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THE PROMISE OF MEDIA ANTHROPOLOGY

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Media anthropology grows out of the anthropology of modern societies, on one hand, and the cultural turn in media studies, on the other. It turns its attention from "exotic" to mundane and from "indigenous" to manufactured culture but preserves the methodological and conceptual assets of earlier anthropological tradition. It prepares media studies for more complete engagement with the symbolic construction of reality and the fundamental importance of symbolic structures, myth, and ritual in everyday life.

Even though it does not have to invent new theories and methods, media anthropology is not a mere exercise of mechanically applying anthropologists' concepts and techniques to media phenomena. The identity of anthropology among the disciplines is based on the development of a distinct conceptual sphere with its own debates, on the more frequent use of those ideas and methods, and hence on the capacity to explain their objects of study according to that specific conceptual lexicon. In taking concepts and methods developed in the specific intellectual community of cultural anthropology (applied and fashioned on specific fields and on specific cultural forms and thus tuned to their traditional objects of study and their traditional debates) into media studies, we face a dilemma common to all interdisciplinary fields of study, as well as to the growth and change of any of the human sciences in this globalizing world: how "universal" or "local" are those concepts and methods—and in how many different modalities, geographically, culturally, logically, empirically, historically? How should they be adapted to their new objects of study and intellectual fields? How much loyalty or fundamentalism to their original forms and fields is appropriate?

In this chapter, we will address these questions in regard to ethnography as method and idea, ritual, myth, and religion as widely used concepts of media anthropology and in terms of levels of generality. The chapter closes with a brief discussion of the promise of media anthropology and of our perspective on the potential contributions of this field of inquiry to its home disciplines of communication and anthropology and to larger currents of intellectual life.

METHOD

One important debate is about whether classical ethnography is necessary to everything called anthropological, or is the adaptation of the spirit of ethnography in media and cultural studies legitimately anthropological? Applying ethnographic

methods to modern societies had already produced a dispute regarding methodological purity within anthropology, even before ethnographic ideas were widely adopted in neighboring fields. Where is the dividing line between doing an ethnography in the classic sense and doing research that is ethnographic in some aspects? How important is that line? The questions become more intransigent in regard to the specific study of media audiences, as illustrated by these two contrasting quotations from the debate.

> Most of this work is based on interviewing audiences in their homes, and critics have argued that the label "ethnography" is misleading, because detailed participant observation is minimal and actual immersion in the daily practices and social worlds of the people studied is almost inexistent. (Spitulnik, 1993, p. 298)

> My own feeling is that despite these clear differences, reception studies can still properly be called ethnographic. It is true that they are not based on extensive fieldwork in distant lands, but they do share some of the same general intentions as anthropological research.... If the means of investigation are not always identical, then the aims of inquiry can be. (Moores, 1993, p. 4)

La Pastina (chapter 14, this volume) argues for anchoring media studies research in the traditions of cultural anthropology:

> Audience ethnography needs to be repositioned as a fieldwork-based, long-term practice of data collection and analysis. This practice allows researchers to attain a greater level of understanding of the community studied and maintain self-reflexivity and respect toward those they are attempting to understand within the everyday life of the community.

Placing his reflections in the context of discussions of intertextuality, Peterson (chapter 13, this volume) maintains that ethnographic investigation is two headed, like Janus: It tries to understand and re-present the phenomena of society and culture, as well as its own discourse, in a permanent effort of reflexivity and self-reflexivity. Thus media anthropology has, in some sense, to reinvent ethnography.

To the study of media, ethnography brings an attention to cultural difference, a commitment to close observation and recording, the provision of "thick" descriptive detail designed to reveal the contexts that give actions meanings to a community, reflexive engagement with the voices of one's hosts, and attention to the contiguity of what is being described to broader aspects of social process. Media ethnography attempts to tease out layers of meaning through observation of and engagement with the everyday situations in which media are consumed, the practices by which media are interpreted, and the uses to which media are put (see Peterson, chapter 13).

