

Lead Article

THE DIACHRONIC ETHNOGRAPHY OF MEDIA: FROM SOCIAL CHANGING TO ACTUAL SOCIAL CHANGES

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Abstract

In this article I address the challenge of how to study media and actual social changes ethnographically. To do so I draw from the relevant media ethnography literature, including my own research in Malaysia and Spain. I argue that ethnographers are well positioned to contribute to the interdisciplinary study of media and social change. However, to do so we must first shift our current focus on media and 'social changing' (i.e. how things are always changing) to the study of media in relation to *actual social changes*, e.g. the suburbanisation of Kuala Lumpur in the 1970s to 2000s, the secularisation of morality in post-Franco Spain, or the success of new indignados parties in Spain's 2015 local government elections. This shift from the ethnographic present continuous to the past simple – a move from potential to actual changes – does not require that we abandon ethnography in favour of social history. Rather, it demands new forms of 'diachronic ethnography' that can handle the biographical, phase-by-phase logic of actual social changes. It also requires that we conduct not only multi-sited (Marcus, 1995) but also multi-timed fieldwork on specific congeries of media practices, forms and agents.

Key Terms

media, social change, diachronic ethnography, media ethnography

DİYAKRONİK MEDYA ETNOGRAFİSİ: TOPLUMSAL DEĞİŞİMDEN FİİLÎ TOPLUMSAL DEĞİŞİMLERE

Öz

Bu makalede medya ve toplumsal değişimler gibi zorlu bir meselenin etnografik olarak nasıl incelenebileceği sorusuyla ilgileniyorum. Bu amaçla bu konuya odaklanan medya etnografisi literatürünün yanı sıra Malezya ve İspanya’da yürüttüğüm kendi çalışmalarımın da yararlanıyorum. Etnografların medya ve toplumsal değişime dair disiplinlerarası incelemelere katkı sunabilecek bir konuma sahip olduklarını ileri sürüyorum. Öte yandan bunu başarabilmek için mutlaka dikkatimizi medya ve “toplumsal değişim”den (yani her şeyin sürekli değişim halinde olduğu yönündeki tespitten) medyanın *fiilî toplumsal değişimlerle* ilişkisi bağlamında incelenmesine çevirmemiz gerekiyor—1970’li yıllardan 2000’lere Kuala Lumpur’da yaşanan banliyöleşme, İspanya’da Franco sonrası dönemde ahlâkın sekülerleşmesi ya da yine İspanya’da yeni indignados partilerinin 2015 yerel seçimlerinde gösterdikleri başarı bu tür değişimlere örnek teşkil edebilir. Etnografik anlamda şimdiki zamandan geçmiş zamana—muhtemel değişimlerden fiilî değişimlere—doğru böylesi bir geçiş toplumsal tarih adına etnografiden vazgeçmemizi gerektirmez. Aksine bu tür bir yaklaşım fiilî toplumsal değişimlerin aşama aşama ilerleyen biyografik mantığını kavrayabilecek yeni “diyakronik etnografi” türlerine ihtiyaç duyar. Bunun üstesinden gelebilmek için medya pratikleri, medya biçimleri ve faillerine dair sadece çok-alanlı (Marcus, 1995) değil aynı zamanda çok-zamanlı saha çalışmaları yürütmemiz gerekir.

Anahtar Terimler

medya, toplumsal değişim, diyakronik etnografi, medya etnografisi

Introduction

The 1990s “ethnographic turn” in British media studies was a response to both the uncritical portrayal of passive audiences common in the discipline at the time and to the prevalence of quantitative mass communication studies, particularly in the US (Horst, Hjorth and Tacchi, 2012, p. 86). One area of great interest within the ethnography of media since then has been the link between media and sociocultural change. However, most media ethnographers have so far paid far more attention to media and “social changing” in general than to media in relation to concrete social changes. In other words, ethnographers tend to discuss how matters were changing at the time of fieldwork rather than how they actually *changed*, say, in the late 2000s, or in 1939-1945, in any given country or field site. In this respect, they are no different from most other

media and communication scholars who study contemporary lifeways: *they write about media in the present continuous*.

This present continuism is no doubt partly an artefact of the ethnographic genre in its current incarnation. In the case of anthropology, the discipline from where the method originates, while earlier generations of fieldworkers denied their research participants' "coevalness" by writing in the ethnographic present tense (Fabian, 1983; Postill, 2006, p. 31-33), the current generation writes in the ethnographic present *continuous* as it strives for an "anthropology of the contemporary" (Rabinow and Marcus, 2008; Budka, 2011). The focus on social changing may also signal a collective anxiety (again, shared with media scholars who are not ethnographers) about technological obsolescence; a fear that the technologies we study in the field will be regarded as 'old media' by the time our findings are published. Moreover, the ethnographic present continuous fits well with recent phenomenological approaches to media inspired by Ingold (2000, 2007) and other theorists, in which humans exist in a perpetual state of "becoming", forever a work in progress (see, for instance, Moores 2010, 2012).

