

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

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

**E-Seminar on Brian Street's working paper
"Autonomous and ideological models of literacy: approaches from New
Literacy Studies"**

(17 – 24 January 2006)

John Postill (University of Staffordshire)
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Dear network

First of all, I'd like to welcome Ryan Shaw (Berkeley), Mette Terp Høybye (ICE Copenhagen), Daniel Perkel (Berkeley) and Rika Allen (Stellenbosch) who have recently joined the list.

As previously announced, the 9th EASA media anthropology network e-seminar starts now and will run on this mailing list for a week until Tuesday 24 Jan 2006 at 9 pm CET.

We'll be discussing a working paper by Brian Street (King's College London) titled 'Autonomous and ideological models of literacy: approaches from New Literacy Studies'. To find out more about Brian's background, see

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

You can find the working paper at

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

The discussant will be Dorle Dracklé (Bremen) who has worked in Portugal on elites and the economy as well as on local media traditions, radio stations and more recently digital media, see

<http://easaonline.org/networkbios-a-f.htm#DD>

The rules of the e-seminar now stand as follows (please note that there is a 3-post limit per participant per seminar):

- 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 offline seminar norms of courtesy and constructive criticism apply.**

We shall be saving the seminar transcript 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.

Finally, I wish to thank both Brian and Dorle for taking the time to participate in this seminar and would like to invite Dorle to post her comments later today.

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>

Dorle Dracklé (University of Bremen)

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Comments on Brian Street's paper: "Autonomous and Ideological Models of Literacy: Approaches from New Literacy Studies"

by Dorle Dracklé, Bremen Institute for Cultural Research, University of Bremen, Germany

In this fundamental survey of current approaches in new literacy studies, we are given a precise summary of the discussions of the last 30 years and learn of the direction in which this field has developed. Only at the end of his article does Brian Street outline an idea of how the fields of literacy studies and media studies are connected.

According to an older concept, literacy is seen as a set of skills, a technology of the mind, a human capacity that must be activated. In the new literacy studies, on the other hand, literacy is looked upon as a social practice, dependent on context, on power relations, and on the relationships that people form with each other when literacy comes into play. Street designates two models of literacy: the "autonomous model" and the "ideological model", in which the previously mentioned differences manifest themselves. In the meantime there have been many local ethnographic studies on literacy, yet this multitude of unconnected examples harbours a danger: one exotic local study is collected after the other and the cross-cultural perspective and globalisation are lost sight of, theoretical developments included. The discussions in recent e-seminars and in the workshop have plainly demonstrated the same deficit in media anthropology.

On the one hand, I have the impression that we are familiar with quite a few interesting theories which could here be effectively applied; on the other hand, when it comes to complex questions such as that about the connection of literacy and media, none of us knows how to proceed.

Street now proposes a combination of three theoretical approaches: Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the actor-network theory and the theory of multimodality. In my opinion, Bourdieu's concept of habitus is, by itself, too narrow to depict real historical change and micro-processes. Next on the agenda is the actor-network theory, and I ask myself how it could be effectively transferred to our work – I think Street asks himself the same question. ANT

shows again from another aspect that literacy can never be seen as independent of the people that apply it, that is, from the actants. What I don't understand is whether, on this view, literacy itself can or must be seen as an actant. If so, wouldn't this perspective then correspond to that of the autonomous model of literacy? Perhaps literacy cannot even be compared to media, which because of their thing-character can be included in the analysis as independent actants.

Finally, the semiotic concept of multimodality: To include other modes of representation besides writing and speech in our analyses (e.g., visual, gestural, kinaesthetic modes) is entirely logical. Here at last the description becomes really "thick"; but then it abruptly breaks off with an ethnographic example about the stories of small children in their London flats: an ethnography that shows how many diverse forms of the representation of families through children are used and how important it is that literacy practices are seen within the context of other modes of communication.

Unfortunately, Street's text ends before we have seen anything of its connections to media anthropology. How can we begin to compare media and literacy, how can we think them together? During the preparation of my commentary I therefore attempted to apply Street's ideas to my own research on e-literacy, and the more I reflected on this, the more questions occurred to me.

