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E-Seminar 66
The Effects of Media Practices

by
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Disclaimer
I am aware that this is not a traditional response in the Media Anthropologies mailing list's fashion, and I don't want people to perceive this as a lack of respect for academic conventions. Dr. Postill's paper invites us to engage with the academic discussion without renouncing to the more informal and casual side of academia.

I'm a communication scholar (please read this both as an apology and as a warning). Well, I have a degree in communication studies, but I am, as Jonathan Sterne has said, an antidisciplinar scholar. Today, nevertheless, reading John's piece, I will align myself with media and communication scholarship to meet his ideas by coming from the other side of the bridge. Us, communication scholars, had our first epistemic shock when, in "Communication Theory 101" we are told that the first theories of communication studied media effects; the role and impact of media in society and people. Just to discover, later in the term, as John rightly pointed out, that we could not use the "e-word" anymore because things were more complex, nuanced and difficult to grasp. While John's colleague may be right when she claims that "the notion of effects is crude and causally linear and cannot capture people's lived experience" (p. 1). At the same time, more and more experiences lived by people are indeed effects of their media practices, John opens a path to discuss them as such.

Part of the problem has to do with the fact that effects seemed so definite, so clearly demarcated and measurable, too binary and overwhealming. The chosen metaphors, including bullets and needles (both with interesting meanings in the era of Covid and misinformation), didn't help the case of effects even if communication theories such as the agenda setting, or the cultivation theory already stated that media effects were more a matter of accumulation or steering rather than a direct behavioural change. And yet, Zuboff (2019) makes the case precisely that digital media are causing direct behavioural change. Perhaps it is time for us to talk seriously about effects and bring them back to the table, I'm glad John opened the gate and invited us in. While the contribution made by Anthropology is undeniable, we also need more bridges with communication and media theories, more interdisciplinary work, particularly in the digital age (see Pertierra, 2018).

Knowing John as I do (and I do know him very well), he practices his scholarship following Pierre's Bourdieu approach to sociology: as a "contact sport". His statements are bold and unapologetic. They are not always the tea for all the cups. They are, nevertheless, always forcing us to confront our own ideas, meten el dedo en la llaga, as we would say, religiously, in Spanish. But he is into something. If there is a time to revisit the idea of media effects perhaps this is it and that is why we need a better and stronger bridge between scholarship in media and anthropological inquiry.

As John, and many of the people reading this, I consider myself an ethnographer and therefore I have borrowed a lot of stories. Let me share a few in order to make a point. Many (many) years ago, in Mexico, I was part of a National research project on TV audiences funded by Televisa (the main media conglomerate). We carried out a gigantic fieldwork in the three main cities in the country. We did a telephonic survey, representative of the entire population, we organised 24 focus groups and carried out 64 in-depth interviews in each city.
As part of this project, once I was interviewing an upper-class woman in her late thirties. Halfway through the interview she asked me: "could you please turn off the recorder?". I did it and she told me: "Television has saved my life". She explained, almost in tears, how her marriage was a disaster and how "the only good thing in her life" was the TV. She kept the television on from morning to night and it was "her companion, her connection to the world, her way to still feel alive". If making you feel alive is not an effect, a lived experience, I don't know what it is. Reading John's account of media use in Sarawak, I remembered the multiple projects of indigenous and community radio I knew and was part during my undergraduate studies. All of these projects were convinced of the positive effects they could have in the community. It was a little paradox, on the one hand we believed in people's agency to "resist" mainstream media and, at the same time, we were convinced that communities needed to develop their own media in order to have precisely an effect on people.

John describes the "effects of media-related practices in people's social worlds" arguing that "these come in three main varieties –mediatising effects, worlding effects and derivative effects". These need to be discussed and perhaps refined (I'm sure more than one person will contest them). Nevertheless, the worlding effects that John describes became painfully clear with the pandemic. During lockdown media not only mediated, in some cases they became

the whole world and this will certainly have some derivations (for example, academic conferences will change).

John talks about how these worlding effects open "an arduous, but exciting, practice-theoretical task ahead of us: to trace the emergence of new social worlds driven by media practices" (p. 8). And I just realised that two of my previous studies could perfectly fit with this agenda: my study about cybersex and my work on selfies. While I will not develop them in full, it is enough to say that a collective and coherent agenda about worlding-building media practices could also bring exciting comparative paths because, as John clearly states: "we know far more about this question (of the effects) than we think, although we have yet to synthesise our collective findings". An idea that some successful projects have already demonstrated (Miller et. al. 2016)

I have only one caveat to this, we also need another and complementary path, to account for how media practices were shaped by the world (for lack of a better word) in the first place. John invites us to "rethink our obsession with the latest digital or datafication trend and adopt a more media historical outlook" (p. 10) an idea that I fully support. While it is clear that the world has become mediatised (and datafied and algorithmicfied), media practices had also been heavily influenced by historical, cultural and economic settings (something that we ethnographers are perfectly positioned to describe). And not all places are New York and Stockholm, there are others like Puno or San Juan Chamula. For an anthropological example of this point see González (2020).

In terms of mediatisation, even before the internet, we already had a richly mediated world, and many people were experiencing already a sort of "virtual space". We simply cannot deny that media had effects and perhaps the sum of them could be considered a process of mediatisation. Jesús Martín Barbero, a Latin American scholar (not always as visible as he should be in the canon) was the first to coin the concept of mediations. His main point was that we should not focus on media texts or the reception of media but on mediations, a very similar approach to what John calls media-related practices. In fact, aren't certain practices with media already media effects?

John is bringing back the game of effects, we should take his invitation seriously and perhaps, think about algorithmic governance and misinformation as bullets and needles to see where does that take us.

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Mark Pedelty (pedeltmh@umn.edu)   **25 Feb 2021**

Very exciting to see Jesús Martín Barbero referenced, and I very much see the connection to John's work, Edgar. His writing is declarative and catalytic, yet not polemic per se. Talking with him was a highlight, and his work stays with you. Carlos Monsiváis came to mind during my first quick read as well.

Will catch up soon, but wanted to second your shout out.

Mark

John Postill (john.postill@rmit.edu.au)   **26 Feb 2021**

Hi everyone

I'm very grateful to Veronica Barassi for co-organising and chairing this seminar, to Philipp Budka for all the work behind the scenes, and to Edgar Gomez for his thoughtful comments on my working paper.

It's a luxury to be able to have a proper scholarly conversation through the old-fashioned medium of email. Let's have a few more this year, pleez. Who needs another Zoom meeting, eh?

(NB. If you haven't had the chance to read the paper yet, you can find the PDF here: https://easaonline.org/networks/media/eseminars)

There's a lot to mull over in Edgar's rich comments, and I'm in danger of writing another paper in this email. To avoid that, I'll be as brief and spontaneous as I can, almost as if this was a verbal communication delivered 'in real time'.

1. I really appreciate Edgar's reminiscences about his trajectory as a communication scholar who specialises in the broad area known as digital ethnography, including his communication 101 experience and the research story about the woman in Mexico and how TV 'saved her life'. This could mean that my paper might have after all, if you pardon the word, the effect of getting us to reflect on our own conceptual repertoire and the often unconscious choices we make when framing our media and comm research. It certainly got me thinking about these matters.

2. Here I should stress, though, as I do in the paper, that my proposal is not about media effects in general but specifically about the effects of media *practices*. I'm saying this because I felt that in a number of places Edgar was slipping into a commentary on media effects as tra-

ditionally understood, that is, as referring to a given medium (e.g. TV, radio) or to media texts or media technologies. To be clear: I'm not advocating that we bring into media anthropology/ethnography media effects as normally understood but rather that we extend our current interest in the practice approach to a specific question: that of the effects of media-related practices.

3. This suggests to me, but I'm happy to hear other views, that the slippage between 'media effects' and 'the effects of media practices' is easy to make. Indeed, I often had to remind myself when researching and writing this paper that I was only after the effects of media practices. Is this a self-limiting imposition? It certainly is, but I don't see that as a problem, so long as we don't try to turn this inquiry into a TOE, a theory of everything, or into a new paradigm for the field. In other words, I'm not proposing a new paradigm for media and communication studies, as Nick Couldry (2004) does in his essay 'Theorising media and practice', which I cite in the paper, or indeed a new paradigm for media anthropology. My aim is simply to see if we can open up a new research avenue that piggy-rides on the research we're doing anyway on media-related practices out there in all kinds of social worlds. As I mention in the paper, I was surprised to find that media ethnographers often write about these effects, but rarely explicitly or directly. If we're already doing the work, why not be more upfront about it and compare our findings?

4. Towards the end of his comments, Edgar writes that he has 'one caveat' about my proposal. He suggests that 'we also need another and complementary path, to account for how media practices were shaped by the world (for lack of a better word) in the first place.' This is a really interesting point, that I'm sure we'll come back to in the remainder of the seminar. I sort of touch upon this in places, e.g. when discussing Yu's (2021) work on video-based activism in China when I suggest that we look at the effects and counter-effects of different practices within the same world, yet without falling into the kind of functionalism that practice theory is meant to overcome in the first place (see Postill 2010). (Perhaps Zizheng Yu himself could shed some light on this, given that he's on this list, no pressure though!). My concern here would be that we don't smuggle in 'society' or 'the system' when talking about 'the world' as a whole, the planet, as opposed to a specified social world.

5. Edgar's caveat is also relevant to my contention that both practice lumping (methodological holism) and practice splitting (methodological individualism) are, in principle, equally valid ways of asking questions about media-related effects. It depends on what you want to know. Is your research, for example, specifically about the effects of Netflix binge watching on family life in the UK, or is it about the effects of relatively old and new media practices (to be specified during fieldwork) on adolescent peer-group relations in South Korea? The former research project would require you to focus, at least some of the time, on Netflix-related practices in all their fuzziness and indeterminacy (see Hobart 2010). By contrast, the second project would be more 'media holistic', although it, too, would have moments in which both you and your research participants would be focused on a given media practice.

6. The toughest problem to crack, I suppose, is how to demonstrate empirically/ethnographically that either a single practice or a nexus/congeries of practices have had an effect on one's

research participants and their world. Did watching television kill my Sarawak hosts' long-established practice, aka tradition, of chatting in the longhouse gallery in the evening? Based on my observations in both self-described 'modern' and 'traditional' longhouses, as well as on archival research, interviews and informal conversations, I have to agree with my hosts that it did kill it. Was TV the only factor driving people from the communal areas to the semi-privacy of the family sitting rooms? Nope, it wasn't. There were surely other factors at play, too. But I would still suggest that the prime mover was not TV but rather *the daily practice of watching TV*. Not all (media) practices are born equal. Some will have a bigger local/group impact, if you'll excuse the i-word, than others.

Thanks again Edgar, and I really look forward to a lively discussion on this slippery problem.

It's over to Veronica now!

Mark Peterson (petersm2@miamioh.edu)   **26 Feb 2021**

Since John, Edgar Cruz and Mark Pedelty have all been so enthusiastic, I will play devil's advocate, or aging curmudgeon, and offer a less enthusiastic appraisal.

For two guys who have written together, edited together and read and commented on one another's stuff for over twenty years, it's amazing how differently John and I still think. About *effects*, for example. I recognize this paper as part of John's very important and thoughtful efforts to understand media and social change. I'm just not persuaded that "effects" is a particularly useful way to theorize about this.

For me, the problem with media effects is that it requires you to describe a corresponding cause. This is closely tied to the issue of agency. What destroyed the utility of the original media effects research was the attribution of agency to media technologies and content. Often, media effects research fed directly into moral panics about new media practices rather than teaching us anything interesting about those practices.

John is not, of course, seeking to revive media effects research; he seeks to write about the effects that new media practices have on other social practices. I understand this, but there are so many other ways to write about media and social change that reviving "effects" seems unnecessary.

But since John is determined—if only, as Edgar Cruz says, as an agent provocateur to provoke us into thinking more clearly about the topic instead of dismissing it out of hand, let me think about it for a moment.
I want to test John's argument by subjecting his examples to a syllogism:
Media practice x caused (possibly in association with other factors) y change (effect) in z.
This works well for his first example.
New practices for viewing television caused a change in local rules of politeness and hospitality.

Bingo. I completely buy it. This is an example of an effect of media practices.

In his response to Cruz, John writes "The toughest problem to crack, I suppose, is how to demonstrate empirically/ethnographically that either a single practice or a nexus/congeries of practices have had an effect on one's research participants and their world."

I agree but I think this problem is not so much with his ethnographic example as with some of the others late in the paper.

When we move on to his second formulation, "worlding effects," I'm lost. I have a very difficult time applying my formula to the examples in this category.

What exactly is the cause? The media practice of running around with other people in a virtual world? And the effect is… doing things in that a virtual world?

The virtual world example is reliant on Boellstorf, who looks at how people do new things in the environment of Second Life. That's all well and good but Boellstorff needs to be read here against someone like Thomas Malaby, who conducted ethnography at Linden Labs among the geeks who designed Second Life. True, as John says, "Second Life was not born fully formed in some nerd's mum's basement." Rather, it was born in a laboratory, created by professional designers who wanted it to enable all the things Boellstorf is talking about as part of what they hoped would be a profit-making venture.

I can see that new digital technologies are enabling nonprofessionals to co-create new kinds of virtual experiences. I'm not seeing a clear cause-and-effect relationship here.

As for his example of journalism, he and I seem to read Krause very differently. I think Krause is writing not about the effects of media practices, but rather the effects of changing political economies *on *media practices. In my reading, Krause is focused on describing changes in the social fields that sustains reporting as a journalistic practice, and sees shifts in capital and ownership as the primary causes for the decline of this practice, with state regulatory regimes and technological innovation as important secondary causes. So what I'm reading in Krause is:
Changes in media ownership and state regulation changed the social field of journalism so that it no longer strongly sustained the media practice of reporting.
Which is not what I understand John to be saying in his use of her as an example.

I've run out of writing time for today, so let me cut to the chase:
While I completely agree with John that there are situations where "effect" is a useful term to describe social change, as in his first example, many of his other examples seem to me to be more about what new digital technologies enable people to do, or how people appropriate new media into existing practices to create new ones. One could probably revise these to use a language of effects, but what do we gain by so doing?

Best

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Birgit Bräuchler (birgitbraeuchler@gmx.net)   **27 Feb 2021**

Hello everyone!