Participant observation, qualitative methods, and *open-ended interviewing* appeared as methods and terms of debate in communication and media studies before *ethnography* and *ethnographic* became common. There has been a tendency to lump them all together, blurring the distinctiveness of the anthropological method. Debates about phenomenology and hermeneutics were prevalent at the time (early 1980s). Although those philosophical debates have faded to the background, there still tends to be something vaguely, even romantically, phenomenological and hermeneutic about *ethnography* and *ethnographic* as those terms are used in the communication literature. The investigator's intention to achieve a deeper understanding of other people's life experiences thus counts for as much as the actual details of research procedures. If, in a given cultural context, these goals can be achieved without extended residential immersion in a foreign culture, then by the standards of most media scholars the process can still be called ethnography.

Our three Internet chapters present a useful contrast and illustrate some of these tendencies. None is a classic ethnography; each has some claim to the ethnographic tradition. Danet's participant observation and interviewing could be called an online ethnography, focused on a symbol world that exists in the flow of image, text, and interactive turns on an Internet server. Hoover and Parks' work depends on qualitative analysis of transcripts from extensive open-ended

interviews. It can be labeled ethnographic in its efforts to understand participants' own experiences in their own terms, contextualized by the researcher's analysis of the situation. Hammer stretches the spirit of ethnography the farthest, although still falling within the grand tradition of the human sciences that it represents. She makes reference to her time as a participant in the online groups she is discussing, but reporting of the observed details of a social world plays a relatively minor role; use of the analytic concepts built up in a century of such work is relatively larger. However, it is still at least philosophically ethnographic to the extent that those concepts and her orientation to her materials address lived experience.

The two of us, Coman and Rothenbuhler, have a pragmatic attitude toward method in research and a disdain for territorial debates between disciplines. Whatever method produces useful answers to interesting questions is fine. That is why ethnography came to be classic in anthropology, because it produced useful answers to interesting questions. Most certainly, the value of the classic method to classic research should continue to be taught in anthropology. Scholars from other fields, too, can learn much from that work; neither of us could have done any of our own work without a deep appreciation of that tradition and much reading of its literature. Due respect should be paid, and there is no better place to look for guidance than to the classic exponents. Yet the tradition will change, and good ideas will be imitated and adapted to new uses in new circumstances.

A key difference with the classic anthropological ethnographies is that media ethnography does not, usually, take place fully outside the researcher's culture. When researchers turn their attention to their own cultures, even some of the more distinct corners of them, some of the— shall we say—*sacred* characteristics of the classical ethnographic experience are missing. One does not travel far to be there, the journey and the life is not strenuous, one does not need to learn a new language or wholly unfamiliar customs, values, and modes of behavior; the researcher is not fully isolated from home, in all

its senses. These characteristics, very real, have generated a mystique for ethnography, but there is no need to transform a mystique into a dogma. Even short periods spent in field, allied with previous knowledge that the researcher brings to the field, can produce partial, yet focused, knowledge of aspects of group life. Valuable interpretive accounts can be based on relatively small periods of observation, focusing on media texts as much as people and activities. If the ethnographic goals are achieved, the research activity is itself legitimately ethnographic—whether or not it fulfills all the requirements of the classical ethnographic field experience. Finally, in purely pragmatic terms, media ethnography has been worth the risk. These studies have yielded a lot of new and exciting information on the media, putting the "classical" assumptions of media studies, as well as ethnography, into new light.

CONCEPTS

In the anthropological approach to mass media, several established concepts are finding relatively new uses: culture (and acculturation, cultural change, cultural diffusion, assimilation, globalization), religion (cult, sacred and profane, transcendence, belief, cosmology, liturgical order, themes and motifs), ritual (ceremony, magic, commemoration, celebration, liminality), myth, narrative, performance, representation, and symbol can all be found in this book and the larger literature. Here in the introduction, we single out ritual, religion, and myth for more discussion.