Whatever the roots of the problem, in this article I argue that it is crucial that we do not confuse ongoing social changing (A is changing) with completed or realised social changes (A changed into B). An example of social changing would go something like "At the time of fieldwork, most villagers in the area were abandoning subsistence farming for waged labour as their main economic activity". By contrast, a social changes passage would read: "Most villagers in the area switched from subsistence farming to waged labour as their main economic activity between the 1980s and the early 2000s". (Note that I am not positing a crude account of 'social progress' here; the example would work equally well in reverse, i.e. a shift from waged labour to subsistence farming).

The trouble with relying on the present continuous is that it paints oddly ahistorical pictures that can tell us a great deal about media and social changing but less so about media and actual social *changes*¹. These are accounts that suffer from an

¹ The approach that I am proposing is compatible with some recent discussions of history and temporal heterogeneity inspired by Foucault, Deleuze and other social theorists. Thus, in the context of her anthropological work on cultural production, Georgina Born (2010, p. 195) writes: "Foucault offers clarity in elaborating difference as a methodological principle. He outlines three modalities of difference to be utilized when tracing genealogy. The first is synchronic: that we should assume the internal differentiation of dominant cultural formations, analysing both their regularities or coherence, and their dispersion. The second is diachronic: that we should trace the trajectory of such dominant cultural formations, assuming neither continuity nor discontinuity, nor a uniform rate of transformation; here we

undiagnosed condition we could call “imminentism”. That is, we tacitly favour the imminent (and immanent) at the expense of the actual and completed, conflating the recent past, the present and the near future in a fuzzy “now”.

In this article I address this latter question by drawing from the media ethnography literature, including my own research in Malaysia and Spain (Postill, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2012, 2016, forthcoming), as well as work by ethnographers from fields other than anthropology. I first sketch a history of media anthropology, identifying a number of key works and themes as well as two main phases of growth since the 1980s. I then argue that anthropologists and other ethnographers are well positioned to contribute to the interdisciplinary study of media and social change. However, to do so we must first shift our current focus on media and “social changing” (i.e. how things are changing) to the study of media in relation to *realised social changes*, e.g. the suburbanisation of Kuala Lumpur in the 1970s to 2000s, the secularisation of morality in post-Franco Spain, or the success of new indignados parties in the 2015 local government elections held across Spain. The shift from the ethnographic present continuous to the past simple that I am proposing – a move from potential changes to actual changes – does not require that we abandon ethnography in favour of social history. Rather, it demands new forms of “diachronic ethnography” that can handle the biographical (phase-by-phase) logic of actual social changes.

At the heart of this proposal lies the working assumption that media-related changes, like all historical processes, have a life course of their own (with a beginning, a middle, and an end) that is amenable to the usual techniques of biographical analysis.

The Ethnography of Media

It was only as late as the 1980s that anthropologists began to take a serious interest in the study of media (Dickey, 1997; Ginsburg et al., 2002; Peterson, 2003; Spitulnik, 1993) and, almost by default, in media and social change. After a brief period of intense activity during the Second World War, followed by a long lull that lasted the better part of the Cold War, the anthropology of media is now thriving. From 2002 to 2005 alone four comprehensive overviews of the field were published (Askew and Wilk, 2002;

read the ethnographic material for its encapsulation of currents or dynamics of different temporal depth. The third is analytical: that in elucidating genealogy, we should effect ‘a sort of multiplication or pluralization of causes ... a multiplication [that] means analysing an event according to the multiple processes that constitute it’, leading to a ‘polymorphism’ of the elements brought into relation in the analysis, and of the domains of reference mobilized.”

Ginsburg et al., 2002; Peterson, 2003; Rothenbuhler and Coman, 2005) while the EASA Media Anthropology Network expanded from a score of founding members in 2004 to nearly 1,600 participants by May 2017. Anthropologists have now conducted fieldwork – as well as historical research – in numerous countries and on a vast range of media practices (Coleman, 2010).