Thanks Veronica, Philipp and John for opening up this space to reflect on the use of the e-word in our anthropological research practices and analyses.

I can follow John's argument and I certainly think that the differentiation between media effects and the effects of media-related practices is an important one. However, I still do have my problems with the terminology. Why do we need to talk about 'effects'? Why do we need to reduce our studies to finding what 'effects' media or media-related practices have on our social worlds? And I know that John tried to anticipate that kind of questions in the first part of his paper sorry ;)

I just want to make a couple of brief points why I am not keen to frame our media research in terms of effects:

1) If you look at it from an etymological angle, the word effect (from latin effectus or old french efet) suggests completion, ending, (intended) result, which does not make much sense in relation to our constantly evolving social worlds, media worlds and media-related practices. Meriam-Webster even defines effects as 'something that inevitably follows an antecedent (such as a cause or agent)', which could not be further from anthropological notions of social dynamics and change.

2) What I also don't like about the word 'effect', and Edgar has indicated that in his response too, is the kind of unilinearity it suggests: media or media-related practices causing something. I don't agree. What comes first: media (effects) or media-related practices? I think what comes first is the way people adopt, adapt, integrate or reject specific media or media practices into their social worlds or other practices. So to talk about media effects or the effects of media-related practices automatically suggest hierarchy and precedence.

3) I would rather prefer to redirect our focus not on effects, but howmedia, media-related practices and other social practices and worlds are co-constitutive. That's an argument we developed in a volume on 'Theorising Media and Conflict' that Philipp and I edited last year, with excellent contributions of some list members (keen to hear your thoughts!) and an afterword by John (we discuss some of the examples John uses in that volume

too). In a nutshell, the argument is not how media (practices) change conflicts or how conflict impacts on media usage, but how media (practices) and conflict are co-constitutive.

4) Talking about effect also suggests homogenisation, as if every member of a social world is equally experiencing the same kind of 'effects'.

Keen to hear your thoughts!

All best
Birgit

John Postill (john.postill@rmit.edu.au)   **28 Feb 2021**

Many thanks to Mark Peterson and Birgit Bräuchler for your frank and robust critiques of my paper. Reading them makes me think that perhaps I should've listened to my concerned colleague after all and steered clear of the e-word.

On the other hand, it's still early in the conversation. Seminars are like sporting events, or like cooking pancakes: you never know how they will pan out.

I'll respond to Mark here and to Birgit in a separate email.

Let me focus on what I think is the thornier issue raised by Mark: the worlding (aka world-making) effects of certain media practices.

My fundamental point is uncontroversial, I hope, namely that some sets (or congeries) of media and other practices will have the overall effect of co-constituting new social worlds. How precisely they do that is an empirical question that requires a lot of blood, sweat and tears to answer, which doesn't mean we shouldn't try - if that's what we want to do. Again, I'm not proposing this idea as a new agenda or paradigm for the entire subfield, only as a question *some of us* (no obligation) could add to our practice-theoretical repertoire.

Take an example close to home: this very e-seminar we are in the process of collaboratively enacting via the internet. What sort of social thing is this seminar? Well, it's a specific kind of media-based practice that brings together a group of people scattered across various regions in the world, mostly people with an interest in the anthropology of media. Like all practices, it has a history, a life course; in this case, stretching back to its launch in 2004, the same year the Network was launched. So it's one of the Network's foundational practices, and as such has had foundational effects on how this world evolved over time. I would argue that this digital practice has had the long-term effect of co-constituting the Media Anthropology Network as we know it today, alongside other (mostly mediated) practices.

How can I make such a crudely causal, linear claim? Because I'm not using the term 'effect' in any sinister way, i.e. as a Trojan horse that will let in the positivist hordes, or as a 'reductionist' framework (see my response to Birgit in my next post).

Rather I'm using the term merely as way of asking what difference, if any, a given practice (or set of practices) have made to the making of a new social world. For example, one could speculate (pending empirical research) that one of the effects of the e-seminar has been to recruit new Network participants. In other words, it's had a recruiting effect. In turn, the addition of new members over time has surely had effects upon this social world, big and small, that ethnohistorical research could reveal. Is this notion of a recruiting effect in any way logically flawed or sinister? I don't think so.

John

Francisco Osorio (fosorio@uchile.cl)   **28 Feb 2021**

Thanks John and all the participants so far (hope more will come).

Let us bring another elephant in the room, the f-word, functionalism I mean. It became a media practice to say functionalism and positivism needed to be avoided. So, here we are, still discussing 19th century theory in 2021. Birgit is trying to escape by using the concept of co-constitutive. When we read most of our seminars, it seems that 1973 is the new most cited theoretical reference in the most cited book for us. But hermeneutics still feels like a proposal or inspiration (how often do we read in articles that the theory or methodology is based on thick description, entering many things in that cradle). Practice theory is another attempt (John is trying to sell this one to us. Good salesman by the way). German inspired system theory did not take over. Now we are exploring complex theory. We could guess AI concepts may have an impact on us along the way.

Following Mark's syllogism, functionalism proposes the following. To have a society in the future, we need to solve the problem of climate change (C). If we do not reduce carbon emissions, we will have no world at all, simple as that. That is our goal (to have a society for our children). We need something (A) to produce a new behaviour (B). A new practice is needed. A new set of rules. To change the game by changing the practice of the game (rules and things we do in terms of Wittgenstein). In classical functionalism A is an institution. B is the new behaviour that will cause the reduction in carbon emissions, therefore fulfilling our need as a world society. B cause the effect we weed. A cause B. In short, A produces B, that in terms produce the effect we need (C).

Functionalism needs three elements to work. It is bad reading the single "cause and effect" situation, for example, "to change society you need to change first". Sure, will say a functionalist, but how do you change first. The classical answer is that an institution produces a change in behaviour. That new behaviour, in term, produces the new society you are looking for.

I think Elihu Katz will be happy reading this (he is more like our Yoda, while John is our Mandalorian), now retired in Israel. In his book Media Events (1994) the subtitle is more important: the live broadcasting of history. In John's words, it is not the TV set the important bit, it is the practice of watching together the key element. Fast forward to 2021, it is not Zoom important, it is the practice of using Zoom that will produce a sort of change in society.

Thanks to all for the seminar and for the new comments that will come.

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Mark Peterson (petersm2@miamioh.edu)   **28 Feb 2021**

Dear Francisco,

I am not sure why John seems to think we threw out the baby with the bathwater and need to reconsider "effects," and I'm more confused by your efforts to bring back functionalism. Maybe we don't mean the same things by "functionalism"

So please excuse the following diagesis not as some form of "splaining" but as a genuine attempt to parse out our differences.

As I see it (and teach it) anthropology never abandoned the concept of *function*-- the idea that cultural systems *do *things like enhance social solidarity or pass on knowledge (And yes, some of these *can *be spoken of as "effects") as well as *mean *things.

When you refer not to "function" but "functionalism" I understand that term to refer to the series of theoretical paradigms that dominated anthropological work from the 1930s into the 1960s. Its dominant versions were the structural-functional and the cultural ecology. The former assumed that cultures were essentially closed systems in which every idea and practice in the sociocultural system functioned to help maintain the integrity of the system as a whole. Cultural ecology introduced a hierarchical principle, in which systems of economic production—the transformation of the materials of nature into the goods and services of society--had a significantly greater causal place in the system than social structures and cultural systems. Economic systems are the engines that drive sociocultural systems and are the foundation of a cause-and-effect system of social change.

When I read you linking "effects" and "functionalism" I am hearing an effort to revive this approach to causality.

I recognize that functionalism of either kind can pretty much explain anything. They are very effective theories in that sense. The cost is a considerable amount of reductionism, and a

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purely methodological approach to cultural relativism (since functionalists can tell you what's *really* going on here).

What anthropological theory as a whole we gained from functionalism was the awareness that social and cultural phenomena are interacting systems of ideas and practices, open systems that adapt to changes introduced by ecologies, environments or interaction with other social and cultural systems. My sense--if only from looking at textbooks every year as I prepare to teach my intro courses--is that most anthropologists are comfortable with this notion of systems and functions without the assumptions of a functionalist paradigm.

So I'm back to the question both Birgit and I separately asked:

What is the *value *of reviving "effects" as an explanatory concept in media anthropology? What is the value of reviving "functionalism" as an explanatory concept in media anthropology? How does either concept contribute to our greater understanding of media practices and their wider cultural and structural context?

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Nick Couldry (N.Couldry@lse.ac.uk)   **28 Feb 2021**

Dear colleagues
I read John's paper with great interest, and as this thread is developing fast and I want to get my two pennyworth in, I'll make some remarks, although a particularly busy weekend on non-work fronts means I'll have to be brief. I don't have time to respond to other's interesting comments, I am afraid.
First, I really like John's provocation. I think John is right that we often use quasi-effects language in talking about media, but, because of the taboo on explicit 'effects' language, this goes largely unregulated by wider discussion. John is trying to kick-start that regulatory discussion and I think that's valuable.
That said, the question by Lazarsfeld and Merton that John quotes me endorsing in my 2004 article ('What are the effects of the existence of media in our society?') was, as I read it, simply a signalling of the necessity for general puzzlement and exploration about how to think about the difference media make at a broad social level. The quote points crucially to a holistic macro-phenomenon ('the existence of media'), but if you re-scale it as John does to the level of 'individual practices', the risk is you open up questions about the linear effect of this or that particular practice that just may not be answerable. In any case, it wasn't my intention to suggest that such questions are, or should be, answerable, which is not to deny that John's re-scaled provocation may still be valuable. Indeed I really think it is valuable.
Moving to John's specific attempts to make those smaller-scale questions answerable, I am sceptical about whether the term 'social world' works here. The reason is similar to that

which John notes in citing Monika Krause on fields: sometimes the existence of a field of competition is clear, and sometimes it isn't. Sometimes, perhaps, I inhabit a distinct bounded social world via a particular practice, but very often I don't. And many types of practice (particularly dispersed ones) surely can't be tied to any particular social world: they float free of any such boundaries, but that does not make them any less practice-like.

As to 'mediatizing effects', my suggestion is that we need to do more work to clarify exactly what this could mean. 'Mediatization' is a word I've been involved in arguing for, not because like it, but because it seems necessary as what Friedrich Krotz originally called a 'meta-concept', to point to particular states of the social world which are characterized by varying levels of complexity and interrelatedness involving media technologies and institutions. As a meta-concept, mediatization is a state of the world, not an action. So I'm not sure I see how any one thing or process or practice can have a 'mediatizing effect': certainly it can plausibly contribute to a state of mediatization, but that does not mean there's an effect from that particular practice that can be isolated. What would it meant to say that practice X has a mediatizing effect, beyond saying that X is part of a mass of interlinked practices that together are becoming increasingly, in some sense, 'socially central'? The risk is that, by posing the question at the level of individual practices, you force us to make claims about social centrality that we might want to avoid.

Derivative effects seems to be a more modest and safe claim, but the question then is whether areas such as free software are best described In terms of such 'effects'. The core of the issue is how we understand the balance between the deep structures of eg free structure practice and the many forms of agency that actualize those structures in some sense: I am not yet convinced that talking about specific effects helps us here.

What I am convinced of is that John has done a valuable service in challenging us to clarify our descriptive and explanatory language when we talk about why media practices of various sorts matter. There is more work to do here, for sure, but it is very welcome that John is provoking us to open up this debate once more. Sincere thanks to John for lighting the fuse!
Nick

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John Postill (john.postill@rmit.edu.au)   **1 March 2021**

Thanks for that fresh round of posts, everyone!

It's our first week of the new academic year down here so I'll have to be as quick and brief as I can. I'll respond to Nick Couldry first, as I think this will help me address some of the earlier points raised by Birgit Braeuchler, Francisco Osorio and Mark A. Peterson, most notably the question of why we would want to study the effects of media practices in the first place, i.e. who needs the darned e-word?

I'm grateful to Nick for the elegant way in which he captures what I regard as an intriguing finding from my preliminary rereading of the media ethnographic literature, namely, as he puts it, that 'we often use quasi-effects language in talking about media, but, because of the taboo on explicit 'effects' language, this goes largely unregulated by wider discussion.' (I may have to borrow this phrase in a future draft of the paper.)

First, I wonder what people in this seminar who oppose the idea of studying the effects of media practices make of this quasi-effects language. Should we media ethnographers be more careful in future and avoid quasi-effects formulations, or is it enough to look the other way and continue to not draw attention to these usages? Alternatively, should we go in the other direction and be more explicit and thoughtful about the effects of media practices, like I am proposing in this paper?

For example, Faye Ginsburg (2002) has discussed how Inuit media practitioners have responded to 'the impact of [Western] representational practices on Inuit society and culture', arguing that 'the activity of media-making has helped to revive relations between generations and skills that had nearly been abandoned. The fact of their appearance on television on Inuit terms, inverts the usual hierarchy of values attached to the dominant culture's technology, conferring new prestige to Inuit "culture-making."' (Ginsburg 2002: 44).

I'm particularly interested in Ginsburg's use of the verb 'to help' when she writes that the activity (for our purposes, the practice) of media-making has '*helped* to revive relations etc'; I'm also interested in how this, in turn, has *conferred* 'new prestige to Inuit "culture-making". What are we to make of this quasi-effects language? Is there such a thing as an auxiliary effect (e.g. 'help revive') or even, god forgive, an agentive effect (e.g., to make up a phrase, 'the new practice empowered/enabled/allowed Inuit to' ....). Here I'm entering deep epistemological waters, for in common academic parlance we like to think of agency as an ability inherent to a self-governing person, namely the ability to act upon the world and change it. Agents, we tell ourselves, are no pushovers. They call the shots. They're not passive recipients of causal effects external to them, e.g. media texts, media technologies or even media practices. That would be too linear, too reductionist, we tell ourselves.

But what if one possible effect of a media practice is to stimulate or awaken the dormant agency of a person or group of people, provided certain conditions are met? Having seen the media ethnographic evidence, I refuse to believe that the indigenous media practices of the Inuit of Canada or the Kayapo of Brazil (Turner 2002) had no effect on the political agency of these groups. In other words, I'm suggesting that in some contexts new media practices, and indeed old ones, can have an 'agentive effect'. Perhaps Alfred Gell's (1988) work on art and agency could be usefully adapted to such instances?

