

Reflections on media anthropology's legacies and concerns (in digital times)

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1) Why anthropology matters – an EASA statement as starting point

I recently came across a statement compiled by the Executive Committee of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) entitled “Why anthropology matters” (Executive Committee of the European Association of Social Anthropologists 2015). In this text, several distinct features or key terms of anthropology as academic discipline are highlighted.

- (1) Cultural relativism as “methodological tool for studying local life-worlds on their own terms”;
- (2) Ethnography as important tool in anthropological research and as main form of data collection which enables anthropologists to “discover aspects of local worlds that are inaccessible to researchers who use other methods”;
- (3) Comparison as method to look for sociocultural similarities and differences to develop “general insights into the nature of society and human existence”;
- (4) And finally, (social) context, relationships and connections as anthropology's main concerns.

With these “tools”, the statement's authors argue, anthropologists are well equipped to generate knowledge that “can help to make sense of the contemporary world” (Executive Committee of the European Association of Social Anthropologists 2015).

Even though one doesn't have to agree on all of that in detail, the text very briefly discusses features or markers of the discipline of anthropology and consequently its subfields, such as media anthropology. I don't want to discuss “why media anthropology matters” – I think this question has been, for instance, answered in the course of this panel – but rather build on selected aspects of the statement which I find particularly relevant for looking into media anthropology's relevance, legacies and concerns (also in times of increasing digitalisation). I can, of course, only scratch on the surface here, leaving much for further debates and discussions.

2) “What is the point of media anthropology?” – re-asking the question

Concerns of media anthropology

Central themes of media anthropology, such as the mediation of power and conflict, media related forms of production and consumption, the relationship between media and religion, and the mediation of knowledge and forms of expression have already been identified and discussed in earlier works, for instance by Kelly Askew & Richard Wilk (2002), Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod and Brian Larkin (2002b), Mark Allen Peterson (2003) as well as Eric Rothenbuhler and Mihai Coman (2005).

And these topics moreover connect to anthropological key questions about hierarchies, power relationships, norms and political agency, materiality, exchange and reciprocity, rituals and ritualization, the construction of histories and traditions as well as symbolism and the meaning of the cultural. Now what does media anthropology do? Or what should it do according to early media

anthropologists?

Eric Rothenbuhler and Mihai Coman (Coman & Rothenbuhler 2005, Rothenbuhler & Coman 2005) discuss in the introductory chapter of their interdisciplinary reader what they call the “promise of media anthropology”. They argue that media anthropology “prepares media studies for more complete engagement with the symbolic construction of reality and the fundamental importance of symbolic structures, myth, and ritual in everyday life” (Coman & Rothenbuhler 2005: 1).

What anthropology can contribute to the interdisciplinary field of media studies is the method and idea of ethnography as well as concepts widely used in anthropology such as culture, ritual, religion, performance or myth. One of the promises of media anthropology is thus the exploration of new application areas for these concepts and methods which have been part and parcel of anthropology for more than 100 years.

In her contribution to Rothenbuhler and Coman's volume, Faye Ginsburg (2005: 17) reminds us that “for many years, mass media were seen as almost a taboo topic for anthropology”. Through the global diffusion of media technologies and the growing importance of mass media in people's everyday life, anthropologists began to study the production, circulation and consumption of media. In doing so, anthropologists have been particularly interested in the “mediation and expression of social processes and cultural meaning” (Ginsburg 2005: 17).

In employing ethnographic research, anthropologists, according to Ginsburg (2005: 20), understand media as “cultural artifacts enmeshed in daily lives”. And it is media anthropology's task to investigate how this new “contemporary cultural force” engage with sociocultural processes such as the circulation of public culture, commercialisation, nation building or identity production by drawing particular attention to “how those processes are being localized”.

Elsewhere, Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod and Brian Larkin (2002a: 3) argue that anthropology situates media as a social practice within “shifting political and cultural frames” looking for “how media enable or challenge the workings of power and the potential of activism; the enforcement of inequality and the sources of imagination; and the impact of technologies on the production of individual and collective identities”. Media constitute thus different social fields for anthropological research.

Media anthropology's models, Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin (2002a: 23) suggest, “must allow for the simultaneity of hegemonic and anti-hegemonic effects as we [anthropologists] examine how “technologies of power” are created and contested within intimate institutional cultures, shaped by ideologies ranging from public services, to audience appeal, to aesthetics, to political empowerment”.

