Media and social changing since 1979:
Towards a diachronic ethnography of media and actual social changes[1]

Dr John Postill
RMIT University, Melbourne
http://johnpostill.com

Abstract

In this paper I address the question of how to study media and social change ethnographically. To do so I draw from the relevant media anthropology literature, including my own research in Malaysia and Spain. I first sketch a history of media anthropology, identifying a number of key works and themes as well as two main phases of growth since the 1980s. I then argue that anthropologists are well positioned to contribute to the interdisciplinary study of media and social change. However, to do so we must first shift our current focus on media and 'social changing' (i.e. how things are changing) to the study of media in relation to *actual social changes*, e.g. the suburbanisation of Kuala Lumpur in the 1970s to 2000s, or the secularisation of morality in post-Franco Spain. This shift from the ethnographic present continuous to the ethnographic past simple (how things *changed* from A to B) – a move from potential to actual changes – does not require that we abandon our commitment to ethnography in favour of social history. Rather, it demands new forms of 'diachronic ethnography' that can handle the biographical logic of actual social changes.

Keywords: media, social change, social changing, diachronic ethnography, multi-timed ethnography, media anthropology, social history, world history

Introduction

1979 marked a watershed in modern world history. The year opened with the reestablishment of full diplomatic relations between China and the US and closed with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In the intervening months, bold socio-political revolutions were unleashed in Nicaragua (Sandinista), Britain (Thatcherite) and Iran (Islamist), each marshalling its own army of media professionals, technologies and practices[2]. The effects of these events – and of their 1980s sequels, notably the spread of neoliberalism and the collapse of the Soviet bloc – are still being keenly felt and debated three decades on (Downing 1996, Graeber 2009, Haywood 2012, Wacquant 2011).

It was precisely in the 1980s that anthropologists began to take a serious interest in the study of media (Dickey 1997, Ginsburg et al 2002, Peterson 2003, Spitulnik 1993) and, almost by default, in media and social change. In this paper I address this latter question by drawing from the media anthropology literature, including my own research in Malaysia and Spain (Postill 2006, 2008, 2011, 2012). I first sketch a history of media anthropology, identifying a number of key works and themes as well as two main phases of growth since the 1980s. I then argue that anthropologists are well positioned to contribute to the interdisciplinary study of media and social change. However, to do so we must first shift our current focus on media and 'social changing' (i.e. how things are changing) to the study of media in relation to *actual social changes*, e.g. the suburbanisation of Kuala Lumpur in the 1970s to 2000s, or the secularisation of morality in post-Franco Spain. This shift from the ethnographic present continuous to the ethnographic past simple (how things *changed* from A to B) – a move from potential to actual changes – does not require that we abandon our commitment to ethnography in favour of social history. Rather, it demands new forms of diachronic ethnography that can handle the finite, processual, clock-and-calendar logic of actual social changes.

At the heart of this proposal lies the working assumption that social changes, like all historical processes, have a life course of their own (with a beginning, a middle, and an end) that is amenable to biographical analysis. The paper ends with a brief discussion of modern states as ideal settings for the kind of biographical, comparative study of media and actual social changes that I advocate.

A thriving subfield

After a brief period of intense activity during the Second World War, followed by a long lull that lasted the better part of the Cold War, the anthropology of media is now thriving. From 2002 to 2005 alone four comprehensive overviews of the field were published (Askew and Wilk 2002; Ginsburg *et al.* 2002; Peterson 2003; Rothenbuhler and Coman 2005) while the EASA Media Anthropology Network expanded from a score of founding members in 2004 to nearly 1,300 participants by July 2012. Anthropologists have now conducted fieldwork – as well as historical research – in numerous countries and on a vast range of media and 'polymedia' practices (Coleman 2010, Madianou and Miller 2012).

Two main stages of subfield development can be distinguished (1) the 1980s and 1990s as a 'take-off' phase in which the study of television took pride of place and (2) the 2000s and early 2010s as a stage marked by theoretical innovation and media diversification. The first stage is well covered in Ginsburg et al's (2002) reader *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (see also Osorio 2001 and Peterson 2003). Ginsburg et al identify five main themes running through the anthropology of media of the preceding two decades: media production, the cultural politics of nation-states, transnational media, indigenous activism, and the 'social life' of media technologies. To these five themes we could add a sixth, namely media, ritual and religion, first addressed in an edited volume by Hughes-Freeland (1998, see also Couldry 2003, Eisenlohr 2011 and Rothenbuhler and Coman 2005).

This late C20 literature largely consists of single-medium ethnographic studies of the dominant media of the day: radio, television, film, video, and print media (the latter

sometimes coming under the separate remit of 'orality and literacy', see Postill and Peterson 2009, Street 1993, 2001). Anthropologists working on the 'reception' end of the media continuum often turned their attention to media questions during fieldwork, after they found their research participants literally turning their backs on them to watch television (Adra 1993, Hobart 2000, Miller 1992). This generation sought theoretical inspiration in British media and cultural studies, whilst hoping to expand the cultural geography of the field beyond the metropolitan North to include 'out-of-the-way places' (Ginsburg et al 2002).

The second phase (2000s-2010s) is still marked by media anthropologists' sustained attention to television, radio and film, but now with an added interest in internet and mobile media. This phase opened with the publication of Miller and Slater's (2000) *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* which paved the way for other ethnographic studies in which the internet was portrayed not as an exotic realm set apart from everyday life but rather as an integral *part of* the everyday (Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002, Kjaerulff 2010a, Postill 2010, but see Boellstorff 2008 for a counter-argument). Like their colleagues in other research traditions, media anthropologists have found it increasingly difficult in recent years to conduct research around a single medium or internet platform (for an exception, see Miller 2011). One example is Madianou and Miller's (2012) call for the study of 'polymedia', a term they coined to capture the new predicament of media users around the globe faced with a vastly expanded choice of social technologies. This is a situation, they argue, in which choosing the 'wrong' technology or platform (e.g. Facebook instead of SMS) can have dire social and personal consequences. Other anthropologists have similarly undertaken ethnographic research across a range of online and offline sites, e.g. to track the logics of virality and aggregation of the new protest movements (Juris 2012, Postill 2012 and forthcoming).

