

**EASA Media Anthropology Network
e-Seminar Series**

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

**E-Seminar on Francisco Osorio's working paper
"Why is interest in mass media anthropology growing?"**

(8 November – 15 November 2005)

John Postill (University of Staffordshire)

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Dear All

Welcome to the 8th EASA Media Anthropology Network e-seminar! This informal seminar will run for a period of a week from now till Tuesday 15 Nov at 9 pm Central European Time. We will use the medianthro@abyznet.net mailing list to talk about a working paper by Francisco Osorio (University of Chile) entitled 'Why Is Interest in Mass Media Anthropology Growing?'.
<http://www.easaonline.org/networkbiosm-r.htm#FO>

This short paper (less than 3,000 words) is already online at
<http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/workingpapers.htm>

The discussant will be Mark A. Peterson (Miami University, Ohio, USA) who has written a history of media anthropology entitled Anthropology and Mass Communication: Myth and Media in the New Millennium (Berghahn 2003),
<http://www.easaonline.org/networkbiosm-r.htm#MAP>

Mark has also put together a superb pre-1988 media anthropology bibliography which will be on our website later today.

To participate all you need to do is email your comments or questions directly to medianthro@abyznet.net (i.e. not to me) after the author has responded to the discussant who will be emailing his comments later today.

N.B.

Contributions can be as short as a few words and as lengthy as 3-4 paragraphs

Please note that we have introduced the following newish seminar rule (no. 9): 'Participants are allowed to contribute a maximum of 3 postings per seminar...'. This is to allow for a broad range of views and comments. The rules of the e-seminar now stand as follows:

- 1. The discussion starts when the discussant emails his or her comments on the working paper to the list.**
- 2. The author(s) then replies to those comments.**
- 3. The rest of list members can then add their comments, questions to the author, points of information, etc. These will be addressed by the author(s) at their own convenience throughout the week.**
- 4. Full bibliographic references are not required, but they are always welcome.**
- 5. All contributions should be emailed directly to the list (medianthro@abyznet.net) not to the seminar chair.**
- 6. Contributions should have a clear, concise subject, e.g. 'Research methods'. Please avoid uninformative (e.g. 'Your comments') and empty subject lines (NB abyznet rejects empty subject fields).**
- 7. Contributions should be kept as brief and focussed as possible.**
- 8. Contributions should be sent in the body of the email, not in an attachment.**

9. Participants are allowed to contribute a maximum of 3 postings per seminar (this restriction does not apply to the author or to the chair).

10. The usual seminar norms of courtesy and constructive criticism apply.

Once the seminar is over, we will be saving it and uploading it onto the website in PDF format, as we think these discussions can be a useful resource for future research and teaching.

I'd like to thank both Francisco and Mark for taking time off their busy schedules to take part in this seminar and would like to invite Mark to email his comments to the list later today.

I look forward to a wide range of comments and questions!

Best wishes

John

P.S. New list subscribers who are still unsure about how the e-seminar works can download transcripts from previous e-seminars from

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

Mark Peterson (Miami University)

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In this brief essay, Francisco Osorio suggests that anthropologists have only recently turned their attention to mass media. Since there is no epistemological reason why anthropology cannot take media as its subject, he argues that there must be a reason why anthropology has ignored media until the late 1980s, and a reason why anthropological attention has been growing. He suggests that the answer is that as anthropology has increasingly turned its attention to nationalism, so it has become more and more interested in mass media.

I want to begin by saying that Osorio is, in general, probably essentially correct. There are close links between the rise of the nation as an object of inquiry, and increasing attention to mass media. Indeed, his argument resonates with Abu-Lughod argument in "Screening Politics in a World of Nations" or the introduction to Dissanayake's edited volume, *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema*.

At the same time, Osorio's essay, as written, overstates its case.

The first problem is the claim that anthropologists have only recently begun to seriously attend to the mass media as a subject of analysis. It is implicit from the beginning, and Osorio explicitly says this when writing that he is trying to explain "why anthropology did not come to mass communication before" nations became a key unit of analysis. This has become a standard trope in anthropological writing about our study of media -- we all invoke the newness of our subject as something that has emerged just in the last 15 years or so, since the late 1980s. I do it in my book, Spitulnik does it in her seminal essay, most of the recent readers in anthropology do this as well.

But it just ain't so. The media have been an occasional subject of anthropological attention at least since Boas referred to the role of native language newspapers in the Handbook of Native Americans in 1918 or Malinowski to advertising in Coral Gardens and their Magic (1935). I have posted to this group's web site a partial list of nearly 180 anthropological works on media predating 1988 (an arbitrary date intended to symbolize "the late 1980s" when interest in media anthropology begins to really take off and not entirely coincidentally the date of the first publication of the journal Public Culture). By "anthropological" I mean that they are written by people self-identifying as anthropologists, or they were published or reviewed in anthropological journals.

They make interesting reading. Some are about modernization, some are about the linking of small communities to larger communities, some are about the cultural construction of truth, some are about myth and ritual, some are about how media re-present old symbolic values in new forms while others are about the ways media offer new models for understanding the world. They take a number of different approaches, variously involving the analysis of texts, the ethnography of production and the study of audiences. They take various entities as their units of analysis: texts, cities, production sites, nations, the world. Theoretical approaches are likewise diverse: some are functionalists, some "culture and personality," some are structuralists, some are interpretivists or symbolic anthropologists, and a few are materialists. And Carpenter is as "postmodernist" as anyone writing today, except for being more readable.

Some of these--Mead, Powdermaker, Carpenter, Warner--probably wrote enough about media to justify their being called media anthropologists. Of these three, only Mead took "nation" as her unit of analysis.

What has occurred since the mid to late 1980s, as Osorio's title correctly states, is a significant rise in serious attention being given to media by anthropology. The last time someone bemoaned in my presence the paucity of media panels at AAA meetings, I pointed out that on at least half the panels, whatever the topic, at least one paper will touch on the media in some form. Media has gone mainstream as a topic of serious anthropological attention. This has all happened during the course of my own anthropological career. When I began the process of leaving journalism for academia in 1987, my mentors warned me off the media, at least until I was an established scholar. By 1991, media study was conceivable so long as it took place in an exotic land (India). When I returned from India in 1996 to write up my dissertation, I was introduced to Sarah Dickey's book on Tamil film in the social life of the urban poor in Madras published by Cambridge, as prestigious an academic press as one can find. In 1998, when I was asked to be faculty at the University of Hamburg's summer school on media anthropology, I met dozens of scholars doing ethnographic work on media not only in "exotic" lands but in the U.S. and Europe as well.

So why has anthropological attention to mass media increased so dramatically? Without in any way contradicting Osorio's links between nation and media as objects of study, I want to suggest that there are disciplinary reasons why the rise of nation as an acceptable unit would make anthropologists more able to write about media. To use an evolutionary metaphor, I see the history of media anthropology to the present era as made up of anthropologists who became interested in media and published on it, only to have their work ignored except when changes in the social context ("environment") made it acceptable. One such context was the second world war, in which the combination of a rise in government funding for work that might contribute to an understanding of morale (including that of allies, enemies and potential allies and enemies) and the closure of field areas made possible the rise of the ICC (led first by Ruth Benedict and then by Margaret Mead) with their studies of "culture at a distance."

Another moment was the rise of development anthropology in the early decades of the cold war, and the hope that mass media could prove the "magic bullet" that would help underdeveloped communities "prepare for take-off" (to use Rostow's ridiculous but influential language). Osorio correctly notes both of these factors.

The current context for the emergence of media anthropology I suspect has as much to do with the collapse of the high art/low art distinction as with the emergence of nation as a unit of analysis. In general in academia, the "popular" has been a problematic subject. It was one thing to write about early 19th century works by Byron or Shelley, quite another to write about Varney the Vampire or Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street--even though at the time of production the latter works reached and probably influenced many more millions of people than the former. This distinction about acceptable canon has been declining since the 1960s, but it remains relevant. It is still one thing to write about Hitchcock, quite another to write about Kolchak: The Night Stalker or Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

For the anthropologist this is a particular problem: in general, the more elite the art form, the less interesting it is. As Lee Drummond has pointed out, it is the movies that people will line up for hours in the blazing sun or even overnight to see that clearly must touch on significant cultural themes. Yet movies like Return of the Jedi are also the very films analyses of which are least likely to impress our colleagues. Rather than hazard the risk of irrelevance or disdain (and subsequent consequence of unemployment), anthropologists could easily just ignore the media. I think Ulf Hannerz hit it on the head way back in 1971 when he wrote: "I have a feeling that anthropologists usually regard mass media research within their discipline as gimmicky. This is a rather unfortunate attitude."

Three significant things have happened to change this for anthropology. The first is the increasing ubiquity of media. In my book, I write:

There is a well known Gary Larson cartoon that shows a group of grass-skirted hut dwelling "natives" scrambling to hide their technological appliances--including a television set--before the anthropologists arrive. But in real life, the "natives," whoever they may be, have not needed to hide their televisions. Anthropologists have done it for them by selectively choosing what they will or will not pay attention to in their ethnographies. Even as anthropologists spent decades insisting that their discipline was not the study of "primitive" cultures, and criticizing notions of unchanging tradition and stable authenticity, they have collectively as a discipline "selected out" or marginalized many aspects of the social lives of the people they studied, particularly where these involved the media.

Eventually, I think, the ubiquity of media just became too great to keep ignoring.

The second factor has to do with the capacity of distance to reframe subject matter. In comparative literature, the popular art of the past is now canonical (i.e. one can now propose writing a crit lit dissertation about Varney the Vampire (1840) without raising too many eyebrows, but not Interview with the Vampire (1980)). Its historical distance makes it acceptable. For anthropologists, geographical distance serves the same function. Rambo is academically interesting/acceptable if we discuss how the films are interpreted in New Guinea. Bombay filmis are interesting in ways Hollywood filmis are not. And it apparently goes the other way. An editor at Berg told me that they picked up Denis Duclos's fascinating poststructuralist analysis of American media violence which had done well in France, only to have it sink more or less without a trace in the American market. Distance also allows anthropologists to define their subject matter in contradistinction to other fields that have been engaged in media studies for many decades. Finally, the trope of distance allows us to frame

our analyses as part of the broader study of globalization, central buzzword of the new millennium.

