

Technical innovation and political invention: making media technologies in Hungary

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"Genuine scientific and technical progress is possible only with freedom and democracy in all spheres of social life"

(Gorokhov 1992:182)

This paper is particularly focused on the technological elements of thinking about the media, and on some considerations about the things that anthropology or anthropologists can usefully say about this subject, even if they do not mean to! So I'm going to discuss some more or less anthropological ideas about media technologies that I have found useful in my research; and outline the approach that I have taken by shamelessly borrowing the most applicable bits from all over the place!

The quote you can all see betrays a great many things about the importance of media technologies – in this particular ethnographic case computers and the internet – in the political and cultural changes that have taken place in East/Central Europe over the past fifteen years. In this brief presentation I will use it to elucidate some of the issues surrounding the notion of the postsocialist in anthropological thinking about the media. It may come as a surprise to hear someone talking about this subject at a workshop which in general is examining contributions by media anthropologists to the wider study of the media.

In fact please do not assume I am being falsely modest when I say that I do not really regard myself as a media anthropologist. Compared to many of the other papers in this workshop this one might

feel a bit light on anthropological theories of the media. Those anthropologists I will talk about are not those who are often connected to the study of the media, because my aim here is to show how in my own work anthropological thinking about what are often seen as 'non-media' issues has become caught up in my fascination for how certain technologies are used and – in effect 'use' – to construct publics and shared social 'identities' (**Hobart**; to provoke people by using a disapproved of 'buzzword' from the mailing list discussions that took place over the recent days!).

What, then, might this quote mean for the study of the media? Written just after the collapse of socialism/communism in Russia/Soviet Union by a philosopher of technology from the school of Langdon Winner and – earlier – Martin Heidegger, the obvious claim being made is that the (let's be honest quite staggering!) scientific and technical progress that was made in Soviet Union and Eastern Europe during C20th was not 'genuine' because it was guided so much by overt political considerations and not by either the desires of private individuals or by any kind of 'natural' progress of technological advancement.

In the context of my own research I found this notion fascinating. In particular the I became very preoccupied with the possibility and nature of a relationship between seemingly 'natural' technological 'progress' and ideas about the 'free' society that was now being built in the former socialist world.

Now, for those of you who I haven't bored already at some time in the past with the basic details, I carried out my PhD research in Hungary

over 2002/2003. This work examined the use of ICTs in the attempt to build a civil society deserving of the accession to the European Union that, it was decided when I was in Budapest, would take place in 2004. I spent a good deal of time exploring the significance of the notion of Europe in the attempt to (re)construct Hungarian public culture, and explored in detail the strange and in almost every case confused and blurred boundary between cultural ideas about *Europe* on the one hand, and the approaching *European **Union*** on the other. Ideas about the European or EU *technological* society are central to this.

Much of the work on which my thesis was based was carried out at an organisation called the HTA.

- Telecottage is a local technology access centre
- Started as means to address infrastructural and skills deficiencies in often quite isolated rural communities
- Today there is a network of 500, divided into regions and all members of a national association. They are built and imagined as the 'endpoints' of a network which is linked in *technological* terms (and they spend a very great deal of time working on developing the technical/infrastructural nature of this) but also, in a way built up over time, can be said to be a network of shared interests.
- Civil owned, what does this mean? They call it 'civil' but this is, as I explore in detail in my thesis, a very contingent something

that they have learned the meaning of *together* in the particular structural, technical, personal, cultural, or historical form of the Association as it has grown through time.

- Absolutely not simply a technology question, instead the technology is a means to a different end, i.e. community building (**re**building after socialism), cohesion, etc. All very much couched in dominant political language of EU and foreign funding bodies, as interpreted through v. complex interface of government, EU accession process, perceived history of the communities etc etc.
- Telecottage as media technology... And this in particular requires us to think about the nature of *innovation*, something that I'd like you to bear in mind and I'll return to it later.