Ritual

The concept that has received the most numerous applications and the most interesting developments in media anthropology has been *ritual.* Many of these references to the ceremonial universe can be surprising to scholars more familiar with the anthropological definitions and uses. At one end, we find the narrow interpretation of the concept: the ritual is a sum of formalized, repetitive, stereotypical acts. In this line,

Tuchman (1978) launched the phrase "strategic rituals" to name the standardized working procedures of journalists. In the same line, other scholars have considered the regular consumption of television programs or the periodic reading of newspapers or romance novels as ritual behaviors (Goethals, 1981; Lull, 1988; Morley, 1992). At the other end stands the broad interpretation of the concept as the ritual perspective of communication proposed by Carey (1988); ritual appears as a form of realization and expression of social communication, as a "model for" communication processes centered not on the transfer of information, but on the sharing of a common culture. In consensus with this perspective, even though inspired from another paradigm (associated with Victor Turner), Dov Shinar (chapter 25) builds a complex interpretative system centering on sociocultural change and the functions of communication in these processes. In his conception, ritual is the instrument through which society manages change; the anthropological theories and concepts offer a scientific lexicon to name and interpret the actors' behavior, the institutional destructuring and restructuring processes, and the dialectic of values and symbols that support these transformations.

From another perspective, at one end, we find the creation of new concepts of ritual to account for new phenomena in the mass communication universe and, at the other end, the often mechanical, blind application of established terminology from cultural anthropology. The latter situation is evident in the use of the notion of liminality as a universal key that explains at the same time the consuming behavior of the public, the journalists' reactions in the newsroom, the global functioning of television, and the experiences lived by participants in a media event. All this without taking into consideration the "liminoid" concept through which Turner (1982) was adapting the initial concept from the explanation of phenomena in nonmodern societies to the explanation of phenomena of the modern world. In the same way, the term *magic* is sometimes evoked metaphorically to explain television's power of attraction, without any connection with the rich conceptualizations of magic in the anthropological literature (cf., later, the same point in regard to myth).

As an example of work that borrowed from anthropology to create a new approach to explain ritual phenomena in the mass communication universe, the best known approach is the one built by Dayan and Katz (1992) around the concept of media event. The theoretical vision of their book has inspired numerous studies, which have broadened the sphere of phenomena that could be integrated in this new ritual category: highly mediated marriages and funerals of representative personalities, political or religious visits, sporting events, festivals, pilgrimages, music concerts, and political celebrations and confrontations. In all these cases, the mediation, even to the point of remaking, of already accepted prestigious ceremonies leads to amplification of the ritual in regard to the number of participants, the area of geographic distribution, the magnitude of experiences, as well as to the modification of ceremonial elements—the ritual script, the form of public speeches, the role of the masters of ceremony, the interpretations, and the attributed significations (see Coman, chapter 5, this volume).

Starting from this model, other scholars have launched different conceptual constructs: media rituals (Couldry), "ceremonial television" (Dayan), disaster marathon (Liebes). In these cases, we are not talking of identifying social manifestations that could be labeled as media events but of new concepts of media anthropology. "Media rituals (in the sense in which I am using the term) are actions that are capable of standing in for wider values and frameworks of understanding connected with the media" (Couldry, chapter 6, this volume). The disaster marathon contradicts the classic scheme of media events because "whereas the success of media events is due to the union of establishment and broadcasters, disaster marathons, brought about by an outside power (natural or human), surprise establishment and media alike, sometimes paralyzing the establishment, leaving media in charge of lost and horrified viewers" (Liebes & Blondheim, chapter 18, this volume). Dayan's

work has shown a trajectory within and yet independent of his collaboration with Katz. Dayan and Katz used the term *media events* to describe their work across the 1980s and to title their book in 1992. The French translation in 1996 was actually a reworking in important ways, and its title in English would be "ceremonial television." This is not exactly "media events," and in interesting ways. It narrows the focus to television, shifts the emphasis from event to process, and draws attention to the markers that distinguish this kind of television, the ceremonial, from ordinary television.

