Networked Anthropology

The advent of social media offers anthropologists exciting opportunities to extend their research to communities in fresh ways. At the same time, these technological developments open up anthropological fieldwork to different hazards.

*Networked Anthropology* explores the increasing appropriation of diverse media platforms and social media into anthropological research and teaching. The chapters consider the possibilities and challenges of multimedia, how network ecologies work, the ethical dilemmas involved, and how to use multimedia methodologies. The book combines theoretical insights with case studies, methodological sketches and pedagogical notes.

Drawing on recent ethnographic work, the authors provide practical guidance in creative ways of doing networked anthropology. They point to the future of ethnography, both inside and outside the classroom, and consider ways in which networked anthropology might develop.

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“Networked Anthropology is an essential roadmap for conducting engaged anthropology on a rapidly changing digital terrain. Collins and Durington detail how anthropologists can make use of social media to link classrooms to local communities in ways that span the corporeal and the digital. They also point out both the potential ethical pitfalls and the unexpected benefits of embracing social networks at every stage of the research process.”

P. Kerim Friedman, National Dong Hwa University, Taiwan, and founding member of Savage Minds

“Contemporary anthropologists share a networked world with research participants and other interlocutors – a world in which we are all producing and consuming media throughout the ethnographic encounter. Collins and Durington examine how social media inexorably reshapes ‘the field’ in both senses (fieldsite and disciplinary practice) and can potentially generate a more nuanced, ethical, public anthropology premised on reciprocity, sharing, and dialogue with participants and audiences.”

Krista Harper, University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA
Networked Anthropology
A Primer for Ethnographers

Samuel Gerald Collins
and Matthew Slover Durnington
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From our 2011 iteration:

Multimedia Logistics: Jay Simpson
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While this book represents one result of collaborative research, mistakes and elisions are ours alone. Nevertheless, whatever the proceeds are from this book, we plan to share them in some fashion with groups with whom we’ve collaborated.
Introduction
What is networked anthropology?

Yesterday’s encounter with laid off former RG Steel workers at the United Steel Workers of America was pretty interesting. Foremost, the union hall, as well as the surrounding area, looks to have been under construction longer than Dr. Dre’s alleged 3rd studio album, Detox. Seriously though, the hall’s entrance rivals a castle’s, only instead of a water filled, alligator protected moat, there are rocks, mud, and “caution” signs. Arguably, the debilitating construction exists as a microcosm for the sea changes that have characterized the lives of former RG Steel employees since its closure. I once spoke to a wise man who told me, “a man who does not work, does not eat, but always remember, a j-o-b is only just over broke”. The folks that were speaking with my fellow researchers and me, however, didn’t have jobs at RG Steel they had careers. Men and women who worked at one place for as many as 3 decades, were able to send their children to college, pay off their homes in some cases, and excel in what they enjoyed doing for a living, spoke candidly about how outsourcing and the ubiquitous effects of globalization led to the plant’s closure. They spoke candidly about how losing their jobs also meant that they also lost their grade “A” health benefits, leading to financial calamity in the form of bankruptcy. They spoke a lot about lost, losing income, insurance, friends, and even a sense of purpose (as evident in the unfortunate demise of too many former steel workers who took their own lives). Even still, in the mist of so much lost, I know why the proverbial caged bird sings. She sings because life goes on. She sings because even if you can’t control the environmental, economic, or political factors that ultimately determine your position, you can always control the decisions you make in response to said factors. She sings because you can go back to school, enter job training, and become certified. This is why the caged bird sings and the steel worker, laid off or not, will be just fine.

(Johnson 2013)

The blog entry above was posted on the tail of the third year of a four-year, networked anthropology project in Baltimore: Anthropology by the Wire. (See Figure 0.1.) The author, a Baltimore student at Morgan State University,
added his thoughts to a growing panoply of multimedia for the summer that included transcripts, notes, theoretically oriented essays, interviews, photographs, film, as well as various *objets trouvés* from all over the internet. While we don’t necessarily agree with everything in the post (is the “caged bird” for these steel-workers that same as Maya Angelou’s?), we nevertheless find this to be a good example of live fieldnoting, as it has come to be called – blogged fieldnotes that include “headnote” reflections and, perhaps, other media (Sanjek 1990).