Second, Nick says that I'm proposing that we see focus on the effects of individual media practices and that this might be an unanswerable question with dubious implications of linearity. For a start, how would we isolate the effects of a single media practice amid 'a mass of interlinked practices', as Nick puts it. In fact, what I've suggested (and I gave the example of Iban longhouses) is that we can look at both single media practices and/or at sets or congeries

of practices; it will depend on the aims of the research project. Yes, it may be an unanswerable question, but we won't know until we've tried. If we agree that the effects of media practices (single and/or combined) matter, then we could try to devise ethnographic methods to help us get to them.

One way in which we could try to isolate the effects of different media practices within the same social milieu would be through Giddens' (1984) version of 'time-geography', including his notion of everyday 'stations' (Postill 2010). So instead of asking the unwieldy question of what difference media practice X has made to the whole of social world Y, we could focus on what difference it has made to its main 'stations' (habitual settings of social life) and analyse these separately at first, before bringing them together later in the analysis.

As I mentioned in the paper, in the mid-1990s, the more 'modernised' Iban longhouses had an unevenly distributed web of media practices across time and space. In the mornings, many women would listen to the radio while farming or doing housework, while schoolchildren would read their textbooks at school, and so on. In the evenings, the whole family would typically gather around a TV set. It follows that one could research the differing mediation of local people's daily 'stations' and the long-term effects of media practices in the co-shaping and maintenance of those stations. Through biographical research one could ask before-and-after questions about, for instance, what difference watching TV had made to family life since this practice became routinised in, say, the mid-1980s. Typically these are quasi-effects questions in ethnographic research, but there's no reason why we can't refine our observations and interviews to make them proper effects questions, yet without falling into simplistic billiard-ball accounts of causality.

Questions like 'You've always had your dinner in this room?' and answers like 'Only since the TV broke down. As soon as we can afford to fix it, we'll go back in the other room so we can eat while we watch telly', combined with longitudinal observations in different households, can shed light on the effects of a single media practice upon family life. This does not mean that we can't also study the combined effects of various intersecting practices.

Finally, Nick argues that by pegging my effects proposal to social worlds, I'm missing out on all the (media) practices that don't belong neatly within any one social world, as well on all the things that we do out and about in our messy lives. I agree, which is why I said at the outset that this was only one possible way to study the effects of media practices. This suggests to me a potential follow-up paper on the dispersed effects of media practices, an idea that I only touch upon in the present paper.

At any rate, many thanks for those comments, Nick. This was meant to be a short answer, apologies everyone!

In sum, all media practices have effects. While some will be small, others will make a significant difference to people's lives. The latter are too important for us to leave them to the communication positivists just because we don't like the word effects. Think, for example, of how

the regular media practice of reading has changed your life, and that of your fellow academic types.

Michael Munnik (MunnikM@cardiff.ac.uk)   **1 March 2021**

Dear all,

Thanks, John, for this really stimulating paper and for all the comments that have come from it. The digital equivalent of my ears pricked up when this paper's title was proposed, as it's an issue I keep coming back to with my teaching, let alone my research. I teach a module on religion and the news for undergraduates in a Religious Studies disciplinary context, so they are coming at the materials mostly as neophytes. Though they're senior-year undergrads, they haven't had the benefit of a few years of core teaching to cultivate in them this aversion to the phrase "media effects".

This means it comes up frequently in essays and exam answers, and I am the one repetitively admonishing them to think "beyond a simple idea of the effects media have on people or society". Yet there is clearly something here they want to discuss - a folk-wisdom idea of the effect of reporting practices and media representations on a particular bounded group, which is a religious community in their case.

Is this then a dishonesty or a bait-and-switch? Am I at risk as their teacher, and are we at risk as academics generally, of confusing things by saying "don't think of it in terms of effects" when there are effects these media are having?

Yet I stumble, as others in this seminar have already stumbled, on the question of demonstration. How do we say that the effects we're describing are not the strict, measurable kind favoured by positivists, who will themselves beat our backs with the rod we've made because the metrics we use don't offer that kind of proof? Are we advocating a special, customised use of the word "effects" that we want to apply internally, with its ensuing vocabulary that John has started to sketch here? This doesn't satisfy me, because I'm sympathetic to Edgar's anti-disciplinarian stance and would want our findings and our conversations to be open to a wide range of scholars. Our vocabulary, then, needs to sync with how others would use or understand the terms.

I'm afraid I'm asking questions more than supplying further ideas. But I'm really enjoying this seminar and am keen to see where the conversation goes.

With thanks,
Michael

Dr. Michael Munnik FHEA
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Belinda Glover (belindaglover2000@yahoo.com)   **1 March 2021**

Dear Scholars.

Regarding the statement made byFrancisco, that "here we are still discussing 19th-century theory in 2021" mademe ponder on the relevance of discussing such a theory in 2021. It willsound somewhat not interesting to discuss such a theory in 2021 but I must saythat a lot has happened in 2020 which obviously should necessitate such adiscussion in 2021. Take, for example, the global pandemic where everything wasmoved online to enable physical distancing. Going online and using themedia/social media particularly during the pandemic may have produced certaineffects although, it was useful and necessary to use the media during theglobal pandemic. The media provided useful information on the pandemic but atthe same time produced some effects as well.

The effect I think was thecreation of the spiral of silence theory (propounded by German-political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann) where some minority groups in thesociety believed the coronavirus does not exist. Particularly in some parts ofAfrica due to different information that was given out at the peak of thepandemic from different media platforms. This minority group who does not believethe virus was real is not found in Africa alone but in other parts of the worldtoo. Therefore, can this effect be termed as one of the "Worlding effects" John was referring to?

Notwithstanding, their opinionson the virus as not being real were somewhat silent by the media, and theopinion of the media-dominated that the virus was real. This led to theillusion of consensus that the virus was real. Hence, they participated in thelockdown to "prevent social isolation" and punitive measures from the government.Nevertheless, I think discussing the effect currently (in 2021) is not out ofplace. Media effects will not go away so long as media is part and part andparcel of our every life. Hence, it is in place for John to remind us asresearchers of the issues of effect and even challenge us to feel free to callit effect and as well as continue to have a discussion around it.I look forward to receiving your thoughts.

Belinda.

Katrien Pype (katrien.pype@kuleuven.be)   **2 March 2021**

Dear all,
Dear John,

thank you for opening up this difficult conversation.

Some of my remarks will echo statements already formulated by other colleagues in this discussion. Nevertheless, I think it is worth it adding them/repeating them but from another angle.

I personally would feel less inclined to use the "e-word" as John provocatively writes, because I'm far more interested in meanings, and thus look into the hermeneutics. However, that does not mean that I'm blind to the performativity of media. Maybe the word "performativity" could be added to the discussion. Although, as I'm typing these words, I'm also hesitant, especially given the fact that most of us will agree that technological determinism is risky.

We surely agree that people engage with media production/consumption/circulation because they want them to "do" something in their lives. Yet, I would feel much more comfortable studying the effects that people want media to have in/on their lives, rather than studying "media effects" as such. There is a clear difference between the two: in the first; one studies how people think about the performativity of media, and how they act there upon. How people imagine media effects, prefigure these, and respond to the successes/failures of these attempts. In the second, the social scientist starts from the premise that media "do" things. Yet, the difficulty here arises: how do we study that? How do we provide "evidence" for this?

In the end, the reason why I would be reluctant to study "media effects" (or at least name it as such), is because of the risk of being reductionist; and added to that; the risk of research conclusions being hijacked by agencies and institutions that implement media in a variety of (social) media campaigns in order to produce a particular effect. While, as has already been said by some other colleagues: context is so important, and media can "do" what they do because various kinds of parameters "align" in order to generate a particular effect. Studying "media effects" risks narrowing the lens to some immediate visible change; rather than bringing various dimensions in conversation. I understand that John does not want to lose the complexity; yet, the word "effect" has exactly that ... effect ...

Finally, we may want to think about our publics, and think about the different kinds of language that we are using when addressing different publics. "Effect" is hampering us (anthropologists, always looking for various layers of meaning) in academic writing; but when we want to reach out to non-academic publics, then "effect" may be the right word. It allows us to grab their attention, and while we're having their attention, then we take them into more complex understandings.

So, based on these disparate thoughts, two questions for John:
1. what is your take on "the performativity" of media, and how do you see this relating to y/our understanding of "effects"?
2. And, what about differentiating between publics?

thanks again for opening up this conversation - it allows us to freewheel a bit, and to literally think out of the box,

Katrien

Hi All

I'm forwarding (with permission) this brief comment from Sebastian Gießmann (University of Siegen) who's unable to join us on this occasion owing to work obligations. He writes:

"...I have read your text thoroughly and with delight, and I would encourage you to be even more radical. What I have learnt in researching media practices is that they are almost equivalent to what Marcel Mauss' has called techniques of the body. So instead of the "effects" of media practice I would always emphasize the capacity of constitutive practices to mediate themselve(s). This is where their efficacy lies, and where anthropological mediation in media cultures happens each next first time. Stabilized media systems like "TV" thus become phenomena enacted by practices, and the empirical questions always is how these practices unfold, and what sort of technical mediation and organized agency they amount to."

I'll send some succinct responses to prior posts shortly.

John

Birgit Bräuchler wonders why we need to talk about the effects of media practices. She asks why we must 'reduce our studies to finding what 'effects' media or media-related practices have on our social worlds'.

As I think I've mentioned earlier, I don't regard this as reductionism. On the contrary, I see it as a potentially useful (to be confirmed) *addition* to the research kit of media researchers intrigued by this question, not to that of those researchers who - despite my best efforts to persuade them otherwise - still will have zero interest in the question of effects at the end of this seminar, or indeed those who will positively hate the very idea of effects till the end of time.

All I'm asking is that you don't reject the idea outright. Give it a bit of time before chucking it.

After all, we are great apes; like other such apes, we humans are totally dependent for our survival on both intuitive and culturally acquired notions of linear causality. That's how we develop from a young age, by gaining a greater understanding over time, through trial and error, of a wide range of effects: physical, social, psychological, etc. (On the 'cultural fabric of human causal cognition', see Bender and Beller 2019).

We academics, for instance, are constantly thinking about the potential effects of media practices, albeit informally: 'If I publish in these kinds of journals, how will this affect my career

prospects?'. 'This smartphone addiction is affecting my concentration. Perhaps I should get one of those crappy old mobiles. But will that affect my ability to function at work and move around with all these Covid restrictions?', and so on.

This hostility towards the very idea of effects by a number of seminar participants reminds me of Ricky Gervais' show Humanity, where he takes aim at people on Twitter who are offended by some of his tweets. He says it's like somebody who sees an ad for guitar lessons in the market square, calls the number and yells down the phone line: 'I don't want f***g guitar lessons!' That's okay, replies Gervais, guitar lessons are not for everybody, and that's absolutely fine. Just ignore them, they're not for you. The same goes for effects research, it won't be grist to everyone's mill.

Speaking of the effects of media practices as an addition (not a reduction), I don't think I'd actually want to do long-term fieldwork (whether onsite or remotely) *only* on the effects of media-related practices. If probably wouldn't make much practical sense, no pun intended. Before asking about effects you'd have to do all the usual cultural learning stuff, the old emic 'focus on what matters to your research participants, not to you'. Effects would be, for me, the icing on the cake, a bonus, a line of inquiry that you could launch in the final phase of fieldwork, once you have a firm grasp on the milieu you're in.

And some settings will work better than in others, e.g. those contexts where some people are seriously concerned about the deleterious effects of, say, gaming, or online poker, or binge TV streaming. etc. These people would have their own folk theories about the (negative) effects of media practices (as I think Katrien Pype is hinting at in her post). They might be good people to think with about this elusive problem.

Birgit also contends that the 'linear' idea that media practices have effects 'automatically suggests hierarchy and precedence'. Instead, she says, 'what comes first is the way people adopt, adapt, integrate or reject specific media or media practices into their social worlds or other practices.' But that would be, by Birgit's own logic, substituting one form of linearity for another. It's like the old anthropological preference for the idea of appropriation and strong dislike of the idea of diffusion (Postill 2006). My linearity is fine because it implies local agency, the diffusionists' linearity is not because it implies imperialist power and local passivity.

My response is that every human being, every artefact, every relationship, every practice, every elephant, every butterfly has effects upon the world. Media-related practices are no different. Some of these effects will be small and fleeting, e.g. the tiny rush we get when our Whatsapp post has been liked by people other than Fred the compulsive liker. By contrast, others will be big and lasting, e.g. the *cumulative effect* upon our lives and careers of having read countless academic texts. Are you saying that a longitudinal study of how reading academic texts has shaped/influenced/affected the lives of a cohort of middle-aged academics, for example, would be a waste of time?

Sorry, no time to address your other two points, Birgit, but many thanks for your mediated reading of my text, which I can assure you has had a linear effect on my thinking about these matters.

Who needs effects? We all do. In fact, we couldn't live without them.

John

Reference

Bender, A., & Beller, S. (2019). The cultural fabric of human causal cognition. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 14(6), 922-940.

Francisco Osorio (fosorio@uchile.cl)   **2 March 2021**

Dear Mark and all participants

Mark asks "what is the value of reviving 'effects' as an explanatory concept in media anthropology?" My reading of the discussion goes as follows: John says "Who needs effects? We all do. In fact, we couldn't live without them". Michael Munnik proposes that "our vocabulary needs to sync with how others would use or understand the terms". Belinda Glover argues that "media effects will not go away so long as media is part and part and parcel of our every life". Her example is the coronavirus situation. Katrien Pype argues that media effect follower "starts from the premise that media 'do' things". Therefore, she prefers the concept effects. In her words "how people think about the performative of media, and how they act there upon".

Nick makes the point that John's challenge is good for us: it makes us think about media anthropology. Nick also found problems in John's proposal. The problem is jumping from higher level concepts to individual practices. In other words, John premises are not perfectly aligned with his empirical findings or examples. A common problem of practice theory still. John's reply to Nick comments shows the point. John remains in the example, the case, the one practice and tries reverse engineering the wider theoretical point. But he is not there yet.

My proposal is that our seminar can be framed in a wider context. Science is under attack by fake news and politicians. Social sciences and humanities are struggling all over (often we read the title 'who needs social scientists'). The effect language is taboo among us because from the late 20th century anthropology tries to escape from the original sin: to become social science. Many natural scientists support SSH, but others do not. Many decision makers are more willing to give grants to natural science than to us. Yes, we have also failed. No, we do not need to revive 19th theory and concepts. We just need our media anthropology seminars.