Throughout this second period of expansion media anthropologists gained greater visibility across media and communication studies and led theoretical advances on topics such as transnational media (Mankekar 2008), cultural and political activism (Ginsburg 2008, Juris 2008, Postill 2011), ICT for development (Slater and Tacchi 2004), 3D virtual environments (Boellstorff 2008, Malaby 2009), blogging (Estalella 2011, Hopkins 2012), geek/hacker subcultures (Kelty 2008, Coleman 2011), journalism (Bird 2010, Born 2004, Boyer 2011, Rao 2010), advertising (Mazzarella 2010), mobile media (Horst and Miller 2006, Tenhunen 2008), social media (Gershon 2010, Miller 2011) and practice theory (Bräuchler and Postill 2010).

Critical interventions

Anthropologists have conducted a substantial amount of work on media and social change/changing since the 1980s. Often they have addressed this question obliquely, via specialist topics such as cultural activism, communication for development, media production, nation-building or international migration (see Ginsburg et al 2002, Peterson 2003, Postill 2006, 2011, Skuse et al 2011). These scholars link specific media forms and practices to broad societal or regional changes, e.g. the spread of neo-Hinduism in India (Mankekar 1999, Rao 2010), neo-Pentecostalism in Africa (Meyer 2010, Pype 2011), or British media development 'aid' in post-Soviet Central Asia (Mandel 2002, Skuse 2012).

Another common tack has been to use ethnographic research to critique the grand claims of media scholars and 'gurus' about the supposedly transformative power of new media in the 'network society' (Coleman 2010, Green et al 2005, Horst and Miller 2006, Postill 2008) – although some media anthropologists themselves have not been averse to making epochal prognoses (see Postill 2009 for examples).

There are, however, a few instances of anthropological texts that have addressed more directly the elusive relationship between media and social change. For instance, Kjaerulff (2010a, 2010b) discusses how teleworkers in early C21 semi-rural Denmark attempted to order their lives by seeking to separate their work and personal activities, albeit not always successfully. Updating Barth's classic theories of practice and social change, Kjaerulff regards work as a changing 'cultural stream' that shapes the practices of local (tele)workers.

Adopting a more political stance, Wallis (2011) cautions against the optimism with which mobile phones have been welcomed in ICT for development (ICT4D) circles. Like other mobile researchers (e.g. Horst and Miller 2006, Jensen 2007, Stammler 2009, Tenhunen 2008), Wallis found that mobile phones can indeed improve the livelihoods of small entrepreneurs and other enterprising individuals in the global South, but this potential is very unevenly distributed. Following ethnographic research among rural migrants in Beijing, she argues that many ICT4D studies unwittingly further a neoliberal ideology in which 'all that is needed is a mobile phone to let the market work its magic, and inequities and power differentials related to gender and class are rendered irrelevant through their erasure' (2011).

For her part, Tenhunen (2008) builds on fieldwork on mobile ICTs in rural West Bengal (India) to argue that media ethnographers such as Horst and Miller (2006) and Miller and Slater (2000) have a tendency to overstress social reproduction at the expense of social change. Tenhunen also takes issue with practice theorists (Bourdieu 1992, Ortner 1984, Sahlins 1985) for overlooking historical agents' 'critical faculties'. This author regards mobile technology as 'a source of dynamism' that shapes culturally specific 'social logistics', highlighting the need to attend to people's desire for social change. Thus, she shows how mobiles have given young women in rural West Bengal greater autonomy from their elders' surveillance, whilst paradoxically reinvigorating traditional cultural forms such as kin-based reciprocity.

As if responding to this call for greater attention to social change, Madianou and Miller (2012) have recently teased out two processes of change among Filipino transnational families in an age of polymedia (see above):

> [a] the ways transnational families change over time (as a result of migration and other social factors but also because of the media used to connect their members); and [b] how media themselves evolve vertically as remediation – see Bolter and Grusin 2000 – and as a consequence of their horizontal integration through consumption (Madianou 2012).

Media and social changing

In this and subsequent sections, I wish to contribute to this critical strand of media anthropological work by examining some of our conceptual blind spots, starting with the rarely problematised notion of 'social change' itself.

A review of the literature reveals that most media anthropologists have so far paid far more attention to media and 'social changing' than to media and social change. In other words, anthropologists have tended to discuss how matters were changing at the time of fieldwork rather than how they actually *changed*, say, in the late 2000s, or in 1939-1945, in any given country or field site. In this respect they are no different from most other media and communication scholars who study contemporary lifeways: they write about media practices in the present (or recent past) continuous. This is no doubt partly an artefact of the ethnographic genre in its current incarnation. While earlier generations of anthropologists denied their research participants 'coevalness' by writing in the ethnographic present simple (Fabian 1983, Postill 2006: 31-33), the current generation writes in the ethnographic present *continuous* as it strives for an 'anthropology of the contemporary' (Rabinow and Marcus 2008, Budka 2011).

This usage may also signal a collective anxiety (again, shared with other media scholars) about technological obsolescence; a fear that the technologies we study in the field will be regarded as 'old media' by the time our findings are published. Moreover, the ethnographic present continuous fits well with recent phenomenological approaches to media inspired by Ingold (2000, 2007) and other theorists, in which humans exist in a perpetual state of 'becoming', forever work in progress (see, for instance, Moores 2010, 2012).

