

But all that is secondary to the key point all these writers and Ursula stress about form in media, and here I found Ursula's suggestions about media 'format' very suggestive. I agree the term 'ritual' is not necessarily very helpful in describing news-making practices since they do

not need to so formalized to be effective. Equally the form of news itself may be constructed (in certain media territories at least - no reason to suppose this is universal) in ways that mark off this area of discourse from others, but without any further formalisation. As Todd Gitlin once put it (speaking generally but the point needs to be made specific to particular media territories and media 'cultures'): 'what makes the world beyond direct experience look natural is a media frame' (1980: 6). Interestingly the media-related term 'frame' reappears here, but without any need to claim that news contents are ritualized, or that news is a ritual. Nonetheless the framing dimension of media results from a social construction that in other circumstances might contribute to media-related rituals, and as Ursula suggests the term 'ritual commitment' would be a link here.

Perhaps these detailed thoughts take us too far away from the broad theme of the discussion, but for me they illustrate a more general point, that the term 'ritual' is not a stand-alone term for which applications must be sought out for their own sake, but just one of a series of working terms (including ritualisation but also framing and many others) that together can give us a grasp of how media are entangled in the constructed 'order' of contemporary societies. John Postill's paper seemed to me very much in this flexible spirit.

So maybe the question (if like me you follow Ursula's second path for 'media-anthropology' - point 2 of her paper) is what other mid-range theoretical terms are also needed to grasp that order. I've said more than enough about ritual/isation! I'd be interested to know from others what further terms might work to supplement them, or maybe replace them, if they can be shown to work better.

All the best

Nick

## References

Gitlin, Todd (1980) *The Whole World is Watching*, Berkeley: U of California Press.

Humphrey, Caroline and Laidlaw, James (1994) *the Archetypal Actions of Ritual*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Rappaport, Roy (1999) *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge Univeristy Press.

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**Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)**  
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I would like to float the idea of Genre for discussion.

I am not sure I really understand the idea of Genre well enough, but I can suggest some of its useful features at least.

Genre is useful because it is akin to "practice" but it emphasises the aspect of how people understand the practices in question.

Practice I am taking in terms of publicly recognisable types of activity, and thus "genre" as a publically recognisable type of mediation.

This does not tie the idea of order, ordering and the emergence of form to the serious life in the way that ritual does. Having fun is a part of how order emerges in our life. How do we meet our partners? This is also a point raised by people like Fiske in relation to media.

I would also say that Genre is useful because it tends to be associated with intertextuality, a type of mediation can be seen as drawing from a variety of genres. It is also a term used within media and literature already to some extent.

Finally it has an explicit sense of historical flexibility: Genres can change over time. They cannot change so fast as to become unrecognisable as being continuous: That is called innovation, and is the source of "new" genres.

However they need not remain constant either: There need not be fixed invariable cores to genres that define them: They can be studied in terms of particular histories of partial continuity of practice.

There is also a sense of genres being generated or maintained actively, and this seems to be a good way of approaching the issue of form and order in mediation and practice.

This actually relates to debates on self-organising systems, which show how form can emerge, and persist, without necessarily being based on fixed underlying constants.

Bakhtin has done work on speech genres and literary genres, showing that it is a flexible concept.

One problem with the use of "genre" is conceptualising carefully how agency fits with the generation and maintenance of genres.

Another way of looking at it is the relationship between genres as histories of practice, and agency in current enactments, and possible transformations and intertextualities in this.

Anyway, that was not as focussed as I had hoped, critical responses are welcomed.

Daniel

## **References**

Gitlin, Todd (1980) *The Whole World is Watching*, Berkeley: U of California Press.

Humphrey, Caroline and Laidlaw, James (1994) *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Rappaport, Roy (1999) *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge University Press.

Daniel Taghioff

**Mihai Coman (Bucharest University)**

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Dear All

It seems to me that from this session arose a lot of bright ideas and I am grateful to the organisers and participants (be they in flesh and blood or virtual shadows J)

I would like to make some remarks

It seems to me that a lot of debates turned around concepts and not theories – even less anthropological theories. Obviously, we can not make a rigid demarcation, but, however, a theory is something more than a concept .... we all agree on that

A large part of these concepts are designing issues – and a lot of inquiries in social sciences are facing these issues – power, exchange, identity, communication, social practice etc

The majority of the concepts invoked are transversal – they circulate between disciplines and it is difficult to locate them in one area exclusively.