In another introduction to one of the first media anthropology volumes, Kelly Askew (2002: 1) states that the volume's aim is to “engage readers in an anthropological critique of how mass media are employed to represent and construct cultures, both Western and non-Western”. And she continues that media anthropology contains “ethnographically informed, historically grounded, and context-sensitive analyses of the ways in which people use and make sense of media technologies” (Askew 2002: 3).

So what is the point of media anthropology?

Under this title John Postill and Mark Allen Peterson (2009) exchanged ideas in the journal *Social Anthropology* about what anthropology can hope to contribute to the interdisciplinary field of media and communication studies. Postill summarises that according to Peterson (2003) media anthropology has three main contributions to make: that is (1) ethnography, (2) the de-centring of “the West” and (3) alternative theoretical concepts and approaches. But for Postill there is one crucial dimension missing: history. And this is because most media anthropology projects focus primarily on contemporary societies through ethnographic fieldwork associating thus media anthropology with media ethnography. But “media anthropology is *not* media ethnography”, as Postill (Postill & Peterson 2009: 335) puts it by adapting Ingold's argument. He concludes that the strengthening of media historical research can contribute to the comparative study of media phenomena in an anthropology of media.

In his response to Postill's statement, Peterson argues that ethnography continues to be “the most common feature” of anthropological research in media (Postill & Peterson 2009: 339) and, by following Geertz, that anthropology is in the end what anthropologists do.

He then concludes that “the point of media anthropology is to broaden and deepen our understandings of human engagements with media through the application of the anthropological perspective – broadly comparative, holistic in its approach to complexity, ethnographically empirical, aware of historical contingency and relativistic” (Postill & Peterson 2009: 339). And Peterson continues that there is a connection between the understanding and conceptualisation of “media” and the field of media anthropology: “policing the boundaries of what constitutes 'media' is as fraught as the problem of locating the boundaries of anthropology in this work we're calling 'media anthropology'” (Postill & Peterson 2009: 343).

Medium, media, mediation

I don't want to go into more details in the discussion of what constitutes “media” or what a “medium” is. However, in anthropology the concepts and conceptualisations of “media” and “medium” are usually broader, more open and inclusive than in other disciplines engaged in the interdisciplinary study of media and communication. Thus media related research questions in anthropology are usually not necessarily built upon a distinct definition or classification of the concept.

Anthropologists are rather interested in processes of mediation or mediatisation which can, of course, also relate to questions of media definition and constitution (Boyer 2012, Eisenlohr 2011, Mazzarella 2004, Meyer 2011).

Patrick Eisenlohr (2011) and Birgit Meyer (2011), for instance, investigate the disappearing of media in the process of mediation and in the context of religious practices. This dissolving of a medium during the act of – in this case religious – mediation, its withdrawal from human perception is, according to Eisenlohr (2011: 44), “central to the definition of what constitutes a medium”.

In addition, Meyer (2011: 32) states that the “presence” and the “disappearance” of media in practices of mediation “is socially produced and depends on authorised perspectives of what media are and do, or are not supposed to do”. Meyer (2011: 27) argues further that what a medium is can only be identified by adopting a viewpoint outside of its “semiotic ideology”. To accomplish just

that, it is necessary to place the paradox of mediation and immediacy in the centre of the research.

Dominic Boyer (2012: 383) identifies a “productive” tension within media anthropology between research projects focusing on the technological and representational aspects of media and what he calls “processes of social mediation”. While mediation raises questions about media conceptualisation, it also opens the possibility to connect research about infrastructure, migration, finance, etc. as mediated practices and processes with research about communication media “under the rubric of a broader *anthropology of mediation*” (Boyer 2012: 384). Media anthropological research could thus be connected more closely with long-standing anthropological research, counteracting subdisciplinary tendencies of fragmentation.

Boyer (2012) further reminds us that media anthropological research has been changing in close connection to changes in media environments and media landscapes. Digital media technologies, for instance, changed the conceptualisations of media producers and media consumers/recipients and their relations. Resilient anthropological concepts such as “sharing”, “exchange” or “circulation” regain importance in the media anthropological analysis of digital culture and economy.

I leave the question if an “anthropology of mediation” hold the potential to integrate related subfields or “subdisciplines” such as media anthropology, digital anthropology and visual anthropology for further discussions and concentrate in the last part of my paper on two key features of anthropology and consequently media anthropology: ethnography and context.

3) Ethnography and context – reflections on two key features of (media) anthropology

One could summarise in a rather generalizing manner that media anthropology is ethnographically investigating the mediation of (human) communication that is enabled by technologies in different sociocultural contexts and under specific historical, political and economic conditions. Let me briefly reflect on ethnography and context.