Two main stages of subfield development can be distinguished; (1) the 1980s and 1990s as a “take-off” phase in which the study of television took pride of place, and (2) the 2000s to the present as a stage marked by theoretical innovation and media diversification. The first stage is well covered in Ginsburg et al.’s (2002) reader *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (see also Osorio, 2001; and Peterson, 2003). Ginsburg et al. identify five main themes running through the anthropology of media of the preceding two decades: media production, the cultural politics of nation-states, transnational media, indigenous activism, and the ‘social life’ of media technologies. To these five themes we could add a sixth, namely media, ritual and religion, first addressed in an edited volume by Hughes-Freeland (1998, see also Couldry, 2003; Eisenlohr, 2011; and Rothenbuhler and Coman, 2005).

This late twentieth century literature largely consists of single-medium ethnographic studies of the dominant media of the day: radio, television, film, video, and print media (the latter sometimes coming under the separate remit of “orality and literacy”, see Postill and Peterson, 2009; Street, 1993, 2001). Anthropologists working on the “reception” end of the media continuum often turned their attention to media questions during fieldwork, after they found their research participants literally turning their backs on them to watch television (Adra, 1993; Hobart, 2000; Miller, 1992). This generation sought theoretical inspiration in British media and cultural studies, whilst hoping to expand the cultural geography of the field beyond the metropolitan North to include “out-of-the-way places” (Ginsburg et al., 2002).

The second phase (2000s-2010s) is still marked by media ethnographers’ sustained attention to television, radio and film, but now with an added interest in social and mobile media. This phase opened with the publication of Miller and Slater’s (2000) *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* which paved the way for other ethnographic studies in which the internet was portrayed not as an exotic realm set apart from everyday life but rather as an integral *part of* the everyday (Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002; Kjaerulff, 2010a; Postill, 2010; but see Boellstorff, 2008 for a counter-argument). Like their colleagues in other research traditions, media

ethnographers have found it increasingly difficult in recent years to conduct research around a single medium or internet platform (for an exception, see Miller, 2011). One example is Madianou and Miller's (2012) call for the study of "polymedia", a term they coined to capture the new predicament of media users around the globe faced with a vastly expanded choice of social technologies. This is a situation, they argue, in which choosing the "wrong" technology or platform (e.g. Facebook instead of SMS) can have dire social and personal consequences. Other anthropologists have similarly undertaken research across a range of online and offline sites, e.g. to track the logics of virality and aggregation of the new protest movements (Juris, 2012; Postill, 2014, and forthcoming). Throughout this second period of expansion media anthropologists gained greater visibility across media and communication studies and led theoretical advances on topics such as transnational media (Mankekar, 2008), cultural and political activism (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015; Ginsburg, 2008; Juris, 2008; Postill, 2011), ICT for development (Slater and Tacchi, 2004), 3D virtual environments (Boellstorff, 2008; Malaby, 2009; Nardi, 2010), blogging (Estalella, 2011; Hopkins, 2012; Reed, 2005), geek and hacker subcultures (Kelty, 2008; Coleman, 2011, 2014), journalism (Bird, 2010; Born, 2004; Boyer, 2011; Rao, 2010), advertising (Mazzarella, 2010; Moeran, 2013), mobile media (Horst and Miller, 2006; Tenhunen, 2008), social media (Gershon, 2010; Miller, 2011; Miller et al., 2016), practice theory (Bräuchler and Postill, 2010) and methodology (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Gray, 2016; Pink et al., 2015; Postill, 2016; Vidali, 2016; Vidali and Peterson, 2012).

Critical Interventions

Ethnographers have conducted a substantial amount of work on media and social change/changing since the 1980s. Often they have addressed this question obliquely, via specialist topics such as cultural activism, communication for development, media production, gendered relations, nation-building or international migration (see Ginsburg et al., 2002; Peterson, 2003; Postill, 2006, 2011; Skuse et al., 2011). These scholars link specific media forms and practices to broad societal or regional changes, e.g. the spread of neo-Hinduism in India (Mankekar, 1999; Rao, 2010), neo-Pentecostalism in Africa (Meyer, 2010; Pype, 2011), or British media development 'aid' in post-Soviet Central Asia (Mandel, 2002; Skuse, 2012).

Another common tack has been to use ethnographic research to critique the grand claims of media scholars and 'gurus' about the supposedly transformative power

of new media in the 'network society' (Coleman, 2010; Green et al., 2005; Horst and Miller, 2006; Postill, 2008; Slater, 2014) – although some media ethnographers themselves have not been averse to making epochal prognoses of their own based on localised or platform-specific studies (see Postill, 2009 for examples)².

