

Why Is Interest in Mass Media Anthropology Growing?

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Abstract

The purpose of this text is to answer why anthropology exhibits a growing interest in mass media. In order to accomplish the objective, I will review three research traditions that I argue can help in the understanding of this growing interest. Briefly, World War II, nationalism and development are the antecedent conditions that provoked mass communication research within anthropology. Therefore, I argue that anthropology entered into mass communication as a reaction, not as a quest.

Introduction

The fact that the 1996 Routledge Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology has an entry for “mass media” is an indicator of the growing interest in anthropology for the subject. Philip C. Salzman wrote the article, basing his analysis on Conrad Kottak and Sara Dickey. Salzman distinguishes traditional forms of mass media, the printed media, and the electronic media. About the first, he says that mass communication can be seen in traditional forms widespread for millennia, such as sermons, plays, town criers, musical concerts, and in the use of loud instruments such as drums or horns. Later, the development of printing made the written word into a medium of mass communication. However, he argues at the end of the twentieth century the reading of newspapers and books are limited considering the total world population. This situation changed with the electronic media, he says, because this medium is coded through the same human skills of speech and body movement that are characteristic of face-to-face communication. Salzman argues that television broadcasting is at the same time highly diverse and notably similar. It is diverse, he says, because media broadcasts travel and are transmitted across cultural boundaries. It is similar because they tend to come from industrial countries to non-industrial countries, from central regions to peripheral areas. In the same year, Salzman published *The Electronic Trojan Horse: Television in the Globalization of Paramodern Cultures* (Arizpe 1996). He became interested in television after his fieldwork with nomads in Africa, because they watched a lot. This essay is an invitation to anthropologists to study television. His argument arises from the fact that Tuareg nomads of the Sahara postponed a major migration in order to find out who had shot J. R., which is a compelling argument for anthropologists to study television. Finally, Salzman mentions the work of G. Granzberg (1977, 1982, 1985) and Liechty (1994) as relevant research.

The purpose of this essay is to answer why anthropology exhibits this growing interest in mass media. In order to accomplish the objective, I will review three research traditions that

I argue can help in the understanding of this growing interest. The histories of both anthropology and mass communication are brief. They have in common a starting point in World War II.

My first argument is that the “Culture at a Distance” school brought the mass media and nations into anthropology as objects of study. Second, nations and nationalism remained the most important political systems in the twentieth century, and anthropology participated in the study of them because of their effects on local cultures. Third, a new discipline grew up in this context: development anthropology. It shares the same interest of campaign studies: persuasion. Anthropology, under the guidance of modernization, is interested in cultural change on some nations, in the direction that modernity theory predicted. Campaign studies share the same interest, under the hypothesis of mass media’s powerful effects.

Briefly, World War II, nationalism and development are the antecedent conditions that provoked mass communication research within anthropology.

Studying Cultures at a Distance (World War II)

The institutionalization of anthropology within universities defined its role as a social science studying primitive people. This situation changed with World War II. At that time, the American Office of War Information asked Ruth Benedict to help understand enemy countries. Benedict’s work on Japanese-American communities, among other Columbia’s scholars, is important on many levels.

a) Methodologically, anthropologists could not rely on fieldwork for obvious reasons. Therefore, they invented methods to understand “culture at a distance”. They were able to interviewed migrants and captives, but other sources came onto the scene: novels, diaries, newspapers, films, and radio programs. In other words, the mass media.

In 1953, Margaret Mead and Rhoda Metraux published *The Study of Culture at a Distance*, dedicated “To Ruth Benedict who inaugurated Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures”. The introduction, written by Mead, is very clear about the purpose of the handbook.

“This Manual is concerned with methods that have been developed during the last decade for analyzing the cultural regularities in the characters of individuals who are members of societies which are inaccessible to direct observation” (Mead & Metraux 1953).

The structure of the book reflects this concern. One of the chapters is “Group Research”, which is a novelty for classical anthropology. Ethnographers used to work alone in the field, and monographs had one author. In this book, methods are developed for anthropologists to work together. Other chapters divergent from the tradition are “Written and Oral Literature” and “Film Analysis”. The chapters “Projective Tests” and “Imagery” reflect the theoretical approach of this school.

b) A new object of study appeared for anthropology: nations. Culture at a Distance conducted studies for Romania, the Netherlands, Germany, Thailand, and Japan. The last one is the most famous, because of the 1946 Benedict's book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*.

The book describes Japanese culture. The first chapter is a good description of the new problems that Benedict faced when studying Japan without fieldwork. I will highlight part of the *Acknowledgments*, which were very unusual for an anthropological book, but characterized the spirit of that time.

