

# **EASA Media Anthropology Network e-Workshop (Part 1)**

**“Using anthropological theory  
to understand media forms and practices”**

**(29 November – 6 December 2005)**

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

**John Postill (University of Staffordshire)**

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Dear list

The first part of the workshop 'Using anthropological theory to understand media forms and practices' starts now. The aim in this first session is to pool our individual experiences of using anthropological theory in the study of media. You're all very welcome to email directly to the list summaries of your theoretical work (no more than 1,000 words, in the body of the email, not in an attachment) and/or respond to any comments or queries about this work if and when you have the time. This applies equally to all Loughborough speakers (9 Dec).

It would be great if we could have 10 or 12 examples of uses of anthropological theory in media research by the end of this session in a week's time, with full bibliographic references thrown in wherever possible.

These examples may come in handy both offline in Loughborough and online after the Loughborough session, when we'll be discussing more generally the contribution of anthropological theory to the study of media.

Transcripts of both e-workshop sessions will be made freely available online in PDF format.

A reminder of the next two sessions:

Fri 9 Dec: Loughborough workshop

Tue 13 Dec to Tue 20 Dec: e-workshop (part 2)

Do let me know off-list if you have any questions or suggestions about this experiment.

Best wishes and I look forward to a great workshop!

John

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**John Postill (University of Staffordshire)**

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Dear list

Mmm, we seem to be having a quiet start to the e-workshop; calm before the brainstorm, no doubt. To get things going, perhaps I can share very briefly some of my own reflections on using anthropological theory to study media forms and practices.

To keep it concise, I'll just mention my work on media and nation building among the Iban of East Malaysia (Postill in press). With hindsight, this research and theorising was caught up in a discursive tension. On the one hand, I found myself at times using modern media to point at the limitations of anthropological theory in certain areas of research, e.g. the anthropology of time. In this research area chronometric media (clocks, wristwatches, calendars, radio, TV, etc) have been relegated to the margins. On the other hand, at other times in that study I drew on anthropological theory to analyse media in ways that I felt hadn't been done well enough in media studies. For instance, media scholars have often used the notion of ritual inconsistently

and without much reference to the vast corpus of anthropological work on this topic. Thus, in my initial PhD analysis of the Dayak Festival I drew on David Parkin's (1992) theory of ritual, derived from his work in East Africa and based on Turner and Van Gennep, to explore aspects of this ritual event such as directionality, bodily movement and efficacious intent. Parkin's Turnerian theory fitted in very nicely both with the existing Iban ethnography (Sather 1993) and with my own observations in the field. It was later on that I read Couldry's (2003) *Media Rituals*, where this media theorist also draws on Turner, and adapted some of his insights to a slightly modified analysis of the Festival.

It is curious, and worthy of notice, that at a time when many anthropologists have turned away from the concept of ritual (e.g. Hughes-Freeland 1998, who prefers to think of ritual as an 'odd-job word', not a concept), scholars from other disciplines such as Couldry are developing it in interesting ways drawing on anthropological sources.

Anyway, that's me in a nutshell. Queries and comments welcomed, and let's have other theoretical notes as well!

John

## References

Couldry, N. 2003. *Media rituals. A critical approach*. London: Routledge.

Hughes-Freeland, F. 1998. Introduction. In: Hughes-Freeland, F. (ed.), *Ritual, Performance, Media*, pp. 1-28, London: Routledge.

Parkin, D. 1992. Ritual as spatial direction and bodily division. In: de Coppet, D. (ed.), *Understanding Rituals*, pp. 11-25. London: Routledge.

Postill, J. in press. *Media and Nation Building*, Oxford and New York: Berghahn.

<http://www.berghahnbooks.com/title.php?rowtag=PostillMedia>

Chapter 1 draft available online at

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

Sather, C. 1993. Posts, hearths and thresholds: the Iban longhouse as a ritual structure. In: Fox, J.J. (ed.), *Inside Austronesian Houses: Perspectives on Domestic Designs for Living*, pp. 64-115, Canberra: Australian National University.

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## Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)

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Firstly I would like to say I would have loved to have been at the Loughborough workshop, but if I don't meet my next deadline I am not likely to ever be an academic anyway. Apologies for not being able to attend.

John mentioned his interest in ritual. In an earlier discussion John disputed my agency oriented definition of practice by saying that practice is characterised by repeated features. This is close to an idea of ritual: Is all practice ritual to some degree?

I would define practice as activities that are publically recognised as being of some type, and thus have roles and ways of proceeding associated with them. This is based on recognisability, which is a looser requirement in terms of continuity, as we recognise things even when they change to a degree.

I would say that the danger with 'ritual' encountered in Anthropology is essentialising continuity and historicity, and thus de-emphasising the ways in which histories of discursive practice are strategically mobilised in specific moments and transformed (to an extent) through the complexity of them being re-presented and re-enacted.

The link with communication is in the issue of recognisability: To what extent does a practice need to be 'repeated' to be recognisable? Well this 'repetition' is not passive but involves agents actively communicating (or articulating) some similarity. This must involve some recognisable model of what communication is as a practice in that instance (language, media practice, an intimate chat, a public address) including roles and ways of proceeding.

So the possibility of both ritual and practice is predicated on the possibility of communication. And since communication is not a reliable-process (i.e you can never be sure of your own or others interpretations) it means that the regularities of ritual and practice cannot be assumed either. People often have very different ideas about what is going on, even as they actively constitute it.

Hopefully this will get somebody going, if only to change the subject to something less obscure and possibly more relevant.

Daniel

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**Simone Abram (University of Sheffield)**

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Hi

I guess I'm a slow starter on the media anthropology front, but I'd like to participate in this discussion.

My interest is perhaps slightly different. From two fieldwork settings, both looking at ideas of 'public' and 'local government', in England and Norway, then you could say that local government institutions have a communication problem which they try to solve by incorporating the media. I suppose it's the 'fourth estate' idea, that the media should provide a means for the state to communicate with the citizens. Indeed, in Norway a local newspaper journalist said as much himself. However, among English city planners there seems to be an extremely ambivalent relationship to local print, radio and tv media, to say the least, and

a much less stable commitment from local press to do the communication work of local government. I haven't looked at the actual encounters between public sector employees and journalists, though, but at the ideas about 'the council' or 'the public' which emerge.