All these new categories, far from being simple scholastic exercises, show that at the interface between the ritual universe and mass communication, syncretic manifestations of a great variety appear, based in both media and ceremony. Their identification, analysis, and conceptualization represent a possibility for a more subtle understanding of the complex transformations of modernity affecting mass media, public spheres, and *imaginaire social*.

The ritualistic approaches to mass communication stem from the conceptions of Durkheim and Turner. The differences between the two schools of thought are not as great as they may look at a superficial glance—see Dayan and Couldry (chapters 16 and 6, respectively, this volume) and Rothenbuhler (1988, 1998). In the first perspective, the ritual produces and maintains social integration; in the second, it contributes to the management of social change (generated by social conflicts, power relations, personal affliction, social dramas, natural disasters) and, implicitly, to the restoration of social order and integration. Because media anthropologists do not mechanically take over these theoretical models, it would be more adequate to talk of neo-Durkheimian and neo-Turnerian approaches. Thus, Couldry (chapter 6) argues for rethinking media ritual to make room for new connections: between the power of contemporary media institutions and modern forms of government and between an understanding of ritual and the disciplinary practices of surveillance. The same critical approach to Durkheim's legacy

is also found in this volume in the studies of Dayan, Lardelier, Rothenbuhler, Thomas, and Zelizer. The Turnerian model is implied in the very concept of media event, as is especially clear in the typologies proposed by Dayan and Katz for various forms of media events. Defining *contest* as "transformative ceremonies," Dayan and Katz (1995) wrote: "The ceremony itself represents a 'liminal' moment, a break in the routinized social time. . . . It offers society opportunity to discover that there are alternatives to its choices and, in doing so, it partially reveals the anxieties, the chaos, the effervescence of genesis" (p. 166).

Victor Turner's legacy is evident in this volume in the studies devoted to the creation of new rituals to surpass a critical event: Rothenbuhler analyzes the emergence of ceremonial forms around Ground Zero that allowed processing and recovery from the significance of the attacks on 9-11. Liebes and Blondheim study the fabrication of ritual behaviors among the actors in a "disruptive event," the journalists who create a "disaster marathon," and the public of such a "media disaster." Zelizer reveals the appearance of ritualistic reactions in the production, distribution, and use of photographs of reactions to traumatic events, to control the social and individual traumas produced by it. On the other hand, the Turnerian model lies at the root of processual approaches that bring about the emergence of new rites not only through various combinations of cultural symbols (be they verbal, body, or object) but also through the ritualization of behaviors until then not included in the sphere of the ceremonial actions. In chapter 6, Couldry unveils the passing from an "interlocking mass of practices" to an ensemble of media rituals, and Coman stresses the mechanism of ritualization of journalists' discourses, which allows them to exercise a "ritual mastery" over the fabrication and legitimation of socially acceptable versions of the events.

The application of ritual in media studies has produced not only numerous case studies but also numerous theoretical debates, reflected in the chapters here as well as in the larger literature. Several major themes structure this debate.

The Relation Between Consensus and Conflict. Media rituals and media ritualization can be considered mechanisms through which individuals are connected to the global social world, see it as a concrete and powerful entity, and become aware of being part of a more than imaginary community (see Dayan, Lardelier, Rothenbuhler, Thomas), but, just as well, rituals and ritualization can be forms of expression and public acceptance of a rupture in the social texture, of conflicts between groups, of the exercise and naturalization of power (see Couldry, Coman, Liebes, Shinar).

The Relation Between Public Participation and Passive Consumption. Whether they have an integrative function or serve to contest the existing order, media events should generate active manifestations of the public. The mobilization of the public should be visible either at the level of the established forms of public spheres or at the level of public "sphericules," such as homes or pubs. Some authors maintain that media events generate, to use Dayan's felicitous formula, "a spiral of affirmation" that produces and expresses the public's mobilization (see Dayan, Rothenbuhler, Zelizer), but there is also the possibility that these manifestations do not generate a response, or not the expected response (see Couldry).

