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E-Seminar 45
Theorising Media and Change

By
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December 5-19, 2013

John Postill <jrpostill@gmail.com>   **December 5th 2013**

Dear all

Welcome to our 'Theorising media and change' e-seminar! (with apologies for the late start).

As I mentioned in an earlier post, last week we held a seminar and workshop at IN3/UOC in Barcelona. While the seminar was a public event, the workshop was aimed at discussing the forthcoming volume Theorising Media and Practice (Postill, Ardevol and Tenhunen, eds) and attended only by the co-editors and three other contributors (Emiliano Trere, Debora Lanzeni and Veronica Barassi [via Skype]). This book is very much a Media Anthropology Network offspring, as it follows from two offline events (in London and Nanterre) as well as an e-seminar on this mailing list (Dec 2012). Many thanks to all involved!

So we thought we'd update you on the progress of our work and hear what other list subscribers have to say about this question. Rather than give you a full report of the Barcelona meetings, I'd just like to briefly introduce three notions that emerged from our discussions and that I personally find intriguing, in the hope that they will get a lively conversation going, namely (1) media-related changes, (2) thick change, and (3) multilinear change.

(NB. We also discussed concepts such as mediatization, polymedia, information ecology,

or mediation, but I'll let others handle these. Of course, feel free to suggest alternative angles or concepts - as long as they have to do with how we may go about theorising media and change).

1. Media-related changes. I'd like to propose the notion of *media-related changes* as the logical, diachronic counterpart to media-related practices (Hobart 2010). By setting out to research such changes in the field we bring the abstract notion of change down to earth, i.e. we turn it into an ethnographic research tool. For instance, when I did fieldwork in rural Sarawak in the late 1990s, local people told me that the arrival of TV sets in the 1980s had triggered a mass exodus from the communal areas (ruai) where people used to socialise in the evening to the more private family rooms (bilik) where they would now gather around the new medium (Postill 2006). We could call this a folk model of a media-related change (not media change in general, but a concrete change), and this is a model that I for one would subscribe to. I would even go further and call it a *media driven* change. Does that make me a technological determinist? I don't think so, for I am not saying TV sets determined the change, only that they afforded or enabled it - a point made by Sirpa Tenhunen in Barcelona in the context of her rural West Bengal research on Facebook.

2. Thick change. This notion came out of our discussions, I forget exactly in what context and I'm not quite sure what to do with it. Any ideas? It does however suggest to me a richly ethnographic (both synchronic and diachronic) approach to researching change, including media-related changes.

3. Multilinear change. I have been inspired lately by the historian and social theorist William Sewell (2005) in thinking about media-related changes in the context of the new protest movements post-Tahrir. Sewell writes about the multiple temporalities of historical processes (e.g. revolutions) and proposes genealogical analyses that trace three distinct types of temporality: events, trends and routines (see Postill 2013). The multilinearity of change strikes me as a more promising way of looking at change than the more familiar notion of non-linearity.

I've already written far too much, so I'll stop there to open up the conversation to all of you. This is an unusual e-seminar in that there is no working paper and no discussant, so feel free to post your brief comments and questions as and when you see fit (no need to ask permission). The seminar will end in two weeks' time, on 19 December.

Looking forward to a great discussion.

John

References

Hobart, M. 2010, 'What do we mean by "media practices"?', in B. Bräuchler and J. Postill (eds.), Theorising Media and Practice, Berghahn, Oxford and New York.

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Sewell W.H., Jr (2005) Logics of History: Social theory and social transformation. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press

See also the Media and Social Change bibliography:
http://mediasocialchange.net/bibliography/

David Hakken <dhakken@indiana.edu>   **December 5th 2013**

Dear John and all

For some time now, I have dealt with this problem by talking about the social correlates of digital media (or of digital technologies in general, as well as the technological correlates of social changes. I suggest the statistical concept is more precise.

John Postill wrote:

"I would even go further and call it a *media-driven* change. Does that make me a technological determinist?"

While not knowing enough about the details of the case, I think it does. While I think digital media can legitimately be described as causing social change, we need more detailed accounts of how correlates become caused in each case.

He continued:

"I don't think so, for I am not saying TV sets determined the change, only that they afforded or enabled it - a point made by Sirpa Tenhunen in Barcelona in the context of her rural West Bengal research on Facebook."

"2. Thick change. This notion came out of our discussions, I forget exactly in what context and I'm not quite sure what to do with it. Any ideas? It does however suggest to me a richly ethnographic (both synchronic and diachronic) approach to researching change, including media-related changes."

This is of course related to Geertz's description of ethnography as "thick description." Bernard Williams talks about "thick ethical constructs" as a possible handle for discussing similarity in ethics cross culturally. Perhaps is would make sense to use a notion of there being "thick social correlates of digital media use" in a particular case, or even more generally, as a way to foster sufficiently nuanced discussions of "from correlates to caused" discourses.

David

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Line Hassel Thomsen <cjult@hum.au.dk>   **December 6th[th] 2013**

Dear John and dear list,

Thanks for letting us in on your discussions for the forthcoming book. I think media and change is a great and much needed topic both to Media Studies and Media Anthropology.

I really like your notion of 'Media-related changes'. From my perspective, I think it is fruitful to study how the media-related changes affect the media-producers. I have just defended my PhD studying journalists at work in the newsrooms of BBC, ITV, DR and TV2. And the overarching theme of my fieldwork has been change. Though I did not set out to study change, change was all the journalists talked of, and in their daily work the new media-related changes were constantly referred to.

The change that I have found is at the same time media-related and market-related. To the journalists I was studying the new media made for new ways of working which were totally at odds with their ideals of journalism. To the journalists I talked to however, the primary frustration is not so much a change in media but the change in ideals that the media-related changes brings about.

This frustration was particularly outspoken among those old enough to have experienced a whole other media-landscape. So I would suggest that looking at age, just as well as nostalgia and shared histories (of how things were before the change) becomes particularly important when studying change.

I'm looking forward to read the book, and sending all best wishes from snowy Denmark,

Line

John Postill <jrpostill@gmail.com>   **December 6th 2013**

Thanks for those comments, David

David Hakken wrote:

"For some time now, I have dealt with this problem [of media-related changes] by talking about the social correlates of digital media (or of digital technologies in general, as well as the technological correlates of social changes. I suggest the statistical concept is more precise."

I'm not sure I follow you. Could you give us an example?

I wrote:

"I would even go further and call it a *media-driven* change. Does that make me a

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technological determinist?

David continued:

"While not knowing enough about the details of the case, I think it does. While I think digital media can legitimately be described as causing social change, we need more detailed accounts of how correlates become caused in each case."

This is an intriguing idea. Again, I'd be very interested in an empirical example, in this case of 'how correlates became caused'.

Best

John

John Postill <jrpostill@gmail.com>   **December 6ᵗʰ 2013**

Many thanks for that post, Line. I think this question of the frustrations in adapting to new media technologies and environments for people used to operating under quite different conditions is a rich area of research.

I'm reminded here of Lanzara's (2010) comparative study of how judges in Italy and music teachers in the US struggle with videotapes and digitisation respectively. Lanzara writes:

"...[T]he judges try to position the videotape within the pre–existing system of practical activities that constitutes the criminal trial. They must turn the video into a *legal object*, so that the evidence inscribed in a visual format can be legally relevant and usable. However, in the process of experimenting with it they discover that the video and the visual replicas put different kinds of requirements, which diverge from the usual paths and rules of the practice. In other words the video exerts a 'pressure' both upon the judges' established routines of running the trial and upon their hitherto unquestioned views and premises of what counts (or doesn't) as legal evidence."

He concludes that:

"The appearance of a new medium in a domain of practice produces a perturbation in the complex ecology of agents and activities, objects and tools, uses and meanings that constitute the practice. Such unbalance leads to discontinuities in the smooth running of practical activities and to a temporary weakening of the sense–making abilities of the actors. The fabric of the practice is loosened or even ripped off, and needs to be rewoven."

I'm guessing that these sorts of 'perturbations' are a source of nostalgia for a seemingly less complicated media past among older practitioners in many fields, e.g. older journalists in your example? Jolynna Sinanan, for instance, is currently working on 'before-and-after' accounts of digital media among Trinidadians.

One danger lurking in Lanzara's account, as I see it, is to exaggerate the supposedly 'smooth running of practical activities' prior to the adoption of a new technology (or set of technologies). Were things ever that smooth in journalism - and in other domains of life with similar complaints from their practitioners?

John

Reference

Lanzara, G. F. (2010). Remediation of practices: How new media change the ways we see and do things in practical domains. *First Monday*, *15*(6). http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3034/2565#p4

B F Dwyer <anthrobfd@hotmail.com>   **December 6th[th] 2013**

Hi all

I haven't posted much here before but if I may respond to John's question:

John Postill wrote:

"While not knowing enough about the details of the case, I think it does. While I think digital media can legitimately be described as causing social change, we need more detailed accounts of how correlates become caused in each case."

He continued, in reply to David:

"This is an intriguing idea. Again, I'd be very interested in an empirical example, in this case of 'how correlates became caused'."

My bit: Is the notion of correlate akin to the notion of proximate or multiple causes?

I mean is an ethnographic context you can observe an individual using say chat to communicate with someone they otherwise would not have been able to if the digital elements were not present. Is that what you mean by proximate here?

Brett

Guido Ipsen <guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de>   **December 6th 2013**

Dear John,

Having contributed from an academic vista in previous e-seminars, I have meanwhile indulged myself in the mysteries and wonders of practical didactics - i.e., I have become a teacher.

I feel, from both a personal and an empirical point of view, that my position in the volume "theorizing...", mentioned by John, has been confirmed.

The point is that usage itself defines the media, and furthermore - as I may expand on my position in a Cassirerean manner - that usage derives from a necessity of the cultural stratum to realize itself, and to thrive for development.

I will give you a practical example. Students of the 9th grade (high school) have to write short stories about Australia. As might be assumed, one of the students uses the Internet as a source for story ideas and more or less copies a story. This particular story, however, is known to the rest of the students because they, too, use the Internet and visit the same locales therein. Now, this puny act of plagiarism is *socially controlled* via the inofficial – channels of student groups on Facebook and other channels. End of story: the student caught in the act gives in, retracts the first story and writes another one, all by herself.

What does this seemingly simple story tell us?

John talks about possible *"1. Media-related changes. I'd like to propose the notion of *media-related changes* as the logical, diachronic counterpart to media-related practices (Hobart 2010). By setting out to research such changes in the field we bring the abstract notion of change down to earth, i.e. we turn it into an ethnographic research tool."*

Very much so. We may accept possible offers of the media-sphere to peer groups as students as the necessary developments meeting their demands for mediated social control, gaining acceptance, and fostering further communication. What's more, the control within the group is executed WITHOUT a teacher even getting knowledge. The self-organisation of the mediated community of students requires technological adaptation to its needs.

He continued:

"2. Thick change. This notion came out of our discussions, I forget exactly in what context and I'm not quite sure what to do with it. Any ideas? It does however suggest to me a richly ethnographic (both synchronic and diachronic) approach to researching change, including media-related changes."

Not having participated in the discussions, I can only guess what thick change might mean here. I guess "thick" is a metaphor for thorough, or maybe some change that brings forth further changes on other levels? We might presume that "changed mediated behaviour" of groups (such as students, or revolutionists, or terrorists, or any other group or movement) will trigger many more changes within and without the world of media. In my small students' example, even the teacher ignorant of social media has to take account of the facts, and adapt his (or her) teaching to the social practices implicated by the new media. There is just no escaping the facts. The same seems to be true in the field of politics, and might be true for any field of application.

"3. Multilinear change."

I cannot really say anything about this right now. I feel inclined that in the world of didactics, there is no coherent temporality, hence it is difficult to adapt my small

example to this particular aspect.

However, I think that what should also be mentioned is that social practices make use of the media *as such*, deforming them in practice, meaning that neither the Internet, nor social media have been designed for didactical, or political purposes. However, they carried the *potential* for, e.g., teacher and student usage, even on a social-behaviouristic level. All of this taken into account, the changes incurred in society by a particular medium should not be measured by an "as is" evaluation, but by "what might be" perspectives. Maybe this is an answer to point 3, somehow.