Would one say it was an approach from anthropological theory to question the basis of the concepts that this problematic relationship was based on? That it is the notion of a 'general public' who can be communicated with via news media - or nowadays via online communications - that is the problem here? That the idea of a monolithic 'council' provides a false object for communications from outside? Political anthropology would probably involved questioning the basis of the governmental idea, providing an alternative way to interpret dilemmas and struggles that practitioners such as local planners face.

On the other hand, I've often thought that ideas about ritual are helpful in interpreting formal political behaviours and role-relationships (eg public sector official : political representative), precisely because of the common reference to ritual in politics. (What do people think this ritual is, why do they tend - in my cases - to think of ritual as a kind of decoration and ignore its role in effecting social relations?) How do the more obviously ritualised practices structure the other practices around them and vice versa?

On that note, thanks to John for some useful references to follow up...

Simone

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**Mihai Coman (Bucharest University)**  
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Dear All

I would like to continue John's challenge and add another perspective in discussing the contribution of anthropological concepts in media studies (in fact we have to problem here - 1. the way media scholars use anthropological concepts, and 2. the way the usage can change, enrich anthropological concepts and theories). I would like to invite you to a discussion on the concept of liminality in media studies and of the possible influence of these analysis on our anthropological perspective

There have been several attempts to apply Turner's concept of liminality which have addressed different aspects of the media process. In my opinion, they can be organized into the following categories: the consumption of media messages and the production of media events. The ceremonial dimension of mass media message consumption is mainly due to the regularity of the mass media flux: media broadcast rhythmically—on the same weekdays and in the same moments of the day—products and messages identical in form. The term 'ritual' is used in this case to name and grant additional prestige to: (1) identical and regular

behaviour; (2) acts of simultaneous reception of certain messages—thus considered as common, therefore also communitarian; and (3) certain dramatically loaded content with the power to interpret the world. The concept of liminality is drastically simplified—it becomes synonymous with all kind of breaks that punctuate our daily life; it refers to all cultural experiences that temporarily remove individuals from accepted symbolic frames; it implies a mystical power to enrich, almost mechanically, our understanding of the world we live in. Consequently, all cultural sharing and exchanges become liminal, and are associated with periodic acts of social communion, with ritual. Television—as the most important system of distributing cultural products—is now placed at the heart of liminal activity, and the mere consumption of television appears as a liminal ritual of modern life.

In studies devoted to media events, the media functions as a factor of ritual feeling, allowing the audience to interpret different forms of social mobilization as great collective rituals. In other words, in exceptional moments, the press functions as part of a true liminal system, proposing images and ways of behaving (possible, but not necessarily applicable outside these places and moments). This means that media events are able to express not so much the concerns or interests of limited groups, as the fears and aspirations of the entire social body; thus, using a ritual language, the mass media creates a liminal, subjunctive framework, a framework for symbolically experiencing possible ways of articulating social life.

The concept of liminality has been used in media studies with reference to both large scale social phenomena or small scale events. In both cases, media studies usage has surpassed the definitions established by Victor Turner's research and reflections. Studies on media consumption and media events use a concept of liminality that lacks defining traits such as a spontaneous, ambiguous, threatening character: liminality become consensual, not conflictual. But the main problem when media studies approaches concepts such as liminality, ritual, myth is not the relationship to classical anthropology (i.e. the more or less faithful use of anthropological concepts). It is, instead, the theoretical paradigm that would enable the use of such scientific tools designed to give meaning to the Otherness in order to understand our Sameness. I believe that such an approach does not imply the simple transfer of concepts from one science to another one, but the creation of a new interdisciplinary perspective and of a new theoretical paradigm that would make a bridge between Otherness and Sameness. I would argue that only the emerging discipline of media anthropology could fill this gap.

Mihai Coman

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**Eric Rothenbuhler (Texas A&M University)**

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Very intriguing comments from Mihai, Simone, and Daniel—and thanks to John for kicking it off. John asked about some inter-disciplinary issues, pointing to how “ritual” is used differently and perhaps more prevalently in media studies than in contemporary anthropology. Mihai points to the possibility of new disciplinary developments, media anthropology as really a new field with concepts and logics tuned to its own phenomena more than loyal to their fields of origin. I have been thinking, while lurking around this list for a few months, about why classical anthropology was so attractive to media and communication scholars and why we have now developed our own uses for such terms as ritual and liminality. My thinking is very unsettled, which is why I haven't written before, but here are some ideas that relate to the issues under discussion.

Among the commonplaces, the taken for granted phenomena, for the communication scholar are action, volition, contingencies of interpretation, individual differences, etc., on the one hand, and the mundane, repeated, sameness of the macro patterns on the other. On the one hand, every speaker and every hearer have their own volitions, every television viewer his or her own interpretations, every situation is defined by its actors from their own points of view for their purposes, each and every bit of communication is a unique event. On the other hand is the ordinariness of it all and the mountains of statistical facts about mass behavior: the average US household has the TV on for 7.5 hours per day; weekly viewing peaks on Thursdays and Sundays; viewing is down in the summer time; viewing is an ordinary, everyday, mundane activity; most conversation is about nothing much and the theoretical possibility of radically diverse interpretation is not a ubiquitously lived reality.

In that context perhaps one of the attractions of “ritual” as a concept is that it captures an idea of volitional form. Rituals do not exist unless people do them; they do not have import without interpreted social consequences. Yet, unlike the dominant models of conversation or television viewing, we give theoretical emphasis to their form. They are symbolic action according to form—and this is something that communication theory has largely lacked—we have concepts rooted in attention to social form (political economy, ideology, etc.) and concepts rooted in attention to individual volition (reader response theory, rhetoric, etc.) but few that handle both at once smoothly.

Re. Daniel’s comment about the unreliability of communication, I have found Rappaport’s analysis very useful. His take is that there is an index at the heart of every ritual and in the Peircian sense an index is a sign that is really caused by its signifier. In the case of most rituals the bodies of the participants serve that function—we stand up, sit down, bow our heads, raise our right hands, etc. In doing so we signify certainly that we did perform the ritual and thereby tie ourselves to its accepted social consequences—which are normally expressed as symbols, narratives, sentences, and semiotic forms much less reliable than indexes. So, to reuse an example, saying “I do” at the right time under the right circumstances means you did and your doubts about whether you should or not, your doubts about the meanings of whatever prayers or songs or other statements came before or after, are all thereby made irrelevant. The index certifies the ritual and so the ritual form is used when the ordinary fallibility of communication could be a social problem or otherwise needs to be propped up.