The Localized or Delocalized (Diasporic) Character of Mediated Rites or of Media-Constructed Rites. The ritual, as it has been identified and defined in classic anthropology, may have a center and a periphery, but it cannot extend its effects beyond a certain area (determined by the coexistence of the participants). The intervention of the mass media allows the dissemination of the ritual to enormous geographical areas and, thanks to television, in full simultaneity with the "original" performance. These "diasporic ceremonies" (Dayan & Katz, 1992) present a double paradox: They cancel both the distance between center and periphery (thus creating a ubiquitous center) and that between in situ participants and those participants in front of TV sets (creating a unity of experiences); at the same time, they subscribe media events within a new

localization, through the creation of privileged places for the collective consumption of televised broadcasts (the home, the pub, the street).

Myth

Another concept that has enjoyed much use in the study of media is myth. The way in which myth appears in media studies unveils the contrast between the anthropological approach and the media studies applications: The disciplines involved in studying myth (the history of religions, comparative mythology, the anthropology of symbolic forms, literary theory, the history of the imaginary, and psychoanalysis) do not have a unitary definition, tending, rather, to a variety of concepts. Cultural anthropology's view of myth generates a vague and ever-contested field. By contrast, in media studies, the tendency has been toward a relatively simple use of the term.

The mythological dimensions of mass culture have been investigated at two levels and from two different perspectives. A large part of the literature has focused on narrative patterns and figures considered to represent modern "mythologies" in movies, TV programs, advertising, music, sports, and other entertainments. This research has centered on the cultural industries, focusing on those products meant for entertainment, which have aesthetic status and non-referential content. These creations have been studied with conceptual tools from art and literature, the history of the imaginary, hermeneutics, and psychoanalysis. The relation to concepts and interpretations derived from the history of religions and comparative mythology is secondary.

There are fewer studies of *news stories* that have the discursive characteristics of myth or that function for specific social groups as myth. In the case of news, we have media texts that are obligated to be verifiable reports of events in real time and space. These media products are thus endowed with instrumental status and referential content; news stories, under that paradigm, then, would not be expected to involve mythological representations. In spite of all this, many recent studies show that some news media texts build a

new level of meaning, deeply anchored in the codes and symbolic vocabulary of the targeted community, starting from and going beyond the referential dimension. The discourse of news media challenges the anthropology of mass media to illustrate how and why there appear, in the field of information and denotation, symbolic constructs and uses whose origins, functions, or means of representation have a mythic significance. "In characterizing television and other media as mythic they are identified as instances of the central symbol system of the society at hand and therefore worthy of the careful treatment anthropologists accord to myth" (Rothenbuhler, 1998, p. 90).

The studies in this volume unveil two major approaches to the relation between myth and media. One consists in placing narration as the common element and identifying mythical attributes in journalistic discourse. The second approach focuses on cognitive processes as the intersection between news stories and myth.

The first perspective is illustrated by Lule in chapter 10. He follows the ways in which various news accounts are constructed through the actualization of cultural archtypes—the "eternal stories":

> Many news stories have no relation to myth. Many news stories are derived from rudimentary story forms and professional conventions of the trade, such as inverted pyramid leads or easy formulas for writing speeches, sports results, or fire stories. . . . Sometimes, however, in describing some experience, in reporting some event, reporters and editors draw upon a fundamental story of earthly existence, a universal and shared story of humankind, and they use that story to instruct, inform, celebrate, or forewarn. Like myth tellers from every age, journalists can draw from the rich treasure trove of archetypal stories and make sense of the world.

For Lule, as well as for others inspired by this paradigm, the mythic status of journalistic accounts derives from the actualization of a preexisting archetype from the distant past in the representation of a current event. This archetype works simultaneously as a cultural framework, an epic pattern, and a reserve of meanings. It is applicable to the specific situation the journalists are referring to and offers a surplus of meaning that makes the event easier to understand and accept. The archetype becomes established in time and is available for several uses, without being influenced by social context, cultural system, or the specific genres into which it is placed and adapted.