Whatever the roots of the problem, it is crucial that we do not confuse social changing (A is/was changing) with social change (A changed into B). An example of social changing would go something like "At the time of fieldwork, most villagers in the area were abandoning subsistence farming for waged labour as their main economic activity". By contrast, a social change passage would read: "Most villagers in the area switched from subsistence farming to waged labour as their main economic activity between the 1980s and the early 2000s". Notice how this second passage refers to a completed rather than ongoing process (NB. I am not positing a crude account of 'social progress' here; the example would work equally well in reverse, i.e. a shift from waged labour to subsistence farming).

The trouble with relying on the present or past continuous is that it paints oddly ahistorical pictures that can tell us a great deal about media and social changing but less so about media and social *change*. These are accounts that suffer from an undiagnosed condition we could call 'imminentism'. That is, they tacitly favour the imminent (and immanent) at the expense of the actual, conflating the recent past, the present and the near future in a struggle to 'keep up' with the seemingly relentless pace of socio-technical change in a competitive academic marketplace.

The biography of an actual social change

Identifying an actual social change is only the first step. We then need to reconstruct its life course and main stages of development. In other words, we must adopt a biographical (or processual) model.

At this point, a further semantic clarification is in order. In common academic parlance the notions of 'life cycle' and 'life course' are often conflated. Yet this is another crucial distinction to make, as it corresponds to a fundamental difference between recursive and non-recursive processes. For instance, when a monarch dies, another monarch takes their place. "The King is dead. Long live the King!". Monarchies have an in-built recursive mechanism (succession) which allows them to reproduce themselves indefinitely (so long as they can withstand revolutionary pressures, that is). On the other hand, the biological death of an individual king or queen is irreversible, for the human life course (or curriculum vitae, *Lebenslauf*) is non-recursive. Whatever our beliefs about the Afterlife and reincarnation, we can be sure that there is no biological going back. Just like their subjects, monarchs are Heideggerian 'beings towards death' (Giddens 1984: 35). To be sure, most human beings are creatures of habit(us) with fairly predictable cycles or rounds of activity, but they are also embarked on life journeys that will end in certain death. Likewise, the career of an actual social change will contain recursive elements, but it is nevertheless a finite process that will eventually either run its course or meet a premature death.

Processual model	Stages
Diffusion of innovations (Rogers 1995)	(1) knowledge (2) persuasion (3) decision (4) implementation (5) confirmation
Social dramas (Turner 1957, 1974, Eyerman 2008, Postill 2011)	(1) breach (2) crisis (3) redress (4) schism/ reintegration
Moral panics (Cohen 1973, Critcher 2008)	(1) warning (2) impact (3) inventory (4) reaction
ICT domestication (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992, Postill 2006)	(1) acquisition (2) objectification (3) incorporation (4) conversion (5) disposal

Table 1. A sample of four processual (stage-by-stage/sequential) models used by media and communication scholars.

Processual thinking has a long pedigree in media and communication studies (see Table 1). Of course, the models listed in Table 1 are merely sketches of real-world processes that are invariably complex, messy, overlapping and contradictory. Thus, not all actual cases of ICT domestication will follow the neat five-stage sequence specified in the model. In some instances two stages will be empirically indistinguishable, in others they will overlap, and so on. Nevertheless, these models are powerful tools that allow us to track both changes and continuities in socio-technical processes that would otherwise remain hidden amidst the mass of empirical data typically generated by ethnographic research. Moreover, as with any theoretical model, the actualities of research 'on the ground' will help to shape the model

dialectically and lead to its refinement. For instance, when I carried out research on the 'biographies' of radio and television sets among the Iban of Sarawak (East Malaysia), I soon realised that a fifth stage was required in order to provide a fuller picture of these artefacts' life courses, namely their disposal (Postill 2006: 135).

But how can a processual model be applied to an actual social change? To answer this question, let us retake for a moment our earlier hypothetical example of the villagers who switched from subsistence farming to waged labour in the 1980s and 1990s. A processual analysis of this social change and its media dimensions would:

1. start with the historical origins (or birth) of this shift, e.g. one could interview the first villagers to make the switch to waged labour back in the 1980s, as well as their employers, local leaders, politicians and other historical agents involved with this stage of the process; the media aspects of this early adoption would be woven into the interviews, e.g. one could inquire into radio and television programmes recalled by local labourers, as well as into government leaflets, church sermons, face-to-face meetings with NGOs, etc. encouraging the abandonment of supposedly 'backward' and 'inefficient' farming practices.
2. continue with a series of interviews with those local farmers who took up waged labour in the 1990s, i.e. during the middle phase of the process; one could investigate a possible 'network effect' (Boyd 2009) and 'tipping point' (Gladwell 2000) to explain why most residents took up waged labour at a particular moment in the early 1990s, along with other environmental (e.g. a prolonged drought) and socioeconomic factors (e.g. a steep rise in living costs); in addition, one could again inquire about the media forms and practices related to this middle phase but always avoiding 'media-centric' biases (see Couldry 2012, Moores 2012).
3. end with the final stage of the process, namely the point at which the practical totality of villagers have by now abandoned farming and rely almost entirely on waged labour for their livelihoods (if this is indeed the case, as research will sometimes overturn even the most reasonable working assumption).

Diachronic ethnography

In both popular and academic discourse we have a habit of using the notion of 'social change' as an uncountable noun, as if it were a powdery or granular substance like flour or sugar. We seldom hear this term being used in the plural ('social changes'). Indeed, the very phrase 'media and social change' suggests a level of generality that defies empirical application. Before we know it, the mind boggles and we have added 'social change' to our mental list of esoteric concepts that are best left undefined, along with 'culture', 'society' and the like.

