

# Mapping Media Anthropology: Thinking through the Possibilities and Shifts

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## Abstract

This paper is on the trajectories, possibilities and shifts of media anthropology or anthropology of media. Media anthropology is a 'buzz word', in discussions on media or communication studies. A niche for media anthropology is sought within the genealogy and critique of media theory to provide a much-needed context and conceptual clarity for the same. Media anthropology's theoretical and historical location is sought in the performative and embodied aspects of media studies. Mapping of media anthropology debates from the 90's to the contemporary Indian context is done to understand what it like is to *do* media anthropology. Media anthropology, and its *whats* and *hows*, are placed between technologies and mediations to think through the constitutions of media and media theories. The paper asks, 'should media theory pave a theoretical and conceptual way for media anthropology'?

## Keywords

Anthropology of Media, Communication, Mediation, Media Anthropology, Media Studies.

## Introduction

The anthropological interest in media came about in the mid-nineties when the importance of media in everyday power relations, identities, imaginations and ideologies became explicit. The everyday practice of media and the participation of media audiences became the anchoring remark for the anthropological engagement with media. The anthropologists attempted to understand the everyday/lived/ongoing media practice enmeshed in daily life. This paper discusses media theory in the framework of anthropology as a discipline and practice. By discipline, it emphasises specifically the stream of anthropology that deals with media. The paper tackles the possibilities of what qualifies to be considered as 'media'. The practice thinks through the multiple methodologies of anthropological studies ranging from the ethnographic studies of newsrooms to the public engagement with media and the state.

Is an anthropological turn sufficient in media theory to understand the daily negotiations of media and people? By tracing the debates between media theory and anthropology of media, the paper would engage media theory in the anthropological terrain with examples from the Indian subcontinent.

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## Media Theory: Genealogy and Critique

The genealogy of media theory could be traced back to the models of communication constituted during the post-world war era. Rooted in puffery and propaganda, these models of communication attributed no agency to the media audience, perceived them as docile users of media devoid of any power to interpret the information being bulleted upon them.

Mass media is the collective term used for means of communication to the masses existing in various mediums and forms. From lithographic printing to the internet, are various forms of mass media depending on the context and purpose of its use. Mass media theory is primarily categorised as a social scientific theory, cultural theory, normative theory, operational theory and everyday theory of communication (During, 2011). Early media theory conceptualised either mathematically, scientifically or as propaganda/puffery had lacunae of understanding the human engagement with the media. The information was seen as a structured *flow* where the *channels of communication* played a vital role, and the *receiver* may or may not have the agency for *feedback*. Communication, an intrinsic phenomenon to human beings where schematised and theorised in the laboratories of companies that produced communication devices like telegrams, including still popular ones like Dell.

Media theory entangled with modernity tried to rationalise and appealed itself as scientific owing to the interests of the west. The loci of these theories were the 'effects' on the receiver along with the receiver's power to propagate information. Certain media scholars attributed the history of communication to Aristotle's concept of Rhetoric. Rhetoric consisting of the speaker, the speech and the listener is considered as the foundation of media theory. Inspired by Aristotle, Harold D Lasswell's schematic representation of communication is regarded as the earliest form of media theory (1948). The influence of this 'mechanistic' and 'effects' model is reflected for a decade in the history of media theory. The primary motive of media theory was influenced through persuasion. The Shannon and Weaver model of communication (1949), Wilbur Schramm's interactive model of communication (1954), Westley and MacLean's conceptual model of communication (1957), Berlo's SMCR model (1960), Dance's Helical Spring model (1967), Becker's Mosaic model of communication (1968), Barnlund's Transactional model (1970) are some of these. Rather than rejecting them as a schematic- mathematical model, a careful examination of these can end up with the traces of the social in it. Lasswell's understanding of the behavioural

aspect of communication extending to animal communication is such a possibility (Lasswell, 1948). These models based on linearity, positioning users from active senders to passive listeners, postulated a notion that the communication involves a mechanical and schematised process (Kumar, 1994).