Lule's position is echoed by the analyses of Schudson, Berkowitz, and Bird, who, putting the story at the basis of journalistic discourse, come to identify structures and mechanisms generating significations commonly across the particularities of different stories and situations. Thus, Schudson, after underlining the predictable, formulaic structure of news stories, after showing how narrative conventions can determine the organization of information, comes to the conclusion that news stories can be conceived of as "part of a process of producing collective meaning rather than transmitting information." What Berkowitz maintains for the specific case of "what-a-story" could be generalized to the ensemble of studies referring to journalistic norms and procedures: "That is, if what- a-story news pertains to big stories—those stories with large social meaning and significance—then what lurks within is the same cultural stuffing from which myth is made." Narrative structures control the process of fixing the unexpected event into a communicable product, and mythical themes offer a series of acceptable significations: "Not only does the mythical framework provide shape for a what-a-story, it also comes equipped with an ending to both the story and the work process."

Bird takes an intermediary position in this configuration, her chapter evoking elements from both strategies: both the way in which epic schemes transmitted by a certain cultural tradition model the fabrication process of journalistic versions of the facts ("reporters learn to find familiar stories in disparate events") and the relation between psychological or knowledge processes that make such a combination possible. In the CJ case analyzed by Bird, the collective,

confused fear of AIDS allowed the transformation of the journalistic account into an epic legendary theme, and then into a mythological construction. In this situation, the journalistic mythical narrative functions in the same way as the disaster marathons described by Liebes and Blondheim, the ritualization of photo and photo consumption analyzed by Zelizer, or the fabrication of ad hoc rituals and of heroic narratives analyzed by Rothenbuhler—they all allow fears, traumas, and uncertainties to be surpassed through the game of symbolic constructions.

The second approach to myth is also illustrated by Coman's analyses. He considers that myth and news stories have elaboration processes in common, based in similar cultural and cognitive logics:

> Journalistic crisis stories, like myths, are meaningful due to their very unlikelihood and absurdity. The system of interpretation they suggest does not confer meaning on the story, but on everything else ("a tout le reste," in Lévi-Strauss's words); that is, on the social order affected by the crisis spectrum. Their discourse is not argumentative, but symbolical. In other words, it does not reproduce existent and acknowledged patterns; instead, it produces and mentally experiments on potential patterns of reality. (Coman, chapter 5, this volume)

Religion

Another concept found in most examples of media anthropology is religion—and, implicitly, sacred, profane, cult, belief, saint, and so on. One might say that the core idea of media anthropology is that the disenchantment of the world cannot happen and that, even though religion is no longer a dominant institution, multiple and complex forms of religiosity are reborn in modern societies. On a first level, religions can manifest themselves using various modern resources, such as the media, yet stay within circumscribed social spheres. Thus Hoover and Park (chapter 23) analyze religious seeking processes on the Internet, processes that bring about the subjective character of the religious act within an elasticity of practices. The study shows that religious activity on

the Internet is not determined by the digital medium but follows other motivations, habits, and activities. Hoover and Park document a series of interactions: between the Internet and other media, between the Internet and traditional religious commitments and beliefs, between religious needs and more vaguely spiritual impulses.

Rothenbuhler's proposal that the media serve as the church of the cult of the individual may appear diametrically opposed to the topic of Hoover and Parks' study, as it makes no reference to the institutionalized religions and focuses on advertising and celebrity instead. Yet there is continuity with the individualistic seeking of some of Hoover and Parks' respondents and with a vision of social life in which religious orientations and behaviors are ubiquitous and inevitable. If individualism is the religion of modernity, media anthropology shows how it is celebrated and proselytized.