Especially electronic, and therefore multimedial, media are multimodal – they combine diverse textualities, diverse visualities, etc., they are totally different in different human contexts – and yet there are also unifying moments; there is a confrontation with identity and power in their use, but also a pleasure in technology. The media are fast, the analysis is complicated; there are infinitely many aspects that must be taken into account in the research, whether in the media (the actant) or the networks in which they play a role. Multimedial media are multiform, and yet still hotly contested. Media technology has at the same time high moral claims. The idea behind its development is that to have a good democracy, we need a "good" technology. And we need only a sufficiently clever policy in order make people appreciate our fantastic computer technology. Thus concurrent with forms of creative appropriation is the forced development of "good" media technology. As in the models of literacy, here too power has its effect by referring to the reality of the sign. This holds especially for e-literacy, a field where media anthropology and literacy studies of course meet. How can we conduct further research at this point? Where does it lead us when we link media technology and literacy studies?

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Many thanks to Dorle for getting the discussion underway. Brian Street has asked me to forward the following response to the list. The seminar is now open to all.

John

**** Response from Brian Street ****

Thanks Dorle for those comments - the responses you give to my paper are exactly those I would hope to elicit from the network. I see this as an opportunity for two fields to meet and discuss, 1) Anthropology of Literacy 2) Anthropology of/ and Media. Oddly enough they have not engaged much but have often covered similar issues, that an anthropological perspective generates eg a social practices approach as opposed to one located more in formalistic and text-based considerations of literacy and media. My piece on anthropological approaches to literacy and modality offers an approach that might link with some aspects of media work but might seem out on a limb to others, as some of Dorle's comments imply – it is exactly such search for overlaps or gaps that was my motivation in engaging with the seminar. This might lead to such questions as:

'How can we begin to compare media and literacy, how can we think them together?'
'what data do we have that might be explored in these ways/ fill the gaps left by Street's paper ending so abruptly?'

'what does anthropological analysis of media add to what we are already doing in the literacy and multimodality field?'

Dorle cites three theoretical areas that I invoke; Bourdieu on habitus; ANT and particularly the concept of 'actants'; and multimodality.

She worries whether Bourdieu's work might be 'too narrow to depict real historical change and micro-processes'. I am not so anxious and think that the understanding of how we learn and deploy particular literacies, media forms, modalities could well be explained with reference to the habitus in which we encounter and use them (as the Pahl example tries to demonstrate). I would be interested in how participants view this and how their work contributes to the debate.

On ANT Dorle asks if we view literacy as an actant, wouldn't this perspective then correspond to that of the autonomous model of literacy?' This is a question I have been struggling with – on the one hand traditional approaches to literacy as technology (including Goody) slid into technological determinism; but on the other, the 'social' approach seemed not to take sufficient account of the artefacts of literacy (precisely because they were afraid of being determinist or reductionist). So I was thinking that the 'actant' approach might offer us a way of reconciling these positions that might also have broader relevance for anthropology and media eg as Reder and Davila suggest, that degrees of 'autonomy' may vary with political trajectory.

Finally Dorle asks 'How can we begin to compare media and literacy, how can we think them together?' She comments that my paper stopped there, just as it might have begun to address this question. In fact I did so precisely because I was hoping for the kind of response she offers in saying 'During the preparation of my commentary I therefore attempted to apply Street's ideas to my own research' – I hope that other participants will use this opportunities

and these 'gaps' to enter their own research and consider whether/how the ideas I have been developing might be relevant?

I look forward to a rich discussion.

Brian

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I am very pleased to see Brian Street's paper showing up on this list, because I think the issue of literacy is actually very challenging for media studies, in a particular sense.

Having moved from teaching TEFL and ESOL, into media studies, I have always had in the back of my mind the issue of enablement, especially because my previous academic background was in Development Studies.

I was struck by how the issue of enablement was very difficult within media studies. The main models of communication were of persuasion, rhetoric and power, of overdetermination. This starts perhaps with Adorno, and this transmission model is diluted through Hall and Fiske, Morley and Ang, to trace the route I took towards audience ethnographic approaches.