There are, however, some instances of ethnographic texts that have explicitly theorised the elusive relationship between media and social change(s). For instance, Kjaerulff (2010a, 2010b) discusses how teleworkers in Denmark seek to order their lives by separating their work and personal activities, albeit not always successfully. Updating Barth's classic theories of practice and social change, Kjaerulff regards work as a changing 'cultural stream' that shapes the practices of local (tele) workers. Adopting a more political stance, Wallis (2011) cautions against the optimism with which mobile phones have been welcomed in ICT for development (ICT4D) circles. Like other researchers (e.g. Horst and Miller, 2006; Jensen, 2007; Stammler, 2009; Tenhunen, 2008), Wallis found that mobile phones can indeed improve the livelihoods of people in the global South, but this potential is highly unevenly distributed. Following mobile phone research among rural migrants in Beijing, she argues that many ICT4D studies unwittingly further a neoliberal ideology in which "all that is needed is a mobile phone to let the market work its magic, and inequities and power differentials related to gender and class are rendered irrelevant" (2011, p. 473).

For her part, Tenhunen (2008) builds on fieldwork on mobile ICTs in rural West Bengal (India) to argue that media ethnographers such as Horst and Miller (2006) and Miller and Slater (2000) have a tendency to overstress social reproduction at the expense of social change. Tenhunen also takes issue with practice theorists (Bourdieu 1992; Ortner, 1984; Sahlins, 1985) for overlooking historical agents' "critical faculties". This author regards mobile technology as "a source of dynamism" that shapes culturally specific "social logistics", highlighting the need to attend to people's desire for social change. Thus, she shows how mobiles have given young women in rural West Bengal greater autonomy from their elders' surveillance, whilst paradoxically reinvigorating traditional cultural forms such as kin-based reciprocity.

² The ethnographic critique of the grand claims, important as it is as a corrective, can have the unintended side-effect of exaggerating sociocultural continuity while downplaying the part played by new media in processes of social change, as shown in Tenhunen's (2008) ethnographic study of mobile phones and village sociality in West Bengal, India.

As if responding to this call for greater attention to social change, Madianou and Miller (2012) have teased out two tangled processes of change among Filipino transnational families: first, how media and migration shape such families over time; second, the ways in which “vertical” technological changes unfold through processes of remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 2000).

The Biography of an Actual Social Change

Identifying an actual social change is only the first step. We then need to reconstruct its life course and main stages of development. In other words, we must adopt a biographical (or processual) model.

At this point, a further semantic clarification is in order. In common academic parlance the notions of “life cycle” and “life course” are often conflated. Yet this is another crucial distinction to make, as it corresponds to a fundamental difference between recursive and non-recursive processes. For instance, when a monarch dies, another monarch takes his or her place. “The King is dead. Long live the King!” Monarchies have an in-built recursive mechanism (succession) which allows them to reproduce themselves indefinitely (for as long as they can withstand revolutionary or republican pressures). On the other hand, the biological death of an individual king or queen is irreversible, for the human life course (or curriculum vitae, *Lebenslauf*) is non-recursive. Whatever our beliefs about the Afterlife and reincarnation, we can be sure that there is no biological going back. Just like their subjects, monarchs are Heideggerian ‘beings towards death’ (Giddens, 1984, p. 35).

To be sure, most human beings are creatures of habit(us) with fairly predictable cycles or rounds of activity, but we are also embarked on life journeys that will end in certain, irreversible death. Likewise, the career of an actual social change will contain recursive elements, but it is nevertheless a finite process that will eventually either run its course or meet a premature death.

Processual model	Stages
Diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1995)	(1) knowledge (2) persuasion (3) decision (4) implementation (5) confirmation
Social dramas (Turner, 1957, 1974; Eyerman, 2008; Postill, 2011)	(1) breach (2) crisis (3) redress (4) schism/ reintegration

Moral panics (Cohen, 1973; Critcher, 2008)	(1) warning (2) impact (3) inventory (4) reaction
ICT domestication (Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992; Postill, 2006)	(1) acquisition (2) objectification (3) incorporation (4) conversion (5) disposal

Table 1. A sample of four processual (stage-by-stage/sequential) models used by media and communication scholars.

Processual thinking has a long pedigree in media and communication studies (see Table 1). Of course, the models listed in Table 1 are merely sketches of real-world processes that are invariably complex, messy, overlapping and contradictory. Thus, not all actual cases of ICT domestication will follow the neat four-stage sequence specified in the model. In some instances two stages will be empirically indistinguishable, in others they will overlap, and so on (see Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992). Nevertheless, these models are powerful tools that allow us to track both changes and continuities in socio-technical processes that would otherwise remain hidden amidst the mass of empirical data generated by ethnographic and social-historical research. Moreover, as with any theoretical model, the actualities of research “on the ground” will help to shape the model dialectically and lead to its refinement. For instance, when I carried out research on the ‘biographies’ of radio and television sets among the Iban of Sarawak (East Malaysia), I soon realised that a fifth stage was required in order to provide a fuller picture of these artefacts’ life courses, namely their disposal (Postill, 2006, p. 135).

