

Media Anthropology Theory

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Introduction

Our on-line seminar papers have led us to several discussions about the definition or limits of media anthropology, its subject matter and its methodology. This face-to-face workshop along with the on-line stage of the seminar that has been going on for the past week aims to explore the use of anthropological theory in media anthropology in more depth.

In my view the discussion is also important in that it should have implications beyond the question of how we are using anthropological theory to understand media forms. In our on-line discussions we have often returned to the question of trying to define media anthropology through either its subject matter (mass media, any media, what is media anyway?) or by its method (often ethnography). I think these attempts are destined to fail. First because the subject matter alone cannot make a piece of research anthropological and, moreover, media are always embedded in the contexts in which anthropologists do research. Second because the long term fieldwork method that characterised anthropology as it emerged as an academic discipline in the mid twentieth century is increasingly being replaced by new forms of ethnographic narrative and innovative methods. This is an important point to keep in mind especially if we want to include applied anthropology within what we call media anthropology. I think we should, as the applied potential and collaborative elements of much media anthropology work is immense. Nevertheless applied anthropologists are often obliged to exchange long term fieldwork for much shorter timescales, participant observation for interviewing and other (often visual) methods – as are other anthropologists who, because of either the timescales they have for research are limited or due to the nature of their subject matter, seek alternative methods to the conventional long term participant observation.

In this context I would argue that it is anthropological theory that necessarily has to underpin our understandings of what media anthropology is. However, I think the question of how anthropological theory is used in media anthropology has been under-explored and that is one of the reasons why we wanted to develop the question of the use of the uses of anthropological theory to understand media practices and forms [although in retrospect – and after the workshop discussions - I suspect that what I meant was that I would like to try to define what an *anthropological approach* to media is and how uses of theory might be implicated in this].

Before opening the workshop I wanted to remind you of some of the themes that have developed from our on-line workshop. I am sure that the speakers will pick up on these themselves as well as introducing new questions

- Anthropological theories of ritual have often been part of our discussions and were equally present in the e-workshop. I know Nick Couldry will be returning to these today, as, I am sure will others.
- Identity emerged as a key theme in the e-seminar. Mark Hobart suggested that identity is an essentialising concept. Others then reasserted its relevance in that the subjects of our research – TV producers, indigenous media makers, and the like – themselves use identity as a concept that informs their own practice. My own view is that theorising identities as contingent, contextual and constituted through practice can allow us to use the concept in a way that is not essentialist and in fact encourages us to analyse the role of media practices in its production.
- Sociality has been suggested as an alternative to identity, although I wonder if we would not achieve more if theories of each of these were used in tandem: is it really possible to understand one without the other?

Clearly there is much more than just ritual and identity to discuss. Some of these themes might come out of our discussions of identity and ritual. For example a theory of practice is usually implied when we speak of both identity and ritual. Others will emerge from this seminar as it develops.

A note on the participants: we are a mix of social anthropologists and media and communications studies academics; we also have a healthy mix of academic staff, postdocs and PhD students, which we hope will allow us all to learn from one another.