Francisco Osorio
Universidad de Chile

Elisabetta Costa (e.i.g.costa@rug.nl)   **2 March 2021**

Hello all,

Thank you for this rich conversation. I am thrilled to see that John's paper is provoking all these comments. I have tried to read them all, and I hope I have not missed any important details.

I find John's provocation fruitful. I agree with him when he argues that media anthropologists have often looked for the effects of media practices. I think that they have simply used different terms to convey the idea of causality and linearity. I now recall the following: impact, influence, consequences, outcome, results; helping to (see Ginsburg in John's comment), conferring, affecting, producing, causing, influencing, etc… John mentions other terms in his paper, and I am sure there are many more.

My understanding is that all these nouns and verbs have been used interchangeably most of the time. They all imply some sort of causality and linearity. They have been used to argue that media practices have caused a change. It is the thick description of each ethnographic study that shows what type of change/effect/consequence/impact is taking place and what role specific media practices play in it. It is not the use of word effect vs consequences, I believe. The main difference between 'effect' and other terms is that 'effect' is charged with a negative meaning because of its history in media studies, the others are not.

Thus, I agree with Mark that the question to ask is 'what do we gain to use the category of effect?' I suggest that John's proposal can become stronger if he clarifies in which ways the category of 'effect' is different from 'impact' or 'consequence'. If we get rid of the negative meanings associated with the term 'effect' (see, for example, Birgit's points on homogenization and notion of complete ending), these concepts now seem to be quite similar to each other.

Thank you, John and all

All the best,

Elisabetta Costa,
Assistant Professor
Department of Media and Journalism
University of Groningen

Mark Pedelty (pedeltmh@umn.edu)   **2 March 2021**

Hi All,

To start, this seems like a good time to give a big shout out to John as the founding leader of one of the first and finest digitally networked seminar series. As an interdisciplinary scholar, I have experienced many attempts to create something like this in other disciplines and associations, the first wave coming about 8-10 years after medianthro, as environmental crisis finally started gaining practical attention, and now 8-10 years after that as COVID finally demonstrates that it is needed and possible. So many associations make perfect the enemy of the good, and fail. The Media Anthro network has been really, really good and an indispensable connection for many of us to a world of media anthropologists. That did not happen on its own. It took forethought, elbow grease, creativity, and care, and John demonstrated all of those qualities in leading the formation and for many years the management of this list, conference, and seminar series. And, to segue to his paper, that is also the kind of person that grapples with things like media "effects" in earnest. Outside "the seminar" (speaking here of the broader concept) is world of conditioning infrastructures and practices and worlds that our poetics only grasp in ghost-like form. Some of the effects literatures, theory, and terms that John suggests revisiting and critically employing can indeed also help us to understand not only how others' mediated/mediatised worlds work, but also how this one has worked.

I see in John's response and the original article a more ecological model for media (John, correct me if that is incorrect). That is: explanatory, relational, systemic, and holistic. That is not to say totalizing, linear, and reductionistic. The opposite, in fact. It engages complexity, both/and recognition, and nuance. In the scholar-critic mode, things often devolve into persuasive rhetoric that ironically replicates the reductionism of positivism, especially when working hard to avoid taboo terms like "effects." One tries to create a singular, air tight argument and others (a few colleagues) determine if it feels cogent in relation to their worldview and epistemological assumptions. Complexity can get lost, as can worlds outside our rhetorics. Expunging what feel like tired and "problematic" terms and theoretical articulations often does little to actually advance knowledge, but it is kind of baked into the Oedipal design of the academy, where each new generation of humanists seeks to demonstrate how their terms are more salient in order to gain a foothold. I like John's approach of recognizing the polysemic nature of all widely used terms, especially a term that is associated with a few fields, literatures, and theories AND a fairly basic part of the lexicon more generally: effect. Assuming that every word we utter can be reduced to one single etymological story (e.g., the simplistic functionalism being ascribed to all utterances of "effects"), is not that different than assuming that we can somehow identify that one single media form "caused" an outcome. In both cases, it is inaccurate and limiting.

Of course, no single text or even constellation of media can ever be demonstrated to cause a policy outcome, behavior, institutional structure, ideology, etc., but the opposite view, the idea that our deep media enculturation (e.g., seeing thousands of ads per day) is neutral or just one undifferentiated part of existence, seems equally inaccurate. There are effects. Those that probe this empirically find it quite often, from the "possible selves" literatures that show how children form professional and other identities, onward to agenda-setting in (and in relation to) policy. As ethnographers, we see that our deep imbrication into a highly mediated system of consumption, politics, ecology, etc. has an empirical connection (yes, I used "empirical," because that is clearly part of the argument to rationalize fieldwork, even in a post-structural-

ist academy where we think of ethnography in more intersubjective terms: "I was there a long time, engaged in practices, and listened closely"). In sum, I think John makes a good argument for easing away from the dialectical tendency to replace one set of metaphors (i.e., words) with another as if that is our sole goal. Nothing feels more like skimming the surface to me than the parlour game of wholesale rhetorical word replacement. In the Foucauldian argumentative style of saying, "it is not this (old term), but rather that (new term)" we also engage in a this vs. that instead of a both/and embrace of complexity. So, yes, I agree that "effects" has its place and the valuation should be in that application, not in its wholesale acceptance or rejection. Same goes for the effects literatures and fields, which we should not strawperson, as a few folks have pointed out here. Like everything we do, those critical literatures grasp at a sliver of truth, at best. While epistemological review certainly has its place, the wholesale rejection of an entire field of theory and research for sake of seeing it from the distance as a simplified gestalt can be problematic. Admittedly, I find much of what I have read in the effects literatures limited, but have encountered pieces that resonate with the evidence. For example, as simplistic as his argument was, I still find Chomsky's take on media as accurate, meaningful, and useful as later work that problematized the more "one-way" effects arguments of an earlier era. There are elements there worth revisiting as such "vulgar" realities as powerful states, corporations, capital, upper classes, patriarchy and racial hegemonies that often got a bit lost in a cloud of literatures that saw their main role as that of problematizing more declarative and explanatory modes of research.

Summarizing the point above, I am not sure that spending significant time arguing for one of the following as more meaningful, accurate, or cogent, in abstract terms: "media-related practices" vs. "media-oriented practices." Both/and. One might work better in one context, another in another context, neither in most contexts ("there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio..."). On page 3, John argues that "there's no need to choose between the two terms." I could not agree more.

I've been struggling with this question when dealing with environmental musicianship, media, movements, and policy. Something akin to "effects" have been slapping me in my face, both in terms of the failure to connect, and in at least one striking case, a very clear relationship between media and a visceral, policy-making "effects" (in recognition of the point above re ecological complexity). I have not found much need for the word in writing about those cases, but it is perfectly fair to describe it in terms of media effects (and affects).

In relation to media outcomes as well as research--not to mention media production as a form of arts-based and action research--I do think that the sciences and arts are a bit better at recognizing the power of *Failure* and *Ignorance* in their work, which are, not coincidentally, two very good books by scientist Stuart Firestein. Scientists and artists both have to produce results with some sort of demonstrably endogenous "effect." Our work is often harder, given the complex and symbolic worlds we study, but is it possible that we play it both ways in the humanities, arguing against "effects" as a word and concept and then simply producing a parallel set of arguments in a more evasive "poetics." We want to make claims and claim it all matters, but we dare not make an argument that opens itself up to external verification or validation. The pure, self-contained, airtight rhetorical argument is the safest, even if--and per-

haps especially if--it fails to connect to anything outside of itself. I see here John arguing for the complexities and messiness of connection to actual impacts, explanation, force, effects, etc. Again, John, do correct me if I am going way off base.

After reading John's provocative piece (in a good way) and the thoughtful responses since, I have been thinking about all the different words and theories we evoke whenever we claim that media "matter" and that our work is worth doing. What I find compelling in evaluating various claims is rarely the discourse that remains solely in the circular economy of the theoretical rhetoric, but rather how explanations and other arguments work relative to the evidence. Again, might sound positivistic, but instead I am thinking more in terms of praxis (theory in turn generated out forms of engagement that go beyond intertextual reference). What if we, as humanists, post-humanists, or even social scientists were to ourselves engage in forms of participant observation so deeply engaged in the worlds that we study that we too would be expected to produce some sort of positive "effect" that goes beyond the production of published words? It is in that sense that I really find John's argument exciting and a more fitting correction to the more solipsistic extremes evidenced in the poststructural turn. In fact, it seems to be what a lot of students and early career scholars are wanting and doing, and I find this concerted turn toward critical engagement very exciting.

To return to the starting point: thanks, John!

Mark

Debra Vidali (debra.vidali@emory.edu)   **2 March 2021**

A resounding yes to Mark's praise and contextualization of John's work and this conversation! Lots of words can and should be used for investigating and assessing "effects"without splitting up into 'good theory' and 'bad theory' camps as if we're still in the 70s: Reverberations, echoes, impacts, effects, resonances, connections, layered meanings and motivations, webs, etc. Love John's mic drop "It's like the old anthropological preference for the idea of appropriation and strong dislike of the idea of diffusion (Postill 2006)."
Giant h/t to John!!!!!!

Debra Spitulnik Vidali, PhD
Associate Professor | Director of Undergraduate Research | Department of Anthropology
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Mark Hobart (mark.hobart@gmail.com)   **2 March 2021**

Dear All

Thank you, John, for your thoughts on media practices and being brave enough to start the hare of media effects running. To judge by the response, he has touched a nerve. I wonder though whether reflecting briefly on media practices might prove helpful.

First I would like to ask John why has he chosen to concentrate on effects to the exclusion of the contentious issue of causation? As it stands, it is a little like studying dogs' tails but ignoring the dogs that wag them. Social scientific explanation ranges across the rival claims of causes or functions to the more humanist emphasis on reasons, intentions or meanings. As it is clumsy (if not a category mistake) to speak of the effects of reasons or meanings, perhaps John could clarify whether interpretation has any role in his argument, be it by the participants or their analysts?

Francisco and Nick have already raised questions about the concept of social worlds. Its implicit symbolic interactionism raises the spectre, as John notes, of the individualism/ collectivism dichotomy that recourse to practice was designed to avoid. Defining social worlds by 'the limits of effective communication', applied to media might risk circularity, quite apart from Strauss's definition presupposing a transmission model and being so broad and ambiguous as to be vacuous (e.g. 1978: 121).

Given his concern with practice, could John also clarify two ostensibly surprising omissions? The first is Foucault's later work, given that it was about practice. Significantly it addresses not only the practices by which humans are constituted as subjects (media practices being a prime example), but also the changing history of those practices by which scholars set about analyzing their subjects and objects of study.

The second is the absence of any reference to Cultural Studies, which prima facie is congenial to an ethnographic approach to practice. For example, the notion of articulation is a way of analyzing differences between overlapping social practices. As a broader framework it also invites a critical analysis of polities, societies or cultures as the inherently contested, ever-shifting outcome of practices of articulation. This offers one answer to John's intuition about effects. Our subjects of study explain and interpret the world. However they do so in ways that presumably partly overlap but also differ in degree, kind and circumstance from ours. How we re-articulate such accounts is, of course, the much-rehearsed issue of cultural translation. As John cites me on imputing effects to Balinese television-viewing, on this view I would be engaged in a compound reticulation of their ideas.

This discussion still presumes articulations to be relatively structured and treats practice as more or less supplementary. How articulations come about remains unclear. People rarely attribute causes, intentions or meaning through the mysterious working of collective representations. They tend to muse over, discuss and invoke previous practices (habitus) as antecedent authority in divergent ways. As Victor Turner noted (1967), witchcraft accusations do not occur mechanically, but are the outcome of often lengthy discussion and argument under conditions of uncertainty.

What happens if we rethink articulation as practice? The pragmatist philosopher Nelson Goodman argued that representing transforms what it claims faithfully to preserve (1968: 27-31). We represent something as something else to someone on some occasion for some purpose. The unitary appearance of articulations fragments as soon as we examine carefully the circumstances under which people comment, assert, question, argue, doubt or disagree over how to understand what is going on. Even supposedly definitive statements about effects are enunciations that some person or group makes for some purpose. You do something in representing something as.

On this account, anthropologists are doing precisely this through their congeries of practices of selecting, interpreting, translating, reframing and textualizing other people's situated practices. Coherence emerges from practices of making sense—whether our subjects' or ours—a point Marvin Harris made about Turner's reliance on Muchono, the ultimate well-informed Ndembu informant (1969: 514-68). I doubt the assumption stands up to scrutiny that our subjects (and our students, as Michael notes) have folk beliefs, while we have knowledge. My occasional study of colleagues' practices in their professional and personal lives around ideas about causation and much else suggests as much a gallimaufry as a rigorous epistemological paradigm. How many anthropologists can outline straight off the major theories of causation in Western thinking? Our Gramscian good sense seems muddled up with a fair dose of common sense. How we represent other people's ideas of cause, meaning, agency etc., which may well be distinct and different, is further complicated by having to extrapolate provisional genealogies of argument from conflicting and contradictory accounts (e.g. Hobart 2010). The 'native point of view' involves tacit, but spurious, totalizing.

My defence of John's sense that some notion of effects is ineluctable may not please him. Ignoring the debates around causation, meaning and intention does not bode well though for a theoretically well-grounded argument. And attention to effects seems to have sidelined critical discussion of media practices, which is sorely needed. However, if my account of media practices has any merit, it opens a can of worms.

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Vincenzo Cavallo (vincenzo@culturalvideo.org)　　　　　　**2 March 2021**

Hi all

This conversation reminds me of the old discussion between qualitative vs. quantitative approach, I think John is just stating the obvious in order to remind researchers of the importance of keeping their mind as much open as possible. Research approaches are not religions, the real enemy is called DOGMA. The study on the effects just as the quantitative approach shall complement the emic/cultural/critical deconstructive/post colonial qualitative approach. The question is what shall come first the eggs or the chicken? The answer for me is whatever you like as long as you don't forget that without chicken you can't get eggs and that eggs come from chickens and that chickens make eggs in a different way depending on the context they live and this is indisputable ;-)

Have a nice day, afternoon, evening
Best

Mark Deuze (deuzemjp@yahoo.com)　　　　　　　　　　**3 March 2021**

Dear friends and colleagues,

What an inspiring seminar! For many years I have marvelled at the debates on this list, hardly - if ever - participating other than listening in. John's provocation to consider media-related practices as having (some) effects is a welcome one, from my point of view. After studying the various posts in the discussion, please consider some additional throughts on this matter. By way of context: I come to this topic from just having finished a new edition of the late Denis McQuail's handbook on Media & Mass Communication Theory (published by Sage last year), whereby I thoroughly rewrote two chapters on the (history and development of) media effects theory and research. To quote Denis' original words: 'the entire study of media and mass communication is based on the assumption that the media have significant effects on people's feelings, opinions, attitudes and behaviours, yet there is little agreement on the nature and extent of these assumed effects' (505).

