

Media Anthropology as a Field of Interdisciplinary Contact

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Abstract

Media anthropology is a rapidly developing new field of interdisciplinary studies. With roots going back decades in both Communication and Anthropology, nevertheless this work has only recently coalesced under the label Media Anthropology and its contributing authors come into dialogue. In turn this has produced a moment of intellectual self-consciousness about the tasks of defining this field of study and debating its parameters. This essay argues that media anthropology is and would most profitably continue to be a field of contact between two disciplines, rather than generating a new disciplinary frame of its own. Often this contact is rudimentary, but productively so. Anthropologists and communication scholars approach Media Anthropology from different directions with different histories and for different purposes. It is not only natural, but productive, that they would make differing choices of concepts, methods, and interpretations. This is as it should be and attempts to discipline Media Anthropology will either fail or bleed the territory of its vitality.

I will start with the briefest introduction of media anthropology, jump to its promise, then some controversies and my response. You will quickly note, Dear Reader, that this is an essay, not a report of research in progress but more the kind of working paper designed to stimulate discussion in the seminar. I am aware that it needs better documentation and that in the search for evidence and example I might well learn that some of my points are overstated, some of my sense of trend a couple of years late. More pointedly, as a communication scholar writing to anthropologists about anthropology I have the nervousness of a guest at a party who is about to stand up and describe its successes and failures to his hosts; the chance that I will say something wrong is enormous.

Nevertheless, in the spirit of Bloch (1977/1989) who said that in the spirit of Malinowski he would rather hang for a sheep than hang for a lamb, here it is. I look forward to your criticisms, corrections, counter examples, and suggestions.

What is Media Anthropology?

Media anthropology is the label that has most recently come into use for a territory of contact between two fields. Briefly, it represents both the use of anthropological concepts and methods within media studies and the study of the media by anthropologists. It may be a new interdisciplinary convergence; it could become an established field of inter-disciplinary studies, or even a new discipline. At the moment, though, it is best described as a territory of contact between two fields, giving rise to a moment of inter-disciplinary discussion. It is probably not accidental that the field is currently best represented in edited books (Askew and Wilk, 2002; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin, 2002; Rothenbuhler and Coman, 2005), on the reading lists of graduate syllabi, and on this listserv itself. These are all places where anthropologists and media scholars take turns talking and the various points of view in the field are presented as side-by-side alternatives. More integrative works, such as Peterson's book (2004), remain rare—though many of us have article-length versions of a similar effort.

Media anthropology contains multiple perspectives, each the product of different intellectual trends, in different fields. In one group are anthropologists who have recently turned their attention more systematically toward the media. Some are studying the production and consumption of media in many of the same settings and using more or less the same methods traditionally used in ethnographies of indigenous, village, and tribal life, others transfer those methods to the work-place setting of media production, and others are engaging whole new questions about transnational cultural flows, media systems, business and industry, and more (see the examples collected in Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin, 2002, for example). Another group includes communication and media scholars who began borrowing concepts of ritual, myth, religion, symbolic structure and process from anthropological theory in the 1980s to forge an alternative approach to media studies (e.g. Carey, 1988, 1989; Dayan & Katz, 1985a, 1985b, 1987, 1988, 1992; Dayan, Katz, & Kerns, 1984; Hall, 1979, 1980, 1982; Katz, 1980; Katz &