But in none of this are the enabling effects of communication addressed fully: This is seen as a moralistic line to take to communication, and one that is complicit with power's claims to be improving everyone's situation, without ever exploiting anyone.

Since my work is an ethnographic approach to communication and media in development, I have not been able to shake these issues off. I have looked at theories of power, Lukes and so on, as well as Foucault. These theorists touch very strongly on the issue of enablement. Lukes actually looks to development theorists like Sen, and to people thinking on similar lines like Nussbaum, to address the issue of enablement.

Foucault goes through the issues of discipline: Looking at institutional knowledge and practices as enabling in some senses. He comes up with the idea of productive power, looking at enablement at the collective level as a way that power and influence and reality production works.

But this is tricky as it is actually a text based approach: Subjects are inadvertently cast as being 'produced' by knowledge and institutional forms. This leaves out the contingencies of how people relate to forms in practice, via complex relationships, situated in specific moments. This means agents in relations, since people can reflect on what is going on and what they do, and act to modify this: This reflexive agency is what confounds approaches that predict outcomes from texts or forms.

Baudrillard attacked this underlying formality in Foucault, but no-one really took up the torch theoretically, to deal with the issue of enablement more carefully. These seem akin to the issues around autonomous models in NLS, and seem to speak to the problems of actor network theory, although I do not quite see how agency is framed in such theories, I probably need to read up on them sometime.

As for Bourdieu the problem is that he never really explains how or when agents might become aware of and reflect upon their habitus: The habitus is just a tacit and uncoded form of text, agency is still not really addressed.

This is not to say that one can easily address the issue of agency and reflexivity, but it would seem to point to looking carefully at how agency is formed in practice: This is for two reasons. The first is the issue of reflexivity, and how it is bound up with how people pick up, use and rework forms (texts, language, signs) as agents, or possibly in some more passive way.

The second is that these framings of agency also allow insight into the issue of enablement. Enablement actually needs to directly address the issue of how people's agency may be transformed, ideally to be increased in some way, but most likely limited or disciplined also.

In a sense the problem is that the forms may well be enabling, depending on how agents relate to them in practice. But the agency thus enabled may well confound any attempt to predict from those forms, and said agency may also be transformed to an extent in the process.

The question then is how do practices and agency in relation to these forms become routinised and disseminated to some extent, and how is this tied up with specific social relations and contexts? This is an ethnographic consideration, which links media and literacy studies in my mind and allows some push towards more comparative work.

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I was wondering whether the trouble with the ideological approach is that it starts off by rejecting the autonomists' (e.g. Goody) stress on the technologies of writing only to paint itself into the corner of social practice. If the beginning and end of the inquiry is social practice (in all its ethnographic richness), there will be a strong tendency towards socio-cultural determinism, as I think one of the authors cited by Brian argues. For Chandler (1996), 'socio-cultural determinists present technologies and media as entirely subordinate to their development and use in particular socio-political, historical and culturally-specific contexts'.

Perhaps one way out of this corner would be to start off with writing rather than literacy -- writing as a vast family of ingenious ways humans have of materially fixing language. Anthropologists working on media could then study the complex ways in which human agents and non-human actants operating in specific settings make use of different material supports of writing, of different media (bodies, paper, computers, books, sand, stone, etc) throughout their life cycles. One example of this kind of approach is Georgina Born's (1997) ethnography of an artificial intelligence research centre near Paris. Not only did she have to learn how to read and write computer programs designed to create innovative music, she also immersed herself in the organisation's numerous other media practices, e.g. sending emails, making phone calls, attending meetings, writing memos, etc. One key finding was that orality

emerged as a manner of intermedial modality in this literacy/numeracy Babel, e.g. programmers met up and spoke face-to-face to try and decipher together ancestral programs whose original rationale had long been forgotten.

It's interesting also that the question of the social affordances of specific media and other cultural artefacts (i.e. the social actions they enable or disable) -- mentioned in passing by Brian -- seems to be cropping up in anthropological writings in recent years, e.g. Holland et al's (2001) work on identity and agency in 'figured worlds', or Mazzarella's (2004) article on mediation and globalisation. Yet unlike the anthropology of orality and literacy, in the anthropology of media we haven't yet had the affordances debate.