Well, having said all this, I think that there is really a lot of media anthropology right in front of my doorstep and I will concentrate more on student behaviour and media in the future.

All the best,

Guido

Mark Hobart <mh5@soas.ac.uk>   **December 7th 2013**

Might I add a couple of comments to the debate?

While I sympathize with the direction in which John is heading, I can see some traps. And I suspect that an astute critic could claim that the argument is potentially circular (change presupposes cause, which presupposes change).

If so much stress is to be placed on the concept of 'change', then it may be wise to consider what the term implies and how to address awkward presuppositions. The difficulty is that change is conventionally part of a model that assumes relatively unambiguous and knowable states, which succeed on another or undergo internal alteration. In short, the notion of change presupposes relatively stable states. The point is made by the OED, where the relevant definitions of 'change' are:

1a. succession of one thing in place of another;

4a. alteration in the state or quality of anything.

On this definition, analysis is largely a question of determining what these states are and what contributes to their alteration or succession.

Such a model presents a number of difficulties, among which I would briefly note.

1. The notion of states involves a curiously old-fashioned ontology. Since Firth's critique of stable states (social structure) in favour of process (social organization) in the 1950s, anthropologists have tended to be cautious about reading states into social action. If social action and process are defined as continually changing, the dichotomy of states and change disappear. So it is interesting to see them resurrected.

2. If states change, the question arises: what determines such changes? The response

tends to be some notion of cause (whether linear, nonlinear or multi-linear subsidiary). Do you really want to commit yourselves to the concept of cause? You will then have to extricate yourselves from Hume's famous skepticism about cause, Kant's reply and Durkheim's rebuttal that such notions were themselves collective representations. In short, cause (and so equally change) is a cultural notion. With these issues in mind Ernest Gellner in Concepts and society argued that what was innovative about modern anthropology was precisely its rejection of cause in favour of contextual explanation.

3. Following on from this, there is the epistemological question: who decides what the states and the causes are? Are you going to attribute some superior knowledge to anthropologists that enables them to determine both the states and their causes? If you do, how do you justify what now looks to be a somewhat hegemonic approach? And, crucially, are you aiming at explanation or understanding? They are quite different. Also, as John recognizes, what relationship do such analytical accounts bear to local accounts?

4. At this point things start to become interesting. If you accept that statements about knowledge tend to be for a purpose and are made in particular social contexts, what are the contexts in which people comment on the role of the mass media in their lives? (If you consider purposes and context to be irrelevant to knowledge, you risk committing yourself to a scientific realism that is hard to square with anthropology's fundamental concerns.) The sting in the tail is that, if knowledge is purposive and contextual, then what bearing does this have on discussion of media-related changes?

5. As John was kind enough to cite me on 'media-related practices', might I note that practice is conventionally part of a quite different ontology from change? The former, as I use it, derives from pragmatism, which sets out to rethink previous models (such as structure and knowledge) by interrogating the constituent practices by which people assert, deny, question – in short, articulate or represent – what is going on around them as this or that or whatever on some occasion to someone for some purpose. As such, change and practice belong to antithetical epistemological frameworks.

Just a few thoughts to toss into the mix.

Best

Mark

Guido Ipsen <guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de>   December 7th 2013

Mark's remarks are most worthwhile.

The question of "change" as "alteration between states" requires [us] to define what a "state" is.

To me, any presupposition that there is anything such as an extensively stable "state of being" is a myth. Following James, who quite early stated that in a pluralist universe

things are all interdependently intertwined, the ultimate question is where to define which "changing" elements are exempt from observation in order not to endanger the idea of the "state" I question. Thus, in essence, "state" is more or less the assumption that in an experimental environment, the majority of processes, or cases observed under equal circumstances will yield the same results, show the same behaviour, etc.

"Change" would then mean that given any circumstantial variable is altered, the behaviour of the item observed will also alter. It is quite obvious that individuals do not behave like liquids in a tube. We must not fall for the structuralist trap. "State" hence can only be what we define it to be, e.g., the usage of media as may be evaluated and measured, say, on 12-7-13.

If people behave differently the next day, hey, there you got your change. But it all depends on the scope of your own research. "State" and "change" are all in the eye of the beholder.

Just a quick response.

Best,

Guido

Julie Debaveye <jdebaveye@gmail.com>   **December 7ᵗʰ 2013**

First of all, I would like to welcome the initiative of this e-seminar that allows us to exchange our views no matter what are our geographical locations. I think that producing some comparisons between grounds is the better way to achieve a better insight of what is happening now with the Internet.

1) Media-related change

The media-related change you have been describing in the observation of the Sarawak people is quite similar to the media-related change I have been observing in the investigation of the online practices of the CLAC (Convergence of Anti-Capitalists Struggles) on Twitter during my doctoral thesis where I observed how Quebeckers activists moved in from elder forms of media as websites, blogs and radio podcasts to social media (You Tube and more significantly Twitter) during the G20 in Toronto (2010). I feel like catching the effects that new media and technologies produce by examining archival works and then linking them to transformational practices over time between contextual events might be quite helpful to see how new technologies impact direct action and media engagement practices. I observed that activists tend to first meet more in the online in 2012 than they used to do before with massive meeting during street protests (since 2001). It is hard to say though if this process is the result of the impact of new media and technology on social practices or is corresponding to a broader change in sociality induced by the democratization of the Internet or even resulting from other local conditions defined by the political context. But at a certain point, the use of Twitter definitely fostered more openness in dynamics with the media and the public sphere "at
a large" after 2010.

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1) Multi-linear change

Foucault's genealogy of power that underlines the persistence of routines over time is a good counterpart at Sewell's contribution as it allows to link the temporality of protests to the shifts occurring in space (here the concept of "media epidemiography" quite fits what I call "contagion" in my thesis analysis with similar results).

The disjunction between diachronicity and synchronicity during the analytical process is interesting even though these two dimensions are so deeply intertwined that I found it quite hard to split it in practice.

Best,

Julie Debaveye

Références

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Postill, John (2013). The multilinearity of protest: understanding new social movements through their events, trends and routines. Melbourne: RMIT University.

David Hakken <dhakken@indiana.edu>   **December 8th 2013**

Brett Dwyer wrote:

"Hi all

I haven't posted much here before but if I may respond to John's question:

John Postill wrote:

"While not knowing enough about the details of the case, I think it does. While I think digital media can legitimately be described as causing social change, we need more detailed accounts of how correlates become caused in each case."

He continued, in reply to my earlier comments:

"This is an intriguing idea. Again, I'd be very interested in an empirical example, in this case of 'how correlates became caused'."

Brett Dwyer wrote:

"My bit: Is the notion of correlate akin to the notion of proximate or multiple causes?"

Dear Brett and John

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Not exactly but sort of in my way of thinking. I mean "correlate" in the statistical sense: that two phenomena co-occur at a higher rate than random variation would predict. Example: Use of computers in communications media is correlated with broader developments in media use as well as other social changes. I think much of our task as media and/or use-of-technology scholars is to identify such correlations, which is what I do ethnographically. That is only part of our job, however. The rest is to see if the correlation is evidence of a causal relationship. That is, if A and B correlate, does A cause B, B cause A, are the changes in A&B a consequence of cause C (or the interaction of C, D, E, etc.), do A&B mutually shape each other, or is there no causal relationship?

The postmodern turn in social science has tended to abjure causal analysis. This is partly justified, certainly if one's search for causes is carried out in an formal, positivist manner, such as presuming that the only kind of causal argument is a singular causal relation that obtains between A&B in any and all contexts. However, there is a more relaxed discourse over social causation that I associate with people like sociologist of social movements Douglas McAdam. I understand this discourse to take the presence of increasingly strong correlations as useful indicators of the existence of some kind of more determinate relationship between factors. This kind of causation need not be unidirectional; that is, it may make the most sense to see A & B mutually shaping each other. This I take to be the basic insight of Science, Technology and Society (STS): that uses of techno-sciences shape social relations, while social relations also tend to shape techno-science. This discourse also should lend itself to differentiating between immediate and more attenuated causal relations, between less and more heavily mediated causal connections.

Brett continued:

"I mean is an ethnographic context you can observe an individual using say chat to communicate with someone they otherwise would not have been able to if the digital elements were not present. Is that what you mean by proximate here?"

I think I would hesitate to describe the relationship you pose here as one of proximate causation, as in this case the change described is unclear. I would first want to be clear about how impossible communication between the two was prior to using chat, what it is about chat that made the impossible possible, or is it just that chat made it easier. I would also want to see if the use of chat was associated with other changes in practices, how many, how different, etc.

Still, I do think it useful to try to distinguish between more proximate and more ultimate causes.

David

Oscar Ramos Mancilla <oscar.orm@gmail.com>   **December 8th 2013**

Dear John and all

With the notion of media-related change comes to my mind specific cases with particular intentions for the uses of technologies: a) a network of local mobile telephony that emerged of the need for communication at low cost in addition to covering the demand of a population in Oaxaca, Mexico, (intervention by those who have the information and technologies http://vimeo.com/59248014), b) development of software in indigenous
languages as TotoOffice 1.0 also in Mexico, by way of a positioning within the global dynamics of technological development as free software (intervention from a university, still in the process of implementation). These two examples show the recovery needs of the population and that they try to give solution through technology resources.

Both cases could be thought like media-driven if we take it like starting points without considering why in different places have different visions of opportunities of uses of technologies, which responds to the latest social processes, e.g. before to phone antenna or the installing software in indigenous languages.

In the case of my current doctoral research, no such interventions more evident, but there is a use of social networks, specifically Facebook . For now following field data I can anticipate that the space between indigenous youth through Facebook is different from any kind of public space or other social spaces where community projects and ethnicity are negotiated. Is a space with specific characteristics that are possible by technology that now use and where what is communicated is related to what happens at the local level. This implies that is media-related change. That is, the media become part of ethnographic analysis, but not the central part, like in my case are a pretext to investigate contemporary processes of indigenous peoples. I think the use of technology is itself a topic (how access or availability is set), but the relationships established by these uses also offer other perspectives beyond the media-related changes. Still, I like this notion and take it up to think about my field data.

Oscar Ramos

Andreas Hepp <ahepp@me.com>   **December 9th 2013**

Dear All,

I have followed this highly interesting online discussion so far and would like to add one further argument: This is the argument that we should not see: 'the media' as the main driving forces of change – but rather 'communication' and its related practices. My argument is that if we take this move we can also arrive at a better understanding of what constitutes 'the media' and how we might reflect their role in changing culture and society.

Why 'communication'?

The argument for this is that communication is the fundamental kind of practice by which we as humans construct culture and society. This sentence does not mean that everything is communication. But is does mean that in everything 'meaningful' (in the Weberian sense), communication is involved. Therefore, if we start our analysis with

communication, we get a deep insight into how different forms of culture and society are constructed. Such an understanding refers back to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmanns (1967) work on the social construction. Based on this, a discussion about a 'communicative constructivism' developed which is in my view at present one of the most convenient approaches for linking media and communication research with a more general analysis of culture and society and its transformation (Couldry/Hepp 2013, Knoblauch 2013). Therefore, the relevant everyday practices we should analyze are those of communication, their contextualization, power relations etc. Out of this, we can follow that each change of the process constructing cultures and societies is first of all a change of collective communicative practices. As a consequence, this is the level at which we might start our analysis of 'change' and 'transformation', not 'the media' as such.

What does this mean for 'the media'?