This brings us to the third significant change, the rise of new conceptual languages that allow us to analyze media in what appear to be more sophisticated ways. By this I do not mean actual theoretical sophistication, but rather the capacity to relate our analyses of media to concepts that have significance in many different disciplines. There is nothing particularly unsophisticated about Peter Claus's structural analyses of *Star Trek* or Ivan Karp's discussion of anti-structure in the Marx Brothers, but (for the reasons emphasized above) structuralism looks more impressive when it is focused on South American myths and anti-structure on Ndembu rituals. Then along came cultural studies. For all its flaws (and I could discuss them at length) cultural studies emphasized the possibility of socially and culturally contextualizing media using the language of political economy. In anthropology, Elizabeth Traube's work is exemplary in this genre. Many of the earlier anthropological studies, in focusing on symbolic structures, had understated the social. Structural analyses that seek to reduce myths to formulaic binarisms look thin by comparison to works that link changes in filmic representation to shifting changes in political economy, racial categorization and gender expression. Many of the media studies of the 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s exist in that "ethnographic present" our discipline inherited from functionalism. Such work cries out for an anchoring in time and space, and discussion of what elements have enduring capacity to entertain what kinds of contemporary audiences, and why. Anthropological study of mass media in its current phase is exciting because having reconnected the symbolic and the social, it also grounds it in ethnography as opposed to rootless analysis of texts common in cultural studies.

This is where I situate Osorio's argument. The nation is one of the (but not the only) new conceptual apparatuses that allow anthropologists to frame their theoretical discussions of media in sophisticated, relevant and interesting ways. In my own history of media anthropology, I probably underplay the importance of nation as a concept. Still, Osorio's phrase "the knowledge that anthropologists have produced in mass communication and especially television takes nations as the unit of analysis" seems to me a gross overgeneralization.

Many of the best work in anthropology of media (Abu-Lughod, Mankekar, Heider) does take the nation as a central focus, but there are many other foci. Identity, ritual, fans, community, family, globalization, consumption--these are all also recurrent foci. Dickey, who Osorio cites, is actually a good example of an anthropologist for whom "nation" is not the "unit of analysis." The same is true of Granzburg, to whom he refers. Indeed, I would invert Osorio's argument about the relationship of nation and modernity. For me, the anthropological study of media is primarily (but still not exclusively) about modernity, and "nation" is one of many crucial modernist concepts.

I am embarrassed to have written a response that is two-thirds the length of the paper I am commenting on. Consider it a testament to the interesting challenge posed by Osorio's paper. Let me repeat that I think Osorio is on to something but that I think his argument requires a more nuanced articulation, and more attention to relations between the shifting content and historical contexts of works on media by anthropologists.

John Postill (University of Staffordshire)

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Thank very much for that detailed discussion, Mark. It's over to Francisco Osorio now for a response, after which the seminar will be open to everyone on the list.

Francisco Osorio (University of Chile)

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I want to thank Mark Peterson for his comments (although my family name is Osorio, not Osario). He is right when arguing that the mass media have been with us from the beginning of anthropology. His "partial" list (soon to appear) of pre-1988 anthropological works on media (178 articles) is a strong argument. Before that list, I had only the abstract argument that there is no reason to exclude the mass media from anthropology (and some examples).

If the 1980s could be considering the take off, well, my preference for the 1970s is the work of E. B. Eiselein. From Peterson's list now I know that Eiselein's published works in the area of anthropology and television goes back to 1971. I didn't find a reference for the 1960s on television (according to the titles); therefore I am gladly surprised how important Eiselein became. I also found in the list a 1976 essay on "Homes and Homemakers on American TV", very interesting. This makes me think that when I was written my dissertation in 1999, I constructed a database from the resources available at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania (plenty of them in paper and a increasing number electronically). When I see now the annotated bibliography of EASA Media Anthropology Network, I am quite sure that we know almost everything anthropologists and communications scholars working on anthropology have written in the English language.

What we are trying to create, Peterson, myself and many of you, is a compelling argument to understand why there is a growing interest in mass media anthropology. Peterson, and according to him perhaps Abu-Lughod and Dissanayake, and of course myself, agree in saying that nations, nationalism, and modernity are key points to consider. Peterson is right when he claims that my sentence is too strong: "The knowledge that anthropologists have produced in mass communication, and especially television, take nations as the unit of analysis." A correct sentence would be: "From most of the anthropological literature on mass media from the 1980s to the 1990s, the knowledge that anthropologists have produced in mass communication, and especially television, take nations as the unit of analysis." That finding is supported in my bibliographical research from 1970 to 1999. The difference among us, then, can be: what is the role that nation or modernity plays to understand this growing interest.

Using Peterson's evolutionary metaphor, there're broadly speaking to roads we may walk to build the arguments: either something happened in the environment (external) or happened within anthropology (internal). If someone thinks that both situations happened, well, you may be right, but we don't know how it happened.

The external argument finds that World War II and government agencies for development played an important role.

The internal argument is proposed by Peterson: "the collapse of the high art/low art distinction, the increasing ubiquity of media, the capacity of distance to reframe subject

matter, and the rise of new conceptual languages that allow us to analyze media in what appear to be more sophisticated ways."

The external argument says that, although the mass media is a classical subject matter for anthropology, the growing interest is due to the research emphasis that funding agencies (mainly government), give to anthropologists from the 1980s to the study of the mass media in problems related to nations and development.

Specifically, I want to propose the following relation. Reading most of the anthropological work of the 1980s and 1990s, you may well be mistaken to label "anthropological" those papers, in the sense that almost anyone looks more like "communications studies", but conducted outside America. The anthropological qualities of those papers are ethnography, not theory. Actually, my proposal is that most of that research tried to prove the knowledge that communication scholars found in America, but in a cross-culturally research.

Let me finish for now with a joke from Elihu Katz. He told me once that God gave cinema to humanities and television to social science. I would add that God gave the following command to anthropologists: go around the world and prove what American scholars have said about mass communication.

Francisco Osorio
Anthropology Department
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John Postill (University of Staffordshire)
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Well, that was quick (so much for the idea that email is an asynchronous medium!) Thanking once again Francisco and Mark for their contributions, I'd now like to open the discussion to the list. Please remember to write directly to medianthro@abyz.net with a brief subject line that sums up your point or question. We'll have a first round of comments and questions before Francisco responds to them.

John

Katrien Pype (Catholic University Leuven)
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Thank you Francisco for the nice paper, and thank you too Mark for the inspiring comments.

The paper presented here is an investigation into the emergence of a new research area. It would be exceptional if all aspects which contributed to this phenomenon would be clarified in a short text. I have two questions concerning this paper.

A first question deals with the distinction between 'reaction' and 'quest'. Most of the anthropological research carried out before anthropology became a major discipline at the universities, was carried out for governments. Why would anthropology's interest for

media at that time have been different?

I think we all agree with Francisco that nationalism might have been one of the most important triggers for the attention for media. However, I think, just as Mark, that this is only one of the elements which have led to the institutionalization of media anthropology as a sub discipline as we know it nowadays – most visible since the nineties. As in all scientific disciplines, research depends on sometimes rather temporal convictions, dominating methods and themes. I think we should situate this emergence of media anthropology within the epistemological history of our discipline. According to me, media-anthropology could only originate as a real sub discipline when anthropologists abandoned a long lasting (western) ‘cultural pessimism’ (see Adorno & Horkheimer – Mark writes about the collapse of high art/low art) that mass media would damage ‘the authenticity’ of the societies they study. In this respect, I argue that the reflexive turn in the eighties, and the debates about anthropology and exoticism have gradually opened up the interest for mass media as not threatening any more for an imagined loss of ‘the cultural other’. Around the same time, we notice the emergence of globalization studies within our field and its loud statements that globalization does not equal global homogenization. I think this too aided the research on local media. Before the nineties a few researchers have worked on mass media, but only when anthropologists acknowledged (or dared to acknowledge) ‘modernity’ and its local effects as a valid research terrain, only then could the sub discipline ‘take off’. Fear was replaced by curiosity (to put it very bluntly). My second question to Francisco would be (in line with Mark’s comments): instead of arguing that anthropology came to mass media as a reaction (I read it in first instance as directed towards mass media through politics, governments and developmental projects) could you not read this growing literature on mass media as a result of the acceptance of the modernity of the other?

Katrien

Disclaimer: http://www.kuleuven.be/cwis/email_disclaimer.htm

Tom Wormald (University of Manchester)
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Dear List,

Firstly, I'd like to say how much I enjoyed Francisco's short paper, and both it and Mark Peterson's comments gave me much to think about. I hope what follows is vaguely relevant and not setting off on too much of a tangent!

Particularly since WWII, it seems fair enough to argue that the nation has become ever more the unit of political organisation in which all people in the world are or (crucially) can be politically located. Is this what Osorio means in his essay? I think the debate about whether or not anthropologists studying media are focusing on nations and nationalism might be qualified by the assertion that all people in the world today who are studied by anthropologists must in some way engage with the fact that they exist within the boundaries of a nation, and are to some extent subject to its coercive force, whether or not they subscribe to it, or view this force as legitimate.

Given this claim, for me it is Peterson's reference to the journal 'Public Culture' that hints at the key point here. Surely the important thing here is that studying public culture, taking the public as an essential part of the make-up of the kind of modern (although not necessarily Western) political society of the nation that Osorio refers to, must by definition also involve in some way or other the study of (mass) media. This might be focused on the technical elements of a given media, their 'impact' on a given group, those that create it or changes in (or so-called 'new') media technologies and techniques, but in every case the 'public(s)' and the media are interdependent. Different publics can be called upon to make up a nation, and by no means all of them are nationalist, or subscribe to the tenets of the nation in which they live (or even to the idea of the nation at all). But crucially, all exist to some extent 'at a distance.'