Dayan, 1985, 1986; Katz, Dayan, & Motyl, 1981; Munson & Warren, 1998; Rothenbuhler, 1988, 1989, 1998; Silverstone, 1981, 1994). A third approach to media anthropology grew out of the ethnographic turn that swept the humanities and social sciences, as British cultural studies became the new mainstream in media studies, and ethnographies of television viewers, fans of popular music, and other forms of audience reception studies became much more common (starting with Ang, 1985, 1990; Hebdige, 1979; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Moores, 1993; Morley, 1980, 1992; see the useful review by Livingstone, 1998; see also the related synthesis of history, anthropology, sociology, and cultural criticism by Mukerji & Schudson, 1991). Fourth are the visual anthropologists, ethnographic filmmakers, and others who for decades had been pursuing many of these interests in their own way, under the guidance of another set of questions and conceptual vocabularies. (The recently completed discussion of a seminar paper by Jay Ruby addressed this area most interestingly; Ginsburg, e.g. 2002, Pink, e.g. 2006, 2007, and others offer a host of productive new approaches in this field.) Yet a fifth approach would be the myth and symbol tradition of interpreting texts with an abstractly anthropological orientation, informed by anthropological reading but not its methods (e.g. Lule, 2001; Real, 1996). These five and more represent the divergent intellectual orientations that may meet in this territory we have recently taken to calling Media Anthropology.

Given that diversity, there is hardly anything more systematic than this to say: Media anthropology is, to one degree or another, in varying ways and for varying purposes, the use of anthropological concepts and methods in the study of the media. I propose we think of media anthropology as a field of contact, rather than a field of interdisciplinary studies. The participating scholars are all coming from different directions and going in different directions. They find themselves in contact as they cross an interesting field; but what they find of interest and how they examine it can be very, very different.

As you will see in the discussion and work cited below I have a broadly encompassing view of media anthropology, using it as a lever of conceptual imagination. I apply this work of imagination both to fields of study (we are all natives in media worlds) and to reinterpret older works written in other modes for other purposes but

which, after the encounter of media and anthropology, appear quite usefully media anthropological. This analytic imagination depends on disciplinary freedom and you will see that I argue against some of the tendencies to evaluate work in the interdisciplinary territory of media anthropology by the traditional criteria of either of the home disciplines.

What is the Promise of Media Anthropology?

Both media studies and anthropology existed successfully long before anything called media anthropology gained currency; so if that latter is a new way of doing old things, it is appropriate to give some attention to what it promises. Why is it worth the extra effort? What do we hope to gain?

I stand by what Mihai Coman and I had to say on that score a few years ago, so will reproduce here a short passage from that earlier essay (the rest of this section is from Coman & Rothenbuhler, 2005, with only slight revisions, used with permission and gratitude).

More adequate understanding of a world that cannot be disenchanting. The great historical process of secularization that has produced modern economies, governments and political systems, educational systems, and formal religions constrained to their specific institutional spheres, cannot, nevertheless, produce a fully disenchanting world. The relation of the human mind and its environments—though secular institutional structures many of those environments may be—will always contain elements of mystery, magic, and ritual. Mythical structures and narrative logics will continue to have influence alongside cause-effect analyses. Choices will be based on values and faith as often as on instrumental reasoning. No field of the social sciences can come to terms with the objects of its study without concepts and methods appropriate to that reality.

Media studies in particular addresses a world founded on texts and discourse. There would be no media audiences or media organizations, no interest in media technologies, without the texts and discourses around which they are organized. The social relations and political realities of the media system, and hence the consequences of their operation, are founded in communication processes. Paradoxical though it may seem, then, in a culture that values rationality above all things, understanding how the

shaman uses text and performance to effect cures is at least as important to media studies as is the rational actor model that otherwise dominates the social sciences.

New uses in new social worlds for concepts and methods that have already given a century of good service. It may be a scholastic pleasure, but we are, after all, people of the academy. One of the promises of media anthropology is the discovery of new uses for good, old ideas. Due to their aptness, their elasticity, and the importance of their referents, the core ideas of cultural anthropology have already proven useful, with appropriate adaptations, for sixty, eighty, a hundred years or more, in the study of social groups all over the globe. This is an invitation to media scholars to join that grand tradition, and an invitation to anthropologists to turn their light on a challenging new subject matter. This will test the elasticity of the anthropological concepts and the cognitive flexibility of the scholars who do the work. I am already convinced of the usefulness of the project for understanding the media and for understanding the social worlds touched by them.