Ethnography

In anthropology, ethnography refers to the research process during which empirical data – usually to describe sociocultural phenomena – are collected in the field and analysed. This process not only has a methodological aspect in deploying different research techniques, such as participant observation or interviews, but also a theoretical one, as theories and theoretical concepts shape ethnography.

In recognizing ethnography's processual character, different aspects come into play.

- (1) Considering the historical context within which “the cultural” is (re)constructed and generated leads to the rejection of the illusion of cultural entities as monolithic and static cultures (Hastrup & Olwig 1997: 9).
- (2) “Local culture” is not necessarily constructed and defined by “the locals”, but in relation, under the influence, and sometimes in opposition to centres of power and their representatives.
- (3) As cultural producers, people are not only aware of specific political and economic conditions, they sometimes intend to challenge those through activist practices (Coleman

2010, Ginsburg et al. 2002b).

- (4) Research partners' reflexivity in respect to the representation of their culture and cultural practices has become an eminent issue in ethnographic research.

Tim Ingold (2014: 383) declares that ethnography has become such an overused term that it has lost much of its meaning. He identifies a conflation of ethnography with fieldwork and therefore pleads for a return to and the strengthening of participant observation as the “way of working” in anthropology (Ingold 2014: 386-87). Moreover, he sees no connection between ethnography and theory and therefore concludes that dropping both would result “in an undivided, interstitial field of *anthropology*” (Ingold 2014: 393).

With Laura Nader (2011), I argue that understanding ethnography (also) as theory can be quite beneficial, particularly for an interdisciplinary field such as media anthropology. Nader (2011) simply defines theory as an analysis of facts in relation to one another. Ethnography, she explains, is not only a description in context, but a theoretical endeavour of describing (sociocultural) facts. Therefore, ethnography can be understood as “a theory of description” (Nader 2011: 211).

This conceptualisation of ethnography as theory includes several important aspects.

- (1) Cultures are interconnected, not isolated or fragmented, and therefore should be studied as whole systems. This idea of holism has its limitations and should rather be understood as a target to aim for.
- (2) Participant observation as “a practice in defamiliarization” and the “key operational phrase” in ethnography has been constantly combined with shifting theoretical frameworks (Nader 2011: 212-13). This implies that ethnography – as research practice or approach – has always been open to innovation and change.
- (3) The relationship between ethnographer/theory/science and informant/knowledge/life-worlds, between “us” and “them” has been continuously reflected upon in ethnography. This contributes to the rejection of simplifying dichotomies as well as to the understanding of cultural constraints.
- (4) The world is changing and so are people. Processes of globalisation and technological development have affected all cultures and societies and have been increasingly changing relationships between ethnographer, people, localities, fields and technologies.

Context

Context as “an aid to interpretation” (Strathern 2002: 302) particularly in social science research is closely related to ethnography, as for instance Marilyn Strathern (2002: 303) points out: “contexts are regarded as piling one layer of understanding, which should thus become deeper, richer; one tool of this deepening process is research through ethnography”. Referring to Markus Schlecker and Eric Hirsch's (2001: 76) discussion of the “crisis of context” in ethnographic research in media and cultural studies as well as science and technology studies, Strathern (2002: 303) underlines their argument that contexts, while generating new data, at the same time “point to yet more possibilities for contextualization”.

But more contextualisation, Schlecker and Hirsch (2001: 78) conclude, does not necessarily equal more knowledge. The multiplication of contexts, the problem of too many contexts, contributes rather to an increase of complexity. This is somehow ironic because according to Schlecker and Hirsch (2001: 70), ethnography's growing popularity in media and technology studies is a response

to the problem of increasing complexity in these fields of research. The underlying problem here, Strathern (2002) argues, is to understand context as being including or encompassing. With Schlecker and Hirsch (2001), Strathern proposes to understand and adopt ethnography in an inclusive rather than an exclusive manner.

Like people's behaviour in society, Strathern (2002) states further, ethnography tolerates disconnections and loose ends. Ethnography “throws up the unplanned, the counter-intuitive, the unpredictable” (Strathern 2002: 309). And this is done by ethnography's ability to detect “people's activities and narratives as *they* cross domains” and by that unpacking “the heterogeneous social worlds people pile up for themselves” (Strathern 2002: 309). Instead of analysing differences or similarities between contexts, an intensive mode of ethnography tracks people while traversing contexts.

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