John

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Hi, list!

I found Brian's paper very useful, specially for me, to actualize this field of knowledge that, I think, relates so close to main subjects of anthropology, traditionally fixed on studying illiteracy peoples and/or oral traditions. I think that this new approach must be definitive to deal with research/action in that area and have political implications that must be seriously taken for developing public policies.

It also poses some homologies between the new perspectives of new literacy studies with the social study of science and technology, by the fact of putting into question the hypothesis of the autonomy of literacy to produce by it self social changes that will benefit the community. As Dorle has pointed out there are similar questions in the social study of science (CTS) and the work done by Woolgar and Latour among others.

I found that the article is very useful also to think about the current ideas about digital literacy gap, most of them with the same presuppositions about the impact of communication technologies to change people's life for better.

Finally, the reading also made me think about the concept of mediation, and how it is related with media studies, but also with our methodology practices. We know that there is a difference in dealing with field notes, recorded interviews or videotaped events that the kind of data we are dealing with will change our relations in the field and with our theoretical constructions or not. This reminds me John intervention about 'affordance' and 'enablement' ... very suggestive if we consider it from the theory of action!

In conclusion, I congratulate the opportunity to read Brian's paper to remove such background considerations. Any case, I did not understand very well why multimodality may be so important to go further in literacy studies, if it is important because literacy studies have to take account of social and cultural context and other modes of communication or because multimodality connects literacy perspectives with the boarder field of study of human communication? I don't understand very well if the categorization of 'ideological approach' is a Brian tag or the way this new movement define itself.

Elisenda

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Dear Brian and list

First, thanks to Brian for a fascinating paper that opens up lots of ideas and questions and invites us to start thinking about links and connections to different areas of anthropology

I want to follow up briefly from Elisenda's mail: I was also not quite clear about the issues realting to multimodality and I was wondering if Brian could elaborate on this a bit more. In terms of my own areas of interest it made me think about how in visual and sensory anthropology there is now interest in ideas about how we might communicate in ways that use not only writing and speech, but through touch, smell, taste as well as of course images. I was wondering if this might be work that NLS could potentially link up to?

Sarah

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Dear All

This would seem like a good time for Brian to take up some of the issues raised so far, but please keep sending in your brief queries and comments, the more perspectives the merrier. As usual, the e-seminar is open for business over the weekend.

Best wishes

John

ps. A warm welcome to Michael Prieler (Tohoku) who's just joined us.

Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)
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Dear Brian and List

Perhaps one of the problems we have from a media perspective is that writing is so cross cutting: It is a part of print, email, websites, it is involved closely in Radio and Television, it is even implicit in non-script forms like cartoons.

Can we really conceive of what it is to be illiterate: Since many of the things that we take as the background of our worlds are seen as based on writing in some way. Benedict Andersson maintains that the nation is based on writing, or more specifically the development of printing. Academia is hardly possible without writing, and I cannot see much left of media, or its study, without writing.

So perhaps questions of literacy amount to a sort of existential crisis for media scholars. What might media look like ethnographically in a non-literate context: What is possible under such circumstances?

To attack it from another angle, how do people learn to read the media? My supervisor loves to explain how it is hard to read adverts when you first come to a new country, because they are so often based on what came before. So how are we socialised into reading media? Is there any work on what happens when people encounter media out of context (Liebes and Katz and the Moroccan Jewish readings of Dallas come to mind.) How does this compare with studies of literacy, especially where it is being introduced.

Also how much is self-making bound up with literacy: Mark Poster explores various modes of self making in relation to various information technologies, can this work be related to practices of self making in relation to literacy.

And finally, ethnographically, do we have studies that are situated in particular social relations, that might allow a comparison of how agents are enabled and constrained in social relations mediated by media and literacy as practices? Surely these issues of subject and agency are where issues like "effectivities and affordances" to use Tim Ingold's language, can be explored in more detail.

Have there been studies on issues of self-making in relation to literacy? Have there been studies of how people's sense of agency and self might be transformed in relation to literacy, and how this might be linked to wider social and political trends? This is partly what media reception studies explore, at least in terms of how subjects understand their own lives (Morley's "Home Territories" is an example), if not in terms of how their subsequent actions and abilities or scope to act are modified.