So study does not have to be of the nation, but perhaps it is fair to say that in the post-WWII world media anthropology has become more predominant because thinking in terms of 'publics' allows a useful way of understanding how people engage with the political and cultural society 'at a distance' within which they now live – whether they consciously choose to be, or are externally objectified within it by power other than their own. This is something that with the ever-increasing agency of people beyond their own immediate social context (which may have led to the dismantling of the high- and low- art distinction?) will tend only to increase, I suspect.

All this leads up to my question to Francisco (and perhaps to Mark as well): is media anthropology becoming more predominant because the media is becoming more important in today's world? Or is it simply that the media and the different kinds of agency that it provides in social life are becoming more visible to the anthropologist? In turn, what does this say about the notion of the modern society in which we are supposed to be living?

Thanks, Tom Wormald

Jay Ruby (Temple University)
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As the new kid on this list, I have a question, is Media Anthro exclusively TV? If not what are its boundaries?

Also a quick read of the papers seems to suggest that people are not aware of Michael Intintoil's pioneering anthropological work, Taking Soaps Seriously or Sol Worth or Eric Michaels and Ki Jung Lee's work.

I recommend that people look at my web site - Web Archive in Visual Anthropology (WAVA) with the following:

Sol Worth Page - contains the complete manuscript of his collected essays, Studying Visual Communication and Through Navaho Eyes the foundational study of indigenous media Worth co-authored with John Adair, plus unpublished papers and commentaries.

Hortense Powdermaker Page - contains the complete manuscript of Hollywood, the Dream Factory plus other related essays.

Michael Intintoli's out-of-print ethnographic study of the production of a soap opera - Taking Soaps Seriously.

Unpublished Theses and Dissertations

Eric Michaels' unpublished Ph.D. dissertation - "TV Tribes" - an early example of an anthropological study of television reception.

KiJung Lee's unpublished dissertation, Film, Culture and the Generation Gap: An Anthropological Study of Chimhyang, A Korean Feature Film (2001) .

Also Powdermaker convened a body of anthropologists at Wenner Gren in the 1950s to discuss mass media, etc. There is lots of stuff out there not being discussed by this list.

The site is available at <http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/wava>.

Jay Ruby

JAY RUBY

My Web page is <http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/ruby/>

PLEASE NOTE NEW EMAIL ADDRESS

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John Postill (University of Staffordshire)

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Dear Jay and list

> As the new kid on this list, I have a question, is Media Anthro exclusively TV? If not what are its boundaries?

Thank you for your posting. Perhaps I should reiterate that we are currently (until Tuesday next week) holding an e-seminar on a working paper by Francisco Osorio, see website link below, a session I am moderating. May I suggest we leave questions that do not arise directly from Francisco's paper until Wednesday?

Best wishes

John

Mark Peterson (Miami University)

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I think Jay's comments are relevant to the papers, particularly in the light of Francisco's closing joke. As I read his questions, they are:

1) What is the media anthropology that is on the rise? Is it only television (as a cursory reading of Francisco's paper might seem to imply) or is it all technologically mediated communication?

2) How deep is our historical base? How do we decide what works are to be included or excluded?

My answers to this are:

1) In my book, I propose a broad and inclusive category of media anthropology: Mass media involve technological transformations of this system of communication in various ways and to different ends. The media thus include not only books, films, television, videos, magazines, newspapers, and radio, but billboards, comic books, e-mail, the World Wide Web, telephones, and many other technologies. The key questions for the anthropologist are how these technologies operate to mediate human communication, and how such mediation is embedded in broader social and historical processes. John Postill would probably have me throw clocks in there, too. But however broadly we define it I don't think that anyone reviewing the literature can pretend that television and movies (in that order) do not dominate anthropological analysis of media.

2) The story Francisco and I (and Katrien and Tom) are discussing involves the rise in anthropological interest in the media since the 1970s (his timeline) or the mid-1980s (my timeline). My list of media anthropologists in my remarks to Francisco were chosen to demonstrate the falseness of his overstated line about the paucity of anthropology of the media prior to the the rise of nations as units of analysis, so I focused on people working in the 30s, 40s, and 50s--thus Michaels and Worth, both of whom I regard very highly and have written about at length elsewhere, were not included. Both appear on the more exhaustive bibliography in the appendix. Intintoil is an unfortunate oversight on my part. He should be in the bibliography, as should Bellman & Jules-Rosette (*A Paradigm for Looking*, Ablex, 1977)

Ki Jung Lee has done and continues to do interesting work, but as he is a 21st century anthropologist, his work is not relevant to this historical discussion. Nor are the many others whose work falls into the post-media boom era (my bibliography currently exceeds 800 and I know there are many I've missed).

The mention of Worth and Michaels (and Bellman and Jules-Rosette) does raise the issue of "indigenous media," however, and its role in the rise of anthropological interest in media.

John Postill (University of Staffordshire)

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Dear list

My apologies to Jay Ruby for overreacting earlier. On second thoughts, I have to agree with Mark about Jay's email being relevant. I read it too quickly in the middle of a busy day; I must remember to slow down a bit :-)

Perhaps at this point Francisco would like to address some of the issues raised in previous contributions (But do, by all means, keep sending in your questions/comments in the meantime).

Best wishes

John

Francisco Osorio (University of Chile)

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Thanks to Katrien Pype and Tom Wormald for the questions, I'm preparing my answers.

About Jay Ruby and Mark Peterson, I want to propose the following answers to the questions what is mass media anthropology and what mass media are.

Anthropology is the social science that studies culture. Therefore, mass media anthropology is the field within anthropology that studies the way in which culture shapes society through the mass media.

What are the mass media? Broadly speaking, mass media can be characterized as those forms of communication that are different from the interchange of messages face to face, requiring for this interchange of some mediating device that allows the access to the messages, extending the own conditions and factors of concrete situations of communicative interaction (verbal language or non-verbal language as mimics).

For example, the typical face to face communication is that in which two people talk in an office, seating in a table of meetings. The typical mass media communication type happens when these people, in different offices, occupy a mediating device to interchange messages, like a telephone or a computer.

More concretely, mass media are devices whose properties (electrical or mechanical, for example) allow access to contents transmitted through these devices.

The television set is an example of a device whose properties allows receiving contents, but people cannot use the same device to transmit contents. However a "chat room" is a software use in the device computer, which allows receiving and transmitting contents.

The point about television is that is the device with more research according to the databases we are using, mainly Mark's and Media Anthropology Network. Other media are on the rise, as well.

Therefore, we have several definitions (Mark, mine and many others) in order to understand what our subject matter is and why there's a growing interest of it.

Francisco

Erkan Saka (Rice University)

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Dear all,

I would like to start by thanking Fransisco, Mark and other contributors and I hope they will forgive me if my ideas are too shallow.

I have a major concern with the reasons of the growing interest in Mass Media Anthropology.

Although, there have always been studies in mass media (and I am grateful to Mark for offering us a precious bibliography), it is certain that acceleration happens in 1980s. In this context, i am especially anxious about the issue of nationalism. the power and extent of nationalism predated the birth of anthropology. if here main focus is the rise of nationalisms in 'non-west', let's say, they have been more powerfully emergent in the post WW2 era. But focus on media anthropology not explicitly emerges until 1980s. Thus, although there might be a positive correlation between nationalism and interest in mass media, it cannot be really proven.

Furthermore, if one can form a causality between these more or less political economical explanations and anthropology, then our discipline had to have a large archive on colonialism. But colonialism is largely ignored in the early studies (as far as I know).

So I tend to agree with Mark in pointing out 'internal reasons'. It seems that gatekeepers of the discipline stubbornly refused to confirm methodological and thematic novelties until 1980s when a disciplinary epistemological crisis could not be ignored anymore. It is ironic that not anthropology, whose primary subject of study is culture, but 'cultural studies' could trigger a flow of media studies within social sciences...

Apart from epistemological reasons three other speculative explanations come to my mind:

- 1) As it is already stated, globalization may have played a causal role. Globalism shapes the very settledness of state of affairs in human lives. One can always relate early studies and some intelligent past observations, but intensive global flows seem to shake our understandings of place, space, relations between the national, global and local....
- 2) Demographical changes in the population of anthropologists and its increasing role in the production of anthropological literature. I believe that the increase of non-American, non-British and let me generalize by non-advanced western country anthropologists could have transformed the content of ethnographic research. And finally,
- 3) Since years of Vietnam War, state funding is diverted to area studies or other disciplines other than anthropology. This forced many American anthropologists stay at home do some work there. I don't mean that this was a mechanical necessity. There was certainly home anthropologists before but 'gatekeepers' could despise the work of these pioneering anthropologists before... But in this new era, the political economical conditions allowed more scholars to focus on domestic culture....

Cordially,
Erkan

--

Erkan Saka

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francisco:

i couldn't disagree more with you when i read your statement that 'mass media anthropology is the field within anthropology that studies the way in which culture shapes society through the mass media'. this probably has to do with problem which i have with your definition of anthropology, discipline which i thought was studying human condition or paraphrasing daniel miller, 'what it means to be human'; if anthropology is studying culture (only), what is the difference then between cultural studies, sociology and anthropology? following from here, i would suggest a dialectical approach in trying to define 'mass media anthropology' as attempt to understand not only how media influence people/cultures we're studying, but/and also an attempt to see what becomes of these media when appropriated by that specific culture/people. otherwise, what's the point in talking about mass media ANTHROPOLOGY, if what you're talking about is rendered to (mass) media studies?

best regards,

ivana

ivana bajic

phd candidate

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Yazan Doughan (SOAS)

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First I'd like to thank Francisco Osorio for his thought provoking paper. Since I am practically ignorant in the history of anthropology, my contribution to this discussion will be regarding the ever present question of what media anthropology is.