These (may I call „natural”) sliperies of our debates shows the difficulty of fixing clear boundaries in media anthropology (I believe we are a little bit tired, after hectic debates in our e-seminars, of saying this, remembering this, accepting this, living with this...)

But the topic of this meeting was the contribution of anthropological theories to media studies. I have presented an opposite analysis in my book (*Pour une anthropologie des medias*, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 2003) showing how inconsistent was the contribution of media (pure, standard, media oriented) studies to anthropological knowledge. Scholars have borrowed concepts, attractive concepts – such as myth, ritual, liminality, social dramas, and sometime magic – from anthropological toolbox, labeling some media phenomena as myth, ritual and so on; it seems to me that they believed (this is also an anthropological concept!) that: A) the aura of such concepts and B) the novelty of the use of them in media studies, will enlighten a fact and give an answer to their scientific quest. This was a pure magical way to transform into a „fetish” a tool (with specific value and specific limits in its own system) .

Speaking on myth (one of the most complex and ambiguous concepts we have in anthropology – which we also „share” with other sciences and disciplines, making everything even more unclear) it was used in a simplistic way, under the aegis of the „archetypal” theories or of the functionalist ones (as I have pointed out in my chapter in Rothenbuhler and Coman (ed) *Media Anthropology*, Sage, 2005). But, even if it is inconsistent from our point of view, reading news as (a) myth was/is, by itself, a revolution in a discipline dominated by an empiricist vision and empiricist paradigm.

The same can be said about ritual and a ritualist frame in media analysis. So I believe that the main contribution of anthropology was to shake the „establishment” of media studies and to bring a fresh air. But this is already history .....

If I'll try to define, on a more abstract level, the contribution of anthropology I would like to remember you a reaction of Marcel Mauss; trying to make a difference between his view and Durkheim's one, he was pointed out the symbolic, as an autonomous part of social life; I believe that the symbolic side of social life is the specific „field” of cultural anthropology. Our discipline push media studies to „re-discover” the symbolic nature of media, not as a residual element of popular culture (or mass com), but as the core of the media system. Everything involved in media constellation (production, distribution, consumption, content, etc) has to be interpreted as symbolic phenomena – and here „classical” concepts such as myth, ritual, magic or more recent one can reshape media theories

However, we still have to underline the anthropological theories that can support this process of scientific re-evaluation of media world. But, where is the inventory of anthropological theories? Have we all agreed upon them? I'll take only one example: Henrietta Moore reader: will we all agree on her selection of texts, authors and theories? Is the place of Geertz's thick description in a chapter devoted to theories on Biology and ontogeny? Where is Turner? Where is Leach?

I do not support a mechanic inventory of theories and a rigid application of all theories in media studies. But I was pleased to see that a media theorist such as Graham Murdock looked to the gift theory to give meaning to media and Internet exchanges ....

I believe Turner, Levi-Strauss, Leach and others have built significant ritual theories (and I felt happy seeing that Hunnphrey and Laidlaw or Handelman or Bloch names were evoked in these discussion, bringing us closer to our specific debates). I think that media scholars interested by a media anthropological approach have to deepen these heritage and look for new approaches and interpretations; anthropological theories are useless if transformed into a magic word and simplistic translations from one area to another (here I subscribe to Elisabeth Bird remarks)

And for the mythological approach – to take just one example - I think that Katz and Liebes analysis on “Dallas” (and any other analysis on the consumption of a successful media story that looks like an “archetypal” one) resonate with Dumézil theories and can find a lot of incentives in such a model.

My point here is that there are a lot of theories or theoretical models rooted in or at least fed by anthropological land, which can be fruitfully applied for (what is commonly designated as) a better understanding of media system.

But for me, now, the main point is not here. I'm more interested in (and working on) the ways media use of anthropological frame, theories, concepts can influence, even change anthropological theories. To take one example – the media events as a specific, mediated, form of ritual or ritualized action would modify our theories on ritual and ritual efficiency as possible only in a non-mediated situation? Nick Couldry's analysis on pilgrimages, confirming some sides of Turner's model and some sides of Eade and Salnow's perspective would oblige anthropologists to re-open the pilgrimage debate and reshape the theoretical frame? I would like to invite to look also to the influence that young and nonconformist anthropological oriented media studies can exercise on the “motherland” theoretical univers.