Instead of accepting this indefinition, I prefer to think of actual social changes in the plural, as (ac)countable, concrete, identifiable, unique and messy *processes*. But adopting a processual approach carries its own costs, for it requires that we rethink our ethnographic practice. For many years we have subscribed to the spatial metaphor of 'multi-sited ethnography' (Marcus 1995), but have yet to embrace its temporal counterpart: 'multi-*timed* ethnography'.

There is certainly nothing new about historicising ethnographic research and writing. Revisiting a site where we, or our predecessors, have worked in the past is a long-established anthropological practice (e.g. Firth 1959, Freeman 1999, Hutchinson 1996, Leach and Leach 1983). However, because of its relative youth, this is yet to be a common occurrence in the anthropology of media, but it is likely that this will become more habitual as today's young scholars reach maturity.

If we are to move towards a multi-timed ethnography, one early hurdle to overcome is our collective reluctance as a discipline to date our research. There are of course numerous exceptions, but frequently when reviewing the (media) anthropology literature, I found that crucial information about the length and period of research was concealed in a footnote, or not given at all. Without adequate dating, though, there is no hope to produce a coherent account of actual social change, let alone compare our findings with those of contemporary researchers working at other sites.

Another hurdle to clear is the anthropological tendency to romanticise 'non-Western' time (Postill 2002) and exoticise 'cyber' time, the latter a trait we share with cultural studies and other fields that came under the sway of postmodernism in the 1980s. But as Gell (1992: 315) concluded in his painstaking review of the anthropology of time, there is

> no fairyland where people experience time in a way that is markedly unlike the way in which we do ourselves, where there is no past, present and future, where time stands still, or chases its own tail, or swings back and forth like a pendulum. All these possibilities have been seriously touted in the literature on the anthropology of time … but they are all travesties, engendered in the process of scholarly reflection.

For better or worse, we must accept the underwhelming reality that both us and our research participants – whether they are in Borneo, Chile or Norway – organise our daily, weekly and seasonal rounds through modern clock and calendar media (Postill 2002). These mediated routines, and their life-historical changes over time, are as inescapable a fact of life as money, gravity, ageing or death. It is only fair, given the circumstances, that we should avoid fairyland notions such as 'timeless time' (Castells 1999) and at long last come to terms with the universality of modern clock-and-calendar time. After all,

> without chronological tools it is hard to envisage how media anthropologists … [would] go about tracking the uneven spread and adoption of media innovations such as writing, radio or mobile telephony. And how could we possibly study media events such as 9/11 in America (Rothenbuhler 2005), People Power II in the Philippines (Rafael 2003) or the assassination of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands (Eyerman 2008) without chronicling the unfolding of these events in real time across different media platforms and physical settings? (Peterson and Postill 2009).

In the present paper my aim is not only to stress the importance of adding a diachronic dimension to our ethnographic work, but more specifically to search for ways of developing diachronic techniques that will allow us to study the life courses of actual social changes (as opposed to media events or media innovations, as in the above quote). But how does one decide which process(es) of social change to chronicle and analyse ethnographically? Isn't this an impossible mission given how muddled, entangled and overlapping such processes are in the real world?

My suggestion is that we combine our existing preference for 'emergent' micro-processes and practices with a newly found interest in large-scale processes that have reached a mature stage in their life courses. For example, if I were studying (God forbid) the media practices of Spanish divorcees who claim to be Catholics, I would pay attention not only to how things are changing at present but *also* to a mature process of change: the post-Franco secularisation of morality in Spain, with special reference to the sub-process of how divorce became normalised in the 1980s and 1990s (following its legalisation in 1981). So I would be asking people the same sorts of questions about their lives during two or three slices in the nation's divorce history, say the early 1980s, the mid-1990s and the early 2010s.

Alternatively, I could rethink my 1999-2009 diachronic ethnography of suburban activism in Subang Jaya, Malaysia (Postill 2011), only now armed with the distinction between social change and social changing – a distinction I did not originally make. Thus I could follow up my original study of digital media and social changing with a sequel that would peg the local data to broader historical processes of social change, e.g. the mass suburbanisation of the Kuala Lumpur region from the 1970s (early phase) to the 2000s (terminal phase).

Let me unpack this idea. If in the mid-1850s Kuala Lumpur was 'little more than a collection of huts occupied by immigrant tin miners from China', by the 1930s it had become a 'racially segregated British colonial town surrounded by rubber plantations' (Postill 2011: 33). Although the satellite township of Petaling Jaya was created in 1953 to cater to a fledgling population of middle-income commuters (Dick and Rimmer 2003: 325; Thong 1995: 318), it was only in the 1970s and 1980s that suburbanisation got under way on a large scale, coinciding with the region's prodigious industrialisation (Thong 1995). Subang Jaya-USJ, the locality where I conducted fieldwork in 2003-4, was a 'late developer' relative to Petaling Jaya. After a slow start in the 1970s by Subang Jaya, its sister township, USJ, eventually opened in 1988 and soon experienced rapid growth

> to meet the demands of largely middle-class families, many of them ethnic Chinese. By 1999 Subang Jaya had twelve thousand residential units, where USJ had thirty-seven thousand units spread over 728 hectares and was still expanding but was reaching saturation point. Because of their staggered settlement, each half has a distinctive demographic and domestic cycle profile. Subang Jaya's families have as a norm older children than those in USJ. At the time of fieldwork in 2003–2004 many offspring were already in their twenties and even thirties, and no longer lived with their parents. By contrast, many USJ families still had children of preschool or school age (Postill 2011: 35).