Osorio's stress on 'mass' media does not seem to be shared with others, and I tend to agree. I also find his definition of mass media as that form of communication which is not face-to-face, quite problematic. The problem with this definition is that it automatically excludes

face-to-face mass communication such as the regular speech given during the Sunday 'Mass', or that by an Imam to the crowd during the Muslim Friday Prayers, or even a classroom lecture. I am even less sympathetic to the definition of media as 'technologically mediated communication' which is what both Peterson and Ruby are suggesting. The problem with this definition, is that, in reality, there is no communication that is not achieved by means of a technology, except, perhaps for telepathy. The difference between my position and theirs lies in the definition of technology. For me, technology is not necessarily related to machines, but rather is any system devised to achieve or facilitate the achievement of a specific result. In that sense, language itself is a technology and all our daily acts of 'communication', whether they are face-to-face or otherwise, are technologically mediated. The proper name for machine-mediated-communication is 'cybernetics'. Moreover, and I think I am being in line with the semiotics of Peirce here, I would have 'communication' replaced with 'mediation' because the former presupposes the transparency of language (or any other technology, for that matter) while the latter allows for the undecideability inherent in signification. The former stresses semantics, while the latter stresses semiotics. To illustrate my point, just consider Osorio's metaphor of a "mediating device that allows the access to the messages".

Starting with this theoretical position, I could suggest that anthropology has always been involved in the study of media. What is new is the naming of the (sub)field of media anthropology. Here, I would make two hypothesis to answer the question of why did media anthropology emerge as a unique field of enquiry, and I would like the more seasoned scholars to comment on them. First, there is a possibility that there has been an epistemological shift in anthropology (for some anthropologists, at least) that changed the object of study from human subjects (whether individuals or collectives) to their forms of mediation. Or, in line with Osorio's suggestion of a reactionary field, it is possible that the name 'media anthropology' came as a reaction to political interest in media, and more recently in new technology.

I hope everyone will take my comments as 'provocative' rather than 'informative'.

Yazan Doughan

Jay Ruby (Temple University)

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Forgive me but your answer is too vague. Are movies, photos, etc included in the study of mass media? How about paintings and church murals? They hall have mass audiences?

Jay Ruby

S. Suryadi (University of Leiden)

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I already studied on the early years of talking machine in Java. This study also traces the public response toward talking machine in nineteenth century Dutch East Indies. Is it also included the object study of media anthropology?

Suryadi

Fausto Barlocco (University of Loughborough)

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Hello to everybody.

I would like to thank Francisco for the interesting contribution and for illuminating, together with others such as Mark, historical aspects I, and maybe some others on the list also, was not really familiar with.

I would just like to share a consideration that the topic made me come out with: if we are discussing about a history of media anthropology, does it mean that we have a well-established discipline with clear boundaries?

Would not be better, as previously suggested by some in the list, to consider media anthropology as a research interest or a tendency bringing together the methodological and theoretical tools of anthropology with an interest on the reality (nowadays impossible to ignore) of media?

If that is the case, is not talking about history of media anthropology a way of objectifying a wide array of research interests and tendencies?

I hope my contribution does not go out of the track.. If that is the case please just ignore it.

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doctoral candidate
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Matthew Durlington (Towson University)

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The discussion that has proceeded since Osorio's paper has been equally frustrating and enlightening. It is always encouraging to see increasing attention brought to media and anthropology, even within a web based group dedicated to it. It is disheartening that a broad swath of history has been overlooked (as made apparent by Ruby and Peterson) in a paper that takes on this history and the emergence of media as its main, albeit brief, subject.

It is amazing to me that Francisco, having built a bibliography at Annenberg as he states, was able to miss an entire corpus of work dedicated to the Anthropology of Visual Communication with figures such as Sol Worth, Dell Hymes, Larry Gross and many others who defined the expansive notion of media within anthropology as early as the 1970s...at a pivotal time of nationalism contestation in the United States with the Vietnam War.

The other issue that has emerged is yet one more semantic revelation that people tend to come across as well...are we practicing media anthropology, the anthropology of mass media, etc...while these are semantic dilemmas they also speak to one's recognition of previous work and theoretical orientation. Media Anthropology was once conceived simply as the involvement of anthropologists with media broadcasts! This was happening concurrent with work addressed already that demonstrates the active involvement of anthropologists in the

analysis of a WIDE BREADTH of media over time. The subject of 'media' is not limited to film (as it is often reduced in visual anthropology to the study of ethnographic film), nor is it reduced to television or video. The work of a generation of graduate students at Temple University, NYU and other institutions outside of the US has taken anthropology to the analysis of everything from Indian Dance Forms to the circulation of Art as a political medium. Many of these folks have moved on in a professional capacity and continue to do this work.

With this being said, I appreciate the intent of Francisco's paper but, unfortunately, the expanse of his topic demands a more thorough historical context...the working paper environment with the webgroup should facilitate the inclusion of more work from this point on as the paper develops.

Matthew

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Sarah Pink (University of Loughborough)

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Hello All

first many thanks to Francisco and everyone else who has contributed so far for a really interesting discussion. I just wanted to add some brief thoughts about the historical perspective:

1. I wonder if the idea of a history of media anthropology is not just about building our own foundation myth for a subdiscipline/field that is now coming into its own: I would say that media anthropology as we have come to call it is in a sense emergent in that it is right now - or in the last few years - that people are starting to define it. That doesn't mean that anthropologists have not engaged with mass media throughout the history of anthropology, rather that calling this 'media anthropology' means a particular type of engagement?

2. Any explanation of the history of anthropologists engagements with mass media would need to attend to the historical contexts of ANTHROPOLOGIES as they have developed in specific national contexts. For example in the US Meads attention to media in the study of culture at a distance work was attached to specific national agendas, of the type that did not impact on British anthropology in the same way.

Sarah

S. Elizabeth Bird (University of South Florida)

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I can't agree with Goughan's objections to the proposed definitions of media by Osario, Peterson, and Ruby. If we start calling language a "technology," and defining all communication as "media," where does that take us? If we accept the position that "there is no communication that is not achieved by means of a technology," and thus all is media, we're simply back to saying culture is constituted through communication, anthropologists study culture, ergo, we potentially study all forms of communication. True, but not productive.

I'd like to address a couple of other points that have come up in the conversation:

I believe one of the reasons interest in media anthropology grew in the 1980s onwards (along with the other reasons already mentioned) was that anthropologists were noticing and responding to the development of cultural studies. When Raymond Williams offered his famous definition of culture as "a whole way of life," that was completely unsurprising to anthropologists, but (along with Hoggart etc) it really put the study of popular culture -- movies, TV, popular music etc. -- onto the map, by opening up the study of such phenomena from a sociocultural, rather than aesthetic perspective. And the cultural studies people really grasped the point that media don't so much act upon culture (a view still expressed by some anthropologists), but that they constitute culture (at least in a western context).

I think, as others have pointed out, that many anthropologists came into the media field in the 80s and 90s by studying media in non-western cultures -- and often that meant audience response, focusing on how media messages are incorporated into local culture (let's leave a parallel tradition of textual analysis out for a moment). The literature they found useful and referenced consistently was the audience scholarship from cultural studies -- Morley, Ang, Radway, Katz and Liebes, Hobson, etc. -- that was burgeoning in the early 1980s. So I think in a lot of ways, the existing body of scholarship offered a solid conceptual framework that allowed many anthropologists to enter the discussion (not that they hadn't been looking at media before, I know). In my own work -- (Shameless plug -- "For Enquiring Minds, A Cultural Study of Supermarket tabloids,") I found far more relevant literature in cultural studies and folklore (one branch of anthropology that was looking more carefully at the interplay between oral and mediated communication) than in mainstream, current anthropology at the time. (The work of the Anthropology of Visual Communication people focused more on analysis of images than reception at that time, although that has very much changed).

The connection with cultural studies also helps to explain why TV became so central, because a lot of that work was about TV, which at the time was widely regarded as some kind of threat to culture. And the emphasis on TV was partly because it's easier to study reception of TV than most other genres -- you have a clear text to analyze, and an audience you can observe and question. It's not so easy to study the role of, say, news in everyday culture, especially in the satellite/internet age -- yet surely one of the most important anthropological questions right now must be how is the reality about the world created through representations in news and other "factual" texts. As all the comments on globalization, dispersed ethnography, and so on suggest, maybe this is an important direction for media anthropology. Because of our comparative, global perspective, we should be able to contribute beyond the focused audience studies that have been the hallmark of both cultural studies and media anthropology. The question is HOW do we study this dispersed, mediated reality ethnographically?

Sorry -- this was meant to be short!

Liz Bird

S. Elizabeth Bird Ph.D.
Professor and Chair: Department of Anthropology
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Jay Ruby (Temple University)
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I think there needs to be a distinction between those who study the media, that is textual analysis and those who study media production, that is, the social uses of media products. Anthropologists employ ethnographic methods to study the way people make and use certain cultural products. It is this approach that we have to offer other scholars of the media. If textual analysis is very limited in that it results in either testable hypotheses or unverified conclusions.

Some European cultural studies folk and some sociologists share our ethnographic approach but we are different from them in that anthropologists' goals are to generate statements about culture and to make cross-cultural comparisons. The problem is that the term media has tended to be associated with TV and has not been well defined. In some senses many of the pictorial products we make can be understood as being the media. We need a better definition of this field. Maybe the term media is the problem in and of itself and should be dropped. Mediate communication takes in too many things.

Jay Ruby

Lauren Shweder (New York University)
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As a student in the Culture and Media Program within NYU's department of anthropology, I strongly second Jay Ruby's most recent comment. The ethnography of media may include some textual analysis, but is largely focused on the politics of production and circulation, with close attention to the stakes that emerge in the "social life of media." In many cases, the production of media reveals the strategic production of culture.

One of the many benefits of an "ethnography of media" approach is that it is particularly sensitive to the role of globalization, as the production and representation of culture often involves intercultural contexts and negotiations.

Lauren Shweder

Lauren Shweder
Ph.D. Candidate
New York University

Francisco Osorio (University of Chile)

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This conversation is getting better by the hour. I would like here to reply to Katrien Pype.