Back to television viewing, I have often felt the terms ritual and liminality were used a little too loosely. Not every pattern of communicative behavior, not every symbolic action according to form is necessarily a ritual. We need more terms to capture the range of possibilities more precisely. For ritual I want to see evidence that the participants consider this an aspect of the serious life, that what they are doing is morally freighted to at least some degree.

I have to cut this off and go teach—perhaps I will provoke someone else into furthering the line of thought.

Cheers,

Eric

**John Postill (University of Staffordshire)**

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Many thanks to our first group of workshop participants. Now that the media/ritual thread is well underway, perhaps other people would like to start other threads?

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**Elisenda Ardèvol (University of Barcelona)**

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Hi, List!

I find the question posted by John not easy to answer, it seems simply, just to present an example of our own experience... but is a challenging quest!!!

First of all, I think that there is a general anthropological background and orientation in the kind of questions and inquiries we are doing in relation with media understanding, although we can use the theoretical work of anthropologists and/or other theory frames coming from media studies, sociology or philosophy, for example.

Maybe there is a common ground in the fact that we do not study media 'per se' but in relation with cultural forms and social practices, for example. From my point of view, I am trying to understand media as a cultural product and process or, in more detail, as a set of social practices related to the social and public- production, circulation, regulation and consumption of representations in concrete intercultural contexts. As you see, I am using here three theorists: Stuart Hall, Bourdieu and Geertz. Only one and a half have a 100% anthropological pedigree!!! And I am using them in my own way (of course!)

... because I cannot escape from my own bias about what is anthropology and what I am looking for, am I studying the media or the body. That is: intercultural comprehension of human being, that take account of contextual and no equal intercultural relations for doing intercultural comparisons and trying to do some generalizations. More or less, anthropological theory development is based on that sort of abstract aims, I believe...

An example: When I started to look at Internet trying to use an anthropological perspective, among others, Geertz's theoretical framework about culture as text helped me to make sense of the Internet as a cultural artefact, whose social meaning was being constructed and negotiated, not only through Internet use, but through social meanings verbal and non verbal representations- associated to that use and related with the sense people make about what Internet will do in our daily life. Of course, 'people' here is an abstraction for different social actors... in different fields as policy, publicity, commerce, education, etc.

Internet can be analyzed from a variety of theoretical perspectives, one of which is to understand it as "media". In fact, it has become 'a' media in part because it has been recognized as a 'new media' from media practitioners themselves. So, what my mind suggest me here is that 'media' is not an anthropological concept, but perhaps a folk entity. Following Geertz (again), we have to deal with those folk entities, not because our knowledge or language is or function 'different' from others, but because our task is to generate reflexive knowledge about our cultural constructs and to understand them considering natives social actors- understandings.

... well, is this a concrete example? May be not! Still searching,

Elisenda

Stuart Hall, Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, SAGE Publications, 1997

Pierre Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, Cambridge University Press, 1977

Clifford Geertz, Interpretation of Cultures, Basic Books Classics, 2000

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**Taru Patanen (University of Art and Design Helsinki)**

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Dear list,

As a first-timer, I would like to add something (maybe off topic) what I have been thinking of in relation to media anthropology and films.

I am interested in documentary film production and documentary film production politics and would like to find out if You could possibly give me any new help in regarding the anthropological theories etc which might be useful. Any new studies been done?

What is documentary film production politics then? I think that it is a definite part of an object of study for media anthropologists. I consider the people from various areas of media (eg film institutions, financing organisations, tv-channels, other financiers etc that is, all of these social actors who have a say in what viewers eventually see when watching a documentary [maybe ethnographic] film) who make choices about which documentary films they finance and what kinds of film productions, producers/documentarists, they support (who produce what kinds of content?), to be in charge of major influence and in a way, power.

Could these people in "media business" be called as an elite who have the ability to influence on what a large number of viewers (globally and locally) see in tv/cinema? As I understood it, an anthropologist Kijung Lee (2001) says, these producers are also viewers themselves, they produce films also for themselves, not only to other viewers out there.

Arjun Appadurai (1990) has argued that we live in mediascapes, which should be more thoroughly studied and understood (also as processes and relationships of power). Kelly Askew (2002) argues that "media technologies do not mediate between themselves and people. Rather, they mediate between people and this is what defines them as a distinct variety of technology." And later: "Media anthropology thus comprises ethnographically informed, historically grounded, and context-sensitive analyses of the ways in which people use and make sense of media technologies".

Faye Ginsburg, Brian Larkin and Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) argue that consumers and producers have themselves been attached to political situations, economical circumstances and national positions, historical moments and transnational currents.

Do these arguments offer a possibility to study the people (from e.g. the various institutions, tv-channels etc) 'responsible' of the produced films? Or in fact, who has the final say in what films are being made? Is it the public government officials or rich tv-channels or production companies (which self-produce their documentaries)?

Anthropologist Barry Dornfeld (2002) has argued that media studies' three objects of study, namely production, media texts and postproduction should be holistically studied with more ethnographic methods. Especially he thinks it is important to scrutinise the institutional framework in which all of these actions and social encounters take place.

Would You think that with anthropological ethnographic methods I could study documentary film production politics that is the processes in which people make choices or select or categorise the films that are worth financing and making? And what about the public sphere then, official decision-makers? People who actually hold the power to decide and influence on films that actually can be made from their points of view. What is this decision-making-process like?

So all in all, I would like to find out what kinds of theories could be drawn from anthropology to use in the analysis of documentary film production politics, of power and of elites and of these public social actors such as film institutions, tv-channels, financiers, etc. I appreciate Your help very much.

Thank You in advance.

Yours sincerely,

Taru Patanen

Doctoral student from the University of Art and Design Helsinki (School of Motion Picture, Television and Production Design) in Finland. Interested in eg. Finnish, Scandinavian and EU documentary film production politics.