This brings me back to the question of media. Of course media are highly important for communication and they have altered communication a lot. If by 'media' we understand all the technical tools by which we communicate — that is: exclude 'natural' media like language, for example — our media of communication make it possible to communicate across time and space. Therefore — and this is a fundamental argument of communicative constructivism but also of other approaches within the field of media and communication research — we cannot imagine certain forms of culture and society without media. So-called 'modern', 'late-modern' and 'post-modern' societies in Europe, for example, are constitutively based on technical communication media as they made widely inclusive, but at the same time also internally fragmented communicative spaces possible, which are the basis for these kinds of societies. In a certain sense we can say that 'media' are technical means to 'institutionalize' and 'reify' communication. Television, for example, developed in a long-term process of institutionalizing certain forms of presenting communication around this technical apparatus. And as such a technical apparatus these ways of communicating were 'reified': In the construction of broadcasting buildings, cable networks, satellite stations etc. The same can be said for digital media related to the Internet and the whole mobile communication infrastructure. Interestingly, this 'reification' stabilizes the ways of communication, and because of this we get the impression that a certain kind of media 'alters' something. In the moment when, for example, media-related infrastructures are built up, it is a highly complex process to once more question these ways of communication. Therefore, media are a part of our analysis as they are important for stabilizing communication and in so doing processes of communicative construction. However, it remains communication / communication-related practices which are the driving forces of change — and not the media as such.

Why might mediatization research be helpful for this?

This brings me directly to what we call mediatization research. Therefore, what is the help of the mediatization approach for analyzing media change? First of all, it is important to bear in mind that mediatization does not refer to a closed theory but more to an (interdisciplinary) field of research (Hepp 2013, Lundby 2014), going back to the beginning of (media and communication) sociology (Manheim 1933: 11). The core of this field is exactly to capture the interrelation between the change of media

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and communication, on the one hand, and culture and society on the other. In this sense, we can say it is about 'correlation', or maybe better 'interrelation', something which has also been a topic within this online discussion. In that field of mediatization research we have at least two traditions: one is the 'institutionalist tradition' coming from mass communication research and mainly investigating how media as institutions 'influence' other fields or systems of culture and society (politics, religion, etc.). This is mostly theorized as the influence of a 'media logic' or a set of media related 'logics'. On the other hand, there is the 'social-constructivist tradition', which is closely linked to the aforementioned communicative constructivism. Here, change is theorized as the change of the practices of (communicative) construction. In my view it is also helpful to have this field of mediatization research in mind when discussing the role of digital media for (present) social and cultural changes in the perspective of media anthropology and ethnography. The reason is not only that especially the 'social-constructivist tradition' is very close to ethnographic and qualitative approaches. In addition, various problems being discussed here had been the focus of empirical mediatization research, and we might learn from this. Just to give you some examples: Referring back to William Sewell (2005), John Postill argued that it is helpful to reflect 'change' based on (three) ideal types of 'transformation', something that had also been a focus in mediatization research (which additionally also reflects 'de-mediatization' and 'reflexive mediatization' as a reaction to 'mediatization'). Additionally, there is a long-term tradition within mediatization research of analyzing change in a 'non-linear' and 'non-media-centric' way (Morley 2009), that is by moving practice and communication into the foreground instead of handling 'the media' as something whose uprising would happen in an 'empty space' and which would 'do' something to us. As outlined above, this does not mean to forget the media as a 'material object', but it is a different way of contextualizing this 'material object' in the process of change.

In core, I see many parallels between the arguments that had been made within this online exchange so far and the present discussion within the field of mediatization research. In this sense, I would be happy if my email might result in some bridging discussions.

Best wishes,

Andreas

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John Postill <jrpostill@gmail.com>   **December 9ᵗʰ 2013**

Hi all

I think this post from Guillaume Dumont may have not reached the list, so I'm resending it.

John

Guillaume Dumont <guidumo@gmail.com>   **December 9ᵗʰ 2013**

Dear List

I'd like to contribute to the media and change discussion by drawing from my current research, which focuses on professional climbers. Professionalization as a process is, by nature, embedded in the notion of change, and appears to be much different in 2013 than, say, 1998. Nowadays, climbing stresses a particular manifestation of globalization driven by corporate entities that use a neo-liberalized approach to global extension. In this context, being a professional climber means two things: (1) acting as a professional and (2) presenting oneself as a professional. While being extremely talented is indispensable to become a professional climber, other (new) competences are required as well. Being mobile, along with a consistency in producing and disseminating quality media content and using social media have both become professional competences. Thus, in the context an activity almost exclusively funded by companies, athletes become professionals because of their realizations on rock and/or competition's results, as well as thanks to their visibility.

John discussed (at the IN3 workshop in Barcelona) change as a move from A to B,

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with a beginning and an end. This view goes in hand with his emphasis on the diachronic nature of ethnography: whether (or not) ethnography is multi-sited, nor it has to be diachronic, leading to diachronic ethnography. But ethnography is also relative to a specific space-time (cfr. Burawoy, 2000) and diachronic. In suggesting the concept of site, Gille (2001, 2003) stressed the necessity to look at local history to understand social relationships. Here, we move from this concern to the connection between individuals and practices (concern that differs from the idea of multi-time ethnography (cfr. Social Anthropology, May 2013). From there, I feel that the notion of change solely engages with a transformation from A to B, while the notion of process allows considering what happened between A and B, and eventually C. I don't think that we are trying to grasp change as a state but rather as a process, correct me if I am wrong.

Engaging with my research, the concept allowed to question the hierarchies (Couldry, 2010) and articulations (Bird, 2010) between media-related practices and other processes of change and/or practices. I explain: while trying to figure how I could make sense of the concept, I realized that I had misunderstood and over-estimated media-related changes. I was conceptualizing these changes (aka. Professionalization processes) as exclusively media driven (I like media-driven change better). In fact, the changes I am looking at were driven by other phenomena, yes intrinsically related to media, but with different intensities and qualities.

Looking at "the field" of climbing, it could be said that the commercialization and the commodification of the activity have transformed the professionalization of elite climbers into a media and mobility driven model, in the context of popularization and democratization of digital technologies. Athletes are not only visible in climbing media and social media but most of them produce and disseminate these digital contents, becoming the actors of their own movie. Furthermore, their creativity in producing high quality content become somehow more discussed that the climbing itself, but this is
another topic.

Yet, discussing this process in a diachronic perspective allows stressing the transformation of both activity and practices. However, regarding to climbing's relatively recent emergence, professionalization and consequent current transformations, I think that it is essential to leave space to consider A, B and a potential C. The example of journalism practices in Canada previously discussed in this e-seminar is explicit in this case, major changes occurred between 2002 and 2012 (see Line Hassal Thomsen's post).

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Looking forward for further discussion.

Best,

Guillaume Dumont

John Postill <jrpostill@gmail.com>   **December 9th 2013**

Dear all

A great start to the e-seminar, with a range of positions already taken, and we're only just warming up. Do keep the brief questions, comments and reactions to earlier posts coming!

Our listserv has been behaving erratically lately, so I'm resending an e-seminar post by Oscar Ramos that I know some of you have not received.

The issue has now hopefully been resolved (with many thanks to Ro Jackson) but do let me know if you think your post never made it to the list before resending it.

For those of you who don't loathe Twitter, I'll be posting any other technical issues on Twitter if I find that I can't reach the list myself, as was the case yesterday (https://twitter.com/JohnPostill).

John

Mirca Madianou <mmadianou@gold.ac.uk>   **December 9th 2013**

Hi everyone

I'm catching up with this fascinating discussion now. Many thanks to John for organising another stimulating seminar and all contributors for your interventions. It's good to pick up the thread of this (recurrent) theme for the medianthro list and I'm glad on this occasion we're engaging with parallel discussions in media studies, for example mediatization. As someone who's been involved in both the media anthropology and mediatization debates I feel there's some scope for synergy between the two approaches/traditions (especially the social constructionist approach to mediatization, see Couldry and Hepp, 2013). My chapter in the forthcoming

Handbook of Mediatization (edited by Knut Lundby) explores what media anthropology can offer to mediatization research.

As I don't want to write an overlong email (this is such a rich area that emails can quickly turn into draft papers of sorts…) I'll restrict my intervention here to responding to Andreas' email. Although I have some sympathy with prioritising communication in the analysis of social change, I do find that it is more and more difficult to separate communication from 'the media'. This is because media technologies are increasingly constitutive of what is being communicated as the theory of polymedia suggests (Madianou and Miller, 2012 and 2013; see also Madianou 2012 and in press). Choosing one technology or medium from an environment of opportunities (assuming all are equally available – and this is a big 'if' but increasingly a reality for many people) acquires communicative intent. For example, choosing email – a platform with a specific temporal structure (asynchronous) – as opposed to Skype (a synchronous platform) signifies something in the context of personal communication which can be as or more important as the actual content. Polymedia focuses our attention to the fact that 'communication' and 'media' are increasingly inseparable and perhaps best understood as environments. Additionally, polymedia helps us understand how people navigate these mediated environments, for example, how do they choose from a menu of opportunities and affordances and how they are constrained by related power processes. Because of its sociotechnical perspective, which examines not only communication and the social uses of the technology but also its affordances (Hutchby, 2001) and technical characteristics (Baym, 2010), polymedia can help reveal the inner workings of communication (Madianou, in press). All this mediated communication may, of course, lead to social change - but I'll resist the temptation of developing that here as I promised to keep this quite short.

This is a very brief summary of my thoughts and also one of the arguments developed in my contribution in the Postill, Ardevol and Tenhunen volume on Theorising Media and Practice. As always look forward to your responses and thoughts!

All best

Mirca

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Emiliano Treré <<etrere@gmail.com>>   December 10th 2013

Hi everyone,

Thanks for bringing up so many fascinating ideas and reflections. As a participant in the seminar in Barcelona, I am glad that the offline debate is continuing online and I thank John for making it possible. I'd like to highlight two main points to contribute to the current discussion.

First of all, I find Hepp's idea of prioritizing communication over media in the analysis of change really stimulating. However, I'd add some reflections that somehow match the point made in the response by Madianou but also bring it to other directions. I think that we should conceive media not only as tools through which we communicate, but as complex infrastructures with three components 1. artifacts or devices used to communicate 2. activities and practices in which people engage and 3. social arrangements or organizational forms developed around devices and practices (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006). Following Gitelman (2006), we can view media as both technologies that enable communication and a set of associated social and cultural practices.

Thus, I think that the notion of media-related changes can be a powerful concept (only) if it succeeds in taking into account media in all their complexity. I'm not a fan of media-driven though, I understand the nuance but I feel that even so the expression is sort of media-centric.

Second point. As I underline in my chapter in the book (Treré, forthcoming), and as it emerged from the debate in Barcelona, we should try harder to focus on what unites different approaches to media and change (mediatization, mediation, polymedia, medium theory, etc.), a task that has sometimes been neglected. For instance, in her response Madianou talks about "an environment of opportunities" when speaking of polymedia. In my forthcoming chapter, I point out that, even if rejecting its

technological determinism (a point clearly stressed by Hepp, 2013), we should acknowledge the contribution of medium theory in conceptualising media as environments and ecologies; for instance, developing the information ecology perspective (Nardi and O'Day, 1999), I have explored the coexistence and the coevolution of technologies, practices and actors (Treré, 2012) in social movements, focusing on both the diachronic and synchronic dimensions of change that have repeatedly emerged during these e-seminar exchanges. Moreover, even if the stress of mediatization on change is surely stronger, I'd like to underline that mediation has always been deeply concerned with social and cultural transformations (especially in the Latin-American tradition with Martín-Barbero -1987- who criticized the view of mediation as simple transmission of information), so when investigating (social) change in relation to the media, many insights from this vibrant tradition are still valuable and intriguing.

Looking forward to continuing this great conversation!

All the best,

Emiliano

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Fausto Barlocco <fbarlocco@yahoo.it>   **December 10th 2013**

Dear all,

Thanks to John and to everybody else for such an interesting start (and hopefully continuation) of debate, I wish I had been in Barcelona to get more of this..
I would like to ask John (or any of the participants at Barcelona)

1) what do you mean by 'thick change'? Apart from the obvious connection with Geertz's 'thick what do you mean by that and what is the use of the concept?

2) why did you decide to use the concept of 'media-related changes'? Just to define a field of enquiry (we are looking at changes that are started/encouraged/caused by /associated with/spread through/located in the media) or to create a theoretical category? If so what is its use? I would like to know what John has to say about that. It would be interesting for Mark to contrast his idea of 'media-related practice' to that.