But how can a processual model be applied to an actual social change? To answer this question, let us retake for a moment our earlier hypothetical example of the villagers who switched from subsistence farming to waged labour in the 1980s and 1990s. A processual analysis of this social change and its media dimensions would:

1. start with the historical origins (or birth) of this shift, e.g. one could interview the first villagers to make the switch to waged labour back in the 1980s, as well as their employers, local leaders, politicians and other historical agents involved with this stage of the process; the media aspects of this early adoption would be woven into the interviews, e.g. one could inquire into radio and television shows recalled by local labourers, as well as into government leaflets, church sermons,

face-to-face meetings with NGOs, etc. encouraging the abandonment of supposedly “backward” and “inefficient” farming practices;

2. continue with a series of interviews with local farmers who took up waged labour in the 1990s, i.e. during the middle phase of the process; one could investigate a possible “network effect” (Boyd, 2009) and “tipping point” (Gladwell, 2000) to explain why most residents took up waged labour at a particular moment in the early 1990s, along with other environmental (e.g. a prolonged drought) and socioeconomic factors (e.g. a steep rise in living costs); in addition, one could again enquire about the media forms and practices related to this middle phase but always avoiding ‘media-centric’ biases (see Couldry, 2012; Moores, 2012);
3. end with the final stage of the process, namely the point at which the practical totality of villagers have by now abandoned farming and rely almost entirely on waged labour for their livelihoods (if this is indeed the case, as ethnographic research will sometimes overturn even the most reasonable working assumption).

Diachronic Ethnography

In both popular and academic discourse we have a habit of using the notion of “social change” as an uncountable noun, as if it were a powdery or granular substance like flour or sugar. We seldom hear this term being used in the plural (“social changes”). Indeed, the very phrase “media and social change” suggests a level of generality that defies empirical application. Before we know it, the mind boggles and we have added “social change” to our mental list of esoteric concepts that are best left undefined, along with “culture”, “society” and the like.

Instead of accepting this indefiniteness, it is more helpful to think of actual social changes in the plural, as (a)countable, concrete, identifiable, unique and messy *processes*. But adopting a processual approach carries its own costs, for it requires that we rethink our ethnographic practice. For many years we have subscribed to the spatial metaphor of “multi-sited ethnography” (Marcus, 1995), but have yet to embrace its temporal counterpart: multi-*timed* ethnography.

There is nothing new about historicising ethnographic research and writing. Revisiting a site where we – or our predecessors – have worked in the past is a long-established anthropological practice (e.g. Firth, 1959; Freeman, 1999; Hutchinson, 1996; Leach and Leach, 1983; Postill, 2006)³. However, because of its relative youth, this is yet to be a common occurrence in the anthropology or ethnography of media, but it is likely that this will become more habitual as today's young scholars reach maturity.

If we are to move towards a multi-timed ethnography, one early hurdle to overcome is our collective reluctance as a discipline to date our research. There are of course exceptions, but frequently when reviewing the (media) ethnographic literature, I found that crucial information about the length and period of research was concealed in a footnote, or not given at all. Without adequate dating, though, there is no hope to produce a coherent account of actual social change, let alone compare our findings with those of contemporary researchers working at other sites.

Another obstacle to clear is the anthropological tendency to romanticise “non-Western” time (Postill, 2002) and exoticise contemporary time, the latter a trait anthropologists share with cultural studies and other fields that came under the sway of postmodernism in the 1980s. As Gell (1992, p. 315) concluded in his painstaking review of the anthropology of time, there is

no fairyland where people experience time in a way that is markedly unlike the way in which we do ourselves, where there is no past, present and future, where time stands still, or chases its own tail, or swings back and forth like a pendulum. All these possibilities have been seriously touted in the literature on the anthropology of time ... but they are all travesties, engendered in the process of scholarly reflection.

For better or worse, we must accept the underwhelming reality that both us and our research participants – whether we are in Borneo, Chile or Norway – organise our daily, weekly and seasonal rounds through modern clock and calendar media (Postill, 2002). These mediated routines, and their life-historical changes over time, are as inescapable a fact of life as money, gravity, taxes or death. It is only fair, given the circumstances, that

³ In fact, as Brian Larkin (2012) pointed out in a response to an earlier version of this paper, “history, or multi-timed ethnography creeps into all anthropological work”, for instance, when returning to one's original fieldwork site or reading the literature on a given geographical area.

we should avoid fairyland notions such as ‘timeless time’ (Castells, 1999) and at long last come to terms with the universality of modern clock-and-calendar time. After all,

without chronological tools it is hard to envisage how media anthropologists ... [would] go about tracking the uneven spread and adoption of media innovations such as writing, radio or mobile telephony. And how could we possibly study media events such as 9/11 in America (Rothenbuhler, 2005), People Power II in the Philippines (Rafael, 2003) or the assassination of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands (Eyerman, 2008) without chronicling the unfolding of these events in real time across different media platforms and physical settings? (Postill, 2009).