A new discourse on communication theory occurred when these 'effects' theory paved the way for those based on experience and relationships ensnarled in the process of communication. The semiotic models of communication influenced by semioticians and linguists, including Ferdinand de Saussure, C K Ogden, I A Richards, and Charles Sanders Peirce's seminal work, contributed a new arena in media theory where the meanings of the messages were given focus. These theories comprehended the social interaction through messages. Theodore McComb's A-B-X model of communication (1953), though functionalist in approach, appreciated the social aspect of/in communication. He introduced the role of communication in social relationships to 'maintain social equilibrium within the social system' (Kumar, 1994). The pioneering work of Marshal McLuhan brought in a paradigm shift in media theory where the medium was considered as the influential agent rather than the content. Though his categorisation of media as hot and cold is dwindling, the over-arching argument postulated by McLuhan, according to media scholars, gained popularity after the widespread of the World Wide Web (McLuhan, 1964). Harold Innis, along with McLuhan, emphasised mass media as a central element in the history of human civilisation. McLuhan considered technology as an extension of man, and Innis found the source of social change in technological innovation (Carey, 1967).

Marxist scholars perceived media as a materialistic product of capitalism. Media was seen as the vested interest and power of the ruling class that deviated the common public from the realities of life. The early Frankfurt school (Adorno and Horkheimer) considered mass media, which is a part of mass culture, as an 'instrument of capitalist hegemony that created false needs and desires' (Spitulnik, 1993). Mass media was seen as a cultural commodity, and the role of media in the creation of a bourgeoisie public sphere was delineated by later scholars like (Adorno, 1991), (Althusser, 1971) and (Chomsky & Herman, 1988). The emergence of British cultural studies embarked on a shift from the structural-functional approach that was in media theory. The cultural specific dimensions of media production and reception, including culturally-based aesthetic evaluation, were their significant contribution to media theory as such. Seminal works of Raymond Williams briefed the role of technology in understanding the social fabric, whereas

Stuart Hall's semiotic analysis understood the process of communication through decoding and encoding (Hall, 1980). Raymond Williams, who combined theory and ethnography, understood various *expressions* of subaltern imaginations, including subaltern resistance through popular culture. The encoding/ decoding aspect of media considered media audiences as the active participants in media engagement (Dickey, 1997). Parallely the media content analysis happening in the United States since 1920 contributed new arenas in understanding the discipline. Inspired by Innis and McLuhan, James W Carey, the communication theorist, brought in a classical turn in media theory that is yet to be acknowledged. He brought the concept of *communion* to the process of communication. A new conceptual understanding was brought by Carey even to the term communication that emphasized media theory beyond a sender-receiver relationship. This concept of *communion* was grounded in the experience of the performance of communication. By attributing 'life as a conversation', Carey phrased cultural studies against positivism and positive science where the foundation of media theory lies. He categorised communication process as the transmission view of communication and the ritual view of communication; transmission view is regarded as may happen in transportation of goods ( like in telegraphs) ritual view as the process of communication intricate to media theory beyond symbols and orders embodied in the culture, practice and rituals. The functionalist and formalist approach to media theory was critiqued by Carey. The emerging empirical tradition in the discipline of media theory was called by Carey as those 'creating and maintaining American society'. Carey's work reflected the existence of social hierarchy in technological determinism. The above-mentioned classification of the communication process as ritual and transmission view of communication emphasis the performative aspects of communication (Carey, 1964).

The ritualistic/performative aspects of communication put forth by James W Carey, can be interrelated with the symbolic theorists who engaged with the text as an ongoing interaction between the producer and the active users of the text. Goffman's (1971), understanding of dramaturgy that deals with the interactions of everyday life can be attributed to the media performance. Inspired from Goffman, Joshua Meyrowitz (1985), draws from McLuhan in deliberating his concept of no sense of place. He decipheres how print kept the media in an intact space, whereas new media is cutting across spatial and temporal biases. Giddens's (1991), formulated his theory of structuration where everyday actions can influence factors, including media. Contemporary postmodern theorists like Jean Baudrillard perceived the media question not

as a mere representation of social life but as how the social life itself has transformed into a media event, shifting to a situation of hyper-reality<sup>2</sup>.

