4.4.3

From Media Anthropology to the Anthropology of Mediation

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When one speaks of media and mediation in social-cultural anthropology today one is usually referring to communication and culture. This is to say, when anthropologists use the term 'media', they tend to remain within a largely popular semantics, taking 'media' to mean communicational media and, more specifically, communicational media practices, technologies and institutions, especially print (Peterson 2001; Hannerz 2004), film (Ginsburg 1991; Taylor 1994), photography (Ruby 1981; Pinney 1997), video (Turner 1992, 1995), television (Michaels 1986; Wilk 1993; Abu-Lughod 2004), radio (Spitulnik 2000; Hernandez-Reguant 2006; Kunreuther 2006; Fisher 2009), telephony (Rafael 2003; Horst and Miller 2006), and the Internet (Boellstorff 2008; Coleman and Golub 2008; Kelty 2008), among others. These are the core areas of attention in the rapidly expanding subfield of anthropological scholarship often known as the 'anthropology of media' or 'media anthropology', which has spent much of the last 40 years researching how the production and reception of communicational media texts and technologies have enabled or otherwise affected processes of cultural production and reproduction more generally. There is, of course, nothing wrong with this established focus on communication, and media anthropology has certainly thrived, particularly in the past 20 years, cementing its subdisciplinary substance and legitimacy through, among other things, a series of fine review articles (Spitulnik 1993; Ruby 1996; Mazzarella 2004; Coleman 2010), edited volumes (Askew and Wilk 2002; Ginsburg et al. 2002; Peterson 2003; Rothenbuhler

and Coman 2005), professorial chairs and research and training centres (e.g., the USC Center for Visual Anthropology, the Program in Culture and Media at NYU, the Programme in the Anthropology of Media at SOAS, the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at Manchester University, the MSc in Digital Anthropology at University College London, among others), and research networks (e.g., EASA's media anthropology listserv: http://www.media-anthropology.net).

Yet, as my fellow practitioners of media anthropology would likely agree, it is very difficult to separate the operation of communicational media cleanly from broader social-political processes of circulation, exchange, imagination and knowing. This suggests a productive tension within media anthropology between its common research foci (which are most often technological or representational in their basis) and what we might gloss as processes of *social mediation*: i.e. social transaction in its broadest sense of the movement of images, discourse, persons and things. The problem of mediation obviously raises the question of practices of communicational media-making and media-receiving, which media anthropologists have addressed at length, especially in the last 20 years. But mediation also raises the question of how we should conceptualize 'media' in the first place. To paraphrase one of Marshall McLuhan's more effective provocations (1964), if one understands media as extensions of human instrumental and semiotic capacities then why should wheels, money and clocks, for example, not also be considered alongside broadcast media such as newspapers, radio and television? Along the same

lines, why could the anthropological study of roads and migration, currency and finance, commodity chains and values, and the formation and dissemination of expert knowledge, not be productively connected to anthropological research on communicational media under the rubric of a broader *anthropology of mediation*?

Alongside the emergence of new, more narrow iterations of media anthropology ('cyberanthropology', for example) we are indeed beginning to see a movement in media anthropology that more centrally highlights mediating practices, technologies, spaces, materials and institutions beyond those of communicational media. In the long run, the further development of anthropology of mediation may help to counteract the inevitable fissile tendency of subdisciplinarity by knitting contemporary media anthropology research more effectively into long-standing anthropological discussions (for example, concerning exchange and knowledge). In this chapter, I briefly describe the historical consolidation of media anthropology as a subfield of anthropological inquiry and move from there to explore the current horizons of media anthropology, including the project of connecting research on media to work on social mediation more generally.

MEDIA ANTHROPOLOGY ALWAYS AND NOW

Compare the opening statements from two articles that have sought to define an emergent field of 'media anthropology':

> After long decades of neglect the anthropological study of media is now booming … . Given anthropology's late arrival at the study of media and communication, what can our discipline hope to contribute to this long-established field of interdisciplinary research? What is, in other words, the point of media anthropology?
> and
> Media anthropology is nothing new. Media and anthropology have been inalienably linked since the beginning of anthropology.