In the present article my aim is not only to stress the importance of adding a diachronic dimension to our ethnographic work. Rather it is to seek ways to develop diachronic techniques that will allow us to study the life courses of actual social changes (as opposed to media events or media innovations, as in the above quote).

But how does one decide which process(es) of social change to chronicle and analyse ethnographically? Isn’t this an impossible mission given how muddled, entangled and overlapping such processes are in the real world? My proposal is that we combine our existing preference for “emergent” micro-processes and practices with a newly found interest in large-scale processes that have reached a mature stage in their life courses. For example, if I were studying, God forbid, the media practices of Spanish divorcees who claim to be Catholics, I would pay attention not only to how things are changing at present but *also* to a mature process of change: the post-Franco secularisation of morality in Spain, with special reference to the sub-process of how divorce became normalised in the 1980s and 1990s (following its legalisation in 1981). So I would be asking people the same sorts of questions about their lives during two or three slices in the nation’s divorce history, say the early 1980s, the mid-1990s and the early 2010s.

Alternatively, I could rethink my 1999-2009 diachronic ethnography of suburban activism in Subang Jaya, Malaysia (Postill, 2011), only now armed with the distinction between social changes and social changing – a distinction I did not originally make. Thus I could follow up my original study of digital media and social changing with a sequel that would peg the local data to a broader historical process of social change, e.g.

the mass suburbanisation of the Kuala Lumpur region from the 1970s (early phase) to the 2000s (terminal phase).

Let me unpack this idea. If in the mid-1850s Kuala Lumpur was “little more than a collection of huts occupied by immigrant tin miners from China”, by the 1930s it had become a “racially segregated British colonial town surrounded by rubber plantations” (Postill, 2011, p. 33). Although the satellite township of Petaling Jaya was created in 1953 to cater to a fledgling population of middle-income commuters (Dick and Rimmer, 2003, p. 325; Thong, 1995, p. 318), it was only in the 1970s and 1980s that suburbanisation got under way on a large scale, coinciding with the region’s prodigious industrialisation (Thong, 1995). Subang Jaya-USJ, the locality where I conducted fieldwork in 2003-2004, was a late developer relative to Petaling Jaya. After a slow start in the 1970s by Subang Jaya, its twin township, USJ, eventually opened in 1988 and soon experienced rapid growth

to meet the demands of largely middle-class families, many of them ethnic Chinese. By 1999 Subang Jaya had twelve thousand residential units, where USJ had thirty-seven thousand units spread over 728 hectares and was still expanding but was reaching saturation point. Because of their staggered settlement, each half has a distinctive demographic and domestic cycle profile. Subang Jaya’s families have as a norm older children than those in USJ. At the time of fieldwork in 2003–2004 many offspring were already in their twenties and even thirties, and no longer lived with their parents. By contrast, many USJ families still had children of preschool or school age (Postill, 2011, p. 35).

In this diachronic ethnography of digital media and social *changing* (an investigation into how digital media may be “changing” local forms of residential activism), I stretched out both ends of my 2003-2004 fieldwork with archival and online research to cover a longer period of time, namely from 1999 to 2009. If I were to revisit this study with a media and social *changes* research agenda, however, I would perhaps retell the story of how USJ developed a vibrant internet activism scene in the early 2000s as a small sub-process nested within a larger process of change, namely the suburbanisation of the Klang Valley that started in the 1970s and ended in the 2000s. I would cut off this process in the 2000s not because there are no more suburbs being built in the 2010s – there are – but because the cultural ideal and reality of the car-dependent suburb as the doxic “place to be” for middle-class Malaysian families was by the early 2000s fully

naturalised; that is, the process of naturalisation had practically run its course by the time I left the field in 2004.

I am aware of a lurking danger here: that I may be misunderstood as advocating rigid, old-fashioned “linear” models of change with limited applicability to the increasingly complex, “rhizomatic” (Estalella, 2011; Hopkins, 2012), “assembled” (Hinkelbein, 2008), and “conjunctural” (Mankekar, 1999) socio-technical worlds we now reportedly inhabit. My response to this possible objection is twofold.