At the moment we write this, anthropologists are working with different communities and collaborators all over the world to post up different content on social media like Tumblr and YouTube: fieldnotes, photographs and recordings that document the community’s problems as well as gesture to creative solutions and even revolutionary possibilities. Invariably, people find at least some of this material interesting: they scroll through posts, click on videos, repost content and tweet. But nothing about this is particularly new. By now, we’ve had almost two decades of ethnographic research on our digital lives, from Usenet to MMORPG’s. And almost ten years of a digital anthropology that works to disseminate anthropological findings through online platforms – and oftentimes open access ones. But this turn to social media seems both qualitatively and quantitatively different: unedited videos of ethnographic interviews on YouTube, photographs of interlocutors on Instagram. Works-in-progress on Tumblr, Wordpress and Blogspot: ethnographies avant la lettre.

*Figure 0.1 Screenshot of the Tumblr site for “Anthropology by the Wire” (anthropologybythewire.com)*
This could be cause for alarm. As excited and intrigued as we are, we’re also cautious and wary. When we teach or collaborate on research with undergraduates, we make sure to address the problem of social media. We’re not afraid to tell people, “No.” “No, you can’t just take pictures of people and post them up on Flickr.” “Does your friend know you’re posting up your interview with her on your blog?” “This is a great video clip, but there’s no way you’re going to get permission to use the theme from ‘the Godfather’.” The ready availability of media, the ease of media production, together with the way people live suspended between their online and offline lives, means that everything people do finds its mimetic imprint in their social media. You didn’t like that class? Well, why don’t you tweet about it!

In 2014, we have already experienced these infiltrations of private and public many times. But over the last thirty years, we’ve also become much more concerned about the fate of the data we record. While human subjects committees generally ask us to keep our records for a period of time before destroying them, the issue is really about control. Who controls our data? Social media is about contagion (although not in a negative sense), and when our anthropological data are loaded to those platforms, then they will be shared, reproduced and remixed (Sampson 2012). That’s a troubling thought. Even researchers from the early twentieth century that we now use in our classes as negative examples of ethnographic ethics would have blanched at sharing each stage of their research on social media.

And yet, who wouldn’t find social media compelling? For anthropologists interested in “everyday life and typical behavior,” it’s wonderful and amazing to look at the record of ordinary (and extraordinary) lives that are documented in different ways on social media. And while food blogging is not anthropology, we still believe that the multitudes of ethno-documentarians uploading their quotidian and extraordinary lives display an anthropological sensibility. Moreover, people value these self-presentations in a way that is qualitatively different than they did decades ago. While our interlocutors might have asked for a copy of a photograph of a film two decades ago, now they ask when they can post media up on their Facebook for their networked relations to see. We would suggest that this means more than just a technological update, a matter of degree. People realize that their online “selves” can (and should) be regularly maintained and augmented with additional media, and they apologize when they haven’t updated their Facebook or blogs. They feel an obligation to emote their lives through media platforms, a sentiment shared by non-profit organizations around the world, who have all – regardless of their primary missions – become media producers, precisely in order to effectively manage their identities on social media that have become steadily more important to their fund-raising.

So shouldn’t anthropologists be part of this? It is ripe ground for incredible possibilities in research but also represents a minefield of ethical and moral dilemmas. These manifestations of a networked anthropology could be new incarnations of the kind of hermeneutic violence that anthropology has
perpetuated for many decades. In his classic critique of anthropologists and their relationships with Native Americans, Vine Deloria, Jr. wishes that Native people “will finally awaken and push the parasitic scholars off the reservations and set up realistic guidelines about what is written and said about them” (Deloria 1972: 96). Just because social media documenting peoples’ everyday lives is readily available doesn’t mean that those lives should be transparent to anthropologists. In other words, just because we can “pitch our tent” in Facebook doesn’t mean that we should parasitically lurk there. This challenge to privacy is a concern to many people, including civil liberties groups. For anthropology, social media could be just another weapon for us to slot the Other into “savage” categories, one that would allow the unscrupulous to “scrape” data off of media and tell stories about people and their lives without any input from people themselves. In this dystopian vision, we would become cultural spies on a par with the National Security Agency, tracking people’s movements through their posts and spying on the worlds they construct.