An approach to media that is tuned to the particular in the general, the local in the global, the transient and circumstantial in the enduring and universal. For decades the study of the media has been bedeviled by a logical problem that appears in many different guises and has recently come into prominent discussion under the heading of local and global. The field of media studies is not unique in this regard, but it may be one of the stronger cases among the human sciences.

The media have been introduced as new technologies and they constitute a separate institutional sphere; what they do is recognizably a different version of previously existing activities. This has helped produce the strong tendency toward asking very general questions: What are the effects of the media? What do they do? What difference does television make, to politics, sports, music, education? But what the media do is communication and each bit of it is unique, each historical moment of it is different, each participant is a willful, interpreting, individual actor. The generalizations, then, have been enormously difficult to come by. (See Lazarsfeld & Merton's, 1948, characterization and response to this problem; similarly Klapper, 1960 who proposed we would never understand the effects of the media without viewing them within specific social contexts as one among a set of interacting influences.)

Cultural anthropology has dealt with a structurally similar problem, though in different ways with different results. Classical anthropology also had very general ambitions: What is the nature of the primitive mind? What is the origin of religion? Of course, these ambitions have been tempered over the decades, just as media scholars are always working to shape and temper the public's interest in "the effects" of "the media" into more precise and answerable questions. But under the influence of those classical ambitions, anthropology developed concepts and methods tuned to the friction between empirical work in very particular, very unique settings and the drive for more generalizable knowledge claims in the published literature. The relation between anthropological theory and anthropological investigations has been managed, in some parts of the tradition, with concepts that are formalistic, if not content free, allowing the specifics to be provided by the empirical materials under investigation. Durkheim's famous definition of the sacred, for example, does not say what it is; he defines it as a form that varies in content across different contexts: The sacred is that which any given people takes as beyond question. Therefore, the category of the sacred may be found in any given society and used in analysis of people's activities there, even as the contents of that category vary so widely that one culture's sacred is another's profane. Add to that van Gennep's concept of the pivoting of the sacred and we have a concept that describes a pattern in human relations and actions that may obtain in reference to the most varied and contradictory of contents across most any social setting—and yet, that defines a distinct and regularly observable pattern.

The literature of cultural anthropology can be read as a rich mine of such concepts that define cultural structures and processes, while leaving their empirical contents as matters for ethnographic investigation. These concepts, as well as this strategy in regard to the relation of the empirical and the theoretical, can be turned usefully to media studies—which is, after all, just another field of culture. (Of course, I will turn right around and say that religion, politics, education, and all the rest are just other fields of media.)

What are the controversies about media anthropology?

The new intellectual dialog among scholars coalescing under the banner of media anthropology has produced a moment of intellectual self-consciousness. The first couple

years of the media anthropology listserv showed recurrent debates about defining the field, drawing boundaries around it, the proper use of methods within it, and other disciplining activities. The details are compellingly interesting and I recommend rereading those early seminars. In this paper I want to focus on some criticisms by anthropologists of the work of communication and media scholars. The demographics, and perhaps intellectual styles, of the two fields are such that this is a dominant trend anyway.

(There are, after all, more anthropologists than communication and media scholars, their field is older, more institutionalized, and more respected. The professional socialization process trains the young anthropologist to feel that institutional support as a power in his or her own thinking. We media scholars are socialized to imagine ourselves always borrowing, always working furtively at the margins.)

From the point of view of anthropology, especially its more traditional practitioners, the anthropological tendencies within media studies often appear inadequate. The ethnographic work is often not rigorous enough. The theoretical work is often out of date; it is too dependent on the Durkheimian tradition. Some of the topical choices, too, are old-fashioned, such as myth and symbol interpretation. These are sensible concerns, from the point of view of anthropology. Anthropology, though, is not the most useful point of view from which to evaluate communication and media studies.

The anthropological tendencies in media studies do not represent efforts to become anthropologists; they are the products of efforts to answer questions of communication theory and media studies. That is the point of view from which they should be analyzed. Let's examine these three points of controversy: ethnographic methods, out of date theoretical sources, and the emphasis on sign, symbol, myth, and interpretation.