I am asking this because I see these questions as being at the very basis of the discussion here and to frame all other discussion. Personally, I think Oscar is on a similar position, I think anthropology is anthropology, the study of everything that has to do with human societies/cultures and I think it makes no sense to concentrate only or primarily on the media, doing 'media anthropology', while doing anthropology. If John found the arrival of television to the longhouse important in moving activities from the ruai to the private bilik that made sense only within the context of Iban culture and Sarawak/Malaysia in the 1990s: Postill could understand and study that significance only because he was studying that space-time-culture context as a whole.

What is the advantage of concentrating on media-related change or practices rather than change or practices in general?

Best

Fausto

John Postill <jrpostill@gmail.com>   December 10th 2013

In his post David Hakken has called for non-positivistic, nuanced approaches to causality in the study of media-related changes. He wrote:

"I mean "correlate" in the statistical sense: that two phenomena co-occur at a higher rate than random variation would predict. Example: Use of computers in communications media is correlated with broader developments in media use as well as other social changes. I think much of our task as media and/or use-of-technology scholars is to identify such correlations, which is what I do ethnographically. That is only part of our job, however. The rest is to see if the correlation is evidence of a causal relationship. That is, if A and B correlate, does A cause B, B cause A, are the changes in A&B a consequence of cause C (or the interaction of C, D, E, etc.), do A&B mutually shape each other, or is there no causal relationship?"

I was wondering if you could give us an example or two, and some bibliographic refs, of how this may work ethnographically? As Mark Hobart pointed out in his post, causality is a no-go area for many of us in the humanities and softer social sciences.

John

John Postill <jrpostill@gmail.com>   December 10ᵗʰ 2013

Dear List

I thank Mark Hobart for his challenging post. Mark fears that if we place too much stress on the concept of 'change' we may find ourselves smuggling into our research a 'cultural' (Western) notion that imposes dubious presuppositions about causality, structure, stasis and the like, on people around the world who may have radically different ways of knowing and articulating the world. I tried to preempt some of these concerns in my 2012 e-seminar paper and subsequent discussion (Postill 2012) but I will try again now.

Precisely the point of a new coinage such as the plural term 'media-related changes' is to get us away from philosophical conundrums like the one described by Mark. This is so that we can get on with the business of 'following the changes' ethnographically as well as social historically, in an open-ended manner, to see where they may lead us. As explained in my opening post, I see this notion merely as a handy research tool, not as the next big paradigm for media and communication studies. I would now add that if we are going to take actual changes seriously, we will need more such notions - notions that guide us towards the specific and away from conceptual muddles, in collaboration with our research participants.

The English word 'change', as defined by the OED, certainly carries with it a great deal of cultural baggage, but I would be very surprised if one of you told me of a culture where people never discuss not the meaning of change in general but rather *actual changes in their social worlds that they have observed or experienced*. One common vernacular device is to think of their societies (or aspects of them) through the before-and-after binary: "When I was young there were no drugs here, but look at this place now. I blame all those video games". This is a made-up example, but Jolynna Sinanan has some interesting ethnographic materials on this vernacular device in the context of media in Trinidad in her forthcoming chapter in the book.

Another is to talk about trends, often worrying trends, e.g. a rise in crime, unemployment, or materialism. For instance, on a recent trip to Yogyakarta (Indonesia) I found that one worrying trend that people talked about was how "The richer are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer" (NB. I didn't talk to any rich people). Some of these vernacular understandings of societal trends and transformations will attribute an important role to media technologies, others won't. See the ample literature on moral anxieties and panics for the former case (e.g. Barendregt 2006, Wilk 2002). Notice also that people will use both binary (before and after) and non-binary (trends) ways of grappling with changes.

But I would argue that our research participants' own accounts of media-related (and -unrelated) changes are a necessary but not sufficient part of the media anthropologist's task. It's only the first step. An even greater challenge is to develop our own understandings or explanations (depending on where we stand along the

humanities-sciences continuum, the Hobart-Hakken continuum, so to speak) of what we think led to the concrete changes that we have studied empirically. Our research participants will have their diverse takes on a concrete change (e.g. the rise of violence in a local neighborhood; some will blame TV, others poor parenting, still others the arrival of foreigners, etc.), but over time our task is to develop thickly descriptive and explanatory accounts of that complex change and its media dimensions, if any. More on thick changes later.

John

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Guido Ipsen <guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de>   **December 10ᵗʰ 2013**

Hello once more,

From what I have read in the contributions so far, I find it most amusing that we do not seem to have a common understanding of the most basic terms, such as "state", "process", or "media".

However, with some satisfaction I note that most of the contributors agree on a non-structuralist, but rather pragmatist, understanding of the terminology. I have always considered pragmatism as a most worthwhile philosophical field for anthropologists to study, because the basic ideas of "how we may understand", and therefore how to make sense of what others do, or more generally, what the community does, rests in pragmatist thought, and nowhere else.

As concerns media, Peirce once noted (even though merely in a footnote), that media should have been the focus of his thought. Naturally, he did not think about technical devices, but the carriers of thought, i.e., signs, as media. What else could signs be but media? And therefore, what else should media anthropologists concentrate on?

As early as 2001, I made clear that there is a difference between the *forms* of mediatization, and the *mediating force* carried by them. I can only insist once more:

Technology is irrelevant. If it causes a change in understanding the world (or whatever), it is by the sheer will, or need, of people who use these devices. The key for understanding media usage is to be found in the *ideas* of humans. The latter are the force that drives them.

Forms are nothing. Meaning is everything. A TV screen in a longhouse is nothing. The urge to go beyond the confines of the longhouse is everything. The urge is not a thing. It is not a device. It is an idea. Human beings are ideas. Without ideas, they were only some organism, biological pulp with some sort of drive for survival. And what does this tell us? That human usage of media is very much pragmatic, it serves an end, it meets some purpose. I think it is as simple as that. As complicated as that. Because the easiest things are, for the most part, the most hard to understand. Or, the most difficult to get your hands on, scientifically speaking.

Best,

Guido

John Postill <jrpostill@gmail.com>   **December 11ᵗʰ 2013**

In his post David Hakken has called for non-positivistic, nuanced approaches to causality in the study of media-related changes. He wrote:

"I mean "correlate" in the statistical sense: that two phenomena co-occur at a higher rate than random variation would predict. Example: Use of computers in communications media is correlated with broader developments in media use as well as other social changes. I think much of our task as media and/or use-of-technology scholars is to identify such correlations, which is what I do ethnographically. That is only part of our job, however. The rest is to see if the correlation is evidence of a causal relationship.
That is, if A and B correlate, does A cause B, B cause A, are the changes in A&B a consequence of cause C (or the interaction of C, D, E, etc.), do A&B mutually shape each other, or is there no causal relationship?".

I was wondering if you could give us an example or two, and some bibliographic refs, of how this may work ethnographically? As Mark Hobart pointed out in his post, causality is a no-go area for many of us in the humanities and softer social sciences.

John

David Hakken <dhakken@indiana.edu>   **December 12ᵗʰ 2013**

Dear John
I'm happy to contribute more to this interesting discussion. There are some important meta-theoretical issues, like the extent to which the task of anthropology is to be conceived as involving more than ideographic (descriptive) activities, to include nomothetic ("accounting for") ones. I think it must, but rather than going into why, I will try to provide an example or two of the kind of "accounting for" that I have (and

have not) in mind.

As described in Cyborgs@Cyberspace? (Routledge 1999), I consider it to be a necessary task of those studying digitally-mediated human activity, both informational and communicative (increasingly difficult to differentiate between these two), to address the popular conception that digital mediation is strongly and inherently inclined to foster important social changes. This conviction (which is what lead me to respond to your first post about the conference) follows from, among other things, my understanding of Richard Fox's description of the many ways in which ethnography is political. In particular, he argues that anthropologists should understand the likely "mind set" of an audience to which one is presenting one's fieldwork. As the belief in the ethnogenerative properties of digital technology use is widespread, one should therefore consider what one thinks about this cultural construct in presenting research to which it is relevant. That means, first, identifying social changes, or the absence thereof, that correlate with digital mediation. With regard to evident change correlates, one should then consider how frequently a change is present with a particular mediation and how frequently it is absent, as well as trying to grasp the range of its relevant possible forms.

For example, consider "disintermediation," particularly phenomena in which several of the intermediate actors, both human and institutional, who before were prominent parts of a given social process are now, post-digital intervention, no longer party to the process. A specific instance: It used to be more or less necessary to use a travel agent in order to book a flight. Not only is this no longer necessary; many travel agencies have gone out of business. MOOCs may lead to the demise of many educational institutions and the loss of many teaching jobs. Etc; it is not hard to think of other examples of disintermediation. I think a strong case can be made that such disintermediation accompanies digital mediation frequently enough to use the language that my algorithmically inclined colleagues use much too easily; That is, to say that disintermediation so frequently accompanies digital mediation that it can be describe as a likely "impact." To say this is so is to enter into a discourse of causality, in the usual, rather broad rather than narrow technical, meaning of this term.

A counter example—that is, something about which I feel much less inclined to talk about causally/impactfully—is the contention, rife in current talk about organization and organizing, that these are rapidly becoming "virtual." (I teach organizational informatics.) Much of the problem I have with advocates of such ideas is the haziness of their concept of "virtual," but there is another, to my view more important flaw is their typical argumentation. When you examine it carefully, the case is made by 1) demonstrating a capacity for, maybe even an affordance of, "virtuality" in this or that digital mediation, and then 2) presuming that the phenomenon made possible/afforded is or will become manifest. Missing is an effort to identify aspects of social formation reproduction which may inhibit or prevent virtualization; That is, an effort to balance evidence for with evidence against, to ground argumentation in what is actually happening in the world, to get to a point where what is happening in the world is disciplining one's ideas about it, rather than one's ideas trying to discipline the world.

I am not arguing that organizational/organizing virtualization cannot or even is not happening. I am saying whether or not this is the case is an empirical matter, and that our job is to do the hard empirical work to see what is the case. Merely demonstrating

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that it might be is not enough. To act as if we can do ethnography of the digital mediation of communication or information and ignore such questions makes no sense to me. Rigidly refraining from talk about things like impacts in digital arenas, when such matters are so central to our informants, is likely to further marginalize us, a problem made bigger in the current era of Big Data-fetishism.

I have dealt with such issues in most of the things I have written on computing and society over the last thirty years. I find the work of Christian Fuchs as exemplary in such matters, whereas I think too much of Manuel Castells work manifests the argumentational dynamics I have tried to point to in my counter example.

David

John Postill <jrpostill@gmail.com>   **December 13ᵗʰ 2013**

In the context of his research into the professionalisation of climbing, Guillaume Dumont wrote:

"[...] I feel that the notion of change solely engages with a transformation from A to B, while the notion of process allows considering what happened between A and B, and eventually C. I don't think that we are trying to grasp change as a state but rather as a process, correct me if I am wrong".

To reiterate, I would distinguish between 'change' (which leads to all sorts of philosophical conundrums) and 'a change' or 'actual changes' (down-to-earth notions that invite the researcher to ask concrete questions). I don't see changes and processes as opposed notions. Indeed we can only understand changes processually, as socio-technical processes that unfold over time. Seriality is taken care of through notions such a 'A
series of changes: A, B, C...'.

For instance, from your own account we learn that climbing is currently going through a wide-ranging process of change, namely from an earlier point at which it was primarily an amateur practice to its becoming a professional practice (or perhaps a growing split, or forking, of amateur from professional climbing?). So B could be the historical moment at which the researcher establishes that the professionalisation of one sector of this field of practice has been attained (this will, of course, be open to competing interpretations from other scholars and from practitioners themselves). If one or two decades down the road sponsors and/or fans were to lose interest in climbing, or the capitalist economic system were to collapse, we could see the onset of a process of de-professionalisation leading to C (this process would be slow or rapid depending on dynamics internal and external to the field).

John

John Postill <jrpostill@gmail.com>   **December 14ᵗʰ 2013**

Andrea's Hepp's thoughtful post on the mediatization approach raises a number of interesting questions about the history and politics of media and communication studies, including the anthropology of media, especially in connection to our present conversation about how we may theorise media and change.