“Japanese men and women who had born or educated in Japan and who were living in the United States during the war years were placed in a most difficult position. They were distrusted by many Americans. I take special pleasure, therefore, in testifying to their help and kindness during the time when I was gathering the material for this book. My thanks are due them in very special measure. I am especially grateful to my wartime colleague, Robert Hasima. Born in this country, brought up in Japan, he chose to return to the United States in 1941. He was interned in a war Relocation Camp, and I met him when he came to Washington to work in the war agencies of the United States” (Benedict 1946).

c) To study nations, the Culture at a Distance project walked from the Culture and Personality School, specifically on the national character concept. According to the 1997 Oxford Dictionary of Anthropology, national character refers to the basic personality structure or psychological pattern of the citizens of contemporary nation-states. This concept is based on the work of Anthony Wallace, the anthropologist from the University of Pennsylvania.

Anthropology and Nationalism

What remains from the national character school is the study object, not the theory. Anthropology has not abandoned its traditional object but added nations into its scope. If Ruth Benedict represents this interest in the 1940s, in the 1960s Clifford Geertz gave it a second wind with his book *Old Societies and New States*, and in the 1980s Ernest Gellner kept the area in movement with *Nations and Nationalism*. Geertz and Gellner have heavily influenced anthropologists to move into the study of nations. Although these anthropologists studied nations different from their own, the shifting interest in nations allowed anthropological research to focus on America and Western Europe. Through this shift, mass society came into anthropology and, with mass society, mass communication appeared on the scene.

The knowledge that anthropologists have produced in mass communication, and especially television, take nations as the unit of analysis. Even if the ethnography is conducted in a city or village, anthropologists are interested in the nation. In fact, a recurrent question is television's effect on national identity. However, research on nationalism does not have to be understood as a unitary field of study. What nations and nationalism are remains an open question. In order to give a general framework for this research, I will review the following essays.

Anthony Smith (1994) says in *The Politics of Culture: Ethnicity and Nationalism* that although some scholars think nations and nationalism have always existed, most research argues for a modern origin of those concepts. Theoretically, there are two main approaches in this area: primordialism and instrumentalism. The first assumes that nationalist ties and sentiments are primordial and even natural. The strong form of primordialism holds that the ties themselves are universal. The weak form claims that members feel that their community has existed “from time immemorial”, and that its symbols and traditions possess a “deep antiquity”. Instrumentalism, in the other hand, understands nationalism as a resource to be mobilized, or an instrument to be employed, by particular groups in pursuit of further ends, usually of a political or economic nature. Anthropologists such as C. Geertz and E. Gellner, and scholars such as B. Anderson, follow the weak version of primordialism, whereas the anthropologist Peter Worsley (see below) follows the instrumentalist view.

Smith argues that neither primordialism nor instrumentalism offers a neutral or detached analysis. Strong primordialism supports a retrospective nationalism, which would treat some communities or groups as “nations” with “nationalist” movements and programs. Weak primordialism supports a modernist perspective, Smith says, that serves the interests of international intellectuals for whom nations constitute unwelcome barriers. This modernist view exaggerates the break between traditional and modern societies and the novelty of modern conditions. Instrumentalism, also, is clearly a critical way of thinking with a strong political view. Smith does not see any kind of theoretical consensus in the way that scholars understand nations and nationalism.

Smith’s main argument is that nationalists create the nation, but they do so only within circumscribed boundaries and with the ethnic materials provided by previous generations within their community. Nations were not created from the nothingness, Smith says, but from a social stratum which he calls ethnic community or *ethnie*, i.e., a human group whose members share common myths of origin and descent, historical memories, cultural patterns and values, association with a particular territory, and a sense of solidarity, at least among the elites.

Smith says that nationalism signifies many things. What he calls the ideology of nationalism holds that:

- a) The world consists of separate, identifiable nations, each with its peculiar character.
- b) The nation is the sole legitimate source of political power.
- c) Every individual must belong and owe supreme loyalty to one and only one nation.
- d) Nations must be autonomous, for only then can global freedom and peace be assured.

To this “core doctrine”, Smith says, nationalists add their own secondary elaboration, which varies in every political context. Alongside with these ideas, he says, the symbols are in nations’ flags and anthems, memorials and monuments, parades and ceremonies, coins and insignia, capitals and assemblies, arts and crafts, music and dance.

Peter Worsley (1994) in *The Nation State, Colonial Expansion and the Contemporary World Order*, says that although the nation-based political system was consolidated in the

1880s, it was only after World War II that nations and nationalism took form in almost every place in the world. For example, seventeen African countries were born in 1960. The ideal of political autonomy, Worsley says, has less empirical support than nationalists would accept. Worsley prefers to use the term “semi-colonies” for most nations, especially Latin America and African countries, because historically the most important political system has been imperialism and colonialism. In fact, the relationship between colonialism and anthropology is so close that the discipline could be explained from this historical situation. Nations, he says, cannot avoid the fact that some countries have a better position because of the development of world history and capitalism. Even nations that followed the communist model of change during the 1990s into mixed systems with capitalism. Worsley concludes that we have to extend our perspectives and consider the historical transformations that modernity has produced in the world. Therefore, modernization and development is another important element of analysis.