First: Of the three issues here, ethnographic work on media audiences is the closest in intellectual orientation and method to current anthropological work. Though it has a history that can be traced back to Columbia, Frankfurt, and Chicago schools of media research (e.g. Herzog, 1941, 1944; Park, 1925), its most immediate progenitors are British cultural studies and the general ethnographic turn of the human sciences, as cited above. The mixture of neo-Marxist and continental social theories in British cultural

studies is shared with much contemporary anthropological theory and the ethnographic turn, of course, was partly led by some prominent anthropologists whose work found less-disciplinary audiences, if it had not been written for them in the first place, including such as Clifford & Marcus's Writing Culture (1986) and Lynn Hunt's The New Cultural History (1989), as well as the influential books of Geertz, Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, and Victor Turner and his many students and collaborators. Some of the ethnographic work on media audiences looks very similar whether by scholars of communication or anthropology and anthropologists can consider it good work by their own standards for their own purposes.

Some work by communication scholars is fully the equal of anthropological work by all of the traditional criteria of ethnography. La Pastina's (e.g. 2004, 2005) ethnographic work on television viewing in rural villages of northeastern Brazil, for example, was based on multiple and extended stays of several months to a year at a time. Similarly, some work by anthropologists is deeply immersed in the communication literature and shows some of the methodological creativity found there, Bird's (2003) for example.

Not all ethnographic work by communication scholars, though, meets the traditional standards of anthropology. Much of it can be and has been criticized because of the short time in the field, the limited range of observations, and the narrow selection of subjects. From this point of view, communication scholars often study too small a slice of the lives of too few people, too close to home, too similar to the scholar him- or herself.

It is not our job as communication scholars, though, to study indigenous communities of distant societies; we are studying television viewers, internet users, journalists, record company executives, or some other such. We are studying media cultures and their people. The most elaborately developed examples of those phenomena are often right outside our doors. Some of the high practitioners visit with us in class everyday. Their arts are based in our own home language and we are in no way naïve outsiders either. We are studying a culture in which we already live. If the purpose of traditional ethnography was to make the strange familiar, to provide entrée for the visiting scholar to the culture of the other, then the analogous purpose for our adaptations

of ethnography to media studies will often be to make the familiar strange, to provide *outré* for the scholar at home reflecting on the mysteries of his or her own culture. Different purposes, different methods, different criteria of evaluation.

Second, another critique of anthropologists is that the use of anthropological concepts in communication theory is not up to date in regard to its sources. Communication scholars make prominent use of older concepts that have been amended or rejected by contemporary anthropologists, and some older sources that are not so much read anymore by working anthropologists. Durkheim and the Durkheimian tradition, Victor Turner and the ritual studies tradition, Eliade, Geertz, Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, and other famous interpreters of signs, symbols, rituals, and myths, are the prominent sources of anthropological ideas in communication theory. In terms of the development of anthropological theory that represents a rather mid-20th century position. Once again, though, unless we are all graduate students in anthropology, this critique is misplaced.

These are enduringly important sources for communication theory because of their answer to problems in that field, communication—problems that, it turns out, are themselves enduringly important. It is a concern for communication theory, rather than anthropology that pulls the communication scholar toward these specific authors, older though they may be as sources of theory. Full proof of the value of these choices would require much more space than this paper allows. But here is a *précis* of one aspect of the argument. I will return to this issue below and present other aspects of the case.

Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss, Gregory Bateson, Clifford Geertz, Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, and other anthropologist-heroes of communication theorists share an intellectual characteristic that is easily taken for granted in contemporary anthropology, but is a point of serious contention in communication and media studies. As different from each other as their works may be in so many other ways, they each structured their arguments with attention to distinguishing two spheres that are in constant danger of conflation in communication studies. On the one hand is the cultural, the symbolic, the world of meanings and ideas and the structures, processes, and rules that obtain there. On the other hand is the material, the biological, the instrumentally rationally, and the structures, processes, and rules that obtain in worlds of objects in time and space or in the worlds of economics, engineering, and other instrumental calculations. Cultural anthropology has

not needed to fight this fight for a long time now. Rather, they have grown sensitive to the distance between their work and these older readings, to the over-generalizations, exaggerations, and misstatements, in these older works. Communication, though, needs the self-conscious clarity of expression with which these older readings present concepts of cultural structures and processes as major, independent forces in society and individual life.