Best  
Mihai Coman

**Ursula Rao (Halle University)**  
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Dear all,

It seems this discussion has difficulties in taking off, although we had three very interesting comments so far:

Elizabeth Bird in a very well formulated statement made clear that anthropology is about the way media become relevant for the production/reproduction of social meaning in action, something that also surfaces in Nick's formulation that we try to "grasp of how media are entangled in the constructed 'order' of contemporary society". It is almost like a reflex that I feel like adding to the latter statement that we need to go beyond order or structure, and look at subversion, destruction, reconstruction of order. I say this not to emphasize again a dichotomy that has been responsible for much debate in media studies, between media as making / supporting structure or media (reception) as subversive practice. I fully agree with Mazzarella's (1994) recent review article that we need to go beyond this dichotomy to discover contradictory and complex processes at work.

Let me demonstrate what I mean with reference to the way I like to use the concept of "social field" (a theme brought up by John already) in reference to news making. It is an argument that ascertains that the concept of social field is extremely helpful to understand journalistic practices while at the same time acknowledging that journalistic practices constantly call into question and transcend social fields through actions that ignore, destroy, transgress boundaries between social fields (e.g. between the social fields of journalism and politics).

Journalists in India (like everywhere else) distinguish between clearly defined positions that identify people as members of distinct professions like journalism and politics. However, while such definitions can mark positions, they cannot extinguish ambivalences in actual practice. In my study I show that politicians and journalists act in tandem and that frames of relevance in the domain of journalism become essential for effects in the world of politics (and the other way round). Furthermore there are exchange relations that tie politicians and journalists together and thereby subvert the creation of separate fields with distinct perspectives and priorities.

Yet this does not make assurances of independence superfluous. By creating a separate subject point for their own profession, journalists participate in creating an imaginary landscape of distinguishable professions, which can be used to guide their practices and justify activities in a social arena that is filled to the rim with occasions for conflict and misunderstanding. Re-creating the field, journalists reassure themselves and others that they are journalists and only journalists.

In this sense the concept of social fields remains valuable for understanding journalism, though in a different way than for example Bourdieu (1998) has suggested. The making of a field is inseparably linked to the practice of demarcating that creates an ideal map of social fields, according to which activities are recognized, interpreted and judged. The social field of journalism comes into being through an interpretative practice that relies on boundaries in order to organize and justify its own practices. This classificatory activity takes place both amid and against the experience of boundary-crossing.

To return to my initial statement, here I show that media practices participate in the making of a particular social order, while subverting it at the same time. It is this tension that intrigues me most and that I believe we need to grasp in order to comprehend the fluidity of order.

Thus, like John (or maybe in a different) way, I suggest ‘social field’ as a helpful metaphor. And like Nick I would love to hear more about other anthropological theories that are being explored for the interpretation of media practices.

thanks to Daniel Taghioff we now also have something on genre!

Ursula

## References

Mazzarella, William. 2004. Culture, Globalization, Mediation. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33: 345-67.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1998[1996]. *On Television and Journalism*. London: Pluto.

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**Ursula Rao (Halle University)**

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Dear all,

I would now like to close the session on „Using Anthropological Theory to Understand Media Forms and Practices“.

The discussion was not very lively, though I have to admit that I personally felt that those who did contribute send in very interesting and useful comments. Thus, I thank all who took the pain to communicate their thoughts and hope that many profited from this event that stretched over almost a whole month now, and taken together produced a number of good ideas.

I would of course especially like to thank the participants of the Loughborough workshop, who shared their papers and thoughts with us, who had to stay home.

I wish you all a merry Christmas, a happy new year and of course a wonderful holiday

Ursula

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**Sarah Pink (Loughborough University)**

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Many thanks to Ursula for chairing the final part of the e-workshop and to everyone who has contributed over the last weeks. We are planning to base a publication on the workshop. Once we have reviewed all the contributions to see how this might fit together we will be in contact with potential

contributors off-list at some point in the new year.

Happy Xmas

Sarah & John

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