I think Katrien falls into the internal argument, i.e., this sub discipline emerges when anthropologists abandon the idea that the mass media could “damage” the societies in which we often conduct research. As Katrien kindly put it, fear was replaced by curiosity. Therefore, Katrien argues that this growing interest come a result of the acceptance of the modernity of the other.

Well, if you are right, Caldarola (1992) must be a happy man, because his research contradicts in many ways the cultural imperialism school, because the evidence in Indonesia proves that the local pattern of interpretation is not an effect of American television.

Although I think your argument is possible, it doesn't apply to the 1970s and 1980s, only from 1990s to the present, according to the anthropological research published in the first two decades when this growing interest take off.

Francisco

Reference

Victor J. Caldarola 1992. “Reading the Television Text in Outer Indonesia”. Howard Journal of Communications 4(1/2), 28-49.

John Postill (University of Staffordshire)

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Dear list

This is no doubt turning into one of our liveliest and more interesting seminars yet, not to mention all those historical materials and references mentioned that may be new to many of us on the list.

I hope I'm not spoiling the fun by reminding you of two of the seminar rules posted at the outset, namely no. 6 and no. 9:

6. Contributions should have a clear, concise subject, e.g. ‘Research methods’. Please avoid uninformative (e.g. ‘Your comments’) and empty subject lines (NB abyznet rejects empty subject fields).

9. Participants are allowed to contribute a maximum of 3 postings per seminar (this restriction does not apply to the author or to the chair).

Many thanks, and I look forward to the rest of the session.

John

Mihai Coman (Bucharest University)

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Dear All

I'm more than pleased by Francisco and Mark papers – they are provocative and substantial – just to thank them does not express all my feelings.

Behind the problem of the growing interest of anthropologists for mass communication and, subsequently, for the discipline that address this concern (i.e. media anthropology / MA) lays the question of the identity of MA. Our obsessive turn around (tourner autour de sa queue – as the French are saying) this issue (see the analyses in Rothenbuhler and Coman reader; see also the effervescent debate on our E-seminar on my paper on MA) give reason to Sarah's remark that „we are building our foundation myth”. As an old researcher in comparative mythology I'll subscribe totally to this assertion! Sarah's sentence is a way to say that MA is enough important (even if not enough mature) to establish, debate, promote its own identity. As usually happens in such situations we have to create/we are creating our sacrifice stories: I believe that the „old” supporters/promoters of this approach can tell many legends (victimising/heroising ourselves) about how we were refused, ignored, mocked and so on, by some of our colleagues, when we proposed papers, articles, work shops, courses on MA.....

It looks to me that the dialogue of Francisco and Mark (and some of the subsequent positions) is focused by the classical question of the external – internal causes of a (in this case scientific) change. Francisco is attracted by an exogen explanation – forced by certain external factors, anthropologists”entered into mass communication as a reaction, not as a quest”. Mark stress the endogen causes (a slow evolution of the profession, a difficult process of acceptance of mass media as a legitimate field – against a deep rooted attitude of „gimmicry” in Hannerz's words). In line with Francisco's arguments Elisbeth invites us not to forget the influence of cultural studies; on the other hand, Tom stressed the revelation of the „public”as an object for anthropologists working on the nations. And the list can be enlarged – or restricted.

Here is one example of a demand for reducing the number of constitutive factors in the rise of MA. According to Francisco the main factors in this process were: World War (i.e. studying culture at distance model), nationalism (i.e. nation as an object for anthropologists) and development or modernity (i.e. the interest for both the process of modernisation of „underdeveloped” countries/cultures and modern ones). However Francisco didn't bring any example of a clear MA approach or analysis for the first factor. I do not know any case of research on my country Romania (as he quotes Romania as the object for Culture at Distance conducted studies), done in that time on the basis of Romanian mass media – which was obviously very poor and imitative in the 40-ties). On the contrary, a lot of American anthropologists (Kligman, Sampson, Verdery, to mention the first names that came to my mind) have come latter to do fieldwork in Romania, even if in the 70-ties the local media were by now rich and interesting as an object per se.

For an exogen interpretation, let me notice that media scholars were from far more interested, active and fruitful in using anthropological concepts to explain media phenomena. Even if they have ignored all our sophisticated debates on the ambiguities of these concepts or our (sometimes suicidal) doubts on the effectiveness or on the neutrality of our field methods. And this happens at least a decade before the „acceleration” (in Erkan wonderful formula) of the anthropological interest for media.

For an endogen interpretation I would like to remember you the applied anthropology interest in media (even if Eisenstein and latter Allen and Burns defined MA in a more restricted and instrumental way) – and this started in the 70-ties

So, what could be the answer for this provocative question: is MA the product of an accident or of a reflexive evolution of anthropological thinking.

To give an answer to this question we have to make a difficult step – we have to define MA. If you look for the roots of a vague defined phenomena you will find dozen of roots (when I was in the college and structuralism was considered the magical key to help you analyse everything, someone stated the Aristotel was the first structuralist; recently I find a paper that claimed that saint Peter was the first journalist). The problem with MA is that the M is very heterogeneous (should we wander?!!!!). One main trend is to identify M only with the MEDIUM. But the different media (= channels that distribute information, supports that carry information) are to be found in all civilisations. Even if we precise that M means technological medium (printed, broadcasted) we still have to notice that they were addressed by anthropologists, when studying exotic groups or third countries collectivities or modern phenomena; in all these cases the M was not an object of study for itself, but an element (like space or like chemical substances for masks) involved in the functioning of the „real” object analysed by anthropologists – be there a ritual, a social organisation, a historical process ...). That’s why I’m very reluctant in equating MA and visual anthropology (as happens in Askew and Wilk reader)

I believe that MA started as a discipline with the awareness that media is more than ... media (medium). That it is an important part of the Culture, and, as I stressed recently (<http://www.philbu.net/media-anthropology/workingpapers.htm>), that it is the CULTURE (and Elizabeth was also pointing this aspect in her reaction). Only under these circumstances we can fight for an „real” anthropological object and, consequently, for the right of a new discipline.

Mihai Coman
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Mark Hobart (SOAS)
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By way of a comment on the Yazan Doughan – Liz Bird exchange, if language is not a medium, what is it?

As Jay Ruby's question of whether (or under what circumstances) murals are media indicates, there is the risk of descending into confusion over what are the subjects, objects and media in relations of mediation, let alone what constitutes a 'mass'.

However interesting the discussion, there is the risk of essentializing mass media (What comprise media? Who/What constitute the masses?). So doing risks becoming an exercise, as Sarah noted, in foundational myth-making.

I take it that Yazan's (and some others') comments have been trying to make a similar point.

Best wishes

Mark

Dr Mark Hobart

Director Centre for Media & Film Studies
SOAS, University of London

Francisco Osorio (University of Chile)

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Tom Wormald argues that a bad reading of the relationship between media anthropology and the nation would be that today most people live inside nations boundaries. Therefore, anthropology always studies nations in some sense. A correct reading would be that we usually studied people within empires or within nations, but now we are conducting research to a different level: nations.

For example, Lisa B. Rofel studied China, specifically how a soap opera that talked about the life in China in the late 1980 created national identity during the early 1990. According to my argument, this relationship first came to life after the WWII, through the Culture at a Distance School.

Tom support Mark's argument that the journal Public Culture may have played an important role in our sub discipline. I would like to label it as an external argument. As Tom says, the main questions can be: a) is media more visible to the anthropologist? (internal argument) or, b) anthropologists turn to media increasingly when the "environment" change? (external argument).

Francisco

Reference

Rofel, L. 1994. Yearnings: Televisual Love and Melodramatic Politics in Contemporary China. *American Ethnologist*. 21(4), 700-722.

Mark Peterson (Miami University)

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I agree with Ruby and Shweder about the centrality of ethnography to the anthropological enterprise but cautiously. It is not my desire to police the boundaries of the discipline--so many interesting things happen on the margins (the emergence of the anthropology of media, for instance)

I am cautious for a number of reasons.

In my book, I try to carefully explore semiotic approaches to text and ways in which anthropological semiotics differs from that of the cultural studies approaches. Right off the bat, we have a problem--some of the most interesting cultural studies textual approaches to media are anthropologists (Traube, Caton).

Putting that aside, I note that one of the key differences between the two disciplines is a tendency by anthropologists to link media to myth, the sort of thing Mihai Comans is promoting. In the end, I conclude that even the most interesting and contemporary of these works (Drummond, Duclos) suffer from an "evasion of the social"--a privileging of a Levi-Straussian approach to myth over a Malinowskian. Cultural studies privileges the social but in (what I take to be for anthropology) a problematic way--they use social, political and economic contexts to contextualize and unpack the meanings of their texts, but they treat these contexts as more or less external to representation when, of course, they are themselves (mediated) constructions of very complex realities selected by the scholar analyzing the text.

Ethnography provides a useful way to approach media because it lets us look at many dimensions. We can use ethnography of audiences to guide us in our readings of films, we can conduct ethnography of sites of consumption, we can look at peoples encounters with texts and what they make of them with little or no regard for the text at all, we can look at what people do with the technologies, and so on and so on. And we can layer these and attempt to describe entire media ecologies.

Yet although this is the direction I move in the book, I do it very cautiously. Cultural studies and lit crit types do "ethnography" too, and sometimes it resembles what we do and sometimes it doesn't. Radway and Morley clearly influenced a generation and beyond, who use various kinds of engagement with actual readers/viewers/listeners of texts to guide their interpretations of these texts.

In particular, in writing a history of anthropological engagement with media subjects, I don't want to a priori exclude anthropologist who read texts as myths, nor do I want to exclude those whose ethnography does not fit my model. So although my book is chock full of definitions, in the history chapter I went with the assumption that media anthropology is whatever anthropologists do to understand media, in whatever contexts they locate it.

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Dear All,

This has been a very interesting discussion. Thanks to Francisco and Mark for their excellent papers and illuminating documentation of historical trends.

I agree with what Sarah says here both about (1) viewing this moment now as a particular moment of definitional efforts and (2) the need to contextualize intellectual efforts with respect to different regional and national traditions of anthropology. Behind these points is a more general critique, warning us to look for multiple and not singular answers to the paper's title question "Why is interest in mass media growing?." Such a search for multiple answers would be in the best spirit of doing good anthropology.