It is only slightly surprising to someone familiar with this field that the first statement, the one that suggests media anthropology is a relatively contemporary area of focus, was published two years ago (Postill 2009: 334). The second statement, meanwhile, the one that argues that anthropology has engaged media both as research object and as method of communication since its beginning, was published 35 years ago (Eiselein and Topper 1976: 123). The statements are less contradictory

than they at first appear; indeed, each tells part of the truth about the history of media anthropology and each reveals something about contemporary concerns over the integrity of media anthropology's subdisciplinary identity.

As Eiselein and Topper contend, it is indeed true that anthropologists have concerned themselves with media for a long time and that anthropologists have always used media to publicize their research findings. Nevertheless, media only really emerged as a specialized topic of research and ethnographic interest for anthropology in the 1940s as part of the explosion of interest across the human sciences in studying the cultural, social, political and psychological effects of broadcast communication. This moment cannot be disentangled from popular and political concerns with fascist and communist movements' use of film, radio and print for purposes of political mobilization and pacification (see, e.g., Lazarsfeld 1940; Lazarsfeld and Merton 1943), and as a result early broadcast communication studies had a distinctly critical edge (Horkheimer and Adorno 1947). Communication studies played a relatively small role in anthropology in the 1940s but they were certainly present (e.g., Bateson 1943; Meadow 1944; Powdermaker 1947) and, likewise, often oriented by a critical sense of the massive cultural impact of broadcasting. Writing of her path-breaking (and to this day, still unparalleled) field research on the Hollywood studio system, Hortense Powdermaker (1950) explained her concern with the manipulative tendencies of broadcast communication:

> I am concerned with opening up the general problem of movies as an important institution in our society. A unique trait of modern life is the manipulation of people through mass communications. People can be impelled to buy certain articles and brands of merchandise through advertising. Columnists and radio commentators influence political opinions. Movies manipulate emotions and values. … In a time of change and conflict such as we experience today, movies and other mass communications emphasize and reinforce one set of values rather than another, present models for human relations through their portrayal by glamorous stars, and show life, truly or falsely, beyond the average individual's experiences. (quoted in Askew and Wilk 2002: 162)

Although, in certain respects, Powdermaker's motivation sounds uncannily contemporary, the historical immediacy of fascism and communism also played a major role in her analysis:

> Hollywood represents totalitarianism. Its basis is economic rather than political but its philosophy is

similar to that of the totalitarian state. In Hollywood, the concept of man as a passive creature to be manipulated extends to those who work for the studios, to personal and social relationships, to the audiences in the theaters, and to the characters in the movies. The basic freedom of being able to choose between alternatives is absent. The gifted people who have the capacity for choice cannot exercise it; the executives who technically have the freedom of choice do not actually have it, because they usually lack the knowledge and imagination necessary for making such a choice. (quoted in Askew and Wilk 2002: 169)

As the area studies revolution of the 1950s and 1960s vastly expanded the professional ranks of anthropology and accelerated the specialization and internal segmentation of anthropological knowledge-making both geographically and thematically, broadcast communication research lost some of its vitality but never disappeared entirely (e.g., Honigman 1953; Mead and Metraux 1953; Wolfenstein 1955; Crawford 1965; Weakland 1966). Meanwhile, the 1950s and 1960s saw the growing involvement of anthropologists in debates within the humanities over the cultural implications of historical transitions between regimes of orality, literacy and electronic media. Although the impact of literacy was acknowledged in the 1940s as well (Ransom 1945), the institutionalization and mass popularity of television in the postwar period, combined with intellectual anxiety at the decline of print culture, seems to have been the more immediate catalyst for a rethinking of the historical significance of the rise of literacy and its impact upon culture and communication (e.g., Innis 1950; Ong 1958; McLuhan 1962, 1964; Havelock 1963). McLuhan's provocations about the 're-tribalization' of modern man in the new environments of electronic mediation appeared to strike a particularly strong chord with anthropologists, many of whom objected to his portrait of 'primitive' non-Western cultures of the 'ear and mouth' and to his generally mediacentric (or, to use my preferred term, 'medial') theory of all human experience and knowledge. In his review of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* in *American Anthropologist*, for example, Dell Hymes criticized McLuhan both in substance and analytic model:

The book, however, cannot be trusted, as more than stimulation. The over-simplified view of types of society and character gets facts wrong. […] The contrast between oral and typographic communication is carried to ludicrous extremes, as a vehicle of cultural criticism and historical explanation. It can no more stand against an adequate view of human history than any other single-minded exegesis known to us. The author's mode of reasoning is such that involvement and importance (particularly of print) is transformed into primary characteristic and determinant, sometimes with a footing in the evidence, sometimes by sheer assertion. (Hymes 1963: 479)

Debates over orality and literacy continued to be an active concern in the human sciences until the 1980s (e.g., Goody 1968; Eisenstein 1979; Ong 1982; Anderson 1983; Schieffelin and Gilmore 1986; Michaels 1988) and indeed have been more recently, if sporadically, revisited by anthropologists (Hirschkind 2006; Cody 2009) and others (Boyarin 1993; Johns 1998).

But media anthropology achieved its earliest iteration of subdisciplinary identity around a different set of conversations concerning methods and theory of visual communication. Building upon critical anthropologist scholarship on broadcast communication as well as upon anthropologists' increasing incorporation of film and photography among their ethnographic techniques (e.g., Bateson and Mead 1942; Rouch 1955; Marshall 1958; Asch 1968; Gardner and Heider 1968), anthropological studies of visual communication, or 'visual anthropology' as it came to be known, articulated a loose net of research problems, institutions, techniques, conversations and (multimedia) texts that was tightened into the texture of a subdisciplinary community in the late 1960s and early 1970s by a number of active proponents (Collier 1967; Ruby 1975; Chalfen 1978) who worked to establish new research and training programmes and journals to help stabilize the subdiscipline. Jay Ruby, one of these key figures in the consolidation of visual anthropology, offers a retrospective narrative of subdisciplinary fission from an uninterested mainstream:

Visual anthropology has never been completely incorporated into the mainstream of anthropology. It is trivialized by some anthropologists as being mainly concerned with audiovisual aids for teaching. The anthropological establishment has yet to acknowledge the centrality of the mass media in the formation of cultural identity in the second half of the twentieth century. Consequently, visual anthropologists sometimes find themselves involved with the research and thinking of professional image makers and scholars from other disciplines   visual sociology, cultural studies, film theory, photo history, dance and performance studies, and architectural theory   rather than with the work of other cultural anthropologists. (Ruby 1996: 1345)

And, indeed, much as Ruby argues, visual anthropology solidified a very generative area of

anthropological scholarship in the 1970s and the 1980s, refining both a theoretical language and methodological techniques of production and analysis (Worth and Adair 1970, 1972; Ascher 1985; Michaels 1986, 1994) that would help legitimate the even more ambitious and multimedial media anthropology that was to come.

The mid-1980s to mid-1990s were a ripe moment for a transition between visual and media anthropology. Communicational media innovations from cable and satellite television to VHS and digital recording technology to cellular (mobile) telephony to the rise of the Internet radically transformed the possibilities and practices of both radial (e.g., broadcast) and lateral (e.g., intersubjective, node to node; see Boyer 2010: 87 88 on the distinction between the 'radial' and 'lateral' potentialities of electronic mediation) communications across the world during this period and anthropologists, as chroniclers of the contemporary, took notice. In this respect, Postill's description of media anthropology's relatively recent origins is accurate as well. The consolidation of media anthropology as a distinct subfield in anthropology is best dated to the 1980s and 1990s, although there was a great deal of interest in and attention to mediated communication beforehand, and although many key subdisciplinary institutions, such as training programmes, professorships, journals, review articles, and the like, emerged only later.

Yet, given the empirical size and complexity of both visual and media anthropology, the idea of a transition between them in the 1980s and 1990s is a conceit for my own storytelling purposes. We must recognize that visual anthropology continues to maintain an institutional life apart from media anthropology. But even if the former continues to resist being institutionally absorbed into the latter, and even if the spokespersons of the latter tend to erase their historical dependence upon the scholarship and institution-building of the former, visual and media anthropology are closely aligned today. At the risk of irritating colleagues on both sides of the spectrum, I would say that the insurrectional, innovational energy of visual anthropology of the 1960s and 1970s passed over into media anthropology during the 1990s and that, much to Ruby's enduring grief perhaps, the majority of the 'anthropological establishment' probably now views visual anthropology as a subset of media anthropology rather than the other way around.