Theoretically speaking, one of the main issues that I encountered both before, during and after my fieldwork was something that the anthropological and other literature had led me to expect before I went out there, namely the idea born largely from EU and transition rhetoric about civil society as an autonomous space of public life that needed to be 'stimulated,' the eponymous 'buffer' that is seen as being necessary between the (in the past certainly and in the minds of many Hungarians today still so) 'predatory' state and the 'people.'

This is the picture that is painted by the EU and accession policy, and one that I found was quite often taken for granted by anthropological analyses of the postsocialist arena. With this in mind, I revisited the work of Chris Hann (Hann 1990; Hann 1993a; Hann and Dunn 1996;

Hann 1998; Hann 2002), Ruth Mandel (Mandel 2002; Mandel and Humphrey 2002), Steven Sampson (Sampson 1996; Sampson 2002) and others who have examined the notion of 'transition' or of 'postsocialism.' How, I wondered, were media technologies implicated (or not) in the creation of the particular politics of freedom? Were media technologies being used to 'create' the buffer? Sustain it? How far, in fact, was it possible to talk about the construction of a 'people' with which the state was relating at all?

In part, we might wonder whether we do not see an attempt to model 'the media' in Hungary on Western models, both in terms of the structures and entities that are put in place and the things that people think the media can or should be doing in society. Many of those at the HTA stated quite explicitly that this was their aim, and the amount of financial and expertise investment by Western owned media companies is huge. But what was interesting to me was the importance at the HTA, an 'indigenous' organisation, of how these models were interpreted and used to construct technical systems which were in fact quite specific.

In my thesis I took sometime to try and debunk the idea of civil society or the 'public' as any kind of neutral buffer, instead following Foucault (Foucault 1991), Graham Burchell (Burchell 1991; Burchell, Gordon et al. 1991), Nikolas Rose (Rose 1996; Rose 1999a; Rose 1999b) and Andrew Barry's (Barry 1996a; Barry 2001) lead in wondering whether the 'freedom' that was being encountered by Hungarians was better understood as a particular political form and organisation, a particular *kind* of relationship between state and its subjects, rather than as an 'absence' of state power per-se.

And the story of the HTA was certainly very relevant here. I found that, alongside the strongly held and indeed very emotive notion of a 'free' and by definition therefore depoliticised political arena, there was an equally strongly held, and perhaps equally emotive question of the 'natural course' of technological development. As the quote above implies, the 'unfree' past of socialism had prevented the 'natural' progression of the development of media technologies such as the internet in Hungary, which meant that, on a national scale, there was a keenly felt need to 'catch up.'

This 'felzarkozás' manifested itself in many ways, very often in the struggle between civil society and the government over who would be seen as the 'rightful' agency in society to 'develop' media technologies – in this case the broadband and access infrastructure in the country.

Development of broadband, struggle over control... 1 or 2 examples.

Civil society in Hungary: facts from the field and the interpretations of many anthropologists... Why are **Hann et al.** relevant to thinking about media studies? What have anthropological analyses of the media said that might be useful in this case?

To pick just a few examples:

Abu-Lughod, construction of social hegemony?

Identity and its construction? (**Couldry** and others again!)

Bausinger (1984): Media Tech and Daily Life: Even reading the newspaper can be a collective activity

Elisabeth Bird: The audience?

Couldry: In this case not a myth of a mediated centre, but rather of a 'mediated decentralisation'

Mazzarella, W. 2004. 'Culture, globalization, mediation', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33: 345-367

Global world through media and mediation

Rotherbuhler, E.W. 1998. *Ritual communication: from everyday conversation to mediated ceremony*. London, Sage.

In other discussions held by this network I have argued that it is not profitable to view the use of technologies such as the internet as artefacts in and of themselves that have given properties. Rather, and this is where so much of the theoretical work done on the media by anthropologists is useful, the relationship in any given ethnographic or other context between 'audience,' centre and periphery, in sort the socio-political form and structure taken by the 'public sphere' studied here on the one hand, and the particular technological configuration taken by the media technology at hand (in this case the telecottages) on the other, must be studied in its own terms if we are to draw anything useful out of thinking about the possible 'effects' of this or that technology on creating and sustaining a 'media.'