### **Some useful books:**

Appadurai, Arjun. 1990: Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. *Public Culture* 2(2) 1-24

Askew, Kelly and Wilk, Richard R. (eds.) 2002: *The Anthropology of Media: A Reader*. Blackwell Publishers. Malden and Oxford.

Dornfeld, Barry. 2002: Putting American Public Television Documentary in Its Places. in Ginsburg, F., Abu-Lughod L. and Larkin, B. (eds.) 2002: *Media Worlds -Anthropology on New Terrain*. The University of California Press.

Dornfeld, Barry. 1998: *Producing Public Television, Producing Public Culture*. Princeton University Press. Princeton.

Ginsburg, Faye, Abu-Lughod, Lila and Larkin, Brian (eds.) 2002: *Media Worlds - Anthroponlogy on New Terrain*. The University of California Press.

Lee, Kijung. 2001: *Film, Culture and Generation Gap: An Anthropological Study of Chimhyang, A Korean Feature Film*.

**Eric Rothenbuhler (Texas A&M University)**  
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Daniel, others,

Re. citing Roy Rappaport, the essays collected in *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion* (1979), and especially “The Obvious Aspects of Ritual,” had a huge effect on my thinking when I was working on my book *Ritual and Communication* (1998).

Re. “the serious life,” Daniel is right, it is tricky—and it can be problematic in some analyses—but I think it is beneficial more often than not, if the idea is used flexibly. Certainly if we want to use the concept in studies of people’s engagement with entertainment, with popular cultures, with the pleasures of everyday conversation, storytelling, jokes, etc., then we have to be more flexible with the concept than implied by the little bit of guidance Durkheim gave us. Of course religion and politics count; but what of sports viewing, music listening, or family reunions?

The criterion I use is some evidence that there is an issue of “ought-ness” in people’s experience. If people act as if there are right and wrong ways to do something, or as if there are obligations to be performed, or responsibilities for outcomes, then I figure there is some characteristic of the serious life. When Baumann defines performance as the acceptance of responsibility for communicative competence—as in the moment in conversation when someone says “let me tell you a joke”—that breaks one frame of experience and introduces another that has an element of the serious about it. When fans of rock music judge each other by the songs they play and argue over the authenticity of musicians, there is an element of the serious about that too (though other criteria would also have to be present before we would call it ritual). When sports fans think about the game coming up, plan their activities around it, invite over guests, serve food and drink, etc., identities and relations are at stake, judgments will be made, and there is an element of the serious about it. Using one of Couldry’s examples, when a television personality walks into the restaurant and we all turn and look, whisper to each other, and tell folks about it later, there is an element of the serious about it.

These things ain’t world shakingly serious; but the ebb and flow of degrees of such seriousness are part of the distinguishing structures of life. It punctuates everyday experience and defines some moments as distinct. This sense of an element of the serious life can help distinguish rituals from habits and parties, for example. (Though of course, then we turn around and confuse the issue by analyzing the ritualist aspects of the party.)

But what about Daniel’s challenge that the indexicality feature of ritual is only different in degree from ‘normal’ communication? Of course there is a feature of indexicality in all forms and processes of communication—who said what, where the sound comes from, how the light falls on the film, etc. This is important to the “infrastructure of communication” but in the ordinarily successful flow of ordinary communication, in that phenomenological sense, it is not problematic. Tripping, stammering, not hearing, etc., on the one hand, and artistic activities (either training for performance or experimenting with technique) on the other, can make the indexical infrastructure into a focus of attention. But usually our attention is focused on the symbolic, the lexical, the icons, the narratives, the arguments, etc.—not the

movements of the tongue or the feet. In ritual, though, which must be according to form, the movements of the tongue and the feet, for example, take on great importance and can even be crucial to the outcome. So it is a shift of emphasis, but as Bateson would say, that's a difference that makes a difference.

And now I've typed on for far too long.

Cheers,

Eric

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**John Postill (University of Staffordshire)**

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Many thanks to our most recent contributors for opening up two more lines of discussion -- i.e. Tara on how to theorise the politics of film production, and Elisenda on the uses of Geertz's interpretive anthropology in the study of the internet -- and many thanks also to Eric for adding to the media ritual thread.

You're all welcome to join these threads or start new ones...

(Please note that this e-workshop ends on Tuesday at 8 pm Central European Time).

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**Daniel Taghioff (SOAS)**

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I feel I need to answer Eric's very thoughtful comments, partly because they relate to a half formulated response I was mulling over. I will observe the 3 posting limit!

I think the distinction he brings out about the serious life is interesting, but seems to me to be about something inherent in all forms of communication, rather than something that distinguishes a special set called ritual, even as only one criteria in that distinction.

The problem is that we are starting with an assumed object "ritual," and then working backwards from that to find distinctions in every day life that help to define it. Which is fine if defining ritual is your task, but does tend to obscure how the distinguishing features are inherent in all communication.

The point about seriousness seems to relate to a much more general need for predictability, underpinning almost all endeavors, science being one way of labeling such efforts at prediction.

Things become "formal" or oriented to form rather than to attempts to interpret the inner meanings and intentions of the other, where the predictability of the form outweighs the enjoyment of the flexibility of the play of meaning, which is useful also in that it allows creativity, and also subtlety and specificity in expression in particular moments.

This formalisation is a general feature of communication precisely because of the undecidability of the intention of another, we must always go on form to an extent, so the distinction is a matter of degree.

This is what I mean when I say that communication is based on some learnt sense of communication as a practice: All communication relies on learnt publically recognisable forms, as some sort of attempt to manage the undecidability of another's intention, or polysemy etc, etc

This is why I stress the distinction as being a matter of degree.

Also it is not always physical indexicality to the body either, that is the form that is focussed on. The example of saying "I do" is not about the body per se, but about observed behaviour. So Rappaport's analysis ( as I infer it from Eric) is that ritual involves an element of practiced behaviourism, of agents in practice paying attention to what people can be observed to be doing, rather than guessing their intention, meaning etc...

But this underscores the question of degree: We cannot say that all we pay attention to is the inner meaning of the other's words, life is not so platonic, we also go very much on what we observe people to do, partly because that is the only way we can make our guesses about their intentions.

I agree that there is a difference in emphasis, and in terms of the public recognition of things being serious or ritualistic, this is a significant one, but I would like to undermine the difference in kind around ritual in order to throw light on the 'ritualistic' elements of all communication, at least as I have laid them out here in terms of attention to form as a means to predictability.