Attention to the cultural has suffered under pressure from two directions in the history of communication studies. First is the dominant concern with individual level effects. From the 1920s to today most communication scholars, most of our university administrators, most of the research funding, and most of the public concern with our field of study is focused on the question: Can media and mass communication produce changes in the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of individuals? Are our minds, or the minds of our children, the masses, or those others about whom we worry, under the influence of these external forces? There is no place for culture in this question—and you can imagine how tired some of us are of its narrowness. Anthropological sources have played a key role in the recurrent constructions of an alternative to this dominant paradigm—in Carey's (1989) proposal of a ritual versus a transportation model of communication, Hall's (1979, 1980, 1982, 1997) use of Lévi-Strauss and semiotics, in Dayan and Katz's (1992) media events project, and in my elaboration of ritual communication (Rothenbuhler, 1993, 1998, 2006a).

The other pressure that has inhibited clear thinking about culture in communication and media studies has been from institutional studies, of law, policy, industry, economics, on the one hand, and the tradition of ideology critique on the other. I combine these heterogeneous traditions in this case because they share a presumption that the action, the power, and the answers to our questions derive from the material domains of social order. Like the public concern with media effects, each of these also has its counterpart in the sphere of public advocacy, whether media finance, media regulation, the media reform movement, or the popular audience for media critique of the Chomsky style.

The tradition of media research as well as the ongoing pressure of public expectations has focused on the social psychology of cognitions and behaviors, on the

one hand, and on media institutions on the other, as if that were a complete accounting. One role for anthropological theory, then, is as a conceptual level to make room for a vision of culture as an independent sphere of action and order—and that is most clearly articulated in those older sources of anthropological theory favored by communication scholars.

Third for discussion here is the interest of communication scholars in myth, story, symbol, hero, icon, and so on. This is embarrassingly old-fashioned. It reeks of folklore studies more than anthropology. Nobody does that anymore. Well, nobody who isn't studying it. Anthropologists do not study myth and symbol much anymore because it has not recently seemed the most direct approach to answering their questions. Media scholars, though, are faced with the largest, most elaborate social machinery of cultural production in the history of the world. No where have stories, images, icons, heroes, song, dance, and entertaining talk been generated by so many, with so many coordinated resources, for audiences of such size, diversity, and geographical spread. It can only be described statistically; any deeper understanding requires methods of analysis in cultural structures. Indeed, one can say that we have discovered ourselves to be studying the mass production of folklore. Once again, different purposes, different methods, different criteria for evaluation.

For example, in my study of the posthumous reputation of the blues musician Robert Johnson I found his music and image to be products of the workings of an industry, but not completely explained by it. The mythical image of Johnson grew over the years in successive refinements of its own internal structure. As various stories, images, ideas, songs, and bits of discourse circulated those that fit the myth best were most often repeated and most remembered. Even stories about other blues musicians, if they fit the Johnson myth and appeared close enough to be caught up in its center of gravity, eventually became stories about Johnson. Eventually he became the modern mediated equivalent of a classic folk tale, an image and an idea that everybody knows—and an examination of the internal structure of the myth, a la Lévi-Strauss but adapted to the realities of industrial media, provided the best explanation for how it all worked (Rothenbuhler, 2007a, 2007b).