What is the conclusion to all this? And what does anthropology have to contribute to the study of the media?

Well, two things.

First: in short it says interesting things about how, in free society, political and technological structures can combine to produce something which looks like a media... in other words which creates a shared access to and reception of information, and which crucially does this in a way that makes the shared element extremely visible. It seems to me that there is a strong relationship between the dispersed form of 'empowering technology' that is represented by the telecottages linked together by cables but also by social and organisational ties (i.e. technology that can empower people to 'create' their own 'natural' social forms such as the community) and the idea of a society that consists of 'free individuals.' It may not be overstating the case to suggest that the Hungarians with whom I did my fieldwork in vitally important ways *learned* (THE RITUALS OF...) (**Liebes, T. and J. Curran** (eds.). 1998. *Media, ritual and identity*) what society as a trans-personal, shared and in vital ways dispersed *was* through learning, following Andrew Barry and Vicky Bell as well as those such as Anna Tsing, how to imagine society that is based on the networks or otherwise technologically mediated shared social forms that are created by the existence of the telecottage network.

Second: New technology? The anthropologist Bryan Pfaffenberger (1988:39), building on the work of John Law (1987), Bruno Latour (1988) and Michel Callon (1980; Callon and Law 1982; see also Woolgar 1991; 1998; 2002) proposes in his famous critique of the

notion of revolutions in the historical development of the computer that “new technologies frequently reproduce existing social and meaning systems; if they do bring about social change, the changes may differ from those intended by their innovators.” I would be reluctant to disagree with the substance of this claim. However, although this view is based on the felicitous work by Woolgar, Law and others regarding the “configured user” (Woolgar 1991) and shares many similarities with Lave and Wenger’s (1991, cited in Liff, Steward et al. 2002:82) writing on “communities of practice,” this approach does not take what is for me the necessary step of questioning how the technology itself comes in the first place to be ‘new.’ New to whom? Where? How is the ‘user’ defined by this newness? A technology that is ‘new’ in Hungary might be already be boringly ubiquitous in California; to follow the focus in Pfaffenberger’s article on Apple Computers, Inc., the ipod – already entirely commonplace and even somewhat *passé* in the USA – is only just now being advertised in Hungary as the ‘next’ thing in electronic entertainment. Even within the country, technology such as broadband internet, increasingly standard in Budapest and other big cities, is still regarded as avant-garde in many of the small communities where telecottages are found.

What is needed in order for something to be ‘new’ is *different* technologies. Or, to put this more carefully, the experience of *different* socio-technical contexts in which locally novel technical forms and systems might be made meaningful and furthermore, technologies that do not ‘fit’ existing moral assumptions will inevitably cause new moral questions to be asked. To call something new raises the implicit question of new *for whom*, a distinction that always creates a moralised group of ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots.’ This is so whether we be

thinking about the 'underprivileged' community or the underdeveloped nation, for whom the technology is indeed new or as yet unexperienced, or the 'pacesetters', the 'leaders' whose new technology can shape the choices available to others. Moreover, I do not take this to mean that that the technical form is *actually* or even *necessarily* new, in the sense of 'never having existed' or 'just having been invented.' Indeed I would argue that very few technologies are *actually* new because they are so often modifications of something else, and moreover it is problematic to assert that an artefact has with all certainty *never* existed. What is important, though, is the impact of the *notion* of 'newness' on the relationship that a community of 'users' or practitioners has with the world in the context of the European technological society, a relationship that locates the community as something other than it was before the technology in question was 'innovated.' Within a global assumption about a new technology why is it only now that this is new *here*? Who had it already? Who does not have it yet? This kind of engagement between 'new' technology and the 'free,' empowered and responsible 'user' is a profoundly locating one within a dominant model of linear and progressive time.

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