Regards

Daniel

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**Guido Ipsen (University of Dortmund)**

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I should like to elaborate very briefly about Daniel's remarks on indexicality:

> This is what I mean when I say that communication is based on some learnt sense of communication as a practice: All communication relies on learnt publically recognisable forms, as some sort of attempt to manage the undecidability of another's intention, or polysemy etc, etc This is why I stress the distinction as being a matter of degree. Also it is not always physical indexicality to the body either, that is the form that is focussed on. The example of saying "I do" is not about the body per se, but about observed behaviour. So Rappaport's analysis ( as I infer it from Eric) is that ritual involves an element of practiced behaviourism, of agents in practice paying attention to what people can be observed to be doing, rather than guessing their intention, meaning etc...

The core meaning of indexicality is that the communicative substance, or sign, has some \*causal\* relationship with its object, or meaning content. This causal relationship may rest in

the physical nature of the sign, e.g., as smoke relates causally to fire, or in thought, e.g., as the idea of a sum refers causally to the elements that make up the sum.

As soon as it comes to communication, and especially rituals in communication, we have to deal with the effects of convention. Conventions can be so strong that we are, sometimes even despite our own efforts as researchers to remain objective, driven to understand "natural" or "causal" relationships where there are none in truth. Hence, the analysis of the ritual involves a highly elaborated deconstruction of the myth of causality, which may be implemented after the firm establishment of the ritualised behaviour. the communicative force of the ritual is predominantly symbolic; rituals need to be learned in order to be understood. You need to know the code behind the ritual in order to decipher its meaning.

This does not mean, however, that there are simply no indexical meanings behind rituals. A ritual that refers to some natural event already has some limited indexicality. Metaphors in rituals have a strong symbolic force, but still evince some indexicality (such as container metaphors, or direction metaphors). A ritual that emerges from older rituals may be symbolic in itself, but may have indexical value if both rituals are compared.

I think that in communicative rituals, the borderline between the indexical and the symbolic is rather blurred.

Regards,

Guido

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**Jens Kjaerulff (Aarhus University)**  
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Hello All, sorry to throw in an 'off-seminar' inquiry here:

I will be teaching an undergraduate level course for 3rd year anthropology students on 'New Information Technology and Society', in the spring. I am a social anthropologist, and a research specialty of mine is 'internet and cultural change'. Despite having spent some years by now developing this specialization, I find that publications on 'information technology' of good anthropological quality remain few and far between, so I would appreciate recommendations for course readings. What do I mean by 'good anthropological quality'? In a

nutshell, that the approach and analysis should be substantially informed by debates in mainstream anthropology, and that the information technology in focus is firmly connected to social practice in some way(s) other than just in terms of 'cyberspace' or 'virtual' whatever.

Also, in particular, I am on the hunt for 'classical' samples of techno-determinism, which may be paired up with excellent and ideally equally 'classical' critiques that point this determinism out. Here it is not critical for me that the focus is 'anthropological', or that it is on 'information' technology.

As an example, I imagine Lauriston Sharp's "Steel Axes for Stone Age Australians" (1952) would be suitable, but I would need a good critique of Sharp, to match up with Sharp, in order to have the 'set' that is ideal for my present purpose.

Other suitable determinists include Lewis Mumford, Marshall McLuhan and Arnold van Gehen, but I need some 'classical critics' to match them up with before they are of any real use.

Just like Robert Redfield has his Oscar Lewis (etc), there's got to be some 'classic critiques of classic techno-determinism' out there, but I seem to have difficulties in tracking them down ....

Hope someone 'round these quarters has a word of useful advice in one or several regards.

Best regards Jens

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**John Postill (University of Staffordshire)**

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Thanks to Guido for his thoughts on ritual and semiotics, and to Jens for throwing in the spanner of technological determinism, which we'll gladly find a use for in the workshop (what about social and cultural determinism? by the way, aren't we anthros prone to this vice?, see Reyna (2002)).

The e-workshop is open over the weekend, so do keep sending in your theoretical notes and queries.

Best

John

Stephen P. Reyna: *Connections: Brain, Mind, and Culture in a Social Anthropology*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002

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**Sarah Pink (Loughborough University)**

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Eric's and Daniel's comments brought to mind Nigel Rapport's work on communication, specifically his chapter in Joy Hendry and Bill Watson's edited volume *AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF INDIRECT COMMUNICATION* (2001). This is not so much about ritual, but rather Rapport writes about how in his fieldwork in an English village, in their everyday conversations with others with whom they were familiar, people 'talked past one another'. He concludes that

“... the polytheticality of symbolic forms in use (such as English words) translates into miscommunication and misunderstanding. Cognitively connecting up common verbal forms in different ways, contextualising them in different associative sets, individual speakers may understand very different things through the interactions they routinely share” (2001: 25).

I was wondering how this fits, or not, with ideas about how communication is ritualised to some degree?

in haste, its saturday morning and children are calling! so no time for me to think about this any more, just thought it might be an interesting perspective to draw people's attention to given the discussions that have developed on the list

Sarah

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**Philipp Budka (University of Vienna)**  
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Dear List,

Concerning Jen's request for 'classical' references dealing with techno-determinism and its critiques, one has to leave the anthropological path to enter into disciplines such as science and technology studies, sociology of technology ('Techniksoziologie' in German) and philosophy. Again a great example of the inter- and transdisciplinary character of media technologies as fields of research.

In her compact introduction to the sociology of technology, Nina Degele, writes that techno-determinism was particularly in the 1960s part of the technology and society discourses, answering questions like 'does technology drive history?' (e.g. Ellul 1964, Schelsky 1965, Marx and Smith 1994). These technocratic approaches were criticised in diverse manners by Habermas (1964, 1981), Marcuse (1967) and Winner (1986).

I hope that this brief comment is of help. References such as Habermas et al. are of course also available in English.

Best,

Philipp

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**Ursula Rao (Halle University)**  
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Dear all

I have been following the debate on media and ritual with great interest. Thanks to all for this debate. Having worked on religious rituals during my PhD-time and working on journalists' practices now, I would like to add by throwing in some thought on Handelman's concept of events as 'models and mirrors', which to me seems extremely helpful understanding media (and also ritual).

