

A few comments on media and sociation

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In this talk I'd like to take off from where I left the question of media and sociation during our mailing list session. I hope that others here and on the list will find this question of interest.

In that posting I mentioned my recent fieldwork in a middle-class suburb of Kuala Lumpur called Subang Jaya. Although I set out to study new media technologies and ethnic identity formation – with a focus on relationships between the local authorities and ‘cyberactivists’ – I ended up concentrating on the problem of sociation. In other words, in the course of fieldwork my attention shifted from media and identity to media and sociality. The problem I am working on is as follows: since the late 1990s, a determined network of activists in Subang have launched a number of initiatives aimed at knitting local ties among residents, shield their neighbourhoods against crime, and strengthen their position vis-à-vis the municipal council. At the heart of these initiatives lie the efforts of middle-class families to reproduce their economic and cultural capital in an inhospitable suburban frontier.

As you would expect, different local activists do things differently, but over the past 10 years or so I would say that a specialist field of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993) has emerged. I am provisionally calling this field a *field of local community building* – and here I am using ‘community building’ as a vernacular term from local Malaysian English, the middle-class lingua franca. This ‘field of organised striving’ (Martin 2003) is a field in the making, with some pockets of residents’ initiatives less well connected to the rest than others. For instance, there is a thriving youth football league in Subang with a busy website run by a former journalist. However, its leaders has so far had little contact with the two

main initiatives, both born in 1999: a thriving independent web forum, and a government-funded neighbourhood watch scheme with an online dimension.

Now to analyse the short but eventful history of this field I am planning to draw on the field theory of both Bourdieu (1993) and Victor Turner (1974, 1957). I don't know yet whether these two very different understandings of field theory will prove incompatible. Bourdieu's model is often criticised for its inattention to change and overemphasis on the more stable aspects of a field, for instance the field of art in France, with its established institutions and consecrated figures (see Gledhill 2000, Kapferer 1996).

In contrast, Victor Turner's field theory is concerned with processes of change as well as continuity, a central concept being 'social drama'. This concept refers to a form of conflict that originates within a social group but can spread across a wider inter-group field unless appropriate 'redressive action' is taken (Turner 1996 [1957]: 91, 1974: 128-32). Social dramas usually unfold around crises in the political lives of key individuals and point at structural contradictions within the group or broader social field.

To illustrate the possible uses of this field concept I'll relate briefly an incident in which I was involved during fieldwork. It all started when a web forum user opened up a thread on the trouble he was having getting the municipal council to fix a drain that had collapsed outside his backyard. The forum thread grew longer and longer and eventually a group of residents, led by the person who started the thread, decided to take action and organise a demonstration to draw media attention to this issue. Being a dutiful fieldworker, I joined the demo but tried to keep a low profile. Yet this was a poorly attended demo, and when I was asked to stand behind the only banner to make up the numbers I foolishly obliged. As a result, the following day my portrait appeared in the Chinese-language press, alongside that of the demonstrators. This photograph was the cause of much strife and conflict, both online and offline, as the web portal founder accused the demonstrators of misusing the portal's domain. He felt that the banner in question was not only rude about the municipal council; its author had also tarnished the portal's domain name (USJ.com.my) by displaying it on the banner. He demanded a public apology on the web forum, as well as to the municipal council.

My pre-analysis of this episode – but this is still work in progress – indicates that this social drama followed the stages proposed by Turner in his model, namely (1) breach, (2) crisis, (3) redressive action, and (4) re-integration or schism. I'm interested in using Turner's model not only to understand the power relations and dynamics within this 'e-community' (as it is known locally) but also within the broader field of community building in Subang, a field that encompasses residents' groups as well as the public and private sectors.

Besides Turner, I may use this case study to explore other theories of social and political process. I am currently, for instance, rereading Stephen P. Reyna's work

Connections (2002) in which he proposes a 'Boasian social anthropology' centred on the concept of 'string being' -- the neural and cultural knotting together of antecedent and subsequent social events that allows people to make connections and create social worlds. In terms of Reyna's as well as field theory, perhaps what's interesting about online threads is that they provide field agents with visible and accessible cultural knots of discourse that can be mobilised for social and political action at critical times.

I also hope to draw on the work of Vered Amit (Amit and Rapport 2002), especially on her call for the enlargement of our sociation lexicon to capture at least some of the fluidity and diversity of social formations we encounter in contemporary (sub)urban spaces. Our current conceptual universe, she suggests, relies too heavily on concepts such as 'diaspora' or 'imagined community' that are hollowed out of social relational content. I'd like to suggest that this conceptual expansion is needed if we are to begin to address the massive proliferation of social technologies in recent years, from websites, web portals and blogs to online dating, viral networking and smart mobbing -- some of which we have already discussed on the mailing list, most recently around Elisenda Ardevol's working paper on online match-making.

Finally, I'd just like to mention that I sense a growing interest in this question of sociation, with or without a media connection. For example, Vered Amit (personal communication, 17 Oct 2005) is organising a panel for the next meeting of The Canadian Anthropology Society. The panel will experiment ethnographically 'with one or more concepts of sociation (sociality) that go beyond the usual familiar but often vague and general notions of community, collectivity etc'. Similarly, John Eade is running a panel at the next ASA conference on the relationship between the social and the spatial in urban settings in which he seeks to reconnect with the work of 'anthropologists in Africa during the 1960s and 1970 on urban migration and new social formations' (from panel abstract). There is also the forthcoming conference at Oxford on cultural change and media theory, in which some of the main themes will be field theory, governmentality and actor network theory.

I think I'll stop there to allow for questions or comments.

Many thanks.

References

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Conferences

ASA Diamond jubilee conference 2006, Keele, UK
<http://www.theasa.org/asa06/index.html>

CASCA Conference 2006, Concordia University, Montreal, May 9 to 14, 2006
http://www.casca.anthropologica.ca/an_casca2006cfp.htm

Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change, Oxford University conference on media and cultural change, September 2006
<http://www.cresc.man.ac.uk/events/sept06/confsept06main.htm>