

Just Like Magic: Anthropological Musings on the History and Culture of Wireless Technologies

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In 1840, Maori elders from New Zealand's north island agreed to the terms and conditions of a British treaty. Amongst its many provisions, the Treaty of Waitangi as it is commonly known, retained Maoris rights in land and taonga (treasures). In 2005, Nextscribe.org, a Catholic think-tank in New Mexico declared that the “network is the church” and set out an ambitious agenda for research into the role that technology might play in the spiritual lives of America's (and the world's) Catholics. What do these events have in common, and why might they be relevant to our contemporary discussions about wireless technologies?

In this talk, I propose to re-examine the notion of 'wirelessness' from an anthropological perspective. This paper is informed by nearly a decade of ethnographic research, with a particular focus on the Asia region, and by ethnographic and feminist theory. I draw on historical and contemporary cultural practices, events and accounts to create 5 interpretative frames for wirelessness. Wireless as schematics; practice(s); politics; citizenship; and imagined. Using these frameworks I suggest a different way of thinking about one of the dominant technology infrastructures of this decade.

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