His premise that we should shift the collective focus from media to communication suggests to me the question of why indeed we have heard much less about the anthropology of *communication* than the anthropology of media in recent decades. I'd be curious to know what colleagues who know well the history the history of the subfield have to say on this matter. One exception would be Mark Peterson's book (2003) Anthropology and Mass Communication, where, if I remember correctly, he starts off with the outline of a communication model of media history.

Having said that, I'm wondering whether all media-related changes should be brought under the umbrella of communication? I'm thinking of ethnographic examples such as Wallis' (2011) study of mobile phones in urban China where she found that although some entrepreneurs used this technology as an important communication tool, other people used it mostly for solitary entertainment, e.g. to play games or listen to music (not as communication devices).

At any rate, I see great potential for interdisciplinary collaboration on the complex question of media, communication and change(s). For those of us with a media anthropological background, one urgent task is to find out *what we already know about this question* in this subfield so that we can engage with other specialists in more meaningful ways. This search is still in its infancy. My hunch is that we probably know a lot more than we think about media-related changes, but that a lot of this knowledge is buried in the literature.

For instance, the other day I browsed through the media anthropology reader Media Worlds (Ginsburg et al 2002) searching for examples of media-related changes and found some interesting leads in chapters by Terry Turner, Mark Hobart, Faye Ginsburg or Richard Wilk - but I shall have to do this more systematically as we put the edited volume together (I'm saying this very tentatively, as it was only a quick foray).

We may need to do some epistemic fracking to get to the more hidden (or forgotten) knowledge.

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Guillaume Dumont <guidumo@gmail.com>   **December 14ᵗʰ 2013**

Dear list:

Thanks John for engaging the discussion.

My emphasis on *process* instead of *change* came from the seminar at the In3. The way you presented it, from A to B with an end, did not - in my opinion - leave enough space for C. As you mentioned in your post, I do not consider change and process as opposed, rather different. Bringing it back to climbing, the process of professionalization could be break into series of changes, such as the media-related changes or the mobility-related changes, or techniques-related changes, socio-related changes, etc. The point is not the conversion from an amateur practice to a professional practice, since they were already professional climbers back in the 90's. Rather, the focus is on how professional practices have evolved through the series of changes described above. Professional climbing today is much different than 15 years ago and, in many ways, borders between amateurs and professional blurred by the sponsors, media and climbers themselves. Thus, B would be a focus on professional today by accounting A and featuring C, focus that stresses how ethnography is embedded in the diachronic. Hope it make sense.

Guillaume Dumont

Sally Applin <saa26@kent.ac.uk>   **December 14ᵗʰ 2013**

I thought I'd chime in here as it is roughly an area I work in (with Michael D. Fischer) and we have a new article in IEEE Society and Technology Magazine which might be helpful: Asynchronous Adaptations to Social Interactions: http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/xpl/articleDetails.jsp?arnumber=6679308

John Postill wrote:

"1. Media-related changes. I'd like to propose the notion of *media-related changes* as the logical, diachronic counterpart to media-related practices (Hobart 2010). By setting out to research such changes in the field we bring the abstract notion of change down to earth, i.e. we turn it into an ethnographic research tool. For instance, when I did fieldwork in rural Sarawak in the late 1990s, local people told me that the arrival of TV sets in the 1980s had triggered a mass exodus from the communal areas (ruai) where people used to socialise in the evening to the more private family rooms (bilik) where they would now gather around the new medium (Postill 2006). We could call this a folk model of a media-related change (not media change in general, but a concrete change), and this is a model that I for one would subscribe to. I would even go further and call it a *media driven* change. Does that make me a technological determinist? I don't think so, for I am not saying TV sets determined the change, only that they afforded or enabled it - a point made by Sirpa Tenhunen in Barcelona in the context of her rural West Bengal research on Facebook."

The idea of "media related changes" is a bit challenging for me. Don't changes come about from knowledge gleaned from the distribution of information, which comes for

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the most part, though various forms of media? By that, aren't most changes "media-related" changes? Or am I missing something specific that you are intending?

If TV sets afforded or enabled the change, could this also be a material culture argument? Or are you considering media as a form of material culture. If so, how does your "media related change" differ from other material culture changes?

He continued:

"2. Thick change. This notion came out of our discussions, I forget exactly in what context and I'm not quite sure what to do with it. Any ideas? It does however suggest to me a richly ethnographic (both synchronic and diachronic) approach to researching change, including media-related changes."

Mike has been talking about thick and thin connections lately and I can assume that thick in this case means that it has more sticking power, that it is bigger and more dense. Changes from your TV example are "thick" in a culture, rather than thin. An example might be if one person in the group had watched a TV somewhere and was telling others about it (thin) vs the entire group all buying TVs and retreating to individual spaces (thick) and doing it daily or constantly.

"3. Multilinear change. I have been inspired lately by the historian and social theorist William Sewell (2005) in thinking about media-related changes in the context of the new protest movements post-Tahrir. Sewell writes about the multiple temporalities of historical processes (e.g. revolutions) and proposes genealogical analyses that trace three distinct types of temporality: events, trends and routines (see Postill 2013). The
multilinearity of change strikes me as a more promising way of looking at change than the more familiar notion of non-linearity.

(NB. We also discussed concepts such as mediatization, polymedia, information ecology, or mediation, but I'll let others handle these. Of course, feel free to suggest alternative angles or concepts - as long as hey have to do with how we may go about theorising media and change)."

Mike and I have done extensive work on what we are calling PolySocial Reality, or PoSR, which is the idea that all messages human/human, human/machine, machine/machine (and animals in the same context) fit into a dynamic structure with synchronous and asynchronous components. The PoSR structure accounts for communications/connections/knowledge transfer that may or may not overlap. With PoSR we look at the outcome of consistent, now nearly ubiquitous, multiple, multiplexed synchronous and asynchronous 'messages.'

PoSR looks at complex multiple multiplexed structures in time and space and thus is addressing the multiple temporalities in a non-linear way though each message is linear, the distribution and communication of those messages are decidedly non-linear with the structure.

In this way, we are attempting to theorize at least the structure that is creating the outcomes of the changes that are being observed.

I offer up PoSR for reference to you in that it may be of interest in that the changes you observe may be outcomes of other forms of behavior. This is what we are presently investigating.

More, and our papers are at http://www.posr.org and http://posr.org/wiki/Publications

Sally

Veronica Barassi <v.barassi@gold.ac.uk>   December 15th 2013

Dear All,

I have been following the debate with extreme interest, and I want to thank John and everyone else for the last week of discussion, which unwrapped the complexities involved in the understanding of media and change. Please forgive my long email, but I have not been able to sit down and reply in time, so I just included everything in one email.

Here below I would like to add some thoughts to the discussion by developing the following themes: 1) thick change . I wish to discuss a bit further (and apologies to Fausto for the late reply) the framework in which the notion of 'thick change' has been discussed during the Barcelona workshop 2) media-related changes 3) communication or media?

1) Thick Change. During the Barcelona workshop we discussed the notion of thick change, when we were working on the chapter that I have written as contribution to the book.

The chapter criticises the literature on digital activism and social change for it's 'ethnographic refusal'.

The notion of "thick change" – at least as far as we discussed it- did not imply that thick change was, as Sally suggested "change that has more sticking power, that it is bigger and more dense". Rather we discussed the notion of thick change with reference to the anthropological "quest for ethnographic thickness". In this framework, "thick change" means an understanding of "change" which takes into account the nuances, cultural varieties, everyday details, the tensions, contradictions, human passions and desires that define change in ethnographic contexts.

But how can we develop this "Thick understanding of change"? Well, in order to respond to the question, my forthcoming chapter draws on the works of scholars such as Geertz, Marcus or Clifford, and focuses in particular on Ortner's (1995) argument that studies of resistance in anthropology and beyond have been constrained by a profound ethnographic thinness.

What is fascinating about Ortner's argument is that she shows how the lack of ethnographic thickness leads to three different consequences that impact on the type of data that we have available on social movements. For her ethnographic thinness

leads to: 1) sanitization of politics (where data on social movements focuses on resistant versus dominant politics without considering the internal politics of groups) 2) the thinning of culture (where data on social movements is culturally thin) 3) the dissolving of actors (where individual actors are often reduced to the image of the 'resistant subject).

In the chapter I argue that much of the literature on digital activism and social change suffers from these consequences, and I show how this is impacting on our understanding of the complex relationship between social movements, new media technologies and social change.

Therefore I call for an approach in the study of digital activism that enables scholars to appreciate the richness, nuances and complexities involved in media-related changes, an approach that takes into account 1) the internal politics of political groups 2) the diachronic transformations in political cultures, and how these cultures relate and are embedded within wider cultural contexts 3) the role of individual actors as well as the role of 'collective actors'.

To reply to Fausto, I am not entirely sure of how we – as media anthropologists- can really define the notion of thick change. This is because I believe that for us 'ethnographic thickness' is too often connected with claims of ethnographic holism, which cannot be really achieved.

Although I do recognise that ethnographic thickness can be seen as a Kantian goal, as something that is not entirely achievable, I also believe that its' quest has opened important possibilities for social research and should continue to do so.

Therefore, I believe that a good starting point to consider "thick change" is to take a step back and explore the impact of thin data on our different research contexts. After we have done so we can start reflecting and imagining how a 'thick understanding of change" should look like.

2) media-related changes. In 2011, in the midst of the 15M movement in Spain I was doing fieldwork amongst an environmental organisation called Ecologistas en Accion, which had a long history of political and media activism, and whose members were active participants in the 15M movement.

One afternoon I sat down for an interview with Julia (fictional name to protect the activist anonymity) one of the full-time staff of the organisation.

Julia discussed her biographical experience, she talked about her ten-year involvement with the organisation and reflected on how Internet technologies had transformed her everyday political practice. This transformation, according to her, was not abrupt and neither rapid, but was rather the product of a slow process of change and renewal of everyday practices. During the interview she remembered how at the end of the 1990s and beginning of 2000s - when she first started to work for Ecologistas en Accion- the organisation only had one computer that was connected to the internet, and all members of staff shared a unique email address. She laughed, looked away and said "it's almost impossible to imagine today how the office was at the time. Isn't it?".

I agreed. More than ten years later, with the extension of wireless connection, the proliferation of email accounts and social media, it was difficult for me to relate back to her first experience. The last ten years had not only gradually transformed activists' everyday practices, but they had also transformed their everyday ethnographic environment in substantial ways.

Listening to Julia, I realised that she was right. As an ethnographer I struggled to image how the office was in the past. (How did the fact of owning one email address influence the internal politics of the organisation? How did activists organise their everyday practices and how did they experience the everyday life at the office? How much of activists' everyday political action evolved around communication practices and media activism?). I really could not imagine it, and if I did I was confronted with the image of an organisation and an ethnographic context that was very different from the one I was studying.

Thus I came to a very simple and if you want obvious conclusion about the relationship between media and change a) firstly that media change is a long and non-linear process of transformation of media related practices and media related beliefs (in my research I am particularly interested in looking at how media related beliefs transform media practices). b) human biographies (especially in western contexts that are influenced by the cultural/positivist understanding that there is a bound - and often linear - connection between technological development and change) are full of linear narratives of change. Within the context of social movements in Europe, therefore, collective memories are often reliant on these narratives of change and transformation.

Therefore, even if I agree with Mark, and appreciate the fact that "change' and "practice" participate to different ontological traditions. I also welcome John's understanding of 'media-related-changes'' as a way of understanding the multi-facet, and multi-layered relationship between social change and everyday practice. This understanding I believe should take into account: change as a unlinear process of transformation; it should consider the relationship between changing media beliefs and media practices: it should explore the 'narratives' of change, which are meaningful for the people involved.

To reply to the last couple of emails, I personally see 'media related change as a process, and don't see why the notion of process should stay in antithesis to the notion of media related change/ or to 'practice'.

3) Communication? First of all I would like to say that I am very much enjoying the discussion raised by Andreas Hepp on whether we should focus on 'communication' in broader terms rather than 'media'.