In working on this book over a period of roughly 8 years - and coming to it from doing a PhD in the social sciences, yet working as a professor in the humanities, having taught in both departments on different continents - I have learned that it is crucial to recognise that scholars from both the humanities and social sciences are to some extent inspired by notions of media as being powerful and having some kind of influence. The difference, perhaps, is that social scientists have designed an entire discipline around this assumption to test its validity, generally with limited (but not insignificant!) success, whereas their friends in the humanities tend to rely on the self-evidentiary nature of media effects to focus attention on appropriation, agency, and meaning-making. Both are deeply important perspectives to understand our media.

Especially in a world today where we are all stuck at home, living among multiple screens, trying to make sense of our 'media lives' in the context of a global pandemic and parallel infodemic, it is not unimportant to consider the effects of media-related practices. Rather than debating the merit or value of the term 'effects' (or influence, impact, consequence), I would like to turn to the question of what we - what the discipline of media studies - can do with the powerful role media play in everyday life, and in the functioning of society and its institutions.

One approach that has been particularly inspiring for me while working on Denis' book, was proposed by Sabina Mihelj and James Stanyer in 2019. Based on an extensive review of media and communication scholarship published between 1951 and 2015, they developed a distinction between two main approaches that cut across the literature: media as an agent of social change, and media as an environment for social change. They conclude that publications bridging the two approaches are still quite rare, and advocate an integrated approach, suggesting research with an emphasis on processes as opposed to outcomes of media and mass communication, as this would be specifically suited to 'investigating the contingent, unpredictable, and multidirectional nature of contemporary change' (Mihelj and Stanyer, 2019: 496).
As has been mentioned by several listmembers: we need integrative approaches that cut across disciplines, rather than boundary work, if we want our discipline and work to - as Mark Pedelty articulated - have effect, to matter.

In conclusion, I was inspired by the list discussion to see if I could frame the collective literature on humanities- and social scientific-based approaches to media effects (broadly conceived) in terms of of John's original essay, the subsequent list exchange, and the proposal of Mihelj and Stanyer for an integrative approach. In doing so, I would argue that to talk about media 'effects' means we are (empirically) looking at media exposure, whereas a focus on the relational or otherwise co-constitutive role of media considers media as practice(s). Additionally, both media as practice and exposure to media can be considered as either an agent of social change, or as an environment for social change. This seems to produce two axes along which we can (admittedly simplistically) plot a lot of the historical theorizing on the relative power of media. See the figure I hastily drew below.
I hope this contributes somewhat to the on-going conversation. Thanks to John and all for your continued inspiration!

Stay safe,

Mark Deuze
University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Mihelj, S. and Stanyer, J. (2019) 'Theorizing media, communication and social change: towards a processual approach', Media, Culture & Society, 41(4): 482–501.

PS: In case the figure did not come across, I posted it on my blog FYI:A Model of Media as both Agent of and Environment for Social Change

Michael Munnik worries that if we media ethnographers were to begin to describe the effects of media practices in 'a special, customised' way this may land us in two soups: (a) the positivists will be on our case for not studying effects properly, i.e. through strict, quantifiable measures, and (b) we'll end up talking to ourselves in a cant that others won't be able to understand.

But we've already been talking for many years about the effects of media practices in ways that are quite distinct from those of our positivist brethren, yet not particularly arcane or 'customised'. It's simply that we haven't yet reflected on this habit or set out to develop the notion that media practices have effects upon the world. Take this key passage in the introduction to the media anthropology reader Media Worlds, a textbook that I mention in my paper:

Although the authors all situate their work in particular historical moments and political economies, producing what Purnima Mankekar aptly calls "conjunctural ethnography" (1999: 49), the different kinds of media practices represented in this volume can be placed on a sociopolitical continuum reflected in the different sections of the book. On one end are the more classic formations of mass media produced through large governmental and commercial institutions intent on constituting modern citizens and consumers. [...] This work assumes some social segregation between producers and audiences and tracks the often unstable relation between intention and *effects* (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002: 7, my emphasis).

Alas, the authors then move on to another matter, leaving this tantalising connection between intention and effects floating in mid-air. Their text is written, by the way, in a style that is reasonably accessible to an interdisciplinary readership rather than in an opaque postmodern lingo. So we certainly have the language to push this line of inquiry further, and we're definitely not beholden to our estranged positivist cousins. We're more than capable of doing our own thing, or indeed to collaborate with the quants brigade should we choose to. They say we're sloppy, we say we're supple. They say they're scientific, we say they're scientistic, but we should be able to talk across the fence sometimes, especially when it comes to sociocultural effects.

This brings me to Elisabetta Costa's remark that I would have a stronger case if I clarified how the notion of 'effect' is different form that of 'impact' or 'consequence'. To elaborate on something I said earlier, to me effects is just a punchy, economical way of asking what difference, if any, something made to the particular social group or world(s) we're studying. Difference according to whom? Well, as always, to both our research participants (emic viewpoint) and ourselves, the ethnographers (hybrid emic/etic viewpoint). But if you need to know, I'm fine with the common, everyday understanding of the English word 'effect', i.e. 'the result of a particular influence' (Cambridge Dictionary).

I don't think the way forward is to get caught up in definitional debates, less still to standardise and police 'correct' language usage. Instead, it's more helpful for us qualitative types to revisit our own and others' writings on the effects/impacts/consequences/results of (sets of) me-

dia practices to take stock of what we already know, and don't know, about this topic, so that we can think of where to go next.

These words are all imperfect, but they are useful tools for research and theorisation, alongside other tools, including the causes dog to the effects tail, to recall Mark Hobart's canine image (which I'll address tomorrow). It may be perfectly possible to study the effects of, say, the practice of video gaming, without using the e-word. But it'll be very difficult not to use any of its close cognates, rather like writing an English novel without using the letter 'e'. As Elisabetta says, the word effects is the most problematic of the lot, but even so, we anthros still manage to quietly slip it into our writings when we need to, as we saw in the Ginsburg et al example above.

Self-censoring or banning words that we don't like is seldom a good move, especially for us whose job it is to try to understand highly complex phenomena. For instance, I don't particularly like the noun 'affect' (there's something affected, pretentious about it, to my ears) but I'm not going to throw it away, for I could well be wrong about it and it may come in handy one day. (On the other hand, I love the verb 'to affect', of course).

In sum, let's reclaim the word effects! Say it loud, say it proud: I love the word effects!

It's a beautiful, universal, hugely versatile word - the Swiss army knife of causation words. More importantly, it's a popular, democratic, prole word that everyone can understand (unlike, say, the somewhat elitist affect).

And no, it doesn't homogenise the world. On the contrary, it's a normatively neutral term that helps you document an endless range of phenomena, a powerful search engine that is not owned by a tech giant.

John

Zizheng Yu (YuZ8@cardiff.ac.uk)   **4 March 2021**

Dear John and other scholars,

Thank you very much John for inviting me to this seminar (especially in the form of a traditional mailing list that we should not ignore). Through your email discussions, I have a deeper understanding of media-related practices (and the effects of media practices).

John invites us to discuss the effects of media practices in people's social worlds - not the "effects of radio, television or software, but rather to the effects of listening to the radio, watching television or coding" (p.4) in his article, I very agree with this point. John's discussion of the effects of media practices can be seen as another "turn" in the study of media, communication and social movements (in addition to the practice turn proposed by Couldry).

I am very interested in the three effects (mediatising effects, worlding effects and derivative effects) John mentioned. In the "worlding effects" section, John cites my research on consumer video activism in China and suggests that we should look at the effects and counter-effects of different practices within the same world, which I fully support. I would like to take this opportunity to explain this consumer video activism example further based on John. According to my research findings (in the consumer activist space in China), by uploading short video evidence to (short-video-based social media platforms) SVB platforms, Chinese consumers can bring increased attention —including that of the media and government departments—to bear on their experiences and demands. Thus, with the aid of media coverage and government intervention, businesses are forced to admit their faults and compensate consumers accordingly. As John indicates, the media practices of Chinese consumers (SVB consumer activism) not only helped them successfully get back the corresponding compensation from businesses (effects) but also aroused the countermeasures of businesses, such as ghost commenting, monitoring consumer opinion 24-hour-a-day on SVB platforms (countereffects). These are only part of the effects and countereffects of SVB consumer activism. Other effects and countereffects include that the SVB consumer activism has become a repertoire of contention imitated by other Chinese consumers; it has caused many Chinese media to start using SVB platforms as their primary news source.

I strongly agree with Edgar and other scholars that media practices had been heavily influenced by historical, cultural, and economic settings. As every one of us, each media practice is unique and deeply influenced by its own "growth environment". We must shed light on the historical, cultural, economic, and other factors behind them and their effects (mediatising effects, worlding effects and derivative effects) if we want to understand them truly.

Thanks again to John and everyone!

Best regards
Zizheng Yu

John Postill (john.postill rmit.edu.au)   **4 March 2021**

In his inimitable style, Mark Hobart has identified a number of omissions in my paper. This may sound both out of character and self-sabotaging but I have to largely agree with him. In fact, I think an expanded version of Mark's post would make a terrific working paper in this seminar series :)

His comments make me think that a revised title of this paper could be 'Media practices and their effects'.

This title would give logical precedence to media practices, although I suppose it's not as catchy as the original working title. In the revised paper I would add a discussion of theories of causation (the dog's body) and effects (the wagging tail). It would be like a zoologist writ-

ing a paper titled 'Dogs and their wagging tales' rather her earlier attempt at writing on 'The wagging tails of dogs'.

Why media practices and their effects? Because, as Mark says, there's still a fair amount of epistemological work to be done on media(-related) practices, an endeavour that got going in media anthropology in the mid-2000s leading to the volume Theorising Media and Practice (Braeuchler and Postill 2010). Indeed my original idea for this paper was to take stock of what's changed in media anthro in the decade since the publication of that book, as well as in the area of social practice theory, esp. Hui et al 2017, and to make connections between the two. Somehow the paper morphed into a thought experiment into the effects of media practices, almost as if in a fever dream (or nightmare).

I'm not equipped right now to respond to Mark's points about articulation and the late Foucault, but I'll definitely look them up in the coming weeks when revising the paper for publication. I can, however, address Mark's following remark: 'Social scientific explanation ranges across the rival claims of causes or functions to the more humanist emphasis on reasons, intentions or meanings. As it is clumsy (if not a category mistake) to speak of the effects of reasons or meanings, perhaps John could clarify whether interpretation has any role in his argument, be it by the participants or their analysts?'

This question goes to the heart of the deep social science vs. humanities divide that has come up a number of times during this seminar, e.g. in Francisco Osorio's and Mark Deuze's contributions. The answer is 'Yes', interpretation has a central role to play in my argument, both the interpretive practices of research participants and of the academic analyst. This is because our participants' dog-and-tail interpretations of their own (media) practices and their effects are central to my proposal.

It's obviously not enough to come back from the field and say that parents were having a moral panic, or at least a bit of a wobble, about their children's media practice X. We'd need to investigate, as Mark himself has done so effectively (oops, sorry about e-word) in his work on what his Balinese research participants made of televised Balinese theatre in the late C20 (e.g. Hobart 2010). He does so through a discussion of local practices and categories of commenting and analysing TV theatre that only partially overlap with Euro-American ones. This is in stark opposition to Geertz's hermeneutic, 'culture as text' approach in his famous Balinese cockfighting essay - which, according to Mark, and I agree, ignores local interpretive practices.

So you can have it both ways: you can mix your social science with your humanities, ask effects-of-practices questions that your participants will help you explore through their own discursive practices. This will be part of a wide-ranging ethnographic exploration of their media-related practices, including the slippery question of causation (the dog's body, to put it politely).

John

I have to thank Katrien Pype for adding the concept of performativity to the mix, a concept I've often encountered in the ritual as well as social movements literature -- mainly linked to Judith Butler -- but don't recall having used in my own work. (Or if I did use it, I probably didn't inhale.)

On first inspection, the notion of performativity appears to be compatible with my aim of thinking more carefully about media practices and their effects. For starters, the anthropologist Jill Cavanaugh (2015) follows Austin (1962) in defining performativity as 'the power of language to effect change in the world'. Again, she seems to have no problem with the e-word.

'Language', continues Cavanaugh (2015), 'does not simply describe the world but may instead (or also) function as a form of social action.'

This author then goes on to say that '[f]ollowing Butler, the concept of performativity has been richly explored in anthropological studies of gender and sexuality. Scholars of ritual have also used the concept of performative action and performativity very productively, looking at how rituals work performatively to have *effects* on the world' (Cavanaugh 2015, my emphasis).

That pesky little word again, effects. As I argue in the paper, we media anthros have to stop associating effects exclusively with the US mass communication positivists, as if they owned this term. It has a long pedigree in, for instance, anthropological studies of ritual and performance, e.g. the effects of rites of passage in producing persons and groups.

Moreover, the concept of performativity appears to have been put to good use in a recent social movements and media practices book by Foellmer et al (2018). They write:

'[B]y linking Austin's and Butler's models of performativity to the concept of corporeal and hence theatrical performativity we are able to understand relations between actors and publics in a non-teleological way and distinct from normative assumptions. Drawing on the notion of theatrical performativity, we can address a diverse range of actions that involve audiences and actors in an intermittent, fluid or fragile fashion, including actions that fail or are meant to fail.'

This looks promising to me, but I've only just found it. I guess I'll add it to my growing reading list...

What did you have in mind when you introduced performativity, Katrien? Any particular empirical examples?

John

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Kerstin B. Andersson (tinni.andersson telia.com)   **5 March 2021**

Hi John and everyone.