In that vein, I have one small comment to add. While this might not be central to Francisco's approach, his title question can and should (if we wish for a less speculative answer) be approached through standard anthropological methods: case history; life history; interviews with key actors at particular historical moments; access to editorial decisions; hiring decisions; granting decisions; data on conference papers; data on course offerings; data on who read what when, etc. This would allow us to better understand the microprocesses that have made history and that have brought us to the present moment.

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Elisenda Ardèvol (University of Barcelona)
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Is Interest in Media Anthropology growing?

Are the correlation between variables statistically proved? Are they quantitatively measured, compared and contextualized with other anthropological productions and consumptions?

Maybe there is also a growing interest in medical anthropology, performance anthropology, science anthropology, ambient anthropology, robotic anthropology, etc...

From my point of view, Osorio's article is interesting, but it presupposes that the growing interest is a non-questionable fact that has to be explained, a fact that implies measurement, because it is a question of degree, and that implies a longitudinal study, because it seems to follow an increasing pattern across time...

From the reading of the paper I am not convinced that it is a proved fact and not a partial perception or a collective illusion product of our "reconstruction" of the past looking for the legitimation of a new subdiscipline or whatever. We can trace back our genealogies, and learn from our ancestors, I do not doubt that these three research traditions have something to do with current interests in media studies by anthropologists, or that they have contributed to the shaping of media anthropology as we try to understand today, but... If we deal with quantitative, longitudinal hypothesis, I think we have to use statistical and historical methods. Otherwise, we have to change our questions, no?

I am confused... may be it's too late at night and need some rest!
Elisenda

Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)
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I am also confused by this discussion, and haunted by a sense of having been here before (we have an archive of our own.)

What we seem to be referring to is "Anthropology" or "Anthropologists" as some group of people sharing some essential characteristics, and asking "why did they do what they did?" This is a strange question. We are looking for trends where there may have been complexity and a fair amount of accident. We can't even define what this supposed group or "audience" was responding to, partly because people were busy, and are busy, reconstituting what media is, in specific circumstances, pretty much continuously.

I think Don Slater's point from before is good: What is it exactly that we want to find out about this? I am confused because I don't understand what the question is.

Are we asking what were the main intellectual influences that we can discern in the texts of early writers that we now attribute as being media anthropology? (What is the geneology of our 'elder's' thinking?)

Are we asking what does that imply for how we see ourselves as some sort of loose and shifting collective now? (Who are we?)

Are we asking what are the relationships between the shifting expressions of modernity and the human and social sciences.(How should we try and place ourselves in relation to a cosmology.)

Or are we asking, what sorts of presuppositions are we carrying into our current work, and where do they seem to be derived from, and/ or how appropriate are they? (What on earth are we playing at?)

I am not sure all these questions, or the impulses in terms of intellectual work and action they seem to be generating here, are commensurable.

So what are we oriented at, our past or our current work? And if so, why, what do we want to get out of this?

Daniel Taghioff

John Postill (University of Staffordshire)
jpostill@usa.net

Daniel Taghioff says he is confused by the discussion so far, and writes:

> So what are we oriented at, our past or our current work? And if so, why, what do we want to get out of this?

I don't think we on this network (i.e. living anthropologists who study media and our colleagues in related fields) have a choice in whether to look at the past or at the present; we have to do both; as well as discuss publicly where we think we're going as a small research area within larger anthropological and inter-disciplinary milieus.

To me, Francisco's paper and the reactions to it have already pointed us in the direction of useful resources (bibliographies, publications, websites, etc) about what anthropologists of previous generations made of the media they studied. Knowing about these earlier contributions will probably help us to better formulate our own present-day questions.

Having read and commented on Mark Peterson's book drafts, I don't see it as a mythological charter (as suggested by some people earlier in the seminar) or Whiggish text but rather as doing precisely that: finding out what earlier anthros made of the media as an exercise valuable to others, but also in order to situate his own theoretical take on this contemporary research area.

John

Katarina Graffman (Uppsala University)

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An excellent comment John!

Katarina Graffman

PhD

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Jay Ruby (Temple University)

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Those restrictions are idiotic. Please remove me from this list. I have managed listserv since the beginning of listservs and never placed restrictions on members. Those interested in a more open listserv about visual communication should join viscom at listserv@listserv.temple.edu.

JAY RUBY

My Web page is <http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/ruby/>

PLEASE NOTE NEW EMAIL ADDRESS

ethnographic@earthlink.net

[Note from seminar chair: Jay Ruby was referring here to the seminar regulation limiting individual contributions to three per session. Following his request, he has been unsubscribed from the list].

Sarah Pink (University of Loughborough)

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John, and all

I don't really want to continue the discussion of definitions and what we think we ought to be doing. However I did want to clarify that the point is that there is a danger that if we start inventing the history of 'media anthropology' then we are creating a history to suit an emergent area of anthropological study. This is distinct from the task of looking at the ways anthropologists have approached media in the past which is what John seems to be suggesting and what I also would advocate.

Maybe using a term such as media anthropology (especially, as our discussions have shown, we are having difficulty in defining it) is the problem? but now we have it so we seem bound to keep using it.

Going back to the idea that history of media in anthropology as something that needs to be situated in the history of anthropology, there are a few other themes from the 1980s we might want to account for: this is the period in which the idea of anthropology as a comparative project was being critiqued and when the 'writing culture' debate came to the fore. Admittedly 'writing culture' did not have much to do with mass media in the form that media anthropologists work with it now (although it was of course about media as it was about text), but we might want to think about how the sort of reflexivity that that era engendered could have opened up a wider space for media in anthropology. We might also note that it was in and around the 1980s that the body, the visual, and the senses started to become more acceptable within anthropology (no not just mass media). More recently, in UK for example, applied anthropology is becoming increasingly connected to academia in multiple ways, which if we consider that there are often applied or policy implications to media anthropology projects could also be something we might want to think about in explaining why there is now a growing space for a 'media anthropology'.

These are just some ideas about the contexts that one might explore to gain a deeper understanding of how media anthropology fits into the discipline, they are also written largely from the perspective of British social anthropology

Sarah

Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)

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John Wrote:

"To me, Francisco's paper and the reactions to it have already pointed us in the direction of useful resources (bibliographies, publications, websites, etc) about what anthropologists of previous generations made of the media they studied. Knowing about these earlier contributions will probably help us to better formulate our own present-day questions."

Well I agree with John, I cursed the dualism of my final challenge even as I sent the mail, although it got the desired response. However, we still have to grapple with the mish-mash of pre-suppositions that these various (useful) resources bring with them.

Wherever we try and fix anthropology or media or media anthropology as one thing, then we are making implicit assumptions about practice, challenged here in the case of what is 'mass media.'

Surely what we are interested in ethnographic approaches, is precisely what happens in practice, and how people define these things themselves in practice:

It is more important what the people engage with understand as being media, than what we try and set up as a term of reference amongst ourselves, however pragmatically useful that might be in terms of referencing resources etc...

This reminds me of an earlier discussion with Katherina about how media producers obscure differences on their own opinions behind an idealised model of what the 'audience' is, something which researchers can easily find themselves colluding with.

And in order to ask questions that do not obscure the multiple and shifting ways that people understand 'media' and 'communication' (or audiences) in their own practices, we need to approach our history critically, in terms of examining our own presuppositions.

In other words our efforts to produce coherence within our tribe, can lead us to obscure our own incoherence, since how we understand media and anthropology amongst ourselves clearly does not fit together, as well obscuring the ways in which 'others' understand these things.

We may find ourselves in "Howl's Moving Castle." We might secure the walls of our discipline, even without any agreed foundations, only to have found that the ground has shifted beneath our feet, perhaps even due to our own efforts: 'Media' especially is not something that sits still quietly waiting for us to define it to the nth degree.

Daniel

John Postill (University of Staffordshire)

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Dear list

Thank you for that recent round of contributions. As usual, the seminar is open for business over the weekend, so you're welcome to keeping sending in your comments -- although we would understand it if Francisco decided to take a weekend break to enjoy the springtime in Santiago. The seminar ends on Tuesday at 9pm CET.

Best

John

Francisco Osorio (University of Chile)
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Erkan says that if we are trying to explain why acceleration happens in the 1980s, we must look for internal arguments more than external. Although Erkan proposes one internal, gives four external arguments, from my point of view.

Erkan's internal argument: Gatekeepers of the discipline from the 1980s allow us to turn to media studies increasingly.

Erkan's external argument: Cultural studies trigger media studies (as Mark says), globalization happens, increasing number of anthropologists in the world, and American anthropologists focus on domestic culture since the Vietnam War.

About Erkan's internal argument, it may be true, although I have some problems to prove the category "gatekeepers" and how they can influence us.

As Erkan nicely says, it is ironic that not anthropology but cultural studies (something external to us) trigger media research. I agree with globalization (of course), the American turn to domestic culture, but I'm not so sure about the demographic change in anthropology. During the 1970s and 1980s, anthropologists tend to be American or European, although I found a reference of Mitra Das from India.

Reading Erkan's words, I can offer another description of the external argument: Political economical conditions turn anthropologists to mass media studies increasingly during the twentieth century. The acceleration happens in the 1970s (my list) and the 1980s (Mark's list).

Reference

Das, Mitra. 1980. "Matrimonial advertisements: an examination of its social significance in mate selection in modern India". *Man in India* 60(3/4), 187-203.

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I thank Ivana to disagree with me about the definition of the field. I think your distinction was nicely reframed by Jay Ruby and later support by Lauren Shweder.

Your question about the "appropriation" of media, according to the studies of the 1970s and 1980s, remember me some findings like that the effects that communication scholars found in America, were also found in other cultures. Newton (1986) conducting research in Japan, USA, UK, Philippine, and Israel, argues that in those five cultures TV characters are clearly distinguished from "real" people. Rodgers (1986) studying the Batak describes how cassettes tapes can be use to transmit kinship in Indonesia.