In this diachronic ethnography of digital media and social *changing* (an investigation into how digital media may be 'changing' local forms of residential activism) I 'stretched out' both ends of my 2003-2004 fieldwork with archival and online research to cover a longer period of time, namely from 1999 to 2009. If I were to revisit this study with a media and social *change* research agenda, I would now perhaps retell the story of how USJ developed a vibrant internet activism scene in the early 2000s as a small sub-process nested within a larger process of social change, namely the suburbanisation of the Klang Valley that started in the 1970s and ended in the 2000s. I would cut off this process in the 2000s not because no more suburbs are being built in the 2010s – they are – but because the cultural ideal and reality of the

car-dependent suburb as the doxic 'place to be' for middle-class Malaysian families was by the early 2000s fully naturalised; in other words, the process of naturalisation had practically run its course by the time I left the field in 2004.

I am aware of a lurking danger here: that I may be misunderstood as advocating rigid, old-fashioned 'linear' models of change with limited applicability to the increasingly complex, 'rhizomatic' (Estalella 2011, Hopkins 2012), 'assemblaged' (Hinkelbein 2008), and 'conjunctural' (Mankekar 1999) socio-technical worlds we now reportedly inhabit. My response to this possible objection is twofold.

First, I am not proposing a model in which temporal precedence translates into mono-causality, i.e. stage one of a given process does not 'cause' or determine stage two. Processual form and sequencing do matter, but causality is always multiple and entails the interaction of endogenous and exogenous factors within a dynamic field of action. Second, clock-and-calendar time is integral to the planning and coordination of modern socio-technical practices and 'assemblages'. Take a recent ethnography of Spanish 'passionate blogging' by Estalella (2011). This study is set at a key moment in the history of blogging in Spain (and other European states), namely the 2006-7 period when blogging was at its peak, just prior to the explosive growth of mass social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Estalella's postmodernist/ Latourian approach works well in a number of places (e.g. when discussing the socio-technical logic of blogs as databases) but it runs into difficulties when discussing the temporality of blogging. Although rightly dismissing fanciful notions of 'cyberspace' as a paradoxical realm of 'timeless time' (see Castells 1999 and above) and stressing the clock-and-calendar aspects of blogging (not least in the folk definition of blogs as diaries displayed in reverse chronological order), he then follows Latour into a world in which time and space are the ad-hoc products of agents and actants constituting one another. To adapt Gell's earlier remark, this Latourian world is a fantasy, 'engendered in the process of scholarly reflection' (1992: 315).

Once again: modern processes of social change are unavoidably mediated by clock-and-calendar time – arguably the most universal of all human codes (Postill 2002). Granted that in recent decades most of us have experienced an 'acceleration' of social life (Eriksen 2001, Wittel 2001), the fact remains that our worldwide standard of time-reckoning and scheduling has not changed at all. Our days still have 24 hours, and there are still seven days in a week. Governments, markets, social movements and media technologies may come and go, but this ubiquitous code remains firmly in place around the globe.

I now turn to my final point, implicit in both the Spanish and Malaysian examples, namely that modern nation-states offer the ethnographer ideal settings for the comparative study of media and social change.

Nation-states as media labs

Kopytoff (1986: 67) has suggested that the biography of an African car would provide

> a wealth of cultural data: the way it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers and of

those who borrow it, the frequency of borrowing, the garages to which it is taken and the owner's relation to the mechanics, the movement of the car from hand to hand and over the years, and in the end, when the car collapses, the final disposition of its remains. All of these details would reveal an entirely different biography from that of a middle-class American, or Navajo, or French peasant car.

By extension, the biography of an actual social change (as opposed to a social changing) in, say, early C21 Senegal will look markedly different from that of a comparable change in Brazil, France, or East Timor during the same historical period. After all, there are no signs that the world's national cultures are on the brink of merging into 'global' sameness. If anything, our cumulative experience of the past decades suggests that nation-states (unlike smaller administrative units, e.g. provinces, *kabupaten*, counties, *Bundesländer*) are managing to retain their cultural distinctiveness despite repeated news of their imminent demise in the age of 'globalisation', as anyone who has travelled in Europe or Asia will confirm.

To open this line of research we must first, however, put aside an unhelpful notion that has enjoyed popularity in anthropology and other fields since the 1980s, namely the idea that nation-states are 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983, Ginsburg et al 2002, Peterson 2003). As I have argued elsewhere, modern countries are far more than imagined communities: they are in fact the 'thickest' culture areas of our age, 'lived-in worlds' whose permanent residents are caught in dense tangles of technical, political and economic relations that short-term visitors may find perplexing (Postill 2006, 2011). In addition, modern states are vast media laboratories where variously positioned social agents deploy a range of old and new media to pursue (or resist) social change – often with unanticipated results. Located at the unstable nexus of global and local forces, nation-states are the ideal homes of 'middle-range theory' (Hedström and Udehn 2009) that takes the unique constellations of intersecting media policies, practices, and technologies found in each country as 'natural experiments' (Diamond and Robinson 2010) in media and/for social change.

New information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been a priority in many countries around the globe, including so-called emerging economies, since the 1990s. This interest has often been couched in the language of competitiveness, national security, social changing and imminentism (as defined above). A commonly held belief in economic planning circles has been that the 'Information Society' is both inevitable and imminent, and that developing nations have no choice but to embrace the new era or they will perish. South Korea provides a striking example of a country pursuing advanced digital policies since the 1980s couched in a nation-building idiom. The prevailing 'techno-nationalistic' discourse became intensified following the regional economic crisis of 1997. A combination of favourable policies towards the online gaming industry, business interests and technological innovation created a highly conducive environment for the explosive growth of Korea's gaming subculture. This strategy was later emulated by other countries in the region, such as Singapore and China. As a result, the ITU has consistently ranked South Korea first in its Digital Opportunity Index (Ok 2011).