I hope these questions are specific enough.

Daniel

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Daniel and List,

These comments provide perhaps a way of linking the work in literacy and that in media. Firstly, in both fields we have to work with the assumption that most people have some encounter with literacy/media - the old (Goody inspired) idea of a divide between literacy and illiteracy is no longer tenable. The literacies that people encounter may not be those of familiar western ways or of the tests used for international comparison - but nevertheless people in rural areas, in city slums etc all encounter some form of literacy and for New Literacy Studies scholars the question is always 'which literacies?'. One scholar draws a distinction between 'low literacy' levels in a high literacy environment and low literacy levels in an environment where everyone is at a common/ shared level. The question that Daniel's comments raise for me, then, is are there similar variations with respect to media 'awareness' or encounters ie that people have differential knowledge/ experience of different media and those differences may be used to reinforce status and other hierarchies - as they are for literacy.

Once we have entered the media field with some of the same questions as in in 'social' literacies (as opposed to autonomous literacy) then many things overlap - Daniel's interest in identity, for instance, is very recognisable in the literacy field (see refs below where the concepts of subject and agency represent key ways of analysing literacy practices) whilst the question of how people 'read' media would also apply to how people 'read' different forms of literacy - scripts, languages, genres etc.; and how they read different modes eg visual, written - the examples of adverts works well here as the 'sedimented' knowledge necessary to read adverts involves exactly familiarity with different modes (cf Kress) and Van Leeuwen.

Best wishes,

Brian

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Dear Brian and all,

I am a French PhD candidate in sociology, working on multilingual literacies in Southern Mali. I will give more details on my research and introduce myself properly in a mail on the list later. Today I will just add a comment to the rich literacy discussion before the end of the e-seminar.

For me, the NLS approach is the right starting point for an ethnographic research on literacy practices. Brian Street's books and papers, and all the studies he has inspired are priceless for me, especially because in France, Goody too often stands for the unique reference in the field. The ethnographic work requires that we pay attention to the local practices without trying to find priori defined features of literacy. On this ground, I agree with Brian and thank him for all he has done to open this perspective.

But some literacies appear to be linked to models developed elsewhere, as Brandt & Clinton point it out. They suggest that these literacies can be analysed in reference to the 'autonomous' model. Brian in his paper replies that there is no need to call distant literacies 'autonomous'. I think it is not only a matter of words. For me the problem is that on my field I find people who share an 'autonomous' view on literacy, especially on schooling. And those are not only the NGO actors, but sometimes villagers themselves. It is a point that John made quite clear about the Iban of Sarawak (Postill, 2003). Brian's own 'Literacy in Theory and Practice' shows to what extent the literacy campaigns have been based on 'autonomous' assumptions.

So the question to Brian is: within the conceptual frame-work of the 'ideological' model of literacy, how can we account for the fact that some patterns of literacy, especially the Western type of schooling, bring about similar expectations in distinct contexts?

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Aïssatou

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Brian Street (King's College London)

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Dear Aissatou and List,

Thanks for those positive comments and that difficult question - there is a long and a short answer; a short answer is that Western schooling generates similar expectations in different contexts because a) reification of literacy has the effect of making it seem the same b) historical traditions and influences have spread common ideas (independent invention/diffusion ?). In the present conjuncture, we might look at the influence of international agencies - Unesco has just produced a Global Monitoring Report (available on line) which explains policy over the past 50 years and offers an ambivalent answer to these very questions, in the form - qualitative/ ethnographic approaches versus quantitative/ universal measures of literacy.

Hope this helps as a beginning.

Brian

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Dear list

In view of the slow start of the seminar last week, Brian has kindly agreed to have it extended another two days up until Thursday 8 pm CET. So please do keep sending in your brief comments and queries until then.