But that is not the only possibility for anthropology in the age of the network. It is also possible that we utilize the global fascination with social media to build more collaboration with communities and to help those communities share their concerns on media platforms. And it offers the possibility that anthropologists might enjoin new communities – collaborators that are generated through the networks of media content we form. While there has always been the call for wider access of anthropological research to collaborators and extended communities, the majority of anthropologists show little inclination to do so having already moved on to another segment of research or a new project once a manuscript is published or ethnographically intended media created. What results of the ethnographic research encounter becomes a static representation of an engagement frozen in time, or, perhaps worse, the anthropologist becomes an advocate for a position or community that has already moved on or been decimated by the processes the anthropologist documents in the first place. Nevertheless, the immediacy of social media, and its rapid propagation, means that we have the potential to make measurable interventions with our collaborative partners. Unlike academic publishing, or even newspaper editorials, social media can be rapidly disseminated to a strategically selected public. As a collaborative tool, we believe the “network” is the appropriate metaphor for what we hope to do: to create effective connections between different groups – including anthropologists, interlocutors, students and an emergent “public” – in order to collaborate on the production of meaning.

These evolving efforts constitute what we believe to be an emerging, networked anthropology. Over the past five years, we have developed a working definition:

An anthropology undertaken in the age of multimedia social networks, one in which all of the stakeholders – ethnographers, interlocutors, community, audience – are all networked together in various (albeit powerful
and unequal) ways. Networked anthropology generates ethnographic data in multiple media. Here it overlaps with similar advances in different sub-disciplines, including visual anthropology, public anthropology and action research. The difference is that a networked anthropology produces data that is simultaneously media to be appropriated and utilized by the communities with whom anthropologists work in order to connect to others (other communities, potential grantors, friends and family). And the opposite is also true – anthropologists are only generating data for their research in the space of their commitments to communities to assist in their efforts to network to different audiences.

(Collins and Durington 2012)

Our experiences are not unique, and, looking around at our colleagues, we can see what we believe to be an incipient networked anthropology in many quarters. It coincides with a growing interest within anthropology for open source transparency and participatory research (Lassiter 2008). Most of all, we don’t believe that networked anthropology is really a departure from other forms of anthropology. To believe otherwise betrays the technological fallacy – that information technology is a deterministic “game-changer” that catalyzes shifts in culture and society.

Instead, we believe that networked anthropology, or anthropology in the age of networks, uncovers and energizes elements of older anthropologies, reshuffling the anthropological project in order to elaborate on possibilities within anthropological research that were heretofore submerged. Rather than introduce some “break” with the past, networked anthropologies connect the past to the future in different ways.

We come back to the metaphor of the network. Anthropology (and other social sciences) have always engaged in “cutting” their networks, defining the anthropologist, the interlocutors, and the fieldsite, and cutting out all of the rest of the relationships and reciprocities that go into ethnographic research (Strathern 1996). It’s a truism that, in order to do ethnography, you’ve got to “leave” the field. Of course, this doesn’t necessarily mean physically leaving, but it does generally mean that we cease collecting data, analyze what we have and disseminate our findings.