Malaysia followed the South Korean example from the mid-1990s, when the federal government called for a move towards a knowledge-based economy as the country faced greater competition from China, Vietnam and other low-cost production

economies (Postill 2011). In 1996 a 'cyber-region' known as the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) was carved out to the south of Kuala Lumpur. Designed as a global centre for multimedia technologies and contents, its aim was to 'leapfrog' Malaysia from the Industrial Era to the Information Era. The MSC was in line with Prime Minister Mahathir's Vision 2020, the dream of a fully developed, knowledge-driven Malaysia by 2020 (Yong 2003, Nain 2004). The vision was 'for government, businesses and citizens to work together for the benefit of the country and all its citizens' (Yong 2003: 190).

In practice, however, the 'social life' of these policies can lead to unpredictable outcomes. Thus in my study of SJ2005, an initiative aimed at transforming the Kuala Lumpur suburb of Subang Jaya into an ICT-driven 'smart community' by 2005, I found that SJ2005 was an ephemeral site of inter-sectoral contest rather than tri-sectoral integration and citizen participation, as originally envisaged by the digital policy makers. Ironically, this top-down project helped to transform Subang Jaya into a hub of internet activism and (cautious) democratic reform (Postill 2011).

As we would expect, Brazil has followed its own distinctive digital trajectory, one radically different from that of either South Korea or Malaysia. Under the stewardship of its leftist President Lula and the Culture Minister Gilberto Gil, Brazil adopted the world's most advanced public policies in support of free software, creative commons and digital inclusion. In part, the free culture and anti-corporate globalisation rhetoric was a way of making virtue out of necessity, as this stance translated into huge public savings in imported proprietary software. The policy framework set out by the government has influenced in both direct and subtle ways how young Brazilians consume digital media. But just as in the Malaysian and South Korean cases, this has not always turned out as expected (Horst 2011).

Lest I be accused of methodological nationalism, I should end this section by explaining that this focus on national cultures does not preclude the possibility of conducting transnational studies of media and actual social changes. On the contrary, it would be very worthwhile to track and compare the media aspects of transnational social changes such as suburbanisation and/or the spread of Pentecostal churches, and indeed their interrelations, not least in countries like Brazil, South Korea and Malaysia where both phenomena have exploded in recent decades (Oosterban 2011: 56).

Conclusion

Relying on social changing to understand social *change* is not unlike visiting an academic library that only stocked first drafts of books and articles. No finished works, no peer-reviewed articles, only work in progress. As intriguing as this library may sound at first, the visit would soon prove frustrating, for we would want to read the published outcome of the more interesting papers.

By this I do not mean to devalue the post-1979 ethnographic literature on media and social changing, or suggest that there is no place in media and communication studies for the study of social changing. Social changing can indeed give us precious clues about small and large processes of social change. More importantly, this fluid notion is well suited to the open-ended nature of ethnographic research. Rather I am

suggesting that if we are serious about media and social change, we should expand our conceptual and methodological repertoire and make more explicit the links between 'emergent' media practices studied in the field and *actual social changes* whereby A became B or Y became Z.

References

Adra, N. 1993. The 'Other' as viewer: reception of Western and Arab televised representations in Rural Yemen. In: P.I. Crawford and S.B. Hafsteinsson (eds.), *The Construction of the Viewer: Proceedings from Nafa* 3, pp. 255-269, Højbjerg: Intervention Press.

Anderson, B. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* London: Verso.

Askew, K. and R.Wilk 2002. *The Anthropology of Media: A Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Bird, S.E. ed. (2010). *The Anthropology of News and Journalism: Global perspectives*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Boellstorff, T. (2008) *Coming of Age* in *Second Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Born, G. (2004) *Uncertain Vision*: *Birt*, *Dyke and the reinvention of The BBC*, Secker and Warburg.

Bourdieu, P. 1992. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Boyd, Danah 2009. Social Media is Here to Stay… Now What? *Microsoft Research Tech Fest*, Redmond, Washington, February 26.

Boyer, D. 2011. News Agency and News Mediation. *Social Anthropology* 19(1):6-22.

Bräuchler, B. and J. Postill (eds) 2010. *Theorising Media and Practice*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn.

Budka, P. 2011. From Cyber to Digital Anthropology to an Anthropology of the Contemporary? Paper tothe EASA Media Anthropology Network 38th e-Seminar, 22 November – 6 December 2011. http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars

Castells, M. (1999). 'An Introduction to the Information Age' in *The Media Reader: Continuity & Transformation*. Hugh Mackay & Tim O'Sullivan (eds), London: Sage: 398-410.

Cohen, S. (1973). *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. St Albans: Paladin.

Coleman, G. 2010. Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39: 487–505.

Coleman, G. 2011. *Hacker Politics and Publics*. *Public Culture*. *Vol 23, No. 3, 511-516*.

Couldry, N. 2003. *Media Rituals: a Critical Approach*, London: Routledge.

Couldry, N. 2012. *Media*, *Society*, *World*. Cambridge: Polity.

Critcher, C. (2008), Moral Panic Analysis: Past, Present and Future. *Sociology Compass*, 2: 1127–1144.

Diamond, J. and J.A. Robinson (eds.). 2010. *Natural Experiments of History*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Dick, Howard and Peter J, Rimmer, 2003. *Cities, Transport and Communications: the Integration of Southeast Asia since 1850*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dickey, S. 1997. Anthropology and its contributions to studies of mass media. *International Social Science Journal* XLIX3, 413-427.

Downing, J. (1996) *Internationalizing Media Theory: Transition, Power, Culture*.

Eisenlohr, P. (*2011),* Introduction: What is a medium? Theologies, technologies and aspirations. *Social Anthropology*, 19: 1–5.

Eriksen, TH (2*001) Tyranny of the Moment*: *Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age*. London: Pluto Press.