Whilst I strongly welcome in media studies an approach that focuses on "communication" (as I welcomed all the cultural turn in media studies or the work of those scholars who focused on ritual communication and less media/centric understandings of media and culture) I am not entirely sure such an approach would work in anthropological and ethnographic terms.

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I personally believe that in anthropological terms it would be very difficult to focus on 'communication' as a whole and move beyond our emphasis on media. This is because, if we really did choose to focus on 'communication' as a broader term, I wouldn't know how to address a series of different concerns: Where are we to draw the line of what communication is? Are we going back to linguistic anthropology? How do we discuss human communication with reference to its multiplicity of forms such as body language? How do we explore culturally specific ways of perceiving communication processes? How do we account for all those implicit forms of communication embedded in the production of human relationships (see Greaber or Turner)? Where do media technologies come into all this? How do we explore the multiple ways of our being with the media (In the forthcoming book there is a fantastic contribution by Sara Pink on this, who looks at the concept of digital media presence and at notions of on/off/and standby) which do not strictly relate to processes of communication?

For my own research purposes I'd rather prefer to stick to the idea of media and media related change, but I am open to hear what other people think and happy to be persuaded about changing position....

Once again apologies for the long, long email and looking forward to hearing from you.

Veronica

Sally Applin <saa26@kent.ac.uk>   **December 15ᵗʰ 2013**

Hi,

So I want to be sure I get this. You're saying that:

"thick change" means an understanding of "change" which takes into account the nuances, cultural varieties, everyday details, the tensions, contradictions, human passions and desires that define change in ethnographic contexts."

So by this, what is your definition of "thin change"?

Also, does this mean that whether or not the change has a large cultural impact, its "thickness" is decoupled from that aspect?

Thanks,

Sally

Guido Ipsen <guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de>   **December 15ᵗʰ 2013**

Dear all,

John asked:

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I'm wondering whether all media-related changes should be brought under the umbrella of communication? I'm thinking of ethnographic examples such as Wallis' (2011) study of mobile phones in urban China where she found that although some entrepreneurs used this technology as an important communication tool, other people used it mostly for solitary entertainment, e.g. to play games or listen to music (not as communication
devices).

I very strongly support this point. The notion of communication as an occurrence between two agents who are using media in order to convey something called a "message" is predominant in media research, and it is - to some extent - misleading. Certainly the idea of senders and receivers contacting one another (be they singular or plural) cannot be discussed away, and I very strongly disagree with any Luhmannian perspective of agents diddipating within "systems".

However, the usage of a medium very much rests upon cognition, and the latter dominates the aspect of communication. Whether or not a medium is designed for communicative purposes is secondary. Its perception is continuous. It is integrated into culture as a symbol for status, or a means of decoration, or whatever. Certainly you will remember the early days of mobile phones when dummies with blinking LEDs were available so people might display them in order to simulate their participation in the mobile phone community?

Best,

Guido

Mark Allen Peterson <petersm2@miamioh.edu>   **December 15th 2013**

Dear Guido,

I agree. But...

What complicates this formulation of yours is that technology are also signs. The screen in the longhouse is never a neutral vehicle but one that is itself already embedded in a system of meanings. It matters insofar as
the signs carried through the screen are affected (framed) by the fact they are carried by the screen and not some other technology. The urge to go beyond the longhouse via television screen may be semiotic ally different than the urge to go beyond the longhouse via the battery operated radio in the longhouse. Peirce insisted that there are no immediate perceptions of signs, that we apprehend signs only through other signs.

Technologies also matter as they introduce new forms of signifying practices, what Peirce would call "habits"

The example I give in my book is Navajo sand paintings. The sand poured in intricate patterns on the ground is ephemeral, and it's ephemerality (especially if one rolls on it

as part of a healing ritual) is part of its meaning. The same pattern of sand poured onto a board coated with glue and fixed for sale to tourists has an entirely different meaning. Changing political, social, economic and cultural contexts opened up new media practices, creating two divergent strands of meaning for sand paintings, created through two different technologies.

The pragmatic question is what changes matter, to what people, in what contexts? And how have signs, and technologies understood as signs and sign-vehicles simultaneously, been part of these changes, and the reasons they matter.

Mark Allen Peterson

Andreas Hepp <ahepp@me.com>   **December 16th 2013**

Dear All,

Reading some of the responses to my contribution to our discussion, I see the need to clarify two points.

1. Understanding of 'communication':
My writing about communication reflects the discussion we had in the field of media and communication studies and sociology within the past few decades. Therefore, it is obvious for me that communication does not refer just to 'exchange of messages between two persons' (this would be a very narrow understanding falling far short of symbolic interactionism). Communication refers to the wide set of practices by means of which we produce meanings, that are of course contextualised and happen in relation to a variety of 'things' and 'apparatuses' as well as in relation to other kinds of practices (cf. my discussion in 'Cultures of Mediatization' on that, pp. 29-68). Some of these practices of communication are related directly to other humans (When we 'talk'), some of them are mediated (within reciprocal media communication and produced media communication), some of them happen in 'virtual spaces' and in relation to machines. My argument is that we should take communication in such a sense more seriously and move our focus to these practices. The reason for this is twofold: a) Empirically, the practices of communication are the ways by means of which we as researchers get our information within the field(s) of ethnographic research. b) Theoretically, communication is the level where a theory of media-related change should be anchored: The 'changing influence' of 'the media' only exists in relation to the practices of communication. We only have a transformation of culture and society if the practices by which we communicatively construct culture and society change. What can media as such do? Nothing. To take a quite old example: An unread book is just an object: it only can 'change' something if it is read. Also Latour (2007) does not argue that things 'do' something on their own, but only in figuration with human action -- that is his argument why we should look at 'actor networks'.

2. The complexity of present media environments:
Some of the mails I read refer to the complexity of the media environment. The implicit argument is that we should focus on the media as there is a relevance to investigate the present complexity of media environments we are confronted with. While I share the argument that we should investigate this complexity, I again would

say that we can only understand this complexity if we start with communication. I would like to take the study on "polymedia" by Daniel Miller and Mirca Madianou (2013) as an example, a study I highly regard (and hopefully you can go with my interpretation, Mirca ;-)). In core, the argument of "polymedia" is that having the possibility to select between a variety of media makes the difference for change -- not a single medium as such. However, it is a selection of media for "communication", and in core the study investigated the communication practices of migrant women when maintaining relationships to their family members. If the study had begun by focusing on a certain kind of medium, let's say the mobile phone or Internet telephony, it wouldn't have been able to develop such a concept as "polymedia". Again, I would understand this as an example for this general consideration. Only if we focus on the process of communication can we arrive at an understanding of the role of media for the transformation of culture and society.

I hope these two points clarify any possible misunderstandings. Of course, there is a variety of ways how to do research on the role of media for transforming cultures and societies -- and it is helpful that we have these different perspectives. The aim of my statement was to stimulate a reflection that results in a certain caution against a strict orientation to 'the media' when discussing this matter. For a long time this was exactly the problem of media studies, as Dave Morley reminded us (2009), and I would be happy if media anthropology avoided this.

Best wishes,

Andreas

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Guido Ipsen <guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de>   **December 16th 2013**

I concur.

With all this thickness and thinness around, I plead for reaching a consensus on using the metaphor.

For me, "thick" means more intense, deeper, more thorough, so by all means, this should address more immediate processes, or those with longer durability?

"Thin" could relate to rather individual, non-communitarian, or situational changes that do not affect the community to a wider extent?

Or, even more metaphorically speaking, "thick" might relate to changes producing more layers of changed/new processes, whereas "thin" means that only a few layers of changed processes occur? And therefore, the latter set of layers is "thinner" than the former?

Best,

Guido

Debra Vidali <debra.vidali@emory.edu>   **December 16ᵗʰ 2013**

Hi John, Hope all is well with you! I am trying to get caught up with this thread - very exciting! Just for now thought it might interest the group regarding one of the questions about "how to account for context ..." to perhaps consider my concept/method of "thick context" in my 2010 chapter, "Thick Context, Deep Epistemology" in your edited volume *Theorising Media and Practice*. I don't have posting access on the group list. Perhaps you can post this for me? I'll try to jump in later, too.
thanks!

Debra

Veronica Barassi <v.barassi@gold.ac.uk>   **December 16ᵗʰ 2013**

Hi Sally and all,

To reply to your question Sally: yes this is how we discussed 'thick change' in the context of the Barcelona workshop. Thick change implies an understanding of change that is ethnographically thick (it does not really matter whether we are talking about a change which has a large societal impact or a small one).

I can answer your question on "thin data" with reference to my personal context of research: digital activism. In recent years, especially following the social uprisings during the so called Arab Spring or the Occupy movements, there has been much discussion concerning the "media-related changes" brought about by Web 2.0 technologies to political participation and action.

A good example of this can be found in the work of Manuel Castells' (2012) latest book Networks of Outrage and Hope. Throughout the book Castells argues that Internet technologies have become the material support of a new type of political participation, and he refers to examples from Iceland to Egypt, Spain and the U.S.

Castells data is thin in the sense that does not explore the cultural varieties of the movements he refers to. In his book there is no investigation of their different political cultures or of the different biographical experiences of the actors involved with these

movements. In doing so his analysis of "media-related change" does not address the cultural and social complexities involved in the dialectics between transformation and continuity, between the technical and the social, and between old and new political repertoires of political action that defines much of contemporary forms of digital activism.

Therefore, I believe that a first step necessary to the development of a thick understanding of change is to critically explore our own research contexts and analyse how 'thin data' often leads to generalisations and assumptions concerning media related changes.

I hope this answers your question

all the best

Veronica

Ursula Rao <ursula.rao@uni-leipzig.de>   December 17th 2013

Dear all,

thank you for the discussion so far. I am following it closely because I am currently writing my contribution for the volume mentioned by John. Using the Indian example of e-governance I provide a micro-analysis of social changing. What are the various processes, imaginations, passions and technologies that contribute towards change and how do they interact (progressively co-creating each other) to bring about change. My article uses "thick description" in the sense of Geertz to draw out the various overlapping activities that contribute towards changing the way people and systems communicate.
The discussion about "thick change" puzzles me, because there seems to be a collision of two very different meanings. (1) Some authors refer to Geertz's concept of "thick description". Accordingly we can distinguish between thick and thin description of media related changes. Thick description allow for a better understanding of contextual frameworks, while thin description might be employed in broader theorizations of media change (over a longer period of time). (2) However, the term thick change appears to evoke another meaning. If thick change is a social process that goes deep and influences many different social sphere, can we then also speak about thin change, a form of change that remains superficial or outward?

I wonder whether the second distinction (thick/thin change) makes any sense at all. If not, then why speak about thick change (when we could say thick description of change), if yes, then what is meant by thick change, as opposed to thin change? Can there by change that is not deeply entangles with a wide range of social institutions and performances? Doesn't the notion of change imply just that, a process of significant and wide ranging impact?

Best, Ursula

Mark Peterson <petersm2@miamioh.edu>   December 17th 2013

I want to follow up on Ursula's comment.

I want to defend the notion of "Thick Change" as modeled on "Thick Description." Geertz's notion of thick description was meant to be a way to conceive of ethnographic writing that included multiple layers of contextualization such that the meanings of social actions that might not be clear to readers with different cultural frameworks, could be explicated. Because many of the early examples of this by Geertz and others focused so much on immediate contextualization--those systems of meaning relevant for understanding a particular bounded event, action or set of actions--some have called for coupling it with a call for "thick contextualization," reminding us that these local stories are tied to much larger social, political and economic contexts. (One of my favorites is Moerman's "Ethnography in a Grain of Rice" in which we see that a brief
exchange between a government official and an anthropologist, lasting maybe three minutes, when properly described and contextualized, is revealed as indexing everything from immediate efforts at one-upmanship to the nature of national-local politics.)

Those wanting to explore these notions should check out Geertz's original essay "Thick Description" as well as some of the important critiques and correctives such as those by Ortner, Abu-Lughod, and Vidali.

What I like here is the analogy of layering contexts in our descriptions of social change-cum-media. I read "thick change" as "thick [description of] change." I like to connect the idea of "thick change" with the notion of "diachronic ethnography" which John has elsewhere blogged about, and I am going to be writing a paper about shortly.