The experiments, research and debates surrounding 'indigenous media' in the 1980s and 1990s provided a natural pivot point for the transition from visual anthropology to media anthropology. The expanded territorial reach of satellite broadcasting in the 1980s and 1990s ignited fierce debates across the world over what kinds of images and messages the new broadcast platforms would carry, by whom and for whom. At the same time, the proliferation of new, much more portable and inexpensive modes of televisual production, reception and archiving like videorecording, also created new possibilities for local cultural expression. The hybrid media activism and media analysis of anthropologists like Eric Michaels (1986), Faye Ginsburg (1991, 1993) and Terry Turner (1992, 1995), as well as the emergence of a broader analytic literature on the intersection of Western and non-Western modes of televisual communication (Graburn 1982; Brisebois 1983; Ang 1985), captures very well anthropology's first engagement of the seemingly paradoxical trend toward greater globalization and localization of broadcasting in the 1980s and 1990s. More than this, the passionate debates that followed about the significance of interventions like the Kayapo Video Project and Australian Aboriginal television   particularly as to whether non-Western use of Western televisual technology enabled or disabled non-Western cultural knowledge and representation (Faris 1992; Turner 1997; Weiner 1997) attracted broader interest outside visual/media anthropology and helped cement the subdiscipline's status as a locus of cutting-edge anthropological research (see, e.g., Marcus 1995).

This was also the time when 'mediation' became a significant presence within the analytical language of media anthropology. Faye Ginsburg, for example, utilized the term to distinguish her work on indigenous media from more formalist projects in visual studies and visual anthropology: 'I am concerned less with the usual focus on the formal qualities of film as text and more with the cultural *mediations* that occur through film and video works' (1991: 94; see also Morris 2000). The redistribution of emphasis from cultural form to process meant, as Michaels, Ginsburg and Turner all advocated, greater attention to the cultural agency of media producers (and receivers). And, production and reception studies became, it is true, the dominant field research and ethnographic foci of media anthropology during the 1990s and 2000s, eliciting particularly rich veins of research and scholarship on advertising (Moeran 1996; Dávila 2001; Mazzarella 2003), on journalism (Bird 1992; Pedelty 1995; Boyer 2000; Peterson 2001; Ståhlberg 2002; Hannerz 2004; Hasty 2005; Bishara 2006) and on televisual and cinematic media (Miller 1992; Abu-Lughod 1993; Wilk 1993, 1994; Dornfeld 1998; Mankekar 1999; Armbrust 2000; Larkin 2008; Salamandra 2008). Production and reception studies have an obvious complementarity with each other, which produces the image of holistic coverage of media phenomena even though some,

perhaps many, media anthropologists have never been entirely satisfied with a production reception polarity within media analysis. There is something 'deeply incommensurate' (Abu Lughod 2004: 24) in the ethnographic sites implied by production and reception, an incommensurability that is difficult to close without appeal to an encompassing third term like 'the nation' or 'the public'. In this respect, the model seems to reproduce a structural paradox or tension in broadcast communications themselves in which centralized broadcast loci radiate messages to portable reception devices and mobilized receivers (Williams 1974: 19 21). And, for this reason, it is better equipped to analyse points of production and reception than, for example, the dense networks of lateral messaging among media 'users' that have increasingly come to characterize mediated communication as more and more messaging takes place across platforms like mobile phones and the Internet. Under such circumstances, it is increasingly difficult to segment 'producers' and 'receivers' as distinct analytical, let alone social, categories and, as such, the justification of studying one or the other (or even both as complementary phenomena) has been increasingly pressured.

