Commentary Article

MEDIA-RELATED CHANGES AS FINITE PROCESSES: A RESPONSE TO ECE ALGAN

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I am very grateful to Ece Algan for taking the trouble to comment on my article 'The diachronic ethnography of media: from social changing to actual social changes' (Postill, 2017) and to *Moment* journal for this opportunity to respond to her comments. Such conversations are all too rare these days, with most of us too busy chasing after elusive metrics to have extended conversations with fellow scholars, and yet they are essential to the advancement of knowledge.

The title of Algan's (2017) piece, 'The longitudinal ethnography of media and a response to John Postill' signals two separate, conflicting aims. First, to argue for media ethnographic studies that entail one or more revisits to an original field site. Second, to respond to my article. The result is a dissipation of efforts and an essay that is strangely at odds with itself, so to regain focus I will concentrate here on the second aim.

Algan makes a number of interrelated points about my article. She begins by finding my stressing the need to take clock-and-calendar time seriously in the study of media to be 'highly problematic'. Unfortunately, she does not say why. She then suggests that 'time is not necessarily linear when media circulate and recirculate' (Algan, 2017, p. 45), but once again she moves on to a different matter, so we are left wondering what this

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phrase actually means. Rather than attempt to second-guess Algan, I would like to query this surprisingly common idea – even among social theorists and media scholars – that clock-and-calendar time (or CCT) is 'linear', and therefore a poor guide to the 'non-linear' messiness that we call human life.

The *Cambridge English Dictionary*[1] defines the term 'linear' as 'involving a series of events or thoughts in which one follows another one directly', for instance, 'These mental exercises are designed to break linear thinking habits and encourage creativity', or 'The movie has a non-linear plot'. What the dictionary does not say, but is implicit in both examples, is that the word 'linear' carries negative connotations such as predictability, routinisation, rigidity, and a lack of creativity. If we extend Algan's line of reasoning, it follows that a theory of social time and history that insists on the centrality of CCT to modern sociality is guilty by association to this dubious idea of linearity. In fact, what is remarkable about CCT is not its linearity, but rather its seamless conjoining of recursive and non-recursive modes of time reckoning – so seamless, in fact, that the two modes are easily conflated. Thus whilst clock time is perpetually recursive (6 pm recurs day after day, and will continue to do so until the end of time), calendar time is non-recursive (the year 2017 CE will never again return, and neither will the twentieth century).

As I argue in the article, and earlier in Postill (2002), these are simple, incontrovertible facts about our universal time-reckoning system that need to be factored into any serious theory of modern social or historical change. The cost of not doing so is considerable, for unless we overcome our received aversion to the very thought of linearity, we will be unable to understand the changes we study as finite processes with a beginning, a middle and an end. Let me repeat this crucial point for rhetorical and mnemonic effect: *Changes are finite processes with a beginning, a middle, and an end.*

This linearity phobia may explain Algan's (2017, p. 46) remark about the impossibility of 'capturing social change in such a neat chronological order, as in decades for instance to refer to Postill's hypothetical example [of a rural locality where waged labour had replaced farming as the main source of income]'. This is not possible, she adds, 'in real life as my longitudinal ethnographic study over 15 years has also shown me'. There are two main problems with this remark. First, as I make painstakingly clearly in my article, terms such as 'change' and 'social change' – in the singular – block our theoretical progress because they are overly general, like 'culture', 'society', or 'nation'

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[1] See http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/linear

(Postill, 2017, p. 28). To bypass this roadblock, I argue for the plural form 'changes', and especially for formulations such as 'concrete changes' and 'actual changes'. For instance, the media scholar Sebastian Kubitschko (2015) argues that thanks to the efforts of the hacker association the Chaos Computer Club (CCC), which demonstrated that electronic voting was unsafe, in March 2009 the German Constitutional Court ruled the use of computers for voting unconstitutional:

> As a consequence of this process the CCC not only politicised the issue of electronic voting but achieved *a concrete change* in democratic procedure. In most of the world's largest democracies – Brazil, India and the United States – where this form of intervention was not performed voting computers are still in use (Kubitschko, 2015, p. 195, my emphasis).

Once we start asking questions about concrete changes, particularly those that have already taken place, e.g. the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa, or the gloomy national mood in Britain following the Brexit referendum, all of a sudden, almost magically, we find specific researchable problems to get to work on, including the possibility of comparing whether or not certain changes have occurred in different times and places, as in Kubitschko's e-voting research linked to 'a concrete change in democratic procedure'.

More importantly, Algan's own superb ethnographic examples later in the text contradict her rejection of the idea of concrete changes as finite processes. She recounts how she took an interest in longitudinal ethnography when she twice returned to the field in Şanlıurfa, Turkey, in order to address some 'unanswered questions that arose in my writing and conceptualization' (2017, p. 48). She was particularly intrigued by the coexistence of media change with social continuity among young people living in this locality. By adopting a longitudinal approach, she was able to show 'how earlier social networks via old media, such as local radio, have been replaced by social media as well as the implications of this transformation in the public sphere'. For example, Facebook, chat, and mobile media had replaced radio song requests as the preferred form of communication among youth. This meant a personalization and privatization of youth sociality compared to her early 2000s observations and a reinforcement of 'the existing gender, class and ethnic identity politics' (2017, p. 48). Thus while boys had a highly visible public presence on Facebook, girls would hide their real identities on this platform for fear of family reprisals.