In his turn, Dayan (chapter 16) underlines the force with which the Vatican creates a religious public sphere (which he defines as a "credoscape"), using not only the Pope's traditional visits (and the correlated believers' pilgrimages) but also television's capacity to transmit and recreate rituals, to federate audiences, transforming them into communities of believers, and to offer a "prefiguration" of an imaginary community, "confirming its existence and aiming to maintain it."

On a second level, one can notice the interpretation of mass media as a macrosubstitute for religion—what Thomas (chapter 8) defines as "more or less syncretized arrangements of an emerging media religiosity with a cultural dynamism of its own." From this perspective, television institutes both "an endless, eternal liturgy, aimed in principle at infinity—indeed, as a liturgical order" and a cosmology, based on media products that "thematicize the archaic-anthropological conflicts." The liturgical and cosmological dimensions of television combine "the permanent 'now' of topicality and the 'history-less-ness' of the ever topical"; by that, it functionally substitutes for religion because, comprising the temporary and the eternal, the plane of daily routine

and the fundamental truths, it offers order and sense to the world we live in.

LEVELS OF GENERALITY

Levels of generality are an issue of important differences among investigators, although they are seldom a matter of explicit debate. The dominant tendency in anthropology today is a commitment to particularism, to local knowledge, bounded arguments, deeper understandings of more particular circumstances. This is, of course, not the only possibility, and the drive to larger, more general knowledge claims is present in the current literature as well as in the history of anthropology. Indeed, macrotheoretical perspectives, such as political economy, cultural materialism, or even the presumption that all knowledge is local, necessarily entail general knowledge claims. So do presumptions about the general usefulness and proper conduct of research methods. Harris (1968), Geertz (1983, 1988), and others have discussed these issues thoroughly and well.

In media studies, interest in anthropology rose in the search for alternatives to social-psychological effects research, with its dependence on surveys, experiments, and content analysis. The focus on culture, the emphasis on symbols and meanings, and the alternative methods were strongly attractive. The focus on particulars came along, but it was not the primary attraction. Indeed, for many media and communication scholars, the older version of anthropology, with its emphasis on cross-cultural commonalities, is more attractive than the more current emphasis on particularism and reflective, contextual knowledge. Many communication scholars are prepared to see what is common to Greek myth; the religions and rituals of the Aborigine, Tikopia, Neur, and Ndembu; the ceremonial life and artwork of the Tlingit and Kwakiutl; the myths of various South American Indians; the televised Olympic games; and newspaper articles. Please, this is too much for the practicing anthropologist of today—and few, if any, media scholars would make explicit claims to commonalities across such wide range. It is a

tendency, though, that is often implied in writing that jumps in the space of two sentences from discussing Victor Turner's studies of Ndembu ritual to our own studies of television audiences. Is it a mistake, a misunderstanding of what anthropology is and how to use its ideas? Or is this a useful freedom in the movement of ideas, with important insights generated by startling new comparisons?

Another perspective on these questions focuses on "vertical" shifts between surface and deeper structures rather than on "horizontal" shifts between local and global, or specific and general. Media contents and products are neighborhoods, of a sort, in which information and symbol, rationality and imagination, cohabit. The anthropological view is more attentive to the symbolic content and signifying structures of cultural products. For the anthropologist, information and rationality are special cases of symbolic structures, processes, and expressions. Bringing this frame from cultural anthropology to media studies, we do not generalize by comparing cultural forms but by comparing processes of thinking.

The media create and impose symbolic systems of thought and enunciation of reality, operating like the cultural forms traditionally studied by anthropologists using such concepts as ritual, ceremony, myth, the sacred, magic, and liminality. In other words, media are cultural systems of the social construction of reality. This construction is made under distinct circumstances, with the tools of symbolic reasoning rather than argumentative reasoning. The anthropological approach asserts that these images are accepted precisely because they have the status of symbolic constructions and, having that status, they function and signify the same way that mythical and ritual systems belonging to nonmodern societies do.