Handelman first developed the distinction between models and mirrors in his theory of events. He is building on Geertz's (1973, 1980) influential formulation, that rituals are models of and models for society. According to Geertz, rituals as models provide condensed communication about the essential elements of society that can be used in the re-creation of practices. There is a mutual relationship between models and performances. Models precede performances in the sense that they provide their scripts. Yet, they are also an outcome of performances, because through action humans create reality and with it the models that make their reality. Handelman engages with this creative potential of models and the process of making and remaking reality through modelling. He distinguishes three kinds of events: events that model, events that present, and events that represent.

Events that model, Handelman says, cannot and do not reflect the totality of life. They are condensed abstractions that have been created for a particular purpose. They are designed to bring into being what they proclaim and thus to initiate a process of transformation in the social order. Contrary to this, events that present do not have any direct impact on the everyday world of participants. They are rather declarations about the state of being, occasions for the public display of social relations. Finally, Handelman distinguishes events that re-present. They provide occasions for the reflection of the social order. By contrasting and comparing, they make parts of the foundations of the social order intelligible, while also

bringing to consciousness alternative models of the social that can function as a critique of existing conditions.

This analytical distinction brings us back to the initial exchange between John and Daniel about structure and agency / contingency. In Handelman's interpretation social events have a conservative function (they are accomplice of structure) and the potential to imitate new models for interpreting / experiencing / creating reality. I have adapted this approach to news-making (in India) and shown how standardized social practices and interpretative approaches are replicated and strengthened through news-making, while there are also aspects of press work that bring to bare new interpretive frameworks and imitate new forms of social practices.

Using the method of deep engagement, anthropologists have the chance to observe, not only structures, but also how structure are subverted, changed in action, adapted, etc. Combined with a complex literature on the relation between structure and agency (or the performativity of social life) this brings a particular innovative focus to the study of media.

And back to Turner: To me it seems almost redundant now to claim that media consumption or media events create liminality. What is more interesting to my mind is to study in detail - not only how *communitas* comes about - but also how it is used, subverted, appropriated to reintroduce structure or influence structure that, according to Turner, is supposed to be separated and different from *communitas* (A distinction that to my mind is much too rigid).

Ursula

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**John Postill (University of Staffordshire)**  
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One area of theory that we haven't discussed is media and identity, which many of us on the network register have mentioned as being a key interest, see

<http://easaonline.org/networksbios.htm>

In my own 2003-4 fieldwork in suburban Kuala Lumpur, I set out to study the relationship between new digital media and ethnic identity formation. Yet it soon became apparent that local activists were using the internet to create new forms of collective sociality and mobilisation that were not ethnic-based. Unlike Malaysian activists operating at the national level, who are concerned with questions such as freedom of expression or equal rights for all citizens regardless of ethnicity or religion, the activism I found on the ground centred around education and quality of life, i.e. on the struggles of middle class families to reproduce their economic and cultural capital in an inhospitable suburban frontier.

Somehow the whole question of ethnicity receded to the back of my field diary and I became more interested in the production of a new locality (Appadurai 1996) and its technologies of sociation (cf. Amit and Rapport 2002), such as online forums, mailing lists, email, text messaging, etc. A key question is how to theorise the emergent 'field of community activism' and its variegated internet usage, e.g. in relation to Bourdieu's (1993) and/or Victor Turner's (1957) field theory. In sum, I set out to study media and identity but ended up studying media and sociation.

I was wondering how others on the list were drawing on anthropological theories of identity and sociality to address these sorts of empirical actualities. My impression is that we're moving away from 1980s-90s theories of identity as something perpetually in flux and easily malleable to, well, I don't really know what. Any thoughts on this?

John

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Turner, Victor W. 1957 *Schism and Continuity in an African Society*. New York: The Humanities Press, Inc.

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**Roger Brown (University of Staffordshire)**

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Re: Sarah's quotation: "...Polytheticality..." Wow, there's a word. What ever does it mean? However the fuller quotation does bring to mind Kate Fox's work, "Watching the English" which I've recently been reading with my students, to all our greater pleasure. She writes well about the necessary ambiguities of language, ritual space and behaviours as necessary lubricants to life.

The essay on pub culture seems apt in the context of ritualised communication..how do you order a pint at a crowded bar? How does the bar man/lady know who next to serve in the right

order and not upset anyone who feels they've been overlooked or 'someone' has jumped the queue.

Regards  
Roger Brown

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**Simone Abram (University of Sheffield)**  
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In response to Roger,  
I'm sure Sarah can answer for herself, but 'Polythetic' comes from Rodney Needham 1983 'against the tranquility of axioms'. He posits polythetic classification as a form of classification by cluster, rather than by boundary. So you can think of a system of practical classification being focused on a range of overlapping similarities, rather than of rigid categories waiting to be filled.

So most bar-people would be trained into probably similar ideas about how to keep track of who to serve, yet each might have slightly different ways of doing it, or slightly different kinds of proto-rules in their heads. There's enough similarity to spot a pattern even if you couldn't explicitly define a general set of rules. In that sense, it's a helpful tool to thinking about vague but useful categories - like 'ritual' itself...

Hope that helps.  
Simone

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**Guido Ipsen (University of Dortmund)**  
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From the perspective of sociopragmatics, both on a linguistic as a behavioural level "metapragmatic acts" are important to consider in this regard. My thesis is that a great amount of utterances and behaviour produced aims at helping the percipient to understand the core meaning of a speech situation, or a behaviour context. I am currently working on a paper on this. The more ritualised a situational context, the less important is the metapragmatic act. However, since there are also microcosms of culture with their own rituals (sticking to the bar

example, there's the regulars vs. accidental guests who do not share the "local customs"), metapragmatic acts still play a role there. I argue that it is a situational hierarchy that governs who of the actors needs to metapragmatically explain their behaviour.

Don't know if this really contributes, but I thought it might as well.

Guido

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**Mark Hobart (SOAS)**

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Dear Members

In reply to John's inquiry about media and identity, identity has a long and chequered history.

Frederick Cooper in *Colonialism in question* (Univ. of California Press, 2005) offers a delightfully devastating dismissal of the notion. He uses a graph to show the inflation of buzz words in the social sciences (2005: 7). The inflation of 'identity' as an 'in' word over the last ten years leaves its rivals (globalization, modernity etc.) for dead.