Many thanks

John

Philipp Budka (University of Vienna)

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Dear MediaAnthros,

A short e-seminar related notice:

The UNESCO launched a new literacy portal: "The Literacy Portal aims to provide a platform for information-sharing on literacy projects and activities undertaken around the world and enhance UNESCO's capacity in coordinating the United Nation Literacy Decade (UNLD) in building partnership at all level. Literacy is one of UNESCO's three special target areas to accelerate progress towards Education for All by 2015."

http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=20869&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

Best,

Philipp

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The discussion about autonomous models of literacy sparked off a memory of a debate about cinema as 'the global vernacular.' There is this sense that film as a technology sets such strong limits on the range of practice one can engage in terms of shots and so on that you can produce, that there is effectively a "universal grammar" of film.

My retort to this was that the technology of film need not have one form, but does so now in great part because of a hegemonic set of practices: Professional standards in the industry, dominant producers of technology and so on. These practices enable film production, and set limits on what is feasible and what is acceptable as film.

However neither the practices or technologies are written in stone for eternity, and variation is already emerging as these practices spread: Bollywood. Also shifting technologies give rise to new forms: Wait for the film made entirely on mobile phones for instance.

This is an old debate about diffusion uptake and adaptation of practices, which we have already chewed, but not swallowed, on this list. However there is an interesting issue in this for me: A practice seems autonomous if you look at it from the 'outside.' If you consider the absence of that practice, it is not enabling, there seems something fairly absolute about that absence, and the limits to action that it implies.

When the practice is there it might be seen in the light of that: i.e. people say 'look, it lets us do something' - read, make films, whatever. So in that sense reading is autonomous, there is an 'inherent' property of dispelling non-reading (although this is not necessarily so, depending on how things are done and what is to be read) but this explains to an extent the sense of autonomy.

My point is however, that when you start to look at the practice, rather than the absence it dispells, then you start to see more variation in relation to what people do, and the contexts they are involved with.

The point being that autonomy and ideology are not mutually exclusive attributions. Hegemonic forces, partly worked through with the urgent pragmatics of dispelling some absence of modernity i.e. - 'this stabilised object/ practice will free you from illiteracy, or a deep-seated lack of film etc..-' an urgent pragmatics that is often labelled 'development, ' may well be involved in why autonomy is put forward as a model, even by the 'other.'

We are not only observing them, but they are observing us also.

Daniel

Katrien Pype (Catholic University Leuven)

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I am sorry for not having joined the discussion a bit earlier, but only now did I find the time for reading Brian's text and the comments. In fact, I do not have a specific question for Brian. I would just like to add a thought concerning the validity of this concept for media-anthropology.

I think the approaches from 'orality and literacy' to study media shed an exciting light upon what we encounter in our fields. I write 'orality and literacy', since I think we should also pay attention to the way both intermingle. And this is an aspect that I have missed in Brian's paper – who is talking about NLS.

One of the old questions with regard to media when speaking about orality and literacy is: do media belong to orality or literacy? Maybe that question does not to be answered. I think, it would be most interesting to understand the entanglements between literate and oral traditions/genres/practices, how they are manipulated, or created, and what new hybrid forms they create in media worlds. In Brian's text, "hybridity" has been used to indicate the different literacy practices. But why should we stay within that field of literacy/ies? Some examples I can give is that (a) the local television programs in Kinshasa (be it locally produced serials or talk shows) often show in the left corner a Biblical verse or reference to it, or (b) the use of Biblical verses as new proverbs both in the sermons, music, and the serials, thus making constant references from 'written texts' to media products, or from 'written texts' to oral genres - back and forth.

Katrien Pype

Brian Street (King's College London)

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Daniel's comments also remind me of a book by Raymond Williams 'Technology, Television and Cultural Form' in which he makes similar comments about television to Daniel's on film - that the particular forms taken especially in early development of these technologies were not, as is sometimes represented, determined by the nature of the technology but rather by the ways in which social conditions and particular interests interacted with those 'affordances'; in this case the placing of a screen in each home, where previously communal sites had seemed the only possibility, enabled vastly more profits, programmes, advertising possibilities than the restricted 'cinema' showings; but this required new institutional arrangements for the mass production of visual images and these were facilitated by the financial potential ...

The broader point Daniel raises also helps locate both literacy and film in larger issues of reification/ process; the idea of 'autonomy', of the stabilised, detached essence of a form is always there even as practices vary its potentials, so there is always a running tension between them, that gets characterised as 'autonomous'/ idealised/ stable versus contextualised/ process/ unstable. It is the tension we need to work with rather than either pole?