As we can see, Algan's own account of her Turkish research has all the necessary

elements to start asking useful questions about a concrete media-related change, namely 'the transformation in the [local] public sphere'. This transformation may have been complex, messy and contested, but Algan herself states that it had already taken place when she revisited her field site, and that it entailed young people's replacement of radio and other earlier media with newer media such as Facebook. In other words, a finite process of change occurred from a state A (young people use radio and other 'old' media to communicate) to a state B (young people migrate to newer media like Facebook); a finite process that took place in the 2000s and had already come to an end by her third visit. It follows that the transformation did not happen overnight, but rather it took a number of years. Like all changes that unfurl over a period of time, we can safely assume that this change happened in stages that are amenable to diachronic analysis. Just like in the case of a biography, there will always be disagreements among scholars about the precise sequencing of a life course, about the relative importance of the various stages, etc., but a biography that went straight from a person's birth to their death and remained silent on the rest of their life would be a very odd biography indeed.

The same applies to the 'biography' – or life course, curriculum vitae – of a societal transformation such as the one described by Algan. To fully appreciate its unfurling and significance, some manner of chronological ordering will always be required. This does not mean, of course, that the analyst is condemned to a strictly chronological recounting of the process (literary techniques such as flashback can provide readers with much needed narrative relief). It does not mean, either, that we cannot investigate subsequent changes in a serial manner, i.e. situations in which we go from a state A to a state B to a state C to a state D, and so forth. Yet any serious account of a process of change – or series of changes – would have to pay close attention to their inescapable historicity and finitude, to both their recursive ('everyday life') and non-recursive (life stages) dimensions. To answer questions such as 'What has changed here since my last fieldwork?' or 'What part did various media play in this change?' we need to avoid overly general notions such as 'social change' and identify instead concrete changes. We must then study them processually, phase by phase, by triangulating and piecing together evidence gathered from our research participants and other sources.

This brings me to Algan's contention that I only provide a hypothetical example of a concrete change in my article, namely the mentioned farmers-to-labourers case (Algan, 2017, p. 46). This is factually incorrect. In fact, I give a number of real-world examples – admittedly very brief in some cases –, including suburbanisation in the Kuala Lumpur

(Malaysia) region, secularisation in post-Franco Spain, apartheid in South Africa, the Brexit fiasco in the UK, and a change of local government in Barcelona (Spain). Let me take up again this latter example (Postill, 2017, p. 34-35) and connect it to Algan's question of what a diachronic ethnography of media may look like, 'since based on Postill's hypothetical example, asking questions regarding media's role is almost an afterthought'. Her concern here is that designing research projects not directly related to media would be of little use to media scholars (2017, p. 47).

There are two advantages to the processual, non-media-centric approach I advocate. On the one hand, it leaves open the possibility that the media forms or practices we are interested in may not have been the prime movers of a particular transformation overall. Only empirical research will determine this, not a priori assumptions or research designs. On the other hand, by breaking down the process into its constituent episodes or phases, we can ask specific questions about which 'media ensembles' (Bausinger, 1984; Monterde and Postill, 2014) – or media mixes – were more influential or prevalent at which particular phase.

For instance, each stage of the Egyptian uprising of 2011 displayed its own unique blend of media, both old and new, analogue and digital – from Twitter and Facebook to graffiti and leaflets through broadcast media such as radio and television. Social media do appear to have been important tools during the preparation and launching of the Day of Anger (25 January), but they were so alongside email, mobile phones, leaflets, television, radio, print media and face-to-face communication. At a later stage, during Mubarak's disruption of internet and mobile services, other media came to the fore, including landline phones, ham radio and graffiti, with TV presumably acquiring even greater importance. As soon as these services were re-established, the protest mediascape was reconfigured again and continued to evolve from hour to hour, day to day. As Mark A. Peterson remarked via the Media Anthropology Network's mailing list, 'because the media are so interconnected, each transformation in one sector requires some changes, minor or major, in others' (quoted in Postill, 2011). The same principle goes for the Barcelona example I present in the article: pending further investigation, we can hypothesise that at different stages of the process of change leading to an *indignados*-led town hall in Barcelona in 2015, different media ensembles took pride of place as the process unfolded over time and space.

But what are media scholars interested in concrete media changes to do if they cannot focus on media? Here a further clarification is in order. Whether or not media are

placed at the heart of a research project will depend on the actual research question being asked. As Algan (2017, p. 48-49) rightly points out, for media scholars

> ethnographic research often means following the media object rather than committing to a site, whereas for anthropologists, their attention could be drawn to a different phenomenon during their revisit – as (Peterson, 2009) has argued, "a growing amount of 'media anthropology' is being written by anthropologists who are not particularly interested in the media" (p. 338).

It follows that most media scholars will focus on media, whilst most media anthropologists will study media out of the corner of their eyes, as it were, whilst sharing in the lives of their research participants (see Postill and Pink, 2012). I have no quarrel with this division of labour, as I regard both approaches as necessary to arrive at comprehensive accounts of the elusive relationship between media and sociocultural changes. In other words, if answering a research question about a medium (e.g. radio) demands that the researcher adopts a medium-centric focus, then so be it.

The challenge is how to find ways to discuss and collaborate across specialist boundaries without falling into mutual recriminations or disciplinary chauvinism. Frank exchanges such as this are an essential part of this recursive process of learning from one another.

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