I am interested in social changes which clearly have recursive media components in tow areas. One project involves the uses of media--"old" and "new" in the ongoing Egyptian revolution. The second involves describing changes n the Indian news media across 15-20 years of technological and economic transformations, glossed as "globalization." In both cases there are at least three complex levels of recursivity that need to be dealt with:

1. Media exist within complex ecologies that (as is implied by the notion of ecologies) are interrelated; new media responds to, and affects "old media" and vice versa.

2. Media--both "old" and "new"--have real causal effects on events and situations as they are used as tools for organization, communication, creative play, diffusion of ideas, and so forth. These effects are recursive in that changes affected by media change the contexts and in turn affect the practices through which people use media. These changes are often hard to map with any real plausibility.

3. Efforts to map the causal effects of media in social change, and the causes of changes in media practices, have led to relatively simple lcoal folk theories that tend to dominate representation of events and actions, and which thus affect media practices by people who believe and articulate them (but not always...). These folk

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models are particularly effective because they are more-or-less "true" just very incomplete and reductionistic (i.e. "thin" description)

Solutions?

In the Egyptian case, I find myself turning over and over again to Victor Turner's theories of rupture, revolution, creativity, and the inextricability of symbolic and social change.
I've published one paper on this, but most of this work consists of blog posts at the moment.

In the Indian case, I find I cannot tell a narrative story because the local folk narrative of technological and economical determinism colonizes any narratives I try to produce (particularly when told or read to my Indian hosts). Instead, I find myself focusing on "ruptures" between past and present, and trying to complicate the technological determinist narratives by thickly describing what a particular practice (i.e.
publishing Urdu newspapers, writing about communal violence, interacting with spokespersons, imagining the audience, projecting economic futures) was like in the early 1990s and in the late 2000s, then contextualizing these changes, so the cultural and local elements that complicate (and sometimes contradict) the technoeconomic determinist narrative are foregrounded. I've published one paper on this, and am working on a book mss.
I find it interesting that I have evolved two different strategies for dealing with the two projects on change, and that I don't feel I could use Turner in the Indian situation, nor the "ruptures" approach in the Egyptian project. Perhaps I need some thick theorization to figure out why that is...

I'm enjoying this thread immensely. I wish I could comment more but I need to get back to grading and dealing with end-of-the-year student "concerns" about final grades...

Mark Allen Peterson

Brett F Dwyer <anthrobfd@hotmail.com>   **December 17ᵗʰ 2013**

Hi all

Veronica wrote:

'Rather we discussed the notion of thick change with reference to the anthropological "quest for ethnographic thickness." In this framework, "thick change" means an understanding of "change" which takes into account the nuances, cultural varieties, everyday details, the tensions, contradictions, human passions and desires that define change in ethnographic contexts'.

My Bit:

I really don't get what you mean by ethnographic thickness - here - are you talking

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about layers of meaning in the Geertzian sense? So are we talking about elaborating discourses? I ask because in my own work (internet in Vietnam) I found all the Geertzian stuff quite confusing and insufficient so I am interested in developments with thick description.

Also - and this relates to David Hakken's discussion below about causation and change - how do you account for ethnographic context?

thanks

Brett

Veronica Barassi <v.barassi@gold.ac.uk   **December 17th 2013**

Dear All,

Thank you so much for the suggestions, references, and ideas, I just wanted to add a few words to the debate.

I think Ursula is absolutely right about the fact that within our discussion on "thick change" there was collision of two different meanings. Whilst some of us discussed "thick change" with reference to 'ethnographic thickness and description" others were focusing on the notion of "thick change" to discuss a change that is more intense, deeper, and involves different social dimensions.

This collision of meanings is not surprising and this is because the concept is largely underdeveloped. As mentioned, the concept emerged during the Barcelona workshop as we were discussing my chapter on ethnographic thickness, and during the workshop we didn't have the time to unwrap its multiple and diverging meanings.

My own position is to understand "thick change" with reference to 'ethnographic thickness' and in my work I do draw from Geertz's notion of 'thick description'. However, I bring his contribution into dialogue with Ortner's work on "studies of resistance and ethnographic refusal".

My understanding is that when we think about "thick change' we are not only talking about the necessity of thick 'ethnographic description' but also about the necessity of designing a research project that are 'thick' in nature.

Of course if I were to work only within the boundaries of anthropology this wouldn't be an issue, but I personally work in a research field (digital activism and social change) where much of the research (e.g. media studies, qualitative research), is ethnographically thin.

Even when scholars claim to have used ethnographic research (e.g. Gerbaudo, 2012), these works often focus on interviews with individual actors and some participant observation, and do not provide us with a 'thick contextualization' of how we can understand media related changes in the context of social movements.

What interests me most is the understanding that 'thin research' often leads to 'thin data' (and here I am referring to much research in media studies that is influenced by a 'thin' understanding of the ethnographic method) and that this type of data – as Ortner brilliantly highlights - really impacts on our shared knowledge of social change in specific fields.

Therefore even if I understand 'thick change' as being connected to the notion of ethnographic thickness, I also believe that these discussions demonstrate that if we want to rely on the concept we need to explore it in more detail and understand its ambiguity. Perhaps we can also reach the conclusion that we should drop the concept entirely.

Once again, thank you so much for these discussions, and Mark please send over your article on Turner, I would really much like to read it once it's published.

All the best

Veronica

Jens Kalerulff jk@socant.net   **December 17th[th] 2013**

To add a layer to the meditation on this wonderful concept, I thought Mark Peterson's concluding remark was on to something:

"...I find it interesting that I have evolved two different strategies for dealing with the two projects on change, and that I don't feel I could use Turner in the Indian situation, nor the "ruptures" approach in the Egyptian project. Perhaps I need some thick theorization to figure out why that is…"

Now, Ursula Rao raised the ambiguity of "thick change", the sense of 'thick description' and the sense of 'deep change' (if I can paraphrase another Geertzian teaser). My intuition suggestions a few more options. In Danish (my 'first' native tongue), "en tyk historie" (literally, 'a thick story') would translate into English as 'a tall tale'. The notion of "thick change" is also suggestive to me in this regard! It is to balance the risk of doing that version, that I think Mark Peterson's remark is worth thinking about - thick change, in the sense of 'thick theorization' of change. Change is everywhere these days, like culture it is 'loose in the streets', as Bohannan once put it. It may also be engaging to describe that 'thickly', but I think we stand to gain more if we aim to theorize it 'thickly'. The Geertzian
project will not suffice in this regard (as I read Mark's remark to suggest).

I find it interesting to reflect on the fact that 'change' only became really 'hot' in anthropology as its potential in terms of overturning the functionalist paradigm was gradually realized. Before that 'turning point' anthropologists of the day just sort of assumed that societies "functioned", and so that's what they described. It seems to me that
these days, most anthropologists just sort of assume that societies (or whatever) "change" or have changed, and so guess what they describe...The great interest in

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'change' towards the twilight of functionalism was in significant measure rooted in the potential a focus on change seemed to hold in terms of completely rethinking our object of study, opening our minds in a big way. It seems to me that these days, that is not really what the buzz about change is about at all, yet I think there is as much potential in thinking about change in this regard today, as there was back then, if only we care to make the effort. My point here is not in terms of 'how', but in terms of 'that' it is being done. The issue needs to be put much more squarely and centrally on the agenda, if 'change' is to move us anywhere. So, 'Thick change' please! /anyone?

B F Dwyer <anthrobfd@hotmail.com>   **December 17th 2013**

Hi Jens, all

Yes I agree with you and I get what Geertz was on about and that is why I have this uneasy relationship with him because I sympathise with his position on the one hand (though I think he got a lot wrong on the other), but he was, nevertheless, all about writing and that is fine in itself; its a big part of what we do, but he is less clear about thickness/layering in the field context itself. In the field you come equipped with a framework for thinking what it is the research participants/you are doing, even if your work is not explicitly about addressing theory, but simply describing what is going on. I see thickness building on that framework - but already thickness is somewhat embedded. However, the practical bit of doing the actual research - the messy bit of actually interacting with the participant gets elided as writing asserts itself - as though because we are dealing with internet/media/media somehow these things don't apply.

So I if I am in the field in my research space somewhere and I am busily going about interacting with, and 'thinking' what is going on - applying this framework, adjusting that one, dismissing another one, checking, collaborating, noting, trying to account for contingencies, outliers etc., and in essence doing what Geertz took to be as the base of 'thickness', then where does a focus on 'thick/ly change' come in?

So my question is how is it that the focus on variation, transition, change is not already implicit? Can thick change only apply within the framework used? Does the field worker 'enter the fray' - so to speak, primed to 'thick' or find change? Does change emerge from 'thicking' or is thickness a result of the search for change?

Sorry about the direct nature of post I'm rushing because I am home with kids and feeling quite thicked

Brett

Gabriela Vargas-Cetina <**gabyvargasc@prodigy.net.mx**>   **December 17th 2013**

Dear all,

thanks for this very interesting debate. One problem we have here is that all of us have accepted Geertz' notion of thick description as a given, since it is part of the regular anthro reading canon. We have all read at least several of Geertz' works, and

now understand practically intuitively what 'thick description' means: We tend to equate it with good ethnographic description.

To think of change as thin or thick, however, is trickier, because what is being qualified by 'thick' is change: Is 'thick change' the transformation from feudalism to capitalism, as it happened in Europe in the 16th century? or from matrilineage to patrilineage, as happened among the Kaguru in the 1960s? or from the vendetta code to Italian law, as it happened (or perhaps has not really happened) in southern Italy during the XX century? or from DOS and Windows systems, as it happened in the 1990s around the world? According to Sherry Turkle, this latter changed implied getting us all to function in a completely different mindset from before, from 'deep connections" to "flat connections" among and between things and people. How do we know which of these changes are thicker o thinner? Or is thick change our thick description of whatever type of change? I agree with Ursula Rao and others that it would be difficult to know what 'thick change' is, since most often we don't realize the 'thickness' of our ever-changing world.

Brett points at the great mistake it would be to assume that any change can be a 'thin change', and to the fact that maybe the usefulness of the concept could be that we have to describe any kind of change as thickly as possible, making 'change' an a-priori category that we must focus on in the field. I agree. This notion would be extremely pedagogical; and I would not have a problem making it regular part of my ethnographic toolbox and teaching my students to think that way. However, perhaps some changes are best understood a-posteriori, such as the DOS to Windows system change, which apparently not only signaled a technological change but an entire worldview change. I am not sure we can always be equipped to see the actual thickness of all change.

Gaby

Mark Peterson <petersm2@miamioh.edu>   **December 17ᵗʰ 2013**

I want to hasten to agree with Gabriela. One of the efforts of this discussion for many of us has been to distinguish between these two notions. That is, does "thick change" mean

1. thick [description of] change

OR

2. change itself being assessed as thick or thin

I, for one, would resolutely reject the latter for the reasons I've already given. This seems to me to involve a series of analytical judgments I find at best presumptuous and at worst ethnocentric. Thick description, thick contextualization, thick theorization of change◊excellent. Analytical classification of changes themselves as "thick" or "thin"-->no, thank you.

Mark Allen Peterson

Mark Peterson <petersm2@miamioh.edu>   **December 17th 2013**

In reply to Jens (and to Veronica), I have started to raise some of the theoretical issues I'm grappling with in my discussion of the Egyptian revolution in a forthcoming book chapter, specifically the problems of contingency and agency:

The first problem in a processual analysis, then, is a problem of contingency: if every event is simultaneously a product of prior events and part of the events to come, how does one know when and where to demarcate
the beginnings and ends of the process? How do we know what function each protest, each clash, each election, each media report, each judicial decision, serves in the larger whole when that larger whole currently has no clear endpoint? Rather than speaking of a revolution, perhaps it would be analytically more helpful to see this process as involving as many (proto)revolutions as there are protest movements (Joshi 2011).