In more or less subtle ways, an emergent media anthropology of Internet-based communication has sought to refunction the production reception polarity toward studies of networked producing, circulating and receiving users (Miller and Slater 2000; Coombe and Herman 2004; Kelty 2005; Reed 2005; Boellstorff 2008; Coleman and Golub 2008; Postill 2008; Boyer 2010), especially hackers, programmers and gamers. This scholarship has deepened research attentions already present in early generations of media anthropology (for example, to questions of cultural reproduction, temporality, sociality, publicity, and of political and social imagination and subjectivity). And, it has also explored new questions more closely tied to the technologies and institutions of 'digital culture' such as recursivity (the participation of media users in reshaping the capacities and operations of their own media use) and virtuality (the constitution of alternative selves and environments).

FRONTIERS IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF MEDIATION

I think it would be wise not to underestimate the impact of the destabilization of mid-twentieth-century broadcasting regimes in terms of opening new ethnographic and theoretical horizons in media anthropology. As noted above, this destabilization was catalysed in part through the innovation,

circulation and institutionalization of new electronic information and communication technologies, many of which diminished the centralized authority and radial messaging patterns of broadcasters while simultaneously enhancing the possibilities of feedback and lateral modes of messaging among 'receivers'. Broadcasting has, needless to say, by no means disappeared, but as the lively public discourse on institutional crises in print media and television attest, broadcasting is not what it used to be and media anthropology has also transformed as a result. Contemporary media anthropology today is, for example, much more likely than it was even 10 years ago to take 'circulation' and 'exchange' as conceptual problems of equivalent significance to those of 'production' and 'reception' (e.g., Kelty et al. 2008; Schiller 2009; Shipley 2009). But rather than viewing the rise of issues like circulation and mediation (and 'publicity,' e.g., Urla 1995; Warner 2002; Briggs 2005; Kelty 2005; Mazzarella 2006; Keane 2009) to ethnographic and theoretical prominence in media anthropology as simply an adaptation to a new environment of communicational media, we might also understand their emergence as framed historically by the collapse of cold-war geopolitics and geoeconomics, by the rise of market (neo)liberalism on a global basis, and by a concomitant exploration throughout the human sciences of analytical models based on liquidity and flow (e.g., Hannerz 1992; Appadurai 1996; Bauman 2000). I find it striking and not incidental, for example, that the anthropology of mediation has achieved impressive resonance in the anthropology of religion and political anthropology (de Vries and Weber 2001; Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Meyer and Moore 2006; Engelke 2010), particularly among scholars who, following Mazzarella's call for greater attention to problems of mediation and immediation (2006), have analysed the 'immediating' tendencies of governmental and religious forces that seek to dampen the intensely mediational qualities of post-1980s globalization under discourses of singular religious or secular truth-regimes (Eisenlohr 2006, 2009; Allen 2009; Keane 2009).

The intersection of politics, religion and media remains a very promising frontier for media anthropology (and the anthropology of mediation). Likewise, I predict an inevitable further expansion of valuable research on Internet and mobile communication practices. A number of anthropologists are in the process of researching social networking software like Facebook and Twitter, for example, and I think it is fair to expect that this will become a very active area of media anthropological research and conversation in the near future (Miller 2011), although it is also one that is already showing the signs of pressing for

a new subdisciplinary iteration under the banner of 'digital anthropology' or 'cyberanthropology' (Escobar 1994; Budka and Kremser 2004). The description of the new (2009) MSc in Digital Anthropology Programme at University College London offers an excellent example of the rationale for further (sub)subdisciplinary fission rooted in the ubiquity and influence of digital information and communication technology:

> Digital technologies have become ubiquitous. From Facebook, Youtube and Flickr to PowerPoint, Google Earth and Second Life. Museum displays migrate to the internet, family communication in the Diaspora is dominated by new media, artists work with digital films and images. Anthropology and ethnographic research is fundamental to understanding the local consequences of these innovations, and to create theories that help us to acknowledge, understand and engage with them. (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/digital-anthropology/about.php)

I do not have the space here to either confirm or deny such portraits of the revolutionary power of digital information and communication technologies. The current and future forms of digital culture are, at any rate, a subject of much lively debate in media anthropology as in public culture more broadly (Boyer 2007). What is less often observed is how the seemingly increasing plurality of contemporary modes of communicational mediation has crystallized anxieties among media anthropologists about the status of their subdisciplinary jurisdiction and identity. For example, a 2005 e-seminar sponsored by the EASA media anthropology network (see http://www.media-anthropology.net/) posed the question 'What is media anthropology today?' and discussed how to articulate its objects and methods. During the e-seminar, Sarah Pink wondered how far to let media anthropology move in the direction of a more general anthropology of mediation:

> Is [media anthropology] a mass media anthropology or is it an anthropology of anything that mediates (which, taking it to its conclusion, could mean an anthropology of anything...), or rather any sorts of practices that involve 'media'?