The philosophical incoherences of identity as a concept were, of course, outlined by Heidegger in *Identität und Differenz*.

The genealogy of the use of 'identity' to refer to the human subject under certain descriptions has been outlined by Ron Inden (1997) *Transcending identities in modern India's world*. In *Politics and the end of identity*. ed. K. Dean, Aldershot: Ashgate, 64-102.). Inden there points to the crucial role of Erik Erikson in helping the term gain currency in American academia. He also notes the extent to which recourse to identity often entails a recourse to forms of transcendentalism, which are certainly notable in much use of media and cultural studies.

The difficulties of using the notion of identity in cultural studies are nicely discussed by Stuart Hall in his 1996. *Introduction: who needs 'identity'?* In *Questions of cultural identity*. eds. S. Hall & P. Du Gay, London: Sage. Hall attempts to steer the line between retaining a weak and nominalist version of the idea – even if under erasure – and recognizing the strong case that Judith Butler has made in successive works against 'identity' on the grounds that the term is almost invariably part of an intellectual strategy of essentializing. As Butler considers her task to be to argue out a philosophical frame of reference for cultural and media studies, she may deserve attention.

Best wishes

Mark

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**Christa Salamandra (City University of New York)**

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I'd like to thank Mark for that concise, critical genealogy of the concept of identity. I'd also like to suggest that the identity is very relevant in many ethnographic contexts, particularly those in which the people we study are themselves engaged in that intellectual strategy of essentializing (media producers, for example).

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Assistant Professor  
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Lehman College, City University of New York

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**Kyra Landzelius (Gothenburg University)**  
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Dear Colleagues,

I'll make apologies up-front, as I'm afraid I don't have much to add especially this late in the game, mainly some reflections and a 'thank you' for the dialogue that I've only just had the opportunity to read this afternoon.

I'll say, though, that I appreciate what a great teaching tool this network has been - reading today I learned, for example, about Turner's influence on media studies, ie. the ritual and liminality bents (clearly I have a lot of reading to catch up on!). I find this personally intriguing, because, as my favorite 'anthropological' theorist, I naturally turned to Turner (no pun intended!) when trying to come to terms with what was happening on homepages posted by parents of preterm babies, graphically and narratively-dense homepages linked into 'virtual communities' (Landzelius 1999) - for me, the concepts of (cyber) pilgrimage, communitas, and initiation seemed the best tools for grasping what was going on with/in these elaborate solidarity networks and (I argued) healing spaces in their own right. Yet in this I was dealing with a small circle or association; and was clueless that media scholars had headed in the same direction, using ritual as a template to interpret media on a grand scale. (One key puzzle for me had been to ponder the relationship between genre and ritual; e.g., are they variations on a theme?, collapsible?, a matter of degree?, is it a 'high culture'/'low culture' issue?, etc.)

This leads to the intrigue from a professional angle: I too find it remarkable that Turner has sparked such interest among media theorists. What does it say about media, or at least media scholars' perceptions of it? Much by way of 'answer' has already been put forth in this forum; to wit, trying to understand matters of volition, actors, habits and praxes, signs, transformation/continuity (the structure/anti-structure issue). I would concur with Erik that a richer selection of concepts and nuances is overdue; and I am grateful to Ursula for her discussion of Handelman.

On the topic, though, it is striking that we (anthros) seem not to be adapting much other 'anthropological' theorists in interpreting media phenomenon, or at least it has not made its way into the conversation here. For my part, in addition to Turner, my online research has been inspired by Fernandez' writings on tropes, Appadurai's 'scapes', more recently I've attempted to return to early concepts of culture(!), to see what if anything they might yield. To grasp media, we also come face-to-face with that old conundrum of the relationship between society and culture, one radically problematized by 'global' media, transnational 'flows', etc.

Otherwise, in seeking to understand media phenomena, much theoretical inspiration for me derives from linguistics and semiotics (Bakhtin, Gramsci, Eco, Pierce). I, for one, would find it of interest to hear from other 'media anthropologists' as to the 'non-anthropological' theorists that we find useful to 'think with' - perhaps another similar roundtable seminar devoted to this topic?? I am wondering if patterns will emerge, or if we are all drawn/headed in different directions...?

I'll wrap up, but in closing will echo John - I too think that there is something transitional about how identity is being discussed (or not), but likewise could not really put my finger on it, nor have I explored the matter. And now I see that Mark has contextualized the present fate of 'identity' - a much welcome update, although I find myself challenged to think around it.

Regards to all,  
Kyra

PS: Guido, you mention an article in progress on 'metapragmatics', and I for one would be interested in reading it, if you can post it or the reference on our list?

The references I mention should be already accounted for? (Bakhtin, Gramsci, Appadurai, Fernandez, otherwise:

Landzelius, Kyra 1999. Screening Preterm Babies: From Cyborg Wombs to Virtual Attachments. Lund: Nordic Academic Press.

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**John Postill (University of Staffordshire)**  
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Dear list

A quick reminder that this session ends tomorrow (Tuesday) at 8 pm Central European Time. Please feel free to add to the existing threads or even go off on a tangent by pointing out areas of theory we may have left out; this is, after all, a warm-up to the two next sessions.

Best wishes

John

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**Mirca Madianou (University of Cambridge)**  
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Thanks to John and Mark for raising this issue and for thoughtful comments. I couldn't agree more that identity is a minefield. In fact it does seem to me that we often (unwittingly?) prioritise identity in our research questions when we set out to study 'an' ethnic group, 'a' transnational community and so on, thus running the risk of overlooking that the single most

common use of the media is for social – not ethnic – purposes. I am definitely observing sociality in my current work on news consumption and emotions.

(of course, i am aware that some sceptics would argue that ethnicity is nothing more than a shared sociality following the social communication approach of Deutch, for example).