Engaging in a networked anthropology doesn’t have to be perpetual fieldwork, but it does entail a cognizance of the networked chains of exchange, circulation and feedback that make up our fieldwork. If we “cut” that network (and we assume that all research calls for some process of cutting) then we need to do it differently in an age of social media, when, as people are fond of saying about Web 2.0, the lines between media producers and consumers blur. Does this reflexivity regarding inclusion take care of concerns about inequalities and power relations in ethnographic research? No – but we would argue that those unequal relations unfold differently in networked environments, and that they moreover reveal other possibilities for redressing those differences in the course of research.
What we’re calling networked anthropology has seven central components:

1 It’s about process. The point behind a networked anthropology is to articulate your work through the network, and that means posting up data, ideas and theories that are still in motion. The moment the book is printed, or the article published, then that process stops, and your work has been ossified – reified – into a singular, static text. Instead, networked anthropology takes a sometimes terrifying step into revealing ideas that are not fully formed.

2 It’s connected. What does it mean to be connected? It means more than just putting something up online. And it means more than your video going “viral.” In other words, being connected is entirely different from the twentieth-century media paradigm of either (a) no one seeing your work; or (b) everyone seeing your work. Instead, “connected” refers to the deliberate formation of a network of followers and sites you follow. It refers to the tagging you use to delineate and interpret your content for search engines and to attract new nodes and new connections. Mass media measure “audience” by demographic blocks; a networked audience is never undifferentiated, even if the number of page views scales into the millions. Each node delineates a particular quality of connection in a connected cluster of similar nodes.

3 It’s cross-platform. One of the biggest antecedents to networked anthropology is multimedia anthropology. A networked anthropology, however, is more nomadic, with the same material being used and reused across different platforms, restlessly remixed and reposted in different configurations. By crossing multiple platforms, meaning inevitably changes, and a networked anthropology seeks to take advantage of that while still admitting the shortcomings (and biases) of commercial platforms.

4 It’s collaborative. Once you’re decided on a networked anthropology, then you’ve given up some control and autonomy over your work. Your immediate collaborators (which include co-researchers, interlocutors and mentors), together with future collaborators (people who have connected to your work in some way through the networks you’ve formed) have measurable impacts on your work.

5 It’s recursive. What do you gain from a networked anthropology? One of the most important benefits is immediate feedback, which is not to say that people are necessarily commenting on content you’ve uploaded. But they are giving you feedback, even if it’s just in the form of site analytics. In return, that is data you need to incorporate into your research – it’s part of an emergent interpretation of your networked anthropology.

6 It’s about the long-term. Given the ephemerality of web content, the insistence on the long term seems disingenuous, but this is exactly the difference between viral media that makes the rounds of social networks over the course of a week and disappears and the anthropology we’re advocating. A networked anthropology establishes long-term connections for the benefit of everyone
in the network. Premised on reciprocity, collaboration and recursivity, it only works if connections have an opportunity to develop over time.

7 It’s Not for Everyone. It would be absurd to say that we expect (or even hope) for people to all start practicing networked anthropology. We can think of many, many field sites where these methods would be entirely inappropriate. We’re working in some of them right now, and there would be hell to pay if the data we’re collecting for those non-networked projects made it on to Facebook or YouTube.

Separately, each of these components has the potential to reimagine anthropological practice. Yet, we are not calling for a “reinvention” of anthropology (Hymes) nor a reconfiguration (Marcus) or altering for inclusion (Harrison), or, a dismantling of the discipline and its practices all together. We assume that there’s a goal: for the anthropologists and the community they work with to create media in some capacity, and to disseminate that media according to various social networks. Simultaneously, we dismiss the notion of a supposed “digital divide” that has sought to reify class, and often racial, barriers between researchers and the communities they engage. While we appreciate increasing economic inequalities in many countries (including the United States), we are way past easy assumptions people have held about lack of access and interest in technology in some of the communities where we work. We also assume that the staid notions of pseudonym creation for those we work with and the places we conduct research are unnecessary and actually impossible to do within networked anthropology. Hence, a networked anthropology will undoubtedly be dismissed too quickly by those who do not see its potential for exposing human rights issues and other political quandaries that our collaborators live in. If there is a need for anonymity within a networked anthropology, there are creative ways to safeguard this ethical position rather than dismiss the possibilities it offers.