First, I am not proposing a model in which temporal precedence translates into mono-causality, i.e. stage one of a given process does not ‘cause’ or determine stage two. Processual form and sequencing do matter, but causality is always multiple and entails the interaction of endogenous and exogenous factors within a dynamic field of regular practice and irregular action.

Second, clock-and-calendar time is integral to the planning and coordination of modern socio-technical practices and “assemblages”. Take a recent ethnography of Spanish “passionate blogging” by Estalella (2011). This study is set at a key moment in the history of blogging in Spain (and other European states), namely the 2006-7 period when blogging was at its peak, just prior to the explosive growth of mass social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Estalella’s postmodernist/Latourian approach works well in a number of places (e.g. when discussing the socio-technical logic of blogs as databases) but it runs into difficulties when discussing the temporality of blogging. Although rightly dismissing fanciful notions of “cyberspace” as a paradoxical realm of “timeless time” (see Castells, 1999 and above) and stressing the clock-and-calendar aspects of blogging (e.g. the folk definition of blogs as diaries written in reverse chronological order), he then follows Latour into a world in which time and space are the ad-hoc products of agents and actants constituting one another. To recall Gell’s earlier remark, this Latourian world is a fantasy ‘engendered in the process of scholarly reflection’ (1992, p. 315).

Once again: modern processes of social change are unavoidably mediated by clock-and-calendar time – arguably the most universal of all human codes (Postill, 2002). Granted that in recent decades most of us have experienced an “acceleration” of social life (Eriksen, 2001, 2016; Wittel, 2001), the fact remains that our worldwide standard of time-reckoning and scheduling has not changed at all. Our days still have 24 hours, and there are still seven days in a week. Governments, markets, social

movements, media forms and platform algorithms may come and go, but this ubiquitous code remains firmly in place around the globe.

Spain's Recent Political Changes

To tie together all these loose epistemological threads about actual changes, collective biographies and diachronic ethnography, let me offer one final case study: recent socio-political events in Spain in the wake of the 2011 indignados (15M) movement.

A time traveller who left Spain in the year 2010 and returned in 2017 would find it hard to recognise the country's present political landscape. At the national level, she would notice that the seemingly stable two-party system that she left behind – in place since the end of the Franco regime – has now been replaced by a four-party system. Whilst the old Conservative (PP) and Socialist (PSOE) parties are still in existence, they have now been joined in the Spanish Parliament by two new populist (or citizenist) parties: the leftist Podemos and the centre-right Ciudadanos. What is more, Podemos is currently polling second in voter intention, ahead of the Socialists⁴. Our time traveller would also notice in astonishment the existence of numerous other new political parties and platforms arising out of something Spaniards call “the 15M movement”. These are now governing or aspiring to govern at the local, regional and national levels (e.g. Ahora Madrid, Marea Atlántica, Barcelona en Comú, and Un País en Comú). Many of these formations have been successful at the ballot box, with Spain's major cities, including Madrid and Barcelona, now in the hands of 15M-derived platforms (Postill, 2016, forthcoming).

At this point some readers may counter that it is still early days to speak of a political transformation in Spain; these varied processes and initiatives, they would argue, are still unfolding and we will not know their outcomes for many years, perhaps even decades, to come. For all we know, the argument would go, the new “citizen parties” may be defeated in the coming elections and the country may return to its customary two-party system. Besides, the Conservatives (PP) are still in power, and the Spanish economy is showing signs of recovery after many years of crisis, which could favour the establishment parties.

These are all fair points, but they all tacitly subscribe to present continuism as defined above; that is, they collapse the recent past, the present and the near future into

⁴ Source: *El País*, 9 February 2017, http://elpais.com/elpais/2017/02/07/media/1486470621_506275.html

one blurry sameness. Yet, to reiterate an earlier point, if we wish to understand actual changes, and their media aspects, we must be able to study the recent past in its own terms. A large, still ongoing process of socio-political transformation like Spain's current "second democratic transition" can still be analytically disaggregated into smaller sub-processes of change in the recent past. Some of these changes will already be completed, whereas others will still be unfolding. Both types of changes are amenable to processual, phase-by-phase analysis.

Let us take but one of these concrete changes – the coming to power of an indignados platform, Barcelona en Comú (BComú for short), following the 2015 local elections in Barcelona – and outline its collective biography. Like all biographies, the biography (or life course) of this socio-political change has a beginning, a middle and an end. Whilst the story of this change clearly ends with the platform's coming to power in 2015, its beginnings are murkier. Platform members themselves often trace them to the 2011 indignados protests. One of their international members puts it thus:

When the *indignados* occupied the public squares of Spain on May 15, 2011, demanding "real democracy", they changed the terms of public debate. They called for an end of elected officials excessive privileges, measures to tackle corruption in public life, the dismantling of the stale two-party system, and citizen participation in decision-making (Baird, 2014).