Having said that, I am also wondering whether we should jettison the concept of identity altogether. In my previous research in Greece with Greeks and Turkish speakers living in Athens (just published as a book, Madianou, 2005a) I observed that my informants were quite ready to refer to their ‘identity’ according to context and especially when it served their interests. The strategy I followed in my fieldwork and the subsequent writing of it was to follow people’s discourses and practices about identity – what has now become a well documented strategy among anthropologists (see among others Baumann, 1996; Dominguez, 1989) as an attempt to avoid essentialism and reification. This way I acknowledged that people essentialise their own identities as much as politicians, policy makers, nationalists and often academics do (a point eloquently made by Baumann in his ethnography of Southall, 1996). As in Baumann’s book (1996), my informants’ discursive strategies and reifications were not stable: they often shifted according to context and what was at stake.

In this context, what I became interested in was whether the media played any role in these shifting, strategic and definitely relational discourses and practices about identity. In my research it emerged that the media (especially television news) did play a role in shaping the boundaries that define (this perceived) insiderhood and cultural intimacy (Herzfeld, 1996).

In sum: although I couldn’t agree more that sociality matters and has been overlooked, I also feel that there might still be occasions when taking into account people’s discursive strategies on identity might still be useful and perhaps even an indication of relations of power (and that includes media power).

With apologies that I will miss the Loughborough meeting – it’s the week when we do the admissions interviews here... At least I am glad I managed to make my first contribution to this very energetic list!

All the best,

Mirca

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**Birgit Braeuchler (University of Munich)**

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Christa made a very good point here and I would also like to thank Mirca for her comment.

Just think of the many 'revitalisation of tradition' movements or other social movements all over the world right now (not to mention diasporic groups). Media (and identity) are of utmost importance for them. Be it the Internet to present identities or to get/keep in touch, be it video CDs to capture revitalised rituals in sound and vision, or PowerPoint presentations to underline the importance of traditional rituals and their relevance in the 'modern age'. All of this can be observed in Indonesia right now in the current process of decentralisation and revival of local traditions. While many anthropologists seem to reject the essentialization of identities (be it religious, ethnic etc.) we are now confronted with these movements criticizing exactly this rejection that seems to de-legalize their claims.

Jolly and Thomas (1992: 242), for instance, talk about scholars who "subvert the 'mythic foundations' of both local and national traditions. This has been seen as an attack on the authenticity of indigenous political claims to land or to separate rights or representations in relation to government or law, and has occasioned vituperative debate between scholars and politicians, between academics and activists...".

Best,  
Birgit

Jolly, Margaret / Nicholas Thomas 1992 The Politics of Tradition in the Pacific: Introduction. *Oceania* 62 (4) June 1992: 241-248.

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**Mihai Coman (Bucharest University)**

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Dear colleagues

This message is addressing the previous discussion launched by Francisco - more precisely a small subject of polemics between me and Francisco concerning the existing/non-existing research on Romania by the student culture at distance school. I have looked more deeply into the bibliography and Francisco is (partially) correct in his statement that such research has been done on Romanian culture. Ruth Benedict wrote a study titled "Romanian culture and behaviour" which she never published; it was a 50 pages booklet that was published in the 70 or 80. But the method she used were less a distant enquire because she interviewed almost 30 Romanians living in US and she used 2 or 3 books on rural sociology available in English. So, my statement that this was not the beginning (at least for Romania as a field) for a media anthropological oriented approach - based on media documents (movies, radio, printed press) was also correct.

My best to Francisco and all partners of scientific dialogue and reflection on our forum  
Mihai Coman

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**S. Suryadi (University of Leiden)**

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Dear Colleagues,

What I am interested in, deals with this our forum, is the people's reactions toward the cultural (re)presentation in modern media. Thus for example, in 22 May, 1892, when the British Prof. Douglas Edmund Archibald for the first time exhibited Edison's phonograph in Java, he was 'attacked' by audience in Surabaya and adversely criticized by the press like Soerabaija-Courant. Prof. Archibald among others presented the recording of British Prime Minister Gladstone's speech. But, alas, the 'wonder' 'talking machine' was hampered by technical problem.

As consequence, the Gladstone's sound on the recording was dull. According to the British spectators, the Gladstone's voice on the recording did not sound "anything like the Grand Old Man's voice". Archibald was made a laughing stock due to the technical problems of his recording machine.

The most protest came from the British spectators in Surabaya who, according to my interpretation, felt that their NATIONAL PRIDE (READ: IDENTITY) had been injured due to poor sound quality of their GREAT LEADER, SIR WILLIAM EWART GLADSTONE. So, here we can see the media and (national) identity: the psychological effect of the sound replication in the early years of sound recording machine invention.

This incident, however, shows the Weidman's claim (2003) that the new stored material preserved in the modern media--the recording machine in this case--come to be experienced as the 'real'; the phonograph, and of course other kinds of modern media, seems to have promptly brought about psychological effect. So, the invention of modern audio-visual media has also affected the human's perception of the 'real'. The modern electronic media has enabled one to store data--in phonograph case: sound-- other than writing. At issue was not simply that the new media technology expanded the possibilities of storage, but that technology was thought of as fundamentally different from what stored by writing. Hope that those among us try to discuss the modern media and identities from different perspective. Talking about media and identities, it is also important, I think, to examine the

people's perceptions, reactions, and responses toward the things (re)presented in modern media, historically, and recently.

Suryadi

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**Francisco Osorio (University of Chile)**

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Dear list,

Here is another great word, this time posted by Mihai: scientific dialogue. Perhaps unintended, our previous seminars remains open. The point is to increase our knowledge of the field, connecting ideas like Suryadi does. I really like the list.

Francisco Osorio  
Anthropology Department  
Universidad of Chile

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**John Postill (University of Staffordshire)**

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Dear All

On that upbeat note from Francisco, and slightly behind schedule, we have come to the end of this session. A PDF transcript of the session will be on our website soon, courtesy of Philipp Budka.

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

A number of themes have emerged -- incl. media and identity, Geert'z interpretivism, the politics of media production, technological determinism, and media and ritual -- some of which are likely to resurface in our two coming sessions, namely:

Friday 9 Dec: Loughborough workshop  
Tue 13 Dec to Tue 20 Dec: e-workshop (part 2)

The Loughborough workshop will be devoted to individual presentations in the morning and group work in the afternoon.

The second part of the e-workshop, chaired by Ursula Rao (Halle), will take off from where the Loughborough session left, a summary of which will be circulated on this list beforehand.

Many thanks to all our participants and I look forward to an intense Loughborough workshop and mailing list discussion!

Best wishes

John