It is useful to recall, too, how contingent were those original 18 days of protest. Many people who supported the initial protests were willing to say by the 29th when Mubarak sacked the cabinet, or Feb. 1st, when he pledged not to run for a sixth term, or Feb. 3rd, after Suleiman's speech, that they had accomplished enough. These included people actively protesting in the midan, saying that enough was enough, that the point had been made, concessions had been offered and it was time to stop the protests. I have an e-mail from a professor of literature at Ain Shams who went to Tahrir January 26th and 27th and by the 29th was arguing that the protests had been hijacked by people with political agendas and the protesters should go home and wait for the reforms their actions would engender. Other protesters had high hopes and ambitions but became demoralized at certain points and were willing to stop, only to be regalvanized by such events as news of fresh protests in Alexandria or Ismailia, or by Wael Ghonim's Feb. 7 television interview. The variety of opinions present in Tahrir Square about why people were there, what they could seriously hope to accomplish and they were risking, not only personally but in terms of the nation, was broad, and variable. The unity of Tahrir Square was a negotiated unity, one continually being argued, debated and re-assessed in the light of shifting events.

It is only after the celebrations of Mubarak's resignation that a simple framing of the 18 days as a clash between the regime and a rainbow cross-section of Egyptians from all walks of life unified by their opposition to the president becomes almost universally salient. So the problem of contingency or indeterminacy, that is, of how to describe and analyze a process as it is unfolding, is an enormous problem.

The second problem is a problem of agency. What control do any of these various participants, with their different fears and visions, have over the final narrative of events? How is closure collectively determined? How are the meanings of various events and actions created or constrained?

A significant part of the problem of agency is not only how agency is exerted in social process, and toward what ends, but also who the agents are. It is common—because it is convenient—to speak of SCAF, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafis, the

secularists, Shebab al-Facebook, and others as coherent groups that act in uniform. In fact, however, all these groups were internally divided, and their divisions often turned around exactly how the institutions should act with regard to the ongoing uprisings.

Several of President Morsi's advisors resigned when he issued his Nov. 22nd declaration. Abbud Az-Zumar proposed his ten-points at a time when the fractures within the Salafist movements had become particularly evident.

An additional complication is created by the fact that the media are both vehicles and agents in this process. The media are vehicles through which struggles over the appropriation of the revolution proceed, through which actors present themselves and their visions publically, and through which coherent narratives of events are offered, contested and transformed. At the same time, the media are also active agents who create, sustain, and refuse various narratives based on their own positioning within Egypt's media ecology (Peterson 2011). Meanwhile, social media has exploded with thousands of new blogs and Facebook pages, including those of current and former government officials, expressing any number of possible scenarios of what Egypt "needs" to do next.

Clearly, both the revolution and the discourses that seek to comment on it and sort out its meanings remain contingent, contested parts in the larger process we are been calling "the revolution." Multiple voices struggle with various (and changing) degrees of agency to determine which narratives will become the dominant narrative that gives coherence to the whole process. Although the ongoing protests continue to bring about changes, at every stage there are many voices, articulated through multiple media, who insist that the uprising must stop here, that further protests are unnecessary and do more harm than good.

Mark Allen Peterson

Jens Kalerulff jk@socant.net   **December 17th 2013**

I am not sure I would dismiss the second sense of thick change ('how deep is your change') any more resolutely than the first, which can certainly also be 'presumptuous'. The example/problem Mark just posted illustrates what is at issue:

"...The first problem in a processual analysis, then, is a problem of contingency: if every event is simultaneously a product of prior events and part of the events to come, how does one know when and where to demarcate the beginnings and ends of the process? How do we know what function each protest, each clash, each election, each media report, each judicial decision, serves in the larger whole when that larger whole currently has no clear endpoint?..."

What discussions of 'change' so often are sorely lacking, is some basic reflection on what constitutes 'change' in the first place – how indeed, as Mark so wonderfully asks, does one decide... e.g. on beginnings and ends, larger wholes, deep and thin, etc ... It seems to me that what we are lacking in the first place is a more developed conceptual apparatus to think about these things. To mention just one notion I think could be

considered much more rigorously in conjunction with 'change', how about the notion of 'variation'? many 'processes' involved in alleged changes could equally be seen as processes involved towards producing 'variation', so how does one distinguish between 'mere' variation, and 'true' change.. (as the distinction is sometimes presented, rather unfortunately).

Again, my agenda here is not come up with ready made solutions, but to point to something anthropologists of 'change' need to think much more rigorously about. And to that end, I think we need to be bold, think out of the box, and try some things that may be outside of our comfort zone. As an example, I just read a recently published book, by a biologist, reviewing the state of the art in evolutionary biology (Thompson 2013, "Relentless Evolution", University of Chicago Press). I would encourage any anthropologist thinking that the days when we took inspiration from evolutionary theory are long over, to have a good look in that book. Evolutionary theory in contemporary biology (spanning genetics and ecology, also in contexts of climate change and industrial wreckage), offers an incredibly rich conceptual apparatus for thinking about these things ... change, variation, adaption ... even some interesting ways to measure and calculate change and variation, measured in "Darwins" and "Haldanes", measures which they are keenly aware are just "descriptions" or analytical fictions.

Anthropologists of 'change' could learn in the first instance to take themselves a bit less seriously from studying how evolutionary biology is grappling with these things, but the field might also inspire some entirely new ways (in anthropology) of thinking about 'change' in a more discriminating way. Dare I say, I also find evolutionary biology a remarkably refreshing alternative to the cocoon of French philosophy that so often becomes the conceptual inspiration when the anthropological imaginary begins to run dry ...

John Postill <jrpostill@gmail.com   **December 18th 2013**

Dear all

A gentle reminder that the seminar will end tomorrow (Thursday 19 Dec) late at night, Central European Time. So there's not much time left for your follow-ups and conclusions!

Like Mark Peterson, and probably many others on this list, I too am interested in processual analyses of change and continuity that incorporate a media/communicative dimension. Mark wrote:

"The first problem in a processual analysis, then, is a problem of contingency: if every event is simultaneously a product of prior events and part of the events to come, how does one know when and where to demarcate the beginnings and ends of the process? How do we know what function each protest, each clash, each election, each media report, each judicial decision, serves in the larger whole when that larger whole currently has no clear endpoint? Rather than speaking of a revolution, perhaps it would
be analytically more helpful to see this process as involving as many

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(proto)revolutions as there are protest movements (Joshi 2011)."

My response would be:

1. Rather than try to account for 'each protest, each clash, each election, etc.' perhaps it makes more sense to concentrate on those few events or phases of an unfolding conflict that were 'genuinely transformative' (Fligstein and McAdam 2011) of the field of contention in question, in this case the ongoing Egyptian 'revolution'. Sewell (2005) defines events as those rare occasions that transform a social structure - I've transposed this to those occasions that transform *a field*, namely to a protest field analysis of Spain's indignados (15M) movement through the notion of 'field events' (Postill forthcoming). So far I have identified only three such events in the Spanish context, and this has allowed me to demarcate phases in the still unfolding struggle, phases with their own transient configurations of political agents, issues, media technologies. Arguably the most significant event to date has been the Tahrir-inspired occupation of Spain's main squares in May-June 2011.

2. The lack of a clear endpoint to such protracted struggles, I agree with Mark, creates a hermeneutic paradox: how can we understand the parts of a process if we don't know the whole, and vice versa? What kind of a historical process is this if there is no end in sight? Here I would say the best we can do is come up with working models that don't do violence to the empirical evidence that we have to hand, models that are open to
revision as more evidence comes in. For example, in Spain we can distinguish the build-up towards 15 May, the 15 May marches, the subsequent (unplanned, contingent) occupation of the squares, their vacating a month later, and so on. These are, of course, rough, overlapping, messy stages, but neither we as analysts nor the field participants can do without them.

3. What about 'media ecologies' and media-related changes in all of this? How on earth do we study them amidst all the contradictions and complexities we experience in such real-world processes? We've had a range of contributions to this seminar about thick description, diachronic ethnography, communication vs. media models, information science approaches, causality and its pitfalls, and so on. My own approach to the study of new protest movements such as the indignados is to think of them as dynamic fields of contention (or 'fields of strategic action', Fligstein and McAdam 2011) in which variously positioned individual and collective agents compete and cooperate over one or more key issues/resources, often by means of digital technologies. Whilst it seems to me that Fligstein and McAdam veer towards a sociological, rational-actor model of action in which field agents are 'skilled actors' with fairly clear goals, rules and information, I see these agents as complex, contradictory, distributed, partially informed and technologically mediated persons who, in most cases, 'have a life' outside the field. Some field situations are unclear, confusing, and people don't always play to win (Warde 2004), e.g. when adopting a new means of communication. So we should ask: Which media
technologies (or set of technologies) at which point in the life course of a historical process of change (e.g. a regime change, an economic reform, a natural disaster) *made a significant difference* to that particular stage? For instance, there is both qualitative and quantitative evidence to suggest that a relatively small number of Twitter users in Spain

contributed to the rapid emergence of a new political vocabulary of contention (new words, slogans, hashtags) in the April-June 2011 period. Twitter was by no means the only platform, but it was one that many of the key strategists of the fledgling movement, as well as many journalists, prioritised in their efforts to navigate a the rough seas of the protest and set the information/action agenda (Monterde and Postill in press).

John

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Mark Peterson <petersm2@miamioh.edu   **December 18th[th] 2013**

Quick response to the first point: I'm not saying we have to respond to, or include, each an every event; I'm asking how we get from the chaos of revolutionary activity to locate those "few events or phases of an unfolding conflict that were 'genuinely transformative' of the field of contention in question." How do we know the events that are genuinely
transformative when we see them--and how do we ensure we are not being reductionistic in the process, abandoning the anthropological commitment to holistic connectivity for the convenience of model-building? This is especially fraught because the folk narratives of social change are reductionistic in just such ways. For me, anthropology requires us to
situate ourselves in the uneasy tension between appreciating and legitimizing "the natives point of view" and "not letting the natives do the analysis".

Mark Allen Peterson

B F Dwyer <anthrobfd@hotmail.com>   **December 18th[th] 2013**

yes many thanks to all for an enjoyable seminar

John wrote:

"Whilst it seems to me that Fligstein and McAdam veer towards a sociological, rational-actor model of action in which field agents are 'skilled actors' with fairly clear goals, rules and information, I see these agents as complex, contradictory, distributed, partially informed and technologically mediated persons who, in most cases, 'have a life' outside the field. Some field situations are unclear, confusing, and people don't always play to win (Warde 2004), e.g. when adopting a new means of communication."

My bit:

Yes I agree. I had to address this a bit with my thesis; accounting for difficulty with delimiting relevant/valid aspects of these agents plays with analysis; also I think Mark noted the issue conflict between the native and researcher points of view - the issue of perspective/ metaphor/model as we all know are also political and fraught - more so in an environment where some players are willing to kill for their beliefs/money etc.

But to the point in general, I agree that getting thick and thin to talk to each other in valid and reliable way is our ongoing and particularly problematic task, especially and might be more so, given the particular contexts, but also the way we (anthropologists) think and politicise 'thicking'.

Brett

John Postill <jrpostill@gmail.com   **December 19th[th] 2013**

Dear All

As they say in the media, this is all we have time for.

Many thanks to all e-seminar participants for another excellent conversation around issues that are still very much a work in progress. This session will certainly help us co-editors and chapter contributors of the forthcoming volume Theorising Media and Change with the redrafting of our papers. In turn, we hope that the book will make a strong contribution to ongoing debates across media and communication studies about how to theorise change, as well as a trigger to new empirical and theoretical work in this area.

I'd also like to thank Tess Conner for kindly offering to transcribe this session (this transcript will be shortly uploaded onto our E-Seminar Series page as a PDF) and Ro Jackson and Armando Ramos for assisting with our listserv woes. The listserv is still playing up, and quite a number of subscriptions have been disabled owing to 'excessive or fatal bounces', including all yahoo addresses, but we're working with Mailman to fix this.

Finally, if you'd like to get involved with the Network either on- or offline do let me know as we're always happy to expand our small team of overstretched volunteers running a 1,450-strong network on a shoestring.

All the best for the New Year

John

<div align="center">**E-Seminar Closed**</div>