Let me offer three more quick examples of how freedom from the three critiques

just discussed can productively open up our thinking. From this point of view an older anthropological investigation like Hortense Powdermaker's (1950) study of Hollywood, that probably appears inadequate and not worthy of recommending to anthropology students today, can appear fresh, intriguing, imaginative, and inspiring to communication scholars. At the least it provides *outré*, helps make the familiar strange, and some of her ideas can do more than that. Look, for example, at her characterization of the implicit logic of Hollywood dealmakers as a kind of reverse animism. Animism, she says, depends on treating a material world that we do not understand as if it worked like the world of people who have characters that we feel make them somewhat more predictable. Hollywood executives, she says, do something similar though working in the opposite direction. They do not understand artists or their work; they find the creative process mysterious and, given the money on the line, potentially terrifying. Therefore they treat creative people and their work as what they do understand: property, money, contracts, and deals.

For another example, something like Helen McGill Hughes (1940) study of the city desk and the human interest news story, an example of Chicago sociology rather than media anthropology *per se*, can generate excitement today as a once lost, now recovered classic. This is a study of the institutionalized production of stories and characters and the potential social functions of their widely dispersed reading. The human interest story, on the one hand, helps fill the pages of the urban newspaper and she shows the growth in the size and importance of the city desk and the page space devoted to stories of local crime, courts, and human interest. This newspaper activity, she points out, rendered the city into a kind of factory of stories and its residents an audience of themselves. These stories exercised the moral imagination and created an image of the city as an agglomeration of proliferatingly heterogeneous citizens living together with an interest in each other. She proposes that this sort of popular literature of moral imagination is necessary to a democratic society, and most so in cities with large immigrant populations.

Horton and Wohl's (1956) classic study of the parasocial relation can also be assimilated to the media anthropology project—though again, it evinces few of the standards of good anthropological work—other than being smart and insightful. What they do, though, is offer deep insight into the performance and display of a new kind of

modern character, one that exists only in the media text and appears to work primarily for the internal logic of the text, yet answers a diverse set of modern social needs. If the new communicative structures of television created new modes of relationship, there had to be too, new modes of conducting them. Horton and Wohl's work on media personae can be connected with Goffman's work on interpersonal rituals, his work on gender advertisements, and Durkheim's proposal that the religion of modernity was the cult of the individual, to produce a conception of the media as the church of the cult of the individual (Rothenbuhler, 2005, 2006b).

How communication scholars encounter anthropology

As some of the examples above implied, it is also relevant that communication has not shared anthropology's history and readers of anthropology in communication often work out of chronology. They are usually not reading the history of anthropology systematically, but sampling. They are not trying to become anthropologists whose knowledge is up to date; they are communication and media scholars looking for interesting ideas, wherever they might be found. We all know old ideas can be new and exciting again when they find new readers and provoke new thinking. For some of us self-consciously on the prowl for intellectual alternatives, the older literature could have the advantage of being more different.

Another important aspect of the violation of chronology and historical thinking in the way communication scholars read anthropology is that we usually come to it after Marx, the Frankfurt School, and the various, often implicit neo-Marxisms of contemporary theory. Adorno, Arnheim, Lowenthal, and others were almost mainstream communication scholars 65 years ago, teaching and publishing on radio, music, and popular culture in America in the 1940s (e.g. Adorno, 1941, 1945; Lowenthal, 1944). The German Ideology and Horkheimer and Adorno's "Culture Industry" were standard seminar reading in the 1980s while anthropology was still an extra-curricular project. That pattern still dominates in graduate syllabi, theory texts, and professional biographies.

(Of course I am betting rather than reporting an empirical finding here; I have not surveyed everyone in the field. Based on my experience as one of the pioneers of

anthropological thinking in communication, going back to my dissertation in 1985, I will bet that to this day you can find more communication scholars more adept with the basic ideas and classic sources of the Marxist tradition than of cultural anthropology. The Marxist presumptions dominate British media studies so completely that Couldry (2003) is essentially alone in discussing Durkheim seriously, and he does it apologetically.)

Coming to Durkheim, for example, after being well versed or tiredly familiar with Marx, Frankfurt, and the neo-Marxist aspects of British Cultural Studies, has a huge impact on what communication scholars see when they do read Durkheim. Who knows whether he was right about the Aborigines (most of us haven't read anything else about them either), but my goodness what a fantastic explanation of modern mass mediated politics! What a refreshing alternative to "it's always ideology"—indeed, it could be reinterpreted as an actual working model of ideology, rather than the presumption of an answer.