Anthropology and Development

Another reason for the growing interest of anthropology in mass communication is the relationship between the discipline and development theory or modernity. As an example, the 1996 book about development and anthropology from UNESCO (*The Cultural Dimensions of Global Change: An Anthropological Approach*, edited by Lourdes Arizpe and including essays from names such as Fredrik Barth, Eric R. Wolf, and Maurice Godelier) has a chapter about television written by Philip C. Salzman.

Development is strongly related to nationalism as discussed before. I will present the argument of the anthropologist Jonathan Spencer as a general framework.

Spencer wrote the entry for modernity in the 1996 Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology. He argues that the history of anthropology could be read from the term *modern*, divided in four periods.

Period	Year	Key Word	Description
I	Before 1950	Modern	Anthropologists are modern people studying pre-modern cultures.
II	1950-1960	Modernization	Colonialism is understood as an economic process under world modernization.
III	1960-1980	Modernism	Anthropology itself is understood as part of a broader intellectual movement in the West known as modernism.
IV	1980-1990	Modernity	The West is characterized by some social, cultural and intellectual features, which collectively may be called modernity. This condition could be investigated ethnographically like any other. Therefore, modernity is an ethnographic object, and the new objects of study are science, capitalism, consumption, and the mass media .

Consequently, the mass media appears as a new object of study to anthropology because of the theoretical shift from modern to modernity.

What is the name for the empirical research into modernity? The answer is development.

Alan Hoben (The Dictionary of Anthropology 1997) gives the next argument that helps to understand the “gaps” on mass media anthropological research. As we know, Ruth Benedict worked in the 1940s and 1950s with the mass media. During the 1960 and 1970s there is almost no research, which grows up from the 1980s to 1990s. Ruth Benedict (as well as Clifford Geertz decades later) worked for the government. However, anthropologists have had an ambivalent relationship with government-sponsored development. Hoben distinguishes four periods.

Period	Years	Description
I	1950s	Anthropologists were employed to facilitate the diffusion of improved technology by overcoming resistance to change grounded in traditional values, institutions, and practices. Scholars such as Goodenough and Mead wrote guidelines for community development, and anthropologists were placed in many aid-missions overseas.
II	1960s	Anthropologists largely abandoned the field and in the United States, virtually all anthropologists left the Agency for International Development (AID), which administered the largest development programs.
III	1970s	New policy emphasized on delivering development assistance directly to the rural poor, and by the end of the decade scores of anthropologists were working in AID and other major development agencies.
IV	1980s 1990s	Anthropologists became instrumental in the articulation of new development initiatives focusing on the environment and sustainable development.

In Hoben’s argument, I can see a correlation between mass media studies and development projects. When anthropologists worked in the middle and later part of the twentieth-century in development agencies, studies on the mass media grew. In the opposite case (1960s and 1970s), the studies decreased.

Another way to understand the relationship between anthropology and development is attending a summary from J. Ferguson dividing the history of the discipline in two questions: How do primitives become modern? How could they be help (or made) to make this transition? The anthropologist James Ferguson (Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology 1996) says that the term “development anthropology” was coined only in the 1970s. (Its is important to highlight that “media anthropology” appeared at the same time. In fact, Eiselein understood his own work as “applied anthropology”). Ferguson says that from the 1970s the term development replaced or subsumed the anthropological studies of culture contact, acculturation and cultural change. However, as Ferguson points out, development anthropology has problems. Among them is the often unconnected communication between professional anthropologists and academic scholars, the

sometimes strong Marxist approach polarizing research and policies, and more important, the need for a theory to explain development and produce successful effects.

In summary, I argue that it is justified a correlation between (a) the “Culture at a Distance” school in the context of the World War II, (b) the study of nations and nationalism influenced by Benedict (1940s), Geertz (1960s), and Gellner (1980s), (c) the professional work of anthropologists in development (from the 1950s to the 1990s), and (d) the mass media.

This situation could explain why anthropology did not come to mass communication before, because if we agree with the hypothesis that the mass media exist in every society and that anthropology was always theoretical and methodologically equipped to deal with them, then there is no epistemological reason to exclude mass communication from anthropology. Therefore, the reason could be found in the antecedents-conditions external to the discipline, which are in this case the World War II, nationalism, and development. Anthropology entered into mass communication as a reaction, not as a quest.

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