Daniel Taghioff commented:

> I think there is a possible solution to the problem of defining the Anthropology of Media in terms of 'mediation' and that spilling over into all forms of practice. … The Anthropology of Media could be sited in the study of the relationships between these more explicitly identified mediated practices, and the implicit mediated aspects of

other practices. This has the advantage of siting the discipline ethnographically in the practices of those involved, rather than founding it on a priori notions of media and mediation.

Later in the debate, Eric Rothenbuhler suggested that finding an integrative definition for media anthropology was less important than considering media anthropology's status as an epistemic phenomenon itself:

> One of the interesting things about 'media anthropology' is the sudden currency of the term. The label was little used until recently and suddenly it seems very right for very many purposes. … It may be useful to see 'media anthropology' as, at the moment, a phenomenon of intellectual history. It is a coming to terms, a moment of recognition of realities that had been waiting to be seen. My own experience [of] the last few years is that everyone likes the term, most respond as if it helps them recognize something, like yeah, I see that. Only a few later ask for a definition.

Rothenbuhler is certainly correct to highlight the historicity of media anthropology's subdisciplinary identity and to suggest that it speaks to retrospective stock-taking as much as to a future research agenda. At the same time, I think that Pink's and Taghioff's reflections on media and mediation signal a growing desire within media anthropology to expand its purview beyond communicational media research. This frontier is already being explored by several scholars interested in the intersection of semiotic, social and material aspects of mediation, including Matthew Hull's work on documents and bureaucracy (2003), Kira Kosnick's work on media and migration (2007), Cymene Howe's research on televisionary forms of activism (2008) and Dimitris Dalakaglou's work on roads, space and identity (2010) to name just a few. But these zones of intersection offer many opportunities for further intervention as well. In my own recent research on media and knowledge, for example, I have discussed the relationship between the industrialization of electronic computation and the rise of cybernetic models of social theory as well as the relationship between the digital media practices of news journalists and their informatic understandings of their work and its significance in the world today (Boyer 2010). Pluralizing our conceptualization of both media and mediation is, as I argued at the outset, a strategic subversion of media anthropology's long-standing assumption that it should focus principally on problems of communication and meaning.

At the same time, Pink's and Taghioff's comments also signal that moving media anthropology

in the direction of an anthropology of mediation is an unsettling idea as well. A more expansive commitment to studying social mediation in all its forms and processes could compromise to a certain extent the jurisdictional locus of communicational media that has proved so fruitful for media anthropology over the past several decades. It could be viewed as 'watering down' the research and discourse agenda of media anthropology to the 'anthropology of anything'. But to follow that metaphor to another conclusion, perhaps watering down the communicational focus of media anthropology would also enhance its epistemic 'liquidity' and allow its work to flow more effectively into the groundwater of 'mainstream' anthropological research and theory. 'Anthropology of anything' is, after all, another way of saying 'anthropology' and I think producing anthropologically meaningful research is a much more important goal for media anthropology than the defence of a subdisciplinary jurisdiction or identity. For one thing, I hope that this essay has demonstrated that media anthropology has always had a broad, dynamic and somewhat fluid core jurisdiction. For another, many of media anthropology's most generative moments (like indigenous media research of the 1980s and 1990s) succeeded precisely because they addressed wider anthropological debates on aspects of social mediation such as representation, technology, exchange and knowledge. In the end, sealing ourselves into a subdisciplinary discourse network, however lively and expanding, seems to me a greater risk than dissolving a sense of unitary subdisciplinary identity and purpose that was never terribly unitary to begin with.

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