This point connects with the one above about the usefulness of some classic anthropological theory in maintaining a view of the independent contributions to social life of cultural forces. Concepts of power, ideology, and institutions, methods for the study of industry and economics, concern with the material conditions of technology are common in media studies and have been for decades (my own first area of research was media industries and economics). What cultural anthropology introduced when it came to communication late in the game, was a way to think about social orders that were not material or economic and did not constrain individual action in those ways, but that did, nevertheless, produce order. Cultural anthropology provided concepts and methods for examining the production of social order through systems of meaning—and that, for students of communication, was an exciting moment.

A Hypothesis about the Structured Relationship Between Communication Scholars and Anthropologists Studying Media Anthropology

I have a proposal to offer, a hypothesis if you will. If we simplify down to a schematic level, it appears that the interests of anthropology in communication theory and the interests of communication scholars in anthropological theory are roughly opposite. Not only is it that each is looking in the other literature for something it lacks

in its own, but that they are each looking for what the other is trying to overcome, to compensate, to leave behind. I can hardly resist proposing that we are a structured pair of oppositions, analogous to Lévi-Strauss's (1982/1985) explanation of how neighboring communities with complementary inversions in their mythology can evolve to have related differences in their social structures—though I hope you imagine me winking as I do so.

Here is how the idea works. The tradition of anthropology provided theoretical and methodological tools for conceiving the world as a set of distinct societies and cultures. There was an elaborate conceptual vocabulary for the study of cultural order, for ideas about how cultures existed separately from individuals and shaped their lives. The professional sensitivities of classical anthropology were to the differences between cultures and to the serious domains of life within each: family, religion, politics, economics, and such. Because their chosen fields of study were non-industrial, they were not concerned with spheres of life differentiated by modern economies, such as leisure, commercial culture, and entertainment. This heritage led anthropologists to resist the study of media and commercially produced culture for many years after their importance should have been obvious.

The tradition of communication studies provided theoretical and methodological tools for conceiving communicative actors with wills, purposes, resources, constraints, creative intelligence, individual interpretations, and so on, tools for conceiving of communication as a cumulative flow of acts, utterances, messages, texts, artifacts, programs, advertisements, appeals, and so on. The dominant vocabulary was social psychological, for conceiving actors in situations. The professional sensitivities were to aggregate statistical patterns on the one hand and to the unpredictability of individual outcomes on the other. While there was also a traditional concern with media law and policy, industry, economics, and the history of media institutions, what the field of communication lacked was a workably sophisticated model for how non-material systems—of ideas, meanings, symbols, and such—could yield order at the level of individual experience.

When anthropologists did turn their attention to the media, they found they needed concepts and tools for the study of communication and cultural industries, their

international commerce, and their audiences. The most intriguing, new, different thing about the study of audiences from their point of view was the willful, interpreting, individual actor. At home with theories of cultural order, anthropologists went looking for concepts and methods that emphasized individual choice, action, and variability.

Communication scholars, on the other hand, at home in a world where the individual reigns supreme, went looking for theories of cultural order. Anthropologists found the more sophisticated examples of what they needed in the more recent decades of media and cultural studies work. Communication scholars found the more inspiring examples of what they needed in the older, more classical anthropological sources.

If this hypothesis holds, even in part, then we see media anthropology as a territory that has been approached by different scholars who are not only coming from different directions but going in different directions. We could presume that this field is a new inter-disciplinary enterprise and that it might evolve into a new disciplinary territory. If that is our goal, then we should be working to establish the new disciplinary standards that will mark the boundaries of that field and police the scholarly activities within it. Before we go that way, I would point out that whatever has been accomplished so far in the name of media anthropology has been produced by inter-disciplinary contact more than by inter-disciplinary study. My proposal is that media anthropology will grow richer, more varied, and more productive to the extent we maintain that somewhat less organized, less disciplined approach.

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