Thanks for your interesting paper, John. I will give a very brief answer, due to lack of time. I have to tell you that I agree fully with Mark, Birgit and others that are skeptical to you use of the term "effect". I think that the argument is reductionist. As Mark states, effects implies a causality, a one way relationship, stating that a media leads to certain configurations. In my reading, the correlation between media, people, society, culture is much more complex and dynamic and I prefer to see it as processes, both in time and over time.

I'm surprised that you don't engage in the recent debates on mediation, mediatization re-mediation in this paper. According to my point of view, this debate in much engages with and takes stand against the media "effect" trend and develops the research field further. Scholars such as Silverstone (2005) highlights mediation and the importance of the dialectical relationship between media and society, Couldry and Hepp (2013) discussing mediatization brings in the need to analyze critically the interrelation between changes in media and communications and changes in culture and society. Other scholars into this discussion are for example Barbero (2006), Thompson (2005), Bolter and Grusin (1999) and others.

Best

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Bolter, J. D., & Grusin, R. (1999). Remediation: Understanding new media. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.

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Katrien Pype (katrien.pype kuleuven.be) **5 March 2021**

Dear John - thanks for this elaboration on "performativity". However, I am not fully convinced (yet).

Could you explain it based on the following observation I made during fieldwork in Kinshasa (and which I use in another context, on a conflict media genre, Budka and Bräuchler 2020, theorising media and conflict):

one morning, I woke up because one of the married women in the compound where I live, had switched on the radio, had put an audiotape in it, and had decided to put the volume on maximum while playing a particular, well-chosen song. All of us in the compound (with various families living around a court yard) woke up; and to my surprise, I saw one of the young girls leaving her bedroom, walking into the compound yard (where the radio had been set). She switched the radio off, and started yelling at the neighbor. Of course, the relationship between the two women had already been fraught, because the married woman suspected that her husband was seeing this young girl. The song that was broadcast was well chosen, the singer spoke about a second wife. Everybody in the compound understood the "event" as an attack, a provocation between rivals (the genre of "pamphlet", a speech genre used by quarreling/rivaling women). By responding aggressively, the young woman confirmed the accusation; through this gesture, everybody in the compound understood that the accusation was founded. Of course, the young girl's reputation was seriously damaged.

How to interpret the "media effect" here?
what were the "media effect(s)"? what was the "radio effect"? and was there a "radio effect"? or was the radio effect more an effect of the woman's decision to turn the volume so high? where was the media performativity? was there media performativity at all?
was there one or more effect? everybody waking up? the young girl feeling attacked? the girl's reputation damaged? or were these effects not so much of the media but of the married women's agency, deploying the media of the radio and the song?

i personally would be inclined in using Gell's language of primary and secondary agency in this context. I totally understand that Gell - in contrast to ANT - does not give any "primary" agency to objects - and I am not convinced that in the above described event, the object's agency is so important.

In the context of research on social media platforms, for example, I like the research on "media affordances", which I feel are very close to "media effects", although I enjoy the notion of "affordance" because it is an affordance to/for certain people. ultimately, what these platforms do, are what they are "made to do by the users". but that sounds not the same as "platform performativity", does it?

btw: you may have overseen my question on "publics" in my previous email. I think that the usage of "media effects" may be more helpful in non-academic discourse, than in academic discourse. What are your thoughts on that?

best,
Katrien

Mark Hobart (mark.hobart gmail.com)   **5 March 2021**

First of all, my thanks to John for his generous response to my post. The aim of my intervention was constructive. As the discussion has shown, there is a danger of throwing out a mewling, but bonnie, babe with the methodologically turbid bathwater in which John chose, perhaps not wisely, to immerse it.

On my reading, what drives John's argument is the intuition that notions of effects permeate both our subjects' and our academic thinking in practice. If recourse to effects—or meaning for that matter—is problematic as the basis of theoretical argument, what status might they have? One answer is to recast such ideas as 'emic', in other words indigenous practices of explaining or interpreting. Although some colleagues might cavil, crucially such 'emic' usage applies pari passu to our scholarly expositions. John has marshalled a sufficient evidence from anthropologists' writings that would be counterfactual to ignore. Otherwise we may mistake our ideal of what we do with actuality. That is why Gramsci's distinction between good and common sense seemed worth mentioning.

Analyzing our subjects' expository practices is integral to much ethnographic inquiry. Often this consists in carefully noting situated practices, then inferring working categories and concepts from the discernible trends. We may need rather different methods to study practices of anthropological reasoning as, unlike Latour and Woolgar's study of the Salk Institute (1979), lectures and seminars apart, our disquisitions often start as relatively solitary. While examining what colleagues say in discussion is often very telling, as John has shown, a critical textual analysis is a good way of revealing what we presuppose in practice. Such scrutiny addresses other potential confusions. Not only in our subjects' or our daily lives, but in academic discourse, cause, intention meaning, signification and reference are frequently muddled or conflated (Hobart 1982: 41-2). So perhaps it is time we deployed our critical faculties on our own taken-for-granted practices.

Interesting questions arise as to how we might conceive of, then relate, these distinct congeries of practices, as we have in principle no prior grounds on which to assume either commensurability or its lack. (I avoid referring of 'overlap' between discourses as the dangers of spatial and visual metaphors are well established, e.g. Rorty 1979; Salmond 1982.) If we are to take pragmatism seriously, then translatability (and interpretability) is a function of our practices not a prior state of affairs. As professional translators know, we create something new. And, as the pragmatist philosopher Quine argued, there are always different 'translation manuals' that fit the known facts, but in different ways (1960: 26-79). Far from being off-put-

ting, such a recognition should impel critical reflection because it problematizes translating and interpreting by bringing practice and agency to the fore. It also intimates how much depends on the complex dialogues between anthropologists and their subjects from which our understanding gradually emerges. Anyhow that is how I interpret the mission implied in John's argument—should you choose to accept it.

As a footnote, in response to John's invitation to write a working paper about media practices, I have written on the topic at interminable length over the last twenty years (masochists will find references here). Anyhow, if we approach it pragmatically, the worth of an argument is how well it enables you to reconfigure existing problems or materials in imaginative new ways, which works best not as detached theory, but in interrogating evidence. So I would risk repeating myself in a kind of intellectual auto-necrophilia.

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John Postill (john.postill rmit.edu.au)   **5 March 2021**

Reading Kirsten and Katrien's posts makes me think that from now on I should preface all posts in this seminar with the line: ** Reminder: This seminar is about media practices and their effects only, not about media effects in general **. This is a point I already made when responding to Edgar's discussant's comments, adding that it's an easy-to-make slippage.

Let me put it this way: we often tell our PhD candidates, as they prepare for submission, that they should be able to respond to the 'So what?' challenge from their examiners, i.e. why do we need another study of X? What's its significance? What does it contribute to our knowledge of problem Y? And more pertinent to our present discussion: What difference, if any, does phenomenon Z -- the subject of your thesis -- make to the world we live in?

By the same token, what I'm trying to do in this working paper is put the so-what question to our media anthro/ethno love of media-related practices. What difference do the key media practices you've studied make to the people you were with? How did these practices affect or influence them, if at all? That's all I'm asking, no sleight of hand, no hidden agenda, I'm not trying to sneak into the humanities my positivist mates hidden inside a wooden horse, my pa-

per is no dog whistle (since we're on canine metaphors) for the alt-positivist hordes. Life will go on once we've rehabilitated the notion of effects, welcomed it back home after its long exile. This little word will just be another string to our bows. Its effects, so to speak, will be largely beneficial to our conceptual health, with only minor side-effects (e.g. occasional irritability).

That said, I find Katrien's intriguing vignette from Kinshasa really useful because it shows that we shouldn't expect the notion of media practices to cover everything. As I argued some time ago, there are certain phenomena that practice theory is not particularly well suited to handle *on its own*, e.g. social dramas, moral panics, internet virals, natural disasters, social protests (Postill 2010). Luckily for us, there's no law of the universe saying you can't combine concepts of diverse provenances to crack an empirical problem, so long as they're compatible rather than just trendy-sounding; in my work I've often combined practice and non-practice concepts, as I'm sure we all have (Postill 2015, 2018). In other words, a purely practice-theoretical analysis can never do justice to our riotously unruly -- recalcitrant I think is the word in vogue -- empirical materials.

The Kinshasa women example, it seems to me, is not about an ordinary media practice but rather about an extraordinary media *event* in the lives of Katrien's research participants. Katrien asks:

'How to interpret the "media effect" here? what were the "media effect(s)"? what was the "radio effect"? and was there a "radio effect"? or was the radio effect more an effect of the woman's decision to turn the volume so high? where was the media performativity? was there media performativity at all?
was there one or more effect? everybody waking up? the young girl feeling attacked? the girl's reputation damaged? or were these effects not so much of the media but of the married women's agency, deploying the media of the radio and the song?'

Again, these are all media effects questions (in general), so we're off-topic.

But let me try a quick reaction, in the spontaneous, open-ended spirit of this seminar. According to your own account, the cheated wife's media performance definitely had an immediate, short-term effect on the young woman who counter-reacted quick as a flash. The wife could've attacked her rival verbally, in the olde 'pamphlet' style, but for some reason (to be investigated) she chose to play that tape. This was NOT a media practice, it was media *performance* that had effects upon the social world you were immersed in. As for the medium- and long-term effects, including knock-on effects (or ramifications), of this performance (not practice), my guess is that there were those as well, not least on the girl's reputation, as you mention (the husband appears to have been less *affected* by this event). Perhaps it was a turning point, a rearrangement in the local field of social relations, to use a classic Manchester School idea, or perhaps not. Semi-structured interviews would seem like a good way to move towards a provisional answer.

Was this an instance of a media effect? Yes, without a doubt, but the term 'media effect' doesn't tell us much here, it's too vague a formulation. More precisely, this was a mediated performance that appears to have hit its intended target: the husband's young lover, blamed for the affair. In other words, this was an effective, performative media event. The performance had its intended immediate effect, yet may have also had unintended consequences (or effects).

So to your question of whether we should restrict our usage of the dirty, crude, linear e-word to our interaction with what we might call the unwashed masses (the general public, the news media, funding bodies, bogus metrics collectors and the like) and ban its use among our own sophisticated selves, my answer is a resounding 'Non!'. The word effects, like its siblings consequences, impacts, influences, etc, should be an integral part of our vocabulary, to be employed only if and when required by the empirical problem at hand.

Effects is just a word, not a paradigm.

John

John Postill (john.postill rmit.edu.au)   **6 March 2021**

** Reminder: This seminar is about media practices and their effects only, not about media effects in general **

I'm very grateful to Mark Pedelty and Debra Vidali for their kind words about my Media Anthropology Network role and about the working paper. This is a good time to mention Philipp Budka, who has been at the heart of the Network since its inception in 2004, often working behind the scenes. There probably wouldn't be a Network today without Philipp.

This will be a reasonably short response to Mark Pedelty's post, you'll be glad to hear, as I believe we are broadly in agreement. Mark P writes:

'I see in John's response and the original article a more ecological model for media (John, correct me if that is incorrect). That is: explanatory, relational, systemic, and holistic. That is not to say totalizing, linear, and reductionistic. The opposite, in fact. It engages complexity, both/and recognition, and nuance.'

I hadn't thought about my paper in these terms, but I think this description is pretty accurate, at least as far as my intentions for the piece are concerned!

Nick, Francisco and Mark (Hobart) have all questioned my use of Strauss' (1978) social worlds notion. Mark H, for example, notes its symbolic interactionism, effective communication tautology and vacuous generality, while Nick points out that it can't account for all the things that we do in our messy lives outside such worlds (see my reply to this in an earlier post). This suggests to me that I'll have to do some tightening around this concept when I re-

work the paper. It's interesting, by the way, that most communication textbooks define communication in symbolic interactionism terms, as the meaningful exchange of symbols (i.e. arbitrary signs). This is problematic, of course, as these definitions ignore non-arbitrary signs, including Peirce's indexes (e.g. yawning).

So a revised, updated version of Strauss' worlds is in order in the paper, perhaps one that takes articulation, mentioned earlier by Mark H, non-arbitrary signs and, of course, effects into account. That said, I don't want to tighten it so much that it loses flexibility, which is precisely the strength of an umbrella term like social world. To me the notion of social world is not the issue here, but rather the question of how social practices, including media practices, *cluster* in different ways and at varying spatio-temporal scales, a subject ripe for anthropological comparison, and one that has been of central interest to social practice theorists in recent years (e.g. Hui, Schatzki and Shove 2017). These theorists are keen to prove that social practice theory can handle large-scale phenomena as well as long-term change, i.e. that it's not condemned to the study of small-scale, routine practices. I support this goal, but only if we accept that, as I said in my previous post, for certain processual phenomena like natural disasters or protests social practice theory isn't enough; it needs to borrow conceptual tools from other traditions.

Is my model systemic? The short answer is I don't know. Are the social worlds that arise, or emerge, from mediated and others practices usefully described as systems? Interestingly, Hui et al (2017) write about 'interconnected systems of practice' which seems to run counter to first-generation practice theorists' (Postill 2010) turning away from systems and structures towards practices. At the same time, these practice theorists advocate a 'flat ontology' (Schatzki 2016), the idea that there's only one level of social reality, e.g. no micro vs. macro levels, and that practices are at the root of all social phenomena. I'm sceptical of this idea, as it seems to me it has the danger of obliterating the hierarchical nature of all complex societies (but see Helle-Valle 2019), or the fact that it seems helpful to me to speak of meta-practices (see Peterson 2010), not to mention social practice theory's monomaniacal fixation with practices at the expense of everything else.

As for holism, this is another tricky one from a practice-theoretical perspective, given that the first generation of practice theorists were trying to escape precisely the holism of systems thinking and structuralism (Postill 2010). It gets even more tricky when you try to bring together social practices and social worlds within a single account, like I'm trying to do in the working paper. In the past I've advocated a dynamic, partial, non-functionalist holism in the study of social movements (e.g. Monterde and Postill 2014), and I guess the same idea underlies my various social world examples in the paper. I'm reverse engineering -- yet trying not to be teleological - by asking how a particular world came into being partly through (media) practices. My assumption is that media-based, or media-dependent, worlds like digital journalism, Second Life or online poker all started with a small set of foundational practices. As these worlds grew in size, so did the range and diversity of their practices, and new meta-practices emerged, too (see my comment on Kelty's 2008 free software account in the paper). The non-teleological, emergent 'social complexity in the making' (to use Tuzin's 2001 phrase)

of social worlds like markets, organisations or publics is typically accompanied, I would hypothesise, by a diversification of their (media) practices.