Media theory took a shift by giving importance to audience engagement with media than the media text. The relevance of anthropology of media is at this vantage point of audience engagement with the media. Media theories conceived in the west based on quantitative data, homogenised the media engagement and experience. The major limitation of media studies/media theory was on the conception of media engagement. The intrinsic elements of media engagement, including the relationship between media and state, media and gender, media and religion, were negated by early media theory. Indigenous film making and comprehension of them ushered the beginning of a sub-discipline in anthropology called the anthropology of media. Known as media anthropology in academic courses, anthropology of media is still an emerging field in understanding the daily negotiations of media and its users.

### **Mapping media anthropology**

Modern fieldwork anthropology was born into this new environment-film for instance, was brought to India and was produced and disseminated not only in urban cinemas but also in the rural traveling shows long before the Malinowskian revolution in anthropology began- and yet, oddly, until very recently, anthropology has largely ignored this perceptual world (Fischer, 1991, p. 531).

American Anthropological Association defines anthropology as the study of humans, past and present. A discipline that understands the full sweep and complexity of cultures across all of human history, anthropology draws and builds upon knowledge from the social and biological sciences as well as the humanities and physical sciences (Association, 2016). Anthropology as a discipline covers various aspects of human interaction and culture, including mythology, art history and various social institutions. Why study media anthropologically and not sociologically? Sociology is a relatively new academic discipline, and in the west, unlike in India, it is seen as a discipline that deals with hardcore quantitative data. Traditionally anthropology studied 'exotic' cultures while sociology was disciplined to study one's own culture, owing largely to colonisation and colonial knowledge. Methodologically, Sociology is rather constituted by case studies, whereas anthropology is equivalent to ethnography, at least for a few.

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<sup>2</sup> A condition where reality and fiction are combined so as it is difficult to distinguish between the two.

Both these disciplines study human behaviour with the social<sup>3</sup>. Through anthropology of media, I would like to discuss the lived/daily/ongoing media engagement with the media users.

The anthropology of media considered media as a shared aspect of contemporary social life (as institutions, workplaces, communicative practices, cultural products, social activities, aesthetic forms and historical developments) not different from the social organisation, law, economics, religion and art, as socially conceived and enacted thoughts thoughts (Ginsburg, Lughod & Larkin, 2002). Media theory shifted from the content to 'post-content' era with the advent of anthropology of media. The study on mass media and its relation to the cultural and the social is applicable to every field research site (Spitulnik, 1993). The strength of anthropology lies in its concern with people and lived practices and their negotiation with embedded ideologies, politics, and economics (Askew & Wilk, 2002). Ethnography is used to understand the production, consumption, circulation and theorising of media. The interconnectedness between media practices and cultural frames of reference is reflected in various ethnographic cases. Certain scholars claim that the ruptures and debates in the 90's and 80's in the discipline of anthropology and its methodology lead to the formation of anthropology of media (Ginsburg, Lughod & Larkin, 2002). A pursuit of ethnographic knowledge and cross-cultural understanding of media can be seen in the studies done by media anthropologists.

It took a decade to understand media through the lens of anthropology after Debra Spitulnik pointed 'there is as yet no "anthropology of mass media"' (1993, p. 293). The paradigm shift in the social, political, economic and cultural post 90's culminated in a constant engagement between media and anthropologists. Early media theorists were curious in understanding media representation, the context of production and circulation of media content, practices and discourses of reception. The empirical works on media from Raymond Williams to Arjun Appadurai (even if deficient in ethnography) locates media anthropology in a society that had a post-understanding on the use of technology. The concept of culture (Bourdieu, 1993), imagined community (Anderson, 1991), and public sphere (Habermas, 1992) is important in understanding these formations. Appadurai's work on understanding the importance of media (even if the media is transnational or national) in translating the 'local' should also be read along with (Ginsburg, Lughod & Larkin, 2002). The vantage point and challenge of anthropology of

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion on history of anthropology see, (Singh & Guyer, 2016). On sociology and social anthropology in India see (Srinivas, 1952). Ethnography and anthropology see (Col & Graeber, 2011).

media was in understanding the 'total social fact'. Sara Dickey points that anthropologists should not shift the complete attention from the centrality of the text (1997). When intertextuality (in the context of new media) plays a major role, one has to understand what constitutes the text itself. The focus of present-day anthropology is on the experience and knowledge during media engagement.