Reference

Newton, Barbara J. 1986. "Metric multidimensional scaling of viewer's perceptions of TV in five countries". *Human Organization* 45(2), 162-170.

Rodgers, Susan. 1986. "Batak tape cassette kinship: constructing kinship through the Indonesian national mass media." *American Ethnologist* 13, 23-42.

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Yazan and I disagree on the definition of what media is. Fortunately, Yazan is very clear in a single paragraph to compare the differences. I want to move on and comment Yazan's hypothesis in our seminar.

Yazan agrees with the internal argument of an epistemological shift in anthropology, although I would like to ask to Yazan how we change "the object of study from human subjects to their forms of mediation". Then, Yazan goes for the external argument we spoke earlier, stressing the political interest in media, and, again, it would be nice to have another couple of lines about it.

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During my time at Annenberg, I was well aware of the work of Sol Worth, actually I talked about it with Larry Gross and I was well aware of Jay Ruby and the group at Temple University (all in the same city of Philadelphia).

>From the beginning, fieldwork in anthropology has routinely used film and photography for documentation. The term visual anthropology now includes video and electronic media. *Visual Anthropology Review's* first number appeared in 1974. *Visual Anthropology* has been running from 1987. I would argue that mass media anthropology is a different term than visual anthropology. However, the fact is that visual anthropology is a well-establishing research tradition, but mass media anthropology is not. For example, there is no mass media anthropology journal. Media anthropology, of course, is wider than both concepts.

What we are trying to understand is how this area started to develop increasingly from WWII, with force from the 1970s and 1980s. The wider question is why we overlooked media

research and recognized it as a sub discipline only in the 21st century, being with us since the beginning.

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Thanks also to Sarah when saying that another point to think about is how anthropology is related to national agendas. We talked about America, but we need to study as much as possible in other nations the relationship between the discipline and media research in this history we are constructing.

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Thanks for an interesting discussion, just want to add some brief remarks.

According to my point of view the historical background of media anthropology is a relevant issue for discussion, not for determining definitions and specific historical starting points, fixed foundations or grids in the development of the academic field, but as a way of exploring the topic, its delimitations, boundaries and potentials with a focus on increasing the knowledge base. Of course this includes a deconstruction and critical reflection on our own presuppositions, goals and aims. (In Daniel' words) In phenomenological terms, the meaning of history is constructed in the present.....

Regarding the discussion on internal and external factors in the formation of the discipline and the question regarding the recent increase in interest in media anthropology I find it relevant to also include more pragmatic factors. The topic of globalisation has been briefly touched in the discussion and as Daniel state "media is not something that sits still quietly waiting for us to define it..." Forms of media, means for dissemination and communication change and transform. Isn't the formation of new forms of media, increase and diversification in forms, factors that should be related to a growing interest from anthropologists?

During the last decades satellite communications technology and the ICT technologies have entered the arena and in the 90s, the multimedia industry exploded. It is generally assumed that the new technologies affect the flow of ideas, cultural and social expressions and gives way to new global forms of interaction. The new technologies have got an increasing effect on the conventional areas of research among anthropologists. They enter into and affect the subjects' life worlds in different ways. To briefly mention some examples; the importance of satellite TV and ICT technologies among Diaspora populations in their relation to the home

country, the use of the new technologies by NGOs and other organisations and groups to create new networks and online communities, the effects it has on local groups, in terms of changes in outreach, target groups, content, information flow and so on that affect the daily life and the structure of the society. It follows that it is becoming increasingly difficult to not deal with those issues for anthropologists....

Best!

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Thank you for the reply. I was actually hoping that many would disagree with both hypotheses. Although I think, as Poster notes, that the research question of 'why media anthropology?' is indeed valid and valuable, I also agree with Pink and Taghioff that your paper runs the risk of being an exercise in foundational myth making. I think that the research should have taken another approach. Instead of starting with a problematic, and rather rigid, definition of what media and media anthropology are and then look at when this object came to being and why, it needed to look at the various ways in which researchers have articulated what they are doing as media anthropology. Judging from the way this and many earlier discussions went, the category media anthropology is very heterogeneous and the various scholars who consider themselves media anthropologists are merely related together by the myth of a unified field i.e. the signifier 'media anthropology'. This should not be understood as saying that media anthropology is a pseudo-science. As a matter of fact, all other fields have a mythical character. The difference is that because media anthropology has not been institutionalised and hegemonised (yet) it remains an interesting field.

Yazan

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A question was posed and not answered, so if I may jump in:

>Yazan agrees with the internal argument of an epistemological shift in anthropology, although I would like to ask to Yazan how we change the object of study from human subjects to their forms of mediation.

As one of Yazan's brothers in arms, I think I can approach this issue.

If you look at the geneology of studies on the formation of human subjects, they have tended to involve considering how subjects were formed, and also performed as agents, in a variety of practices of communication, or if you wish to highlight miscommunication, mediation.

Foucault talked of epistemes (structures of thought) early on, but then settled into practices of self making later on. His productivism, that discourse could operate as a machinery producing subjects, was rightly attacked by Baudrillard. There was no straightforward mechanical way in which subjects were produced from a machinery of wider discourse, this was something that went on in particular instances of communication and mediation, in which discursive formations might be mobilised in unpredictable ways.

This is akin to the ways in which texts have come to be understood in reception studies.

Thus the emphasis shifted towards communicative practices, for instance in the work of Laclau on articulation. Unfortunately Laclau himself feels that his work is rather abstract, and that it has not been worked out in terms of how particular instances of communicative practice can be approached as objects of study. Hence the need to consider issues found in anthropological approaches to practice, such as how do people themselves understand the practices they engage in, and how does this 'subjectivity' form the practices they engage in. One issue that emerges is, how do people understand practices of mediation and communication, and their roles in this. And how does this understanding, coupled to the common terms of reference that they draw from the full range of practices in their lifeworlds, operate in constituting them as subjects.

Finally, since this constitution goes on in specific instances and moments, how are situated agents operating in complex and strategic relations with one another and with histories of discourse/materia/practice, and also, crucial from this perspective, how is this complexing operating as practices of communication or mediation. In other words how is complex agency (From the philosophy of R.G. Collingwood, the New Leviathan) implicated with practices of mediation?

This firmly shifts the focus from the human subject, with its implicit assumptions of negative liberty and privacy, to the excluded middle of the substantive practices constituting human relations, and thus humans. Media forms one such instance of an excluded middle, both in terms of its production, reception and as a factor in how people constitute their understanding of the public.

Daniel Taghioff

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Liz gives us very good ideas to think about. She supports Mark's proposal of the reaction against cultural studies and goes further to explain why TV studies grew up: she supports Katrien Pype about the perception that TV was a threat to culture. Then, Liz argues that this particular media has methodological advantages compare to others, allowing more research.

One important aspect Liz brings into the seminar is that communications scholars during the 1980s produced a strong conceptual framework that anthropologists tested worldwide through comparative research. That's why I proposed a joke in my reply to Mark. Also, communication scholars before us were using anthropological methods and concepts to their own research. The invitation they gave us, took so many years to respond from anthropology.

Although we have accomplished one of our tasks, ethnography, we are moving on, trying to propose an anthropological theory to the study of media in all its forms. In Liz's words, the question is how do we study this dispersed, mediated reality ethnographically?

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I think Mihai must be very happy because this seminar shows how important was his question in the seminar he proposed earlier, that's it, in order to explain the growing up of a sub discipline, we must work also in what our boundaries are. Jay Ruby notices it and later came into discussion Mark, Ivana, Yazan, Fausto, Matthew, Sarah and Lauren. I didn't realize that at the beginning, so I am glad we are able to run two questions together. Be aware in the next seminar: important questions are hard to answer and keep going for years.

Mihai is not so sure that Romania is a good example of the culture at a distance school. I don't remember right now where I read about it, but must be in Margaret Mead and Rhoda Metraux 1954 book. I must check the reference. About examples, well, this school studied radio broadcasting and newspapers, trying to understand those cultures during the war.

Mihai supports my timeline for the 1970s and we both agree that communication scholars saw in anthropology a real help long before us. My comment on his proposal for the field will go in a different reply.

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I think Debra made a great contribution to this seminar guiding us to gather more information from the scientific enterprise of anthropology. You must be one the persons to ask for an interview, because of you influential 1993 paper.

In line with Debra's proposal, we are constructing an emergent sub discipline and, with time, we'll be a classical sub discipline. The difference between them can be expressed in indicators such us: is there an ISI journal devoted to the field? Well, not now, although visual anthropology is very close. Is there a manual or a book with the title of the discipline? Yes, one example: Media Anthropology (Sage, 2005). Is there a community gathering those interested in the field? Yes, EASA Media Anthropology Network created by John Postill. Is there a program inside a university about the field? Yes, many. Are the papers growing in the field? Yes, strongly from the 1970s and 1980s. Is there a single definition to the field? No, sorry.

Many answers to those questions are positive, but recent. All is happening as we speak and that's the beauty of our efforts.

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In line with Jay great contribution to this seminar, I would like to answer as well to Mihai, Mark Peterson, Mark Hobart and Fausto.

If we watch how other people construct the own sub disciplines, we may later discuss some choices in ours. Let's take, for example, cognitive science. The philosopher Barbara von Eckardt argues that this field studies intelligence or cognition, with basically two main frameworks that not always work together: either cognition is representation, either is computation. She says that no matter what's your discipline of origin, your favorite theory, methods, your preference for multidisciplinary research or single discipline, etc., as long as you keep the program moving, because we are all interested in cognition.

This is the path that Mark Peterson, Mihai Coman and Eric Rothenbuhler are supporting, among others in this seminar.

I propose another path. Although I think this open invitation is correct, it brings us more problems to our field. I think we must work to a single definition of the field. Although this definition can exclude some members, it allows us to better solve the problems we encounter on the way by having a unify framework from the start. Scientific communities have always been working this way or the other, so we are not inventing the wheel. With time, definitions change, as well as communities.