Brian

John Postill (University of Staffordshire)

jpostill@usa.net

Brian wrote:

The broader point Daniel raises also helps locate both literacy and film in larger issues of reification/ process; the idea of 'autonomy', of the stabilised, detached essence of a form is always there even as practices vary its potentials ...

I don't think we can establish a priori that ALL social practices vary in any significant way the potentials of writing, film or other media forms. This is precisely what needs to be investigated case by case. Looking at the problem historically, I would say that when people in a given geographical area first appropriate a specific media form (e.g. school literacy in West Borneo in the 1960s) they invariably adapt it to their own priorities and concerns in relation to existing practices, including oral practices. In parts of West Borneo, Indonesian school literacy has been strongly shaped by the indigenous languages, rural economy, etc. But once it becomes routinised, in this case once school literacy becomes a complex of local practices, it goes through a period of stabilisation as it becomes embedded in recursive processes, e.g. the recursive cycles of the school calendar. So there are historical phases of relative stability of local media practices, and others of relative instability that may result in significant changes to the media form.

John

Brian Street (King's College London)

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I am excited by Katrien's data and wonder whether we could treat this as a stimulus for more such exchanges. In theoretical terms, I see what she is saying as being best framed in terms of 'multi modality' (which is how I am using 'hybridity') ie oral, written, visual and other modes interact in specific contexts and we know little/ have done little ethnographic description of these interactions and the ways they are stimulated/ regulated - or as Kress and colleagues would say, of their 'underlying grammar' using grammar in a broad sense to mean systematic patterns. I see NLS as basically feeding into this broader debate rather than trying to privilege literacy - and I see the ethnography of media as taking this forward through close description of practices on the ground allied to such theory, in the way Katrien's brief references to Kinshasa suggest.

Brian

John Postill (University of Staffordshire)

jpostill@usa.net

Dear list

A quick reminder: this e-seminar ends tonight (Thursday) at 8 pm Central European Time. You're welcome to keep sending in your postings until then.

Many thanks

John
ps Welcome Danah Boyd (Berkeley)!

Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)
danieltaghioff@yahoo.com

John's response to Brian is a bit of a gordian knot (I am sorry for breaking the three posting rule, but I don't sense I am crowding out anyone here.)

Yes we cannot say apriori that a practice will not stabilise, however we can say that it will be modified by surrounding practices. John's example is that of schooling stabilised by another social practice: that of keeping calendars. John's focussing on time-keeping is interesting, since these seem like stabilizing social practices, but surely by stabilising a practice they are also modifying it?

I am not sure that I hold with the sense that there is a necessary relation between modification and change: Mutability might be the initial condition that is modified.

Daniel

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Dear list

I wish to close our 9th e-seminar by thanking Brian Street for his paper and responses, Dorle Drackle for being our discussant and all other participants. A PDF of the seminar will be on our website shortly (see further references from 2 participants below).

Our next seminar will be on a working paper by Katrien Pype (Leuven) entitled 'Getting rid of my ngatiul. Negotiating marriage through serials in Kinshasa' and will run on this mailing list from 21 to 28 February. We'll be circulating the abstract sometime next week.

In the meantime, do let me know if you have a working paper you'd like to share with the list.

Best wishes

John

Further references

From John Postill:

Eilenberg, M. (forthcoming 2006) The paradox of national schooling in the borderland of West Kalimantan, Indonesia: A case of the Iban. *Borneo Research Bulletin*.

From Daniel Taghioff:

Anderson, BROG (1983) *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, London: Verso.

Ingold, T (1992) 'Culture and the perception of the environment', in E Croll & D Parkin (eds), *Bush base: Forest farm. Culture environment and development*, London: Routledge, pp. 39-55.

Liebes, T & Katz, E (1990) *The export of meaning: cross-cultural readings of Dallas*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Morley, D (2000) *Home territories: media, mobility and identity*, Comedia, London; New York: Routledge.

Poster, M (1990) *The mode of information: poststructuralism and social context*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Poster, M (1995) *The second media age*, Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.