The decade long gap mentioned by Spitulnik does not imply the complete absence of anthropology of media. The early offset of anthropology of media can be seen through the 'culture-at-a-distance' approach formulated by the United States during World War II. The ethnographic work done by Hortense Powdermaker (1950) on Hollywood film-makers can be considered as the baby child of anthropology of media. The anthropology of media conceived by Powdermaker, Mead and Bateson had a different epistemological understanding since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The relations between Hollywood, the produced movies and impact on the audience were her central concern. Media anthropologists ushered a shift in media theory entangled in quantitative studies and used qualitative methods like an in-depth interview and participant observation. Later on, ethnographic studies on media emerged (Dickey, 1997). Rather than seeing media as an 'entity that corrupts the public' anthropology of media reconceptualised the mass media's relation to the "culture" and "society", briefed on the construction of an imagined community of nation-state by configuring a central position to media (Spitulnik, 1993). The neglect of anthropology of media leads to the conceptual gap in understanding the centrality of media in the twentieth century, especially where concepts like print capitalism is much critically understood (Dickey, 1997).

The 'mass-mediated identities' in 'imagined spaces' became a constant in media anthropology. Post 90's the methodology of anthropology of media can be attributed to studies on producers, consumers, space of media (exhibition sites like cinema halls, cinema locations, film festivals) and reflexive method where one's own encounter with media is taken into account. From anthropological studies of the newsroom to folk songs among native communities, anthropology of media engaged with the lived experiences of media and its worlds. When it came to films, the materiality of cinema as a medium and as a form is of curiosity. Anthropologists are yet to make a clear distinction between media and other forms of knowledge in the creation of these identities. A media audience can either consume their own culture or create a visual pleasure/desire by consuming the culture of the other. The major focus of media anthropology is proliferated on large media forms like television (Ang, 1989), (Hamilton, 2002), (Lughod, 2002), (Mankekar, 2002)

and radio (Tacchi, 2002). Studies are emerging on micro media forms like audio cassettes, compact disc lending shops and so on. The differential ideological positions of media producers give the anthropologists a new space to emerge with a wider understanding of media anthropology (Askew & Wilk, 2002).

Corporate ethnography, new media anthropology, digital anthropology and cyber anthropology are some of the buzzwords in media anthropology. The establishment of graduate courses in the west on digital anthropology and anthropologist's intervention on the digital (internet including social networking sites, apps etc.) gave a new methodological arena of digital ethnography. Debates persist on various aspects of digital ethnography, including assurance of research ethics (Miller, 2011), (Miller & Slater, 2000). Visual anthropology and ethnographic films constitute another major part of the present day's anthropological work. Critical engagement of anthropologists and media can be seen by the introduction of two books; *The Anthropology of Media: A Reader* (Askew & Wilk, 2002) and an edited volume titled *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (Ginsburg, Lughod & Larkin, 2002). These anthologies on the anthropology of media brought a new understanding in conceptualising media theory where the constant interrogation of media and the people became primary. The anthropological works on indigenous media enabled the discipline to engage with race, ethnicity, symbolic processes, and political arenas.

Media anthropology thus comprises ethnographically informed, historically grounded and context-sensitive analysis of the ways in which people use and make sense of media technologies. From gender and media to the aural media forms, anthropology considers the experience of media texts rather than its mere interpretation.

### **Selected works from the Indian context:**

From film fan clubs (Dickey, 1993) to film making (Pandian, 2016), there has been a critical engagement between the anthropology of media and the Indian subcontinent. Anthropological studies on media in India have largely been on visual anthropology works ranging from calendar arts to the pictures of Gods. There are also works on cinema based on production ethnography, audience viewership, relations between gender and media to idea of nationalism. The prima facie importance of anthropology of media in India was on the visual manifestation of the social.