If we follow the open invitation path, we must welcome all definitions but we cannot disagree with them as a community (only at the personal level). If we follow the close invitation path, we must work for an increasingly better definition of the field of media anthropology. Both paths, by the way, produce knowledge and are worth to follow.

Reference

Von Eckardt, Barbara. 2001. "Multidisciplinarity and cognitive science" *Cognitive Science* 25, 453-470.

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Well, many thanks to Francisco for that weekend effort! If anyone has any brief concluding remarks, today (Monday) is the ideal day for them, so that Francisco, and perhaps our discussant Mark Peterson as well, have time for their own final thoughts on Tuesday.

John

Matthew Durlington (Towson University)

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As I stressed before, I believe you have an ambitious project that the debate that has occurred should reinforce and bolster as you progress with your paper. I am also glad that you had the opportunity to speak with Larry Gross and that you were aware of the work in the surrounding Philadelphia area at that time and historically.

You are also correct in dating the first appearance of VAR. What you did not reference was the history of the journal 'Studies in Visual Communication' which emerged around that same time and looked to contextualize a wider terrain of study beyond film and video to engage a variety of media, therefore extending the analysis of anthropology to a variety of 'mass media' sources...this journal also came out of Annenberg.

I believe this additional thread of mass media anthropology history directly relates to your project as you state it below... 'how the area developed increasingly from WWII, with force from the 1970s and 1980s.

I continue to disagree with you regarding your statement that media research was overlooked until the 21st century. Even the readers that have come out in the past few years (Askew and Wilk for instance) still attempt to root their attempt to redefine 'the anthropology of media' in conjunction with historical trends and political movements.

Basically, I do not feel that media research was 'overlooked', it has thrived and been recognized in a series of progressive steps...it has always been a subdiscipline and an active one at that. What has occurred are several papers/books/readers that are attempting to situate the study as it stands now in the 21st century...not recognize it for the first time.

Regardless, I appreciate your argument and project...it is a necessary one and the debate/questions have been very productive.

Matthew

John Postill (University of Staffordshire)

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Dear list

I wish to welcome two new members to the list: Adolfo Estalella (UO Catalunya) and S. Suryadi (Leiden). The latter wrote:

> I already studied on the early years of talking machine in Java. This study also traces the public response toward talking machine in nineteenth century Dutch East Indies. Is it also included the object study of media anthropology?

I consider this to be a crucial question. It is closely related with Jay Ruby's initial query last week about the boundaries of media anthropology. To judge by our register of 60-odd media anthropology network members (<http://easaonline.org/networksbios.htm>) virtually all of us seem to be working on contemporary media. The same goes for the readers by Askew and Wilk and Ginsburg et al: all their anthropological chapters are devoted to contemporary societies.

Yet in Askew and Wilk two pages are devoted to a Timeline of Media Development from the Year 100, when papermaking was reportedly developed in China, until 1998, the start of digital TV broadcasting (2002: x-xi). Similarly, in Ginsburg et al (2002: xvii) there is a wonderful cartoon by Michael Leunig, "The Consumers", showing a cave family watching a schematic wall painting of a deer as if they were watching TV.

My parting question is: Are we to continue to concentrate on contemporary societies and leave past eras to media historians? To me, this is our greatest challenge as an anthropological research area: what do we do about those cave paintings and papermakers? Surely these are legitimate objects of anthropological study?

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Thanks for your words. You're right about "Studies in Visual Communication", although is no longer running.

Your argument is clear (and others on this seminar); you even make me have some doubts about my position. Nevertheless, I think the fun resides in keeping my views in this conversation in order to increase our knowledge of the field. Besides, who knows if we both are wrong!

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I thank you Daniel for the contribution to the seminar. Great answer. This is the third time I read your argument about agency and forms of mediation and I can't reply in a critical way, only silently read and think about it.

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I thank you Kerstin for your contribution. The final remark in your text makes me think about the anthropologists Martin Topper and W. Leigh Wilson, writing in 1976 about cable television. They were trying to use cable television as a tool for applied anthropology in a small neighborhood in Virginia. I think they could be thinking, as you say now, how we can't deal with this "new" media as anthropologists.

As far as I know, this study remains as the only one in cable television published in main anthropological journals during the twentieth century. We didn't overlook the subject, but this effort took years to be recognized.

Reference

M. Topper and W. L. Wilson. 1976. "Cable Television: Applied Anthropology in a New Town". *Human Organization* 35(2), 135-146.

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Thank you all for your comments in the seminar. Thanks Mark, John and Matthew.

Thanks also to Katrien, Tom, Erkan, Jay, Ivana, Yazan, Suryadi, Fausto, Sarah, Liz, Lauren, Mihai, Mark Hobart, Debra, Daniel, and Kerstin.

Thanks to the readers that didn't participate with messages but, perhaps, were involved in one way or the other.

I see my replies as a way to thank you (not "reply" as such), because most of the time I didn't have much to say about such important ideas. My perception is that great arguments came to the discussion, and those need time to think them.

I am going to transform this seminar into an essay for some journal in anthropology or communication, quoting every one of you in the text. Bye for now.

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Thanks Katrien. Victor J. Caldarola supports your previous comment about the fear we had that TV would erase cultures, imposing American culture through American television programming.

Your ethnography of American wrestling shows also is supported by Arlen Davila, studying national identity in Puerto Rico.

Therefore, cultural imperialism school fails when saying that there is a powerful influence of television in people. According to them, the role of culture is to determine behavior and the role of people is to be a passive receiver.

Reference

Arlene Davila. 1998. "El Kiosko Budweiser". *American Ethnologist* 25(3), 452-470.

Victor J. Caldarola 1992. "Reading the Television Text in Outer Indonesia". *Howard Journal of Communications* 4(1/2), 28-49.

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Mark Peterson (Miami University)

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This has been a very interesting discussion and I want to thank all the contributors.

John has asked me for closing comments, so I'll offer the following: much of the discussion, however, has centered around the problem of defining media anthropology. While discussions of what we variously mean by the term are both interesting and fruitful, I find efforts to actually establish a definition unfortunate for several reasons.

First, attempts to define a field almost inevitably turn into hegemonic exercises in exclusion. Is media anthropology only studies of media that draw on anthropology's theories of myth and ritual? Is it only work that is grounded in ethnography? What kind of ethnography? Are anthropologists who test or apply mass communications theories cross-culturally not media anthropologists? What about anthropologists who apply cultural studies methods of text analysis on the media of their field areas? Like many others, I have some concerns about exactly what anthropologists bring to the study of media that makes us different from the myriad other fields that have already staked out the media as part of their disciplinary terrain but I am not overly concerned.

Second, to predefine what anthropology is in a historical exercise of the sort Osorio is engaged in seems particularly problematical. Media anthropology, historically speaking, must necessarily be about what anthropologists have written about media. Writing a history of this sort should be a descriptive, not a prescriptive exercise.

This is not to say some selectivity is not exercised. Both Osorio and I have focused on anthropological analysis of media produced by media professionals, not on 1) visual anthropology (in the sense of the anthropological use of visual materials for recording, analysis and articulation of arguments), 2) indigenous media, or 3) anthropologists engaging with media to present anthropology to a wider public. I have written about all of these in other fora, but a critique of Osorio did not seem to be the place. Osorio's focus seemed clear enough, and broad enough, to critique on its own terms.

I also have practical problems with those who would define media anthropology as the study of all communications media. There is no question that the voice is a medium, as is gesture. Philosophically and logically, I agree one can make a concrete case for their inclusion in anything that labels itself 'anthropology of media'. Practically, though, I agree with Elizabeth Bird. I think it is a little silly. There are branches of anthropology that study language and paralanguage, sign language, kinesics, proxemics and so forth, and I cannot see what utility their practitioners would find in being encompassed into a larger media anthropology. Nor can I imagine that they would have a great deal to say to those who analyze television texts as expressive of narratives of nation.

Defining media anthropology as the study of technological mediation (as Osorio does and as I have done in my book) is not a win-win solution either, though. Technically, much contemporary communication uses human-produced artifacts of one sort or another, from Ouiji boards to soap boxes to lecture halls to powerpoint slides, not to mention letters and clocks and so on and so forth. Is analysis of wedding rings media anthropology because a manufactured material object is used to convey a message without

My own preference in defining our field of study borrows an image from Wittgenstein, who argued that human conceptualizations of this sort were best understood not by some mathematical notion of bounded sets whose members are defined by shared attributes but by the image of a light shining on a wall. There is a bright clear center that gradually dims as one moves out to the peripheries. This is a model that focuses on centers rather than edges.

On the plus side, agree or don't agree, it is always interesting and stimulating to participate in a conversation in which so many different points of view are represented, as well as so many different ways of interpreting what has been said. It's the little epiphanies we have while engaging in these kinds of discussions that makes academic discourse fun. Again, I want to thank Francisco, and everyone who contributed to this interesting discussion based on his paper.

John Postill (University of Staffordshire)
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Dear all

I wish to close the seminar by thanking our presenter, Francisco Osorio, our discussant, Mark Peterson, and all those of you who've contributed to this engaging seminar! I'd also like to thank Philipp Budka for making the materials available online. As usual, the seminar transcript will soon be available on our website in PDF format.

I can now confirm the working titles, authors and dates of two of our forthcoming papers, namely:

17-24 Jan 2006 Brian Street (King's College London) Autonomous and ideological models of literacy: approaches from New Literacy Studies

<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/depsta/education/hpages/bstreet.html>

21-28 Feb 2006 Katrien Pype (Leuven) Gender, courting practices and the dialectics between mass media and the personal lives of young Pentecostals in Kinshasha

<http://easaonline.org/networkbiosm-r.htm#KP>

If you have a paper or topic in mind for an e-seminar from mid-March onwards, please let me know in advance so I can book you a slot for this academic year.

For any contributions you wish to make to the annotated bibliography (which now includes some full texts) please contact Anna Horolets (labusia_xl@wp.pl)

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

Finally, we'll be circulating an update on the Loughborough media anthropology workshop (9 December) very soon.

Best wishes

John