References not in the paper

Monterde, A. and J. Postill (2014). Mobile ensembles: The uses of mobile phones for social protest by Spain's indignados. In G. Goggin and L. Hjorth (eds.) Routledge Companion to Mobile Media. London: Routledge, pp. 429-438.

Schatzki (2016), "Practice Theory as Flat Ontology." In Practice Theory and Research: Exploring the Relevance for Social Change, Gerd Spaargaren, Don Weenink, and Michelle Lamers (eds), Abingdon, Routledge.

Tuzin, D. (2001). Social complexity in the making: A case study among the Arapesh of New Guinea. Routledge.

Erkan Saka (sakaerka gmail.com)   **6 March 2021**

There have been so many arguments here by people whom I had always admired. I do not believe I can contribute much but I will try to add a few comments. Despite John's emphasis on media practices and their effects only, NOT about media effects in general, any theoretical discussion on effects will inevitably converge two cases. A discussion on media effects will probably elaborate it in a sense that it will focus on a particular media practice to substantiate a claim on media effects.

I think no scholar of media can escape from the idea of the effect. As some argued, at least the broader public will always question the scholars about issues related to the effect. Every new media tool will trigger the effect questions both in scholarly and not-scholarly venues. So I agree with John's justifications to study effect issues. What I am not sure about is if we can keep the same terminology. Old terminology is always loaded. Bringing some concepts from the dead, always re-activates old debates that had never been resolved. For various reasons, a "re-branding", revitalizes the theoretical debates and new ideas emerge quicker. Just like affordance, there can be many other approaches to study effects. If the effect question is posed-that happens to me regularly from the Turkish media outlets- I prefer to re-frame the question, not because I do not like it but to provide answers that could be more helpful.

I am a relatively late-comer to STS Studies so I may embark on already left-behind debates: I imagine cases of assemblages in which humans and non-humans act. Causality is not specified but attributed case by case to whatever entities at work. In the early 2000s, this idea seemed to be shining as I had an opportunity to write a piece with George Marcus*. I imagine I could use this theoretical scheme to study media effects, for instance. (But of course, as I was trapped back in Turkey, I may have missed many scandalous developments on this)

Marcus, G. E., & Saka, E. (2006). Assemblage. Theory, culture & society, 23(2-3), 101-106.

David Zeitlyn (david.zeitlyn anthro.ox.ac.uk)   **6 March 2021**

Dear all

My small contribution to this fascinating discussion is to ask a question and suggest a title

What do image practices do? (Apologies to WGT Mitchell)

A possible title: How to do things with image practices (Apologies to John Austin)

I think these point to connections to different literatures that might be productive

best wishes
davidz

--
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Mark Hobart (mark.hobart gmail.com)   **6 March 2021**

Apologies. The link that I mentioned in my post yesterday got lost in transition. Should anyone be interested, it is at: www.criticalia.org/media-and-cultural-studies <http://www.criticalia.org/media-and-cultural-studies>
Best

Mark Hobart

Koen Leurs (K.H.A.Leurs uu.nl)   **7 March 2021**

Hi dear all,
I've been following the discussion with great interest ---

Just a brief note to suggest Engin Isin and Evelyn Ruppert in their book Being Digital Citizen (2015/2020) offer ways to bridge thinking on performativity between (digital) media practices and feminist/critical theories on performativity.

They argue some digital acts can be seen 'as a kind of speech act and means of social struggle', and they hypothesise recognising the multiplicity of such acts may reveal rights 'as not static or universal but historical and situated' (2015: 10–11).

Ludek Stavinoha transposed this approach to understand communicative practices of refugees in a refugee camp in Chios, Greece, in his article

Communicative Acts of Citizenship: Contesting Europe's Border in and Through the Media, published in the International Journal of Communication, https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/10428

Ludek foregrounds the communicative and mediated dynamics of digital, performative acts "by adopting a distinct communications lens, it [the article] has sought to further our understanding of how acts of citizenship are mediated or silenced, online and offline, and to what effect." P. 1226

In parallel, Rae and colleagues' (2018) study of detention camps on Manus and Nauru shows how "social media networks," especially Facebook, "enable detained asylum seekers to conduct an unmediated form of self-represented witnessing that exposes human rights abuses and documents justice claims" (p. 479).

Rae, M., Holman, R., & Nethery, A. (2018). Self-represented witnessing: The use of social media by asylum seekers in Australia's offshore immigration detention centres. Media, Culture & Society, 40(4), 479–495.

Warm wishes from Utrecht,
Koen Leurs

Assistant professor Gender & Postcolonial Studies | Graduate Gender Programme | Department of Media and Culture Studies | Utrecht University, the Netherlands |

Elisabetta Costa (E.I.G. e.i.g.costa rug.nl)	8 March 2021

Dear all,

Please see John's comment below. I am posting it on his behalf because there are some technical problems with the mailing-list:

Many thanks to Mark Deuze for his thoroughly interdisciplinary post, in which he seconds Mark Pedelty's call for the need to work across the humanities vs. social science divide in the study of media, including media-related practices and their effects. I, too, favour such integrative approaches and have found Sabina Mihelj's and James Stanyer (2019) painstaking review of the media and comm literature very useful, not least in my teaching on media and sociocultural changes.

I'm not trying to be difficult but I wonder about this passage: '[Mihelj and Stanyer] conclude that publications bridging the two approaches are still quite rare, and advocate an integrated approach, suggesting research with an emphasis on processes as opposed to outcomes of media and mass communication, as this would be specifically suited to 'investigating the contingent, unpredictable, and multidirectional nature of contemporary change' (Mihelj and Stanyer, 2019: 496).'

Can't we have it both ways, i.e. track those 'contingent, unpredictable, and multidirectional' processes of change as well as their equally messy outcomes or effects? Why choose one or the other as our paradigm? One postmodern idea I've always found unsmokable is the supposedly perpetual 'ongoingness' of social life. Yes, ongoingness is certainly a crucial feature of human life – and its one that we ethnographers are particularly good at capturing during fieldwork, alongside open-endedness – but so is rupture, termination, finality, death. Some processes run their life courses quickly, others go on for a very long time. Some are recursive, others non-recursive; some sustainable, others unsustainable (Postill 2017).

And let's not forget continuity.

Some media-related practices, I would argue, can have the effect of helping maintain the political status quo or, for example, of holding a group together. I'm thinking of Christensen and Røpke's (2010) practice-theoretical discussion of how mobile phone practices help to 'hold together' Danish families e.g. through coordinating meals, or Miller and Slater's (2000) early work on the internet and its role/effect in allowing Trinidadian families to 'be themselves', as it were, despite some family members having moved overseas.

That is to say, it'd be a logical error to associate the effects of media practices exclusively with sociocultural changes; they are equally important when it comes to sociocultural continuities. This why I'm reluctant to subsume my proposal under the study of social change, as some seminar participants have done. (On this question, I'm cc'ing Thomas Eriksen who's done a great deal of comparative research, of course, on both change and continuity, most recently in connection to smartphones).

John

Reference

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Miller, D., & Slater, D. (2000). *The Internet: an ethnographic approach*. Routledge.

Postill, J. (2017). The diachronic ethnography of media: from social changing to actual social changes. *Moment, Journal of Cultural Studies* 4(1): 19-43.

Elisabetta Costa,
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Veronica Barassi (veronica.barassi unisg.ch)   **9 March 2021**

Dear Media Anthropology Network,

This is just a reminder that the E-Seminar on the Effects of Media Practices by John Postill, will be closing this Thursday.

Thank you so much to all of you who have participated so far, and if you want to join in the discussion, you have two more days to send your questions, comments and thoughts!

Veronica

Prof. Dr. Veronica Barassi
Professor in Media and Communications Studies
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Chair of Media and Culture, MCM Institute
University of St Gallen, Switzerland

John Postill (john.postill rmit.edu.au)   **9 March 2021**

David Zeitlyn may well have written the shortest post in the history of this seminar series. This deserves a virtual round of applause. (If only I could be half as concise *sigh*). He writes:

'What do image practices do? (Apologies to WGT Mitchell) A possible title: How to do things with image practices (Apologies to John Austin)'.

I think this could be a worthwhile essay to write. One may not even need to use the pariah word e****s, though it would certainly run throughout the piece, albeit implicitly.

A quick empirical example.

In the second half of 2011, Spain's indignados (aka the 15M movement) routinely 'shared' images of police brutality through their digital devices. These image practices often came with

audio and/or text, e.g. in the form of YouTube videos of the latest cop outrage, with Twitter as the main viral, hashtag-driven commentary platform (Postill 2014a). What did these mediated practices do? Put differently, what was their cumulative effect on the movement ? I would say that, among other things, they helped reinforce (here's the auxiliary verb 'help' once again) the popular narrative of a rigged, unfair, violent 'system', a democracy in name only -- a populist narrative shared by a majority of Spaniards, according to various surveys (Postill 2015b).

But this constant sharing of disturbing images of police brutality also set off alarm bells among some indignados. For example, the author Isaac Rosa worried that 'the long-term exposure to violent materials via social media [could] lead to the 'normalisation' of police violence as an entertainment genre' (Postill 2014b: 355). He wrote: 'We share videos, examine photographs more suited to a forensic inquiry (split heads, bruised backs, even eye-gouging) and gather information to count the victims: how many wounded, how many arrested, how many journalists assaulted, how many police infiltrators [...]. It's beginning to feel like a routine, another day in the cycle of protests.' (Rosa 2012, my translation).

To take up again an earlier thread in this seminar about the emic viewpoint, to understand what such 15M images practices 'did' back in the day, we'd need to take into account not only how they were shared and commented upon, but also the meta-practice of commenting on the image practices themselves, and whether these had any influence on other protesters over time. It'd be a huge research challenge, that's for sure, to reconstruct the flows of influence upon people's daily practices.

That said, one reasonable working assumption would be that if people in your immediate circle start frowning upon your sharing of certain images of police brutality, e.g. the more gory ones, you are more likely to stop sharing them than if they keep schtum or ask you for more, please.

So to get at the question of what image practices (including meta-practices) do in general, I would first switch to the past simple ('did') and to a number of comparable times and places (e.g. Spain, Tunisia, and Egypt in 2011), and focus on a genre (e.g. police brutality) in order to be able to compare and contrast them.

And with that, I've just opened another can of worms: comparison. The comparative method used to be, of course, an anthropological hallmark (Bororsky 2019). Now it's another pariah concept, tarred with the same 'positivist' brush as effects.

References

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Postill, J. (2014a) Democracy in an age of viral reality: a media epidemiography of Spain's indignados movement. Ethnography 15 (1): 50-68.

Postill, J. (2014b) Spain's indignados and the mediated aesthetics of nonviolence. In P. Werbner, K. Spellman-Poots and M. Webb (eds) The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest: Beyond the Arab Spring. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 341-367.

Rosa, I. (2012), 'Violencia policial: que tiene que pasar para que alguien tome medidas?' El Diario, 15 November 2012. Online at www.eldiario.es/zonacritica/ [represion_huelga_general_policia_6_69353080.html](http://www.eldiario.es/zonacritica/represion_huelga_general_policia_6_69353080.html)

Mark Pedelty (pedeltmh umn.edu)   9 March 2021

Those skeptical of claims about claims re the "effects" of media images will find support in Perlmutter's book. He systematically challenged claims about major "iconic" images changing views concerning major events. It's a compelling piece of research:

Perlmutter, David D. 1998. *Photojournalism and foreign policy: icons of outrage in international crises*. Westport, Conn: Praeger.

And their more recent work directly dealt with the effects lit/theory:

Mielczarek, Natalia, and David D. Perlmutter. "Big pictures and visual propaganda: the lessons of research on the 'effects' of photojournalistic icons." *Visual propaganda and extremism in the online environment* (2014): 215-232.

Mirjam de Bruijn (m.e.de.bruijn hum.leidenuniv.nl)   10 March 2021

Dear colleagues,

Thanks for opening this discussion on 'effect' of media practices that helps us to think through media interactions with the social. In previous anthropological/ethnographic work that I did on mobile telephony and socio-political change in various African settings I always tried to avoid words like effect and impact. Students who used the word impact were guided to use more dynamic and dialectical terms and concepts. Why did I do this? In fact, indeed to avoid a functionalist mode of reasoning, the causal straight away: after all we (anthropologists) have learned and see that society is complex, human behavior layered etc. I was and are very much part and embedded in the discussions around agency, intersubjectivity, etc. in which 'direct effect' of something on something, causal linkages are not the way to discuss social change. However, if I read the discussion well, and understand the paper of John correctly, I now see that in fact what I did was also describing effects of mobile telephony as it 'impacted' on transnational communities, daily life in rural areas, and as a tool that was used in political engagement and hence changed the political landscape (in African settings). Indeed, not the technology itself, but its use, or the practice around it steered the course of socio-political change and economic change in a variety of ways. This is impact, or effect of the 'use' of technology. Of course there is a world in front of us to discover on how this use is put

in practice, what the practices are and who is involved or not.However, after all we do analyze impact. May be this discussion is related to the discussion of Power. Communication Power is the title of the book of Manuel Castells (introduction hard to read) that in fact directs us to see communication indeed as a vector of change. This power dimension is not so present in the discussion so far. The other dimension is information, and information flows. Information is captured in discourse, and discourse in itself has power. Media practices are part of power constellations and at the same time transforming those, a.o. by the use of information that is caught in discourses (mediating information) who in themselves also have power and the power to change. Then the effect of media practices can indeed be very deep and in some cases scary, as it is difficult to grasp.

I try to understand media practices in the Sahel conflict. An ongoing conflict that has multiple dimensions, a huge variety of (violent) actors and has been so difficult to contain. One of the outcomes seems to be a war in which oppositions are being reshaped, reinterpreted. Ethnic dynamics are not to be avoided in the explanation of the conflict, how difficult and precarious this is. I have for long avoided to mention these, trying to understand the conflict in livelihood, or land conflict terms. These are very possible indeed, but there is also that other layer avoided by most who explain the conflict both in academia, especially anthropologists 😉 and in policy circles. One of the many dimensions of the war is ethnic division and polarisation. The role of media practices in the shaping of violence is an ongoing debate (also raised in this discussion). If the media effect is that a conflict becomes ethnic, then we should dare to say it. To understand this kind of impact of media practices is urgent. The dynamics that we can uncover is how social media practices are informed by real life experiences, and at the same time by interpretations that relate to the power of memory, of remembered histories, of interpretation, but these can become real in discursive warfare that in its turn influences the reality on the ground and has a direct impact on violence (and entails a combination of power and information).