Estalella, A. 2011. Ensamblajes de esperanza: Un estudio antropológico del bloguear apasionado. Unpublished PhD thesis**,** Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Barcelona.

Eyerman, R. 2008. *The Assassination of Theo van Gogh: From Social Drama to Cultural Trauma*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Fabian, J. 1983. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Firth, Raymond *1959 Social Change in Tikopia*: *Restudy of a Polynesian Community*. New York, Macmillan Company.

Freeman, J.D. 1999. *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead: A Historical Analysis of her Samoan Research*, Bounder, CO: Westview Press.

Gell, A. 1992. *The Anthropology of Time: Cultural Constructions of Temporal Maps and Images*, Oxford: Berg.

Gershon, I. (2010). *The Breakup 2.0*: *Disconnecting over New Media*. Cornell UP.

Giddens, A. 1984. *The Constitution of Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Ginsburg, F.D. 2008. Rethinking the digital age. In D. Hesmondhalgh and J. Toynbee (eds.) *The Media and Social Theory*. London: Routledge.

Ginsburg, F., Abu-Lughod, L. and Larkin, B. 2002. *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

Gladwell, M. 2000. *The Tipping Point: How Little Things can make a big Difference*. London: Brown Little.

Graeber, D. (2009) *Direct action: an ethnography*. Edinburgh, Oakland: AK Press.

Green, S., Harvey, P. and H. Knox (2005) 'Scales of Place and Networks: an Ethnography of the Imperative to Connect through Information and Communications Technologies', *Current Anthropology* 46(5):805-826

Haywood, J. (2012). *The new atlas of world history: Global events at a glance*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hedström, P. and L. Udehn. 2009. Analytical sociology and theories of the middle range. Pp. 25- 47 in P. Hedström and P. Bearman (Eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hinkelbein, O. 2008. '*Strategien zur Digitalen Integration von Migranten: Ethnographische Fallstudien in Esslingen und Hannover'*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Bremen.

Hobart, Mark (2000) 'The end of the world news: television and a problem of articulation in Bali.' *International journal of cultural studies*, 3 (1). pp. 79-102.

Hopkins, J. 2012. The monetisation of personal blogging: assembling the self and markets in Malaysia. Unpublished Phd thesis, Monash University, Melbourne.

Horst, H.A. 2011. New Media Practices in Brazil: Free, Social and Inclusive, *International Journal of Communication*, Vol 5 (2011), http://ijoc.org/ojs/index.php/ijoc/article/view/699

Horst, Heather A., and Daniel Miller (2006) *The Cell Phone: An Anthropology of Communication*. Oxford: Berg.

Hughes-Freeland, F. 1998. (ed.), *Ritual, Performance, Media*. London: Routledge.

Hutchinson, Sharon E. 1996. *Nuer Dilemmas*: *coping with money, war and the state*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press.

Ingold, T. (2000) *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge).

Ingold, T. (2007) *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge).

Jensen, R. (2007) 'The Digital Provide: Information (Technology), Market Performance, and Welfare in the South Indian Fisheries Sector', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 122(3): 879-924.

Juris, J. S. 2008. *Networking Futures: The Movements against Corporate Globalization*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Juris, J. S. (2012), Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: Social media, public space, and emerging logics of aggregation. *American Ethnologist*, 39: 259–279

Kelty, C. 2008. *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Kjaeruff, J. 2010a *Internet and Change: An Anthropology of Knowledge and Flexible Work*. Hojbjerg: Intervention Press.

Kjaeruff, J. 2010b A Barthian approach to practice and media: internet engagements among teleworkers in rural Denmark. In Bräuchler, B. and J. Postill (eds) *Theorising Media and Practice*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn.

Kopytoff, I. 1986. The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process. In: Appadurai, A. (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, pp. 64-94, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leach, Jerry and Edmund Leach (1983). *The Kula: New Perspectives on Massim Exchange*. Cambridge University Press, New York.

Madianou, M. 2012. Re: Theorising media and social change. Comment to the EASA Media Anthropology Network 40th e-seminar, 3 July 2012, http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars

Madianou, M. and Miller, D. (2012) *Migration and New Media*: *Transnational Families and Polymedia*. London: Routledge.

Malaby, Thomas M. (2009): *Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Mandel, R. 2002. A Marshall Plan of the mind: the political economy of a Kazakh soap opera. In: Ginsburg, F.D., Abu-Lughod, L. and Larkin, B., (eds.), *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*, pp. 211-228. Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

Mankekar, P. 1999. *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: an Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India*, Durham/London: Duke University Press.

Mankekar, P. 2008. Media and mobility in a transnational world. In D. Hesmondhalgh and J. Toynbee (eds.) *The Media and Social Theory*. London: Routledge.

Marcus, G. E. 1995. Ethnography In/Of the World system: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 95-117.

Mazzarella W. (2010) *Beautiful balloon: the digital divide* and the charisma of new media in India. *American Ethnologist* 37(4): 783-804.

Meyer, B. 2010. "There is a Spirit in that Image." Mass Produced Jesus Pictures and Protestant Pentecostal Animation in Ghana. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 52 (1): 100-130.

Miller, D. (1992). 'The Young and the Restless in Trinidad: a case of the local and global in mass consumption' in R. Silverstone and E. Hirsch (eds) *Consuming Technologies*. London: Routledge.

Miller, D. 2011. *Tales from Facebook*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Miller, D. and D. Slater (2000) *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: Berg.

Moores, S. 2010. "'I Didn't Realize How Attached I Am": On the Environmental Experiences of Trans-European Migrants', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13(2), pp. 171-89.