Out of this historical event came the new citizen platform Guanyem, which later had to change its name to Barcelona en Comú for legal reasons. However, prior to Guanyem and the occupied squares, the core members of BComú were involved in a housing rights platform named PAH, aimed at defending the rights and wellbeing of families unable to pay their mortgages after the property market collapsed. The former PAH activist and current BComú councillor, Gala Pin, once noted that although PAH was slightly older than the indignados movement (it was launched in 2009), the two were "a perfect match". There was, however, one striking difference between them: whilst the indignados eschewed any notion of leadership, PAH was unapologetically led by Ada Colau (Nodo50, 2013) – a charismatic activist who went on to lead BComú and became the mayor of Barcelona in May 2015.

We can therefore speak of six main phases in the life course of the process of change culminating in BComú gaining control of Barcelona's municipal government. First, the early PAH years. Second, the square occupations of May 2011. Third, a post-

squares interim period of renewed PAH activity. Fourth, Ada Colau leaves PAH to launch the citizen platform Guanyem (later renamed BComú). Fifth, BComú contests the local elections. Finally, it wins the elections and forms a new municipal government, which brings the process to an end.

Alongside this diachronic, phase-by-phase account of a new state of affairs in Barcelona's local government, we can ask questions about the media and communication aspects of this process of change, e.g. How important were social media vs. mass media for BComú? What about the role of face-to-face communication during its campaigning? Like Podemos, BComú's electoral success was the result of a low-budget but highly effective transmedia strategy. Their electoral programme was "crowdsourced" to over 5000 people, "with contributions made in open assemblies and online" (Baird, 2015). One of BComú's campaign offshoots was SomComuns, a network of internet activists campaigning via social media. Another was a collective of designers and artists named The Movement for The Graphic Liberation of Barcelona (Sandiumenge, 2015). A thorough account of this transmedia strategy would map it onto the six phases of the process just outlined.

Conclusion

The chief purpose of this article is to start a productive conversation about the urgent need to explicitly distinguish between (a) media and "social changing" and (b) media and actual social changes. The methodological and conceptual difficulties of operationalizing this new distinction are daunting (Larkin, 2012), yet if we wish to study media-related changes systematically, we must rethink and expand our conceptual language and methodology. This applies not only to media ethnography, but also to all other media and communication studies that concern themselves with the recent past, the present, and/or the near future.

Relying on the vague tacit notion of ceaseless social changing to understand actual social *changes* is rather like trying to clap with one hand, or like weighing oneself only once to measure weight loss. It would be as frustrating as watching but one episode of a thrilling Scandinavian crime series on TV and never knowing how the story unfolded in subsequent instalments.

I have suggested that we should be specific about the media-related changes we examine, studying them processually as collective biographies with a beginning, a middle and (eventually) an end, and acknowledge that actual changes entail a

transformation from an original state A to a subsequent state B. Claiming that 'change is not linear' or that 'things are changing all the time' will not get us very far. Instead, we must get down to the business of teasing out empirical examples of mediated social changes *that have already taken place* in the recent or distant past.

In sum, I am proposing that we turn our attention from social change in general (a mind-boggling notion) to media and concrete social changes. One advantage of this approach is that it forces us to grant media producers and consumers historical agency. That is, the analysis can only work if we posit variously positioned historical agents (both media professionals and non-professionals) within a social space or field struggling for or against a specific process of change. No process of change ever goes unchallenged, and as media scholars we would want to know who supported and resisted the change, through which media and with what consequences, e.g. journalists engaged in the struggle for and against apartheid in South Africa, or politicians caught up in the campaign for and against Brexit in the UK. A post-Bourdieuian field-theoretical analysis may be useful in future analyses, with fields understood not as institutionalised domains of regular practice – as they are in Bourdieu's theory – but as dynamic domains of cooperation and conflict subject to abrupt fluctuations in their personnel, boundaries and media ensembles (Postill, 2015).

The social changes approach I am advocating does not commit us to the idea that a 'change from A to B' will be necessarily clear-cut. Most changes will be hard to research, messy, unclear, ambiguous, and open to multiple interpretations – but does not mean they are unresearchable (see Postill and Pink, 2012). For example, Spanish scholars may disagree about the timing, sequencing and media dimensions of the process of post-Franco secularisation, but not many would dispute that there has been a major societal shift in Spain away from Catholic values and practices over the past 40 years (albeit with a possible regression or backlash in recent years under the PP's conservative government).⁵

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⁵ Meanwhile, other countries have seen concurrent shifts towards greater religiosity, particularly in the global South.

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