The question that I ask for the Sahel case is how does discursive war as being present on social media look like? What are the dynamics? Can we make a relation between the dynamics, practice of social media and the violence on the ground? What is the effect of discursive warfare on the reality of the conflict?

The latter question was originally not formulated in this way, but I think it is a better way to say what I try to find out. I will not forget the dynamics, dialectic relationships and the subjectivities that inform the practices of media, but that this will have an effect is clear. The effects that we find can be divided in categories of which the sideline/the hazardous is probably the most important. Because the effects are oftentimes not intended, but they happen. A project that compares (social) media practices in conflict and their 'effects' , the (discursive) warfare(s) and violence, is necessary to inform a discussion on the relation between media and violence that can be instrumental to stop excessive violence.

These were my thoughts provoked by the discussions on effect.

Mirjam de Bruijn/Institute for History & African Studies centre/ Leiden University

John Postill (jrpostill gmail.com)   **10 March 2021**

I'm just reacting intuitively here, and with Zeitlynian terseness, to Mirjam's rich post about mobile practices in the Sahel.

I'm wondering if we could speak of 'congeries of effects' (to adapt Mark Hobart's 'congeries of practices') in order to capture the complex, messy, non-teleological outcomes of certain (media) practices? That would counter the common accusation that the notion of effect entails a reductionist, singular, (uni)linear and/or direct, causality.

John

Debra Vidali (debra.vidali emory.edu)   **10 March 2021**

Happy to share an older piece (2010) where I directly engage these issues, a publication that had input from John, Mark, Faye, and Nick. (attached and cite below.) The main point is that we get out of the simplistic positivist/interpretivist dualism (and warfare), if we widen our understanding of culture + fields of meaning making/experience. This move allows us to also widen our inquiry into 'effects' and more robustly capture what is going on. [supporting all that John, Mirjam are others are saying on this thread]. The second main intervention is that I offer and apply Deleuze & Guattari's model of the rhizome, as a way to theorize and apply a method that disrupts and supplants the business-as-usual measurements of (or expectations for) linear causality, or non-teleological causality in John's words.

Spitulnik Debra. 2010. "Thick Context, Deep Epistemology: A Meditation on Wide-Angle Lenses on Media, Knowledge Production, and the Concept of Culture." In Theorising Media and Practice. Birgit Bräuchler and John Postill, eds. New York and Oxford: Berghahn. Pp. 105-126.

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Scott MacLeod (sgkmacleod@worlduniversityandschool.org)   **10 March 2021**

Thanks, John, M.E., Debra, Medianthro, All,

Seeking succinctness too re this interesting thread:

A

For John,
what is an effect?
example -
"this very e-seminar we are in the process of collaboratively enacting via the internet" ... "this digital practice has had the long-term effect of co-constituting the Media Anthropology Network as we know it today" Word-wise, effect seems in part to be a 'consequence,' or to be 'constitutional' ...

Appreciating the anthropological focus on the specificity here of (media) effects, which we might learn through field work in a field site even – re John's observation that this conversation is "about media practices and their effects only, not about media effects in general" And furthermore, that "effects of media-related practices in people's social worlds" arguing that "these come in three main varieties–mediatising effects, worlding effects and derivative effects."

But what about further the role of specific pictures and videos and virtual world conversations? (I ask with regard to understanding further the effects of 'ethno-wiki-virtual-world-graphy' - a social theory and method I'm developing - https://scott-macleod.blogspot.com/search/label/ethno-wiki-virtual-world-graphy).

B
Found interesting M.E. - Mirjam's bringing Manuel Castells into this thread (re the discourse of "communication indeed as a vector of change" – and presumably as an effect as well), and regarding Castells' far-reaching focus on power in the information age, where John seems to focus little on questions of power. What is power for Manuel Castells?

"Power in the Network Society" Chapter 1 in #Castells' "Communication Power" 2009/2013:10) "Power is the relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically the decisions of other social actor(s) in ways that favor the empowered actor's will, interests & values...by coercion" (https://twitter.com/scottmacleod/status/1369756055232647168?s=20)

and further ... "Power is exercised by means of coercion (or the possibility of it) and/or by the construction of meaning on the basis of the discourses through which social actors guide their actions. Power relationships are framed by domination, which is the power that is embedded in the institutions of society. "

How might we examine John's example of this MediaAnthro conversation's effects as potentially informing questions of change as a developing MediaAnthro network, and re power, and the information we share in conversation, as we analyze these questions further and anthropologically??

C

Appreciating too in this thread Debra's focus on discourse, I think, regarding that we "widen our understanding of culture + fields of meaning making/experience. This move allows us to also widen our inquiry into 'effects' and more robustly capture what is going on. [supporting all that John, Mirjam are others are saying on this thread]."

Regarding effects of 'ethno-wiki-virtual-world-graphy' - into a single realistic virtual earth for Anthropology at the cellular and atomic levels too (think Google Street View with time slider with Maps and Earth with TensorFlow AI and Translate, conceptually, and realistic avatar bots, even for actual-virtual telerobotic surgery),

#RealisticVirtualEarthForAnthropology
https://twitter.com/hashtag/RealisticVirtualEarthForAnthropology?src=hashtag_click

#RealisticVirtualEarthForArchaeology
https://twitter.com/hashtag/RealisticVirtualEarthForArchaeology?src=hashtag_click

... in what ways could we 'widen our understanding of culture,' per this MediaAnthro e-seminar on effects, with the use of emergent 'text-in-the-sidebar' in Google Street View regarding all the field sites we've mentioned from war in the Sahel in Africa to Harbin Hot Springs in northern California? ... to move beyond the consequences of text even – eg the word 'effects' in these email threads - and to encompass the whole around each of us in an emerging, we wiki-create it, virtual earth, with ethnographic interpretations via the group-making, hetero-glossic, polysemic processes (Jim Clifford +) of postmodernity, into 'Internetity,' a word I'm coin-ing to characterize the information age - and to understand further specific effects?

Thank you, Scott

John Postill (jrpostill@gmail.com)   **11 March 2021**

Hi everyone

As this is the last day of the seminar, I'll try to address some of the points left hanging in the air, in no particular order. I'm afraid I won't be able to respond to all, for there have been many, but I'm sure I'll still be processing them in the weeks to come as I revise the paper.

I'm very, very grateful for all the time you've taken to read the paper, follow the conversation and send some tough challenges my way, including the lively off-list exchanges with some of you.

As I mention in the paper's Acknowledgments, these increasingly rare pockets of scholarly conversation may not be metrifiable or CV-enhancing, but they're still well worth the effort, in my experience. The effects, or indeed the rewards (Warde 2005), of intense media practices like this seminar are hard to demonstrate, yet if I had to bet I'd say they are no less real for it.

Nick Couldry wrote the following:

'As to 'mediatizing effects', my suggestion is that we need to do more work to clarify exactly what this could mean. 'Mediatization' is a word I've been involved in arguing for, not because like it, but because it seems necessary as what Friedrich Krotz originally called a 'meta-concept', to point to particular states of the social world which are characterized by varying levels of complexity and interrelatedness involving media technologies and institutions. As a meta-concept, mediatization is a state of the world, not an action. So I'm not sure I see how any one thing or process or practice can have a 'mediatizing effect': certainly it can plausibly contribute to a state of mediatization, but that does not mean there's an effect from that particular practice that can be isolated'.

I sort of answered the last bit of this, I think, but not specifically the mediatizing issue. What probably happened when I was drafting the paper is that I needed a term to describe the messy, non-linear, elusive effects of media practices upon thinly mediated worlds like the Sarawak longhouses where I lived in the 90s.

There were two main candidates: (a) John Thompson's (1995) 'mediazation' of culture, a term that never really took off -- such are the contingencies of language -- and (b) the concept of 'mediatization' which is as ubiquitous these days as face masks. So I went with mediatization, by which I simply meant the process whereby a given social world becomes more mediated by modern technologies such as radio, television or mobile phones. (It couldn't be 'mediation' because this term lacks the historico-processual dimension I was after).

By this I don't mean to suggest that a universal 'media logic' has colonised these worlds but rather that when a group of people create and sustain one or more new media practices (new to them, that is, e.g. watching TV in 1980s rural Sarawak) these will intersect and interact with pre-existing practices in ways that can be potentially transformative, or at least in ways that will change some aspects of their lives by adding a new layer of technological mediation.

Exactly how this will play out is impossible to predict, which is why we need ethnographers to try and make sense, together with their participants (and however imperfectly) the congeries of effects resulting from the expanded practical repertoire over a period of time, ideally over several years rather than 12 months.

John

References

Thompson, J. B. (1995). The media and modernity: A social theory of the media. Cambridge: Polity.
Warde, A. (2005). Consumption and theories of practice. Journal of consumer culture, 5(2), 131-153.

Dear John, dear list members,

I am a little late for the party, but would like to add a few, rather unstructured, thoughts anyway.

John writes in his last message:
"Exactly how this [new media practices intersecting with pre-existing practices] will play out is impossible to predict, which is why we need ethnographers to try and make sense, together with their participants (and however imperfectly) the congeries of effects resulting from the expanded practical repertoire over a period of time, ideally over several years rather than 12 months."

Positioning the effects, consequences, impact, etc. of media practices in historical processes makes more sense to me than including these notions or categories in the conceptual repertoire for anthropological or ethnographic analysis. Looking at effects from this angle, highlight (1) the importance of diachronic and longitudinal research for anthropological and ethnographic (media) studies, (2) the entanglement of effect-related questions with the anthropological key concepts of change, comparison and relation.

Besides John's own media anthropological work, in which he constantly reminds us of the necessity to include the diachronic dimensions of media phenomena, Kottak's study of Brazilian TV could be mentioned as an example here. Kottak understands "TV impact" as a process and not as "a matter of simple, automatic, programmed responses to irresistible, omnipotent stimuli" (Kottak, 1990/2016: 191-192). In the introduction to the updated edition of his book, he explicitly links this processual approach to (social) change that can be monitored through cultural comparison and historical contextualization (ibid.: xxiv-xxvii). This connection between effect and temporality is also discussed by Strathern (2020) in her new book on the concept of relation in anthropological research. She notes that "between an enactment and the interpretation of it, time must lapse; past events, (…), are 'known' through their subsequent effects" (ibid.: 66).

Reconsidering the effects of media practices is a worthwhile effort because this points us, at least in my interpretation, to the basic idea that these practices are different and similar, changing over time and place.

Thanks John for the great paper, and thanks to all for the lively
discussion!

Philipp

References

Kottak, C. P. (2016). Prime-time society: An anthropological analysis of television and culture (Updated ed., orig. 1990). London: Routledge.

Strathern, M. (2020). Relations: An anthropological account. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

John Postill (jrpostill@gmail.com)   **11 March 2021**

Kerstin B Andersson wrote:

'As Mark [A. Peterson] states, effects implies a causality, a one way relationship, stating that a media leads to certain configurations. In my reading, the correlation between media, people, society, culture is much more complex and dynamic and I prefer to see it as processes, both in time and over time.'

My response is that the effects of media practices come in countless variations. One effect (or congeries + concatenation of effects) of a given media practice can be to trigger a chain of unpredictable events. I'm thinking of the moral panics triggered by media-related practices such as watching TV in Belize (Wilk) or sexting in Indonesia (Barendregt), to mention but two media anthropological studies.

Investigating the effects of media practices doesn't preclude the study of 'complex and dynamic' processes of change over time. Indeed, it will often necessitate the latter kind of study.

John

John Postill (jrpostill@gmail.com)   **11 March 2021**

Erkan Saka points out that resuscitating old terms like 'effects' 'always re-activates old debates that had never been resolved. For various reasons, a "re-branding", revitalizes the theoretical debates and new ideas emerge quicker.' Yes, I've had similar thoughts before and during this seminar, as well as in the past with other taboo notions like diffusion, a term I have absolutely no objection to (for starters, without diffusion there's no appropriation).

There's a trade-off to be considered, in my view.

What are the pros and cons of using the word effects to talk about the effects of media practices vs. using an ersatz word that does the same thing but doesn't have the, um, effect of annoying people? I'm in two minds about how to proceed. Part of me wants to call a spade a spade and insist there's nothing wrong with the term effects (as long we handle it properly, i.e. allow for the messy complexities of life that we so cherish as ethnographers). Another part of me wants to find a friendly, cuddly replacement that won't, erm, 'cause' an uproar; like using the word 'spread' instead of 'diffusion', for example. Not necessarily a single replacement

word, it could be a different formulation, e.g. 'What do media practices do?' (see David Zeitlyn's post) in lieu of 'What are the effects of media practices?', or 'What difference do media practices make?'

One thing's for sure: this should never be a popularity contest. Just because a sizable portion of your readership disagrees with your argument, or with a part of it, it doesn't mean it's wrong. May the best argument and supporting evidence win -- until a better one comes along, that is. (Oops, did that sound positivist?)

More importantly, I agree with Debra Vidali, Mark Pedelty and others in this seminar who've argued for a rapprochement between the humanities and the social sciences. Collaborating across epistemic turfs in order to work on complex problems is far more important than getting bogged down with terminological quarrels. A key part of that collaboration would be to reach a 'rough consensus' -- to use the hacker expression -- on the meaning of the keywords shared by the interdisciplinary team, yet without agonising too much over fixing the meaning of words that are not meant to be fixed anyway.

I find it curious that the same colleagues who normally cherish ideas of fluidity, ambiguity and polysemy, when it comes to pariah words like effects (or indeed diffusion) suddenly are convinced of their fixed, unchangeable essence and narrowly defined meaning.

We could call it semantic determinism.

John

Veronica Barassi (veronica.barassi unisg.ch)   **11 March 2021**

Dear Media Anthropology Network,

What an honour and pleasure it has been to chair this seminar! I enjoyed every moment as a passive participant!

A heartfelt thanks goes to John for his paper, stirring key debates and bringing us to think, challenge and re-consider the idea of 'effects' and 'practices'. I also would like to thank Edgar for opening the discussion with his thoughts and critical insights.

We are now accepting papers for future seminars. Please do get in touch if you have a paper that you would like to propose for a seminar.

all best
Veronica

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