Moores, S. 2012 Loose Ends: Lines, Media and Social Change Paper to the EASA Media Anthropology Network 40th e-Seminar,19 June – 3 July 2012. http://www.media-anthropology.net

Nain, Z. 2004. 'New Technologies and the Future of the Media in Malaysia' in *Communicating the Future: Proceedings from the National Conference on the Future of Media in a Knowledge Society*. Kuala Lumpur: UNDP and Strategic Analysis Malaysia (SAM).

Ok, H. 2011. New Media Practices in Korea. *International Journal of Communication* 5:0. http://ijoc.org/ojs/index.php/ijoc/article/view/701

Oosterbaan, M. (2011), Virtually global: online evangelical cartography. *Social Anthropology*, 19: 56–73.

Ortner, S.B. 1984, 'Theory in Anthropology Since the Sixties', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 26(1), 126-166.

Osorio, F. (2001) Mass Media Anthropology. Unpublished PhD thesis: University of Chile.

Peterson, M.A. 2003. *Anthropology and Mass Communication: Myth and Media in the New Millennium*. Oxford/New York: Berghahn.

Postill, J. 2002. Clock and calendar time: a missing anthropological problem, *Time & Society*, 11, 251-270.

Postill, J. 2006. *Media and Nation Building: How the Iban Became Malaysian*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn.

Postill, J. 2008 Localising the internet beyond communities and networks, *New Media and Society* 10 (3), 413-431.

Postill, J. 2010. 'Researching the Internet', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16 (3), 646–650.

Postill, J. 2011. *Localizing the Internet: An Anthropological Account*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn.

Postill, J. 2012. Digital politics and political engagement. In H. Horst and D. Miller (eds) *Digital Anthropology*. Oxford: Berg.

Postill, J. forthcoming. Democracy in an age of viral reality: a media epidemiography of Spain's indignados movement, *Ethnography*.

Postill, J. and M. Peterson 2009. What is the point of media anthropology? *Social Anthropology* 17(3), 334-344.

Pype, K. 2011. Dreaming the Apocalypse. Mimesis and the Pentecostal Imagination in Kinshasa. *Paideuma*, 57 (June 2011).

Rabinow, P., Marcus, G. E. (with Faubion, J. D., Rees, T.) 2008. *Designs for an anthropology of the contemporary*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Rafael, V. 2003. The cell phone and the crowd: messianic politics in the contemporary Philippines. *Public Culture* 15:3, pp. 399-425

Rao, U. 2010. *News as Culture. Journalistic Practices and the Remaking of Indian Leadership Traditions*. Oxford: Berghahn.

Rogers, E.M. 1995. *Diffusion of Innovations*, 4th edn, New York: Free Press.

Rothenbuhler, E. 2005. *Ground Zero*, the Firemen, and the Symbolics of Touch on 9/11 and After. In Rothenbuhler, E. and M. Coman (eds). *Media Anthropology*. London: Sage.

Rothenbuhler, E.W. and Coman, M. (eds.) 2005. *Media Anthropology*,London: Sage.

Sahlins, Marshall. 1985. *Islands of History*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Silverstone, R. and Hirsch, E. (eds.), 1992. *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces*, London: Routledge.

Skuse, A. (2012) 'Communication for Development and Public Diplomacy: insights from an Afghan radio drama'. In M. Gillespie and A. Webb (eds), *Diasporas and Diplomacy: Cosmopolitan Contact Zones at the BBC World Service (1932-2012)*. Routledge, London.

Skuse, A., Gillespie, M., & Power, G. (2011) *Drama* for *Development*: *Cultural Translation and Social Change*. Sage Publications, New Delhi

Slater, D. R. and Tacchi, J. (2004) *Research*: *ICT Innovations for Poverty Reduction*. New Delhi: UNESCO.

Spitulnik, D. 1993. Anthropology and mass media. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22, 293-315.

Sreberny-Mohammadi, A. and A. Mohammadi (1994) *Small Media*, *Big Revolution*: *Communication, Culture, and the Iranian Revolution*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Stammler, F. M. (2009). <u>Mobile Phone Revolution in the Tundra?</u> Technological change among Russian reindeer nomads. *Folklore* (Tartu) 41, 47-78.

Street, B. 1993. *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Street, B. 2001. *Literacy and Development: Ethnographic Perspectives*. London: Routledge.

Tenhunen, S. 2008 'Mobile technology in the village: ICTs, culture, and social logistics in India', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)* 14, 515-534.

Thong, Lee Boon (1995). Challenges of Super-Induced Development: The Mega-Urban Region of Kuala Lumpur – Klang Valley. In Terry G. McGee and Ira M. Robinson, eds., *The Mega-Urban Regions of Southeast Asia*. Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 315-317.

Turner, Victor W. 1957. *Schism and Continuity in an African Society: A Study of Ndembu Village Life*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Turner, V.W. 1974. *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Wacquant, L. (2011) Three Steps to a Historical Anthropology of Actually Existing Neoliberalism, *Social Anthropology*, 19, (4), pp.1-14.

Wallis, Cara. 2011. "Mobile Phones without Guarantees: The Promises of Technology and the Contingencies of Culture." *New Media & Society* 13, no. 3, 471-485.

Wellman, Barry, and Caroline A. Haythornthwaite. 2002. *The Internet in Everyday Life*. Oxford, Blackwell.

Wittel, A. 2001. 'Toward a Network Sociality', *Theory, Culture & Society* 18(6): 51–76.

Yong, J.S.L. 2003. 'Malaysia: Advancing Public Administration into the Information Age' in J.S.L. Yong (ed.) *E-Government in Asia: Enabling Public Service Innovation in the 21st Century*. Singapore: Times.

Endnotes

[1] This working paper is a slightly revised version of a paper first delivered (in absentia) at the EASA 2012 biennial conference, Nanterre, Paris, July 2012. Available at http://johnpostill.com/papers/.
[2] For an influential study of the use of 'small media' during the Iranian Revolution, see Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1994).