The role of media in the formation of nationalism (in its ultra-form or sense of belonging) is one of the recurring themes in works pertaining to media



anthropology in India. Purnima Mankekar, in her seminal work *Hindu Epics, Epic Contests: Television and Religious Identity in India*, ethnographically studies the neighborhoods in Delhi to posit questions pertaining to Indian culture, community and identity. She analyses how questions on morality, politics, ideal manhood and womanhood is proposed through the serial *Ramayana*, which was telecasted through state television. The influence of the visual iconography of *Ramayana* popularised through calendar art is primary in conceiving the epic in terms of moving visuality. She draws how the politics of popular *Ramayana* prevailing in Northern India negated with the ideas of *Ramayana* prevailing in Southern India. Along with contributing to Hindu nationalism, a demonised othering of identities (including of Sikhs and Muslims who may not watch the serial) were done as certain of *Ramayana* got interpellated with the desires of consumerism and cosmopolitanism (Mankekar, 2002).

*National texts and Gendered Lives: An Ethnography of Television Viewers in a North Indian City* is a continuation of Mankekar's work on the Hindu epics of *Ramayana*. The focus of the study is on the act of viewing television and audience engagement, where gender becomes the constituent element of television viewing in Indian households (Mankekar, 2002). If not for right-wing nationalism, a sense of belongingness induced by the idea of nationalism is discussed by Tejaswini Ganti in *And Yet my Heart is still Indian: The Bombay Film Industry and the (H) Indianization of Hollywood*. Without claiming ethnography, the author employs an in-depth interview method. She carefully analysis the decisions, negotiations and evaluations that undergoes during the *Indianization* of Hollywood movies. The construction of the Indian audience by Bollywood filmmakers is the primary concern of her study. She considers *Indianization* as a relationship between filmmakers and their construction of Indian audiences. The Indian filmmakers act as the cultural mediators, evaluators of appropriate/inappropriate contents, characters and themes for the Indian audience. Ganti employs first-hand film viewing experience with the filmmakers as the method for understanding these quotients. The act of viewing a film is related to the act of identification. The relationship between the Indian audience, their creation of social sensibility and moral attitude is analysed through the box office trends, a yet another way to engage with films (Ganti, 2002). The ideas of nationalism and identity were the foundations of works of the studies on visual anthropology in India. Christopher Pinney's works from *Photos of Gods* (2004) to *Camera Indica* (1997), re-imagined the sense of sight in India. *The Indian work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction: Or, what happens when peasants "get hold" of images* analysed chromolithographs from North India and critiqued the

concept of Walter Benjamin's aura based on ethnography furthering into questions on caste (2002).

The production ethnography on Tamil cinema *Reel World* is a fresh take on the methodology of anthropological engagements. Instead of engaging with the final product of media, be it cinema or photographs, this study literally went behind the screens. The multi cited ethnographic done by Pandian deciphers filmmaking from the contours of human constitutions like hope, dream, space, art, love and desire. The feelings and textures of cinema is based on the experience of cinema and not on the process of the same. The interlocutor of Pandian, a farmer who often sings at his paddy field, asks, 'have you ever felt your life as a cinema'? it is through such sensations that the text goes through (2016).

### **Conclusion**

The overarching thoughts rising from these debates on media theory and media anthropology initiates a thread on what can be conceived as media. Should there be a media object in flesh and blood to consider something as media? The materialities, subjectivities and affective lives of media definitely give multiple manifestations to what can be qualified as 'media'. If media can be 'anything' or 'everything', can media theory be called media theory in itself? Should it be reconceptualised as 'communication theory' considering the performative aspects in media theory embodied in the social, cultural, practice and rituals? (Carey, 1992).

There was a failure in understanding the production of meaning and ideology in media theory along with the questions pertaining to agency and interpretation of media engagements. Will anthropology of media be a sufficient entity to fill this epistemological gap? Anthropology of media studies the cultural and social fabric between the engagement of technology and its user. Along with the technology, that is, the media, it is the mode of interaction and comprehension of this mode of interaction of media and its user that constitutes anthropology of media. Thus does anthropology of media attribute to the anthropology of mediation? The existing debates on anthropology of mediation culminate into lacunae by claiming the concept as the twin sister of anthropology of media with an identity crisis. Epistemological enquiry on the anthropology of media/mediation must take place than of a debate on the identity of the sub-discipline belonging to anthropology<sup>4</sup>. If at all the epistemic gap in media theory can be addressed by

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<sup>3</sup> For detailed discussion on anthropology of mediation and digital anthropology see: (Boyer, 2012)

media anthropology, what if it becomes a mere reiteration of empires of the media market?

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