Such a vision, which proposes interpretation of media phenomena in terms of the theories and concepts of cultural anthropology, shows that symbolism, far from being a residual element of journalistic communication, for example, is one of its fundamental factors. This perspective forces us to reconsider theories regarding the role of the

media in the construction of the public space and in the creation of the modern social imagination; it requires us to rethink the rapport between the rational and the nonrational in the construction of mediated public space (Coman, 2003).

What Is the Promise of Media Anthropology?

More Adequate Understanding of a World That Cannot Be Disenchanted. The great historical process of secularization that has produced modern economies, governments and political systems, educational systems, and formal religions constrained to their specific institutional spheres cannot, nevertheless, produce a fully disenchanted world. The relation of the human mind and its environments—though secular institutional structures many of those environments may be—will always contain elements of mystery, magic, and ritual. Mythical structures and narrative logics will continue to have influence alongside cause-effect analyses. Choices will be based on values and faith as often as on instrumental reasoning. No field of the social sciences can come to terms with the objects of its study without concepts and methods appropriate to that reality.

Media studies in particular addresses a world founded on texts and discourse. There would be no media audiences or organizations, media technologies would be of no concern, without the texts and discourses around which they are organized. The social relations and political realities of the media system, and hence the consequences of their operation, are founded in communication processes. Paradoxical though it may seem, then, in a culture that values rationality above all things, understanding how the shaman uses text and performance to effect cures is at least as important to media studies as the rational actor model that has dominated Western philosophy and the social sciences.

New Uses in New Social Worlds for Concepts and Methods That Have Already Given a Century of Good Service. It may be a scholastic pleasure, but

we are, after all, people of the academy. One of the promises of media anthropology is the discovery of new uses for good, old ideas. Due to their aptness, their elasticity, and the importance of their referents, the core ideas of cultural anthropology have already proven useful, with appropriate adaptations, for 100 years or more, in the study of social groups all over the globe. This is an invitation to media scholars to join that grand tradition and to anthropologists to turn their light on a challenging new subject matter. This will test the elasticity of the anthropological concepts and the cognitive flexibility of the scholars who do the work. We are already convinced of its usefulness for understanding the media and for understanding the social worlds touched by them.

An Approach to Media That Is Tuned to the Particular in the General, the Local in the Global, the Transient and Circumstantial in the Enduring and Universal. For decades, the study of the media has been bedeviled by a set of problems that have recently come into prominent discussion under the heading of local and global. Media studies is not unique in this regard, but it may be one of the stronger cases among the human sciences.

The media have been introduced as new technologies, and they constitute a separate institutional sphere; what they do is recognizably a different version of previously existing activities. This has helped produce the strong tendency toward asking very general questions: What are the effects of the media? What do they do? What difference does television make to politics, sports, music, education? What the media do is communication, and each bit of it is unique, each historical moment of it is different, each participant is a willful, interpreting, individual actor. The generalizations have been enormously difficult to come by.

Cultural anthropology has dealt with a structurally similar problem, although in different ways with different results. Classical anthropology also had very general ambitions: What is the nature of the primitive mind? What is the origin of religion? Of course, these ambitions have been tempered over the decades, just as media scholars

are always working to shape and temper the public's interest in "the effects" of "the media" into more precise and answerable questions. But under the influence of those classical ambitions, anthropology has developed concepts and methods tuned to the conflict between empirical work in very particular, very unique settings and the drive for more generalizable knowledge claims in the published literature. Anthropological theory tends to operate at a much higher level of analysis than anthropological investigations. The relation between the two can only be managed with concepts that are relatively formalistic, if not content free, with the specifics provided by the empirical materials under investigation. Durkheim's famous definition of the sacred, for example, does not say what it is; he defines it as that which any given people take as beyond question. Therefore, the category of the sacred may be found in any given society, even as the contents of that category vary so widely that one culture's sacred is another's profane.

The literature of cultural anthropology is filled with concepts that define cultural structures and processes and leave their empirical contents as matters for ethnographic investigation. These concepts, as well as this strategy in regard to the relation of the empirical and the theoretical, can be turned now to media studies.

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