But if there’s a companion volume to this work, it should be called “Un-networked Anthropology”; the unfortunate (or fortunate, depending on your fieldwork) reality is that our work is hemmed in on all sides by social media. For example, there are hundreds of photo blogs out there where would-be urban anthropologists post photos of homeless people and abandoned homes; video blogging sites where people are uploading street fights and neighborhood parties. For good or ill, these form the backdrop for any media we might wish to make or any applied intervention we might want to accomplish. So this impacts the ways people view your ethnographic work, even if you yourself have never networked anything. Moreover, the circulation of images is instantaneous and chaotic. The ease with which some image or table you’ve published can be disengaged from its original context and remixed onto something else altogether is an alarming fact of life in a networked age. Again, the question is: how can you avoid networked anthropology?

Given that one of our hopes in ethnographic research is to communicate with people and even to make a difference in the ways things work, perhaps the better question is: how can I manage networked anthropology? In other words,
whether or not we think of ourselves as practicing a networked anthropology, we work in a world that is heavily networked, and becoming more so. So even if the research that we describe here is not something that you anticipate doing, the questions we ask are nevertheless the questions you should be asking about your own research.

Some central questions for networked anthropology.

1 Networked ecologies. How are people networked already? Who are the collaborators? Is the social media platform appropriate for that community? Networked anthropologists need to elicit people’s networks – both online and offline – before they develop a networked anthropology with that community. Doing this reveals structures of networks and the gaps in those networks that socially networked media might redress.

2 How do anthropologists enjoin existing networks? When we plan interventions, we do so in a crowded field of social media and representation, some of which will be familiar to our collaborators. And some of which might be objectionable for numerous reasons. People are already uploading videos, photos, and recordings of themselves and their neighbors. It’s important that we not only acknowledge these other efforts, but also incorporate both the media and the intent behind the media into our work. This is similar to the concerns all of us bring to fieldwork, but with a difference: not just when do we take out a camera, but when and where does that media get uploaded?

3 Networked publics. Who are the publics for networked media? What are the connections? The disconnections? Anthropologists and their interlocutors need to ask themselves who is supposed to see media content, and how they are supposed to respond? Will it be people from the neighborhood? Will it be potential grantors? Government agencies in a position to provide services?

4 Networked media. What kinds of media do we make? How is that serving diverse publics? Different media may be tagged differently and may move through social media in different ways.

5 How do networked media change over time? Media change as they’re networked. YouTube videos collect comments, views, subscribers, cross-posters who embed the videos on their blogs. How do we incorporate those features of social media? Ultimately, how do we treat social media as social and protean rather than fixed texts? And how can we use those characteristics to the advantage of the communities with whom we work?

6 Networked ethics. What are the ethical considerations? Undertaking a networked anthropology imbricates the fieldworker in ethical dilemmas that are unique to social media. What kinds of ethnographic data can be shared? Under what circumstances? How should you incorporate data from networked collaborations (e.g., posted comments)? How do ethical challenges arise or change over the course of a social media project? What restrictions need to be placed on networked data? If creative commons licenses are used, what limits should be placed on these? Can people change content for their own purposes? Can they sell it?
**Who is this book for?**

We have written *Networked Anthropology* with multiple audiences in mind – faculty, students and practitioners – and, to accommodate different needs and interests, we’ve included different materials. First, there are theoretical chapters that ground the practice of networked anthropology in historic anthropological antecedents (however sublimated in hagiographies of anthropological theory) while at the same time engaging recent developments in visual anthropology, the anthropology of media and digital anthropology. There is always value in looking to our predecessors, and we believe that networked anthropology harkens back to a “road not taken,” one that offers some distinct advantages in a networked age. Second, there are chapters that center on practice: here, we mean methods that we’ve explored through networked anthropology and case study examples that show the way these methods have been negotiated on the ground through long-term collaborations.

Our hope is that these chapters provide some recognition in our colleagues that they’ve been doing networked ethnography all along, but haven’t really paused to think about what that means. Over the past few years, we’ve communicated with dozens of colleagues who have been doing a de facto networked anthropology in their communities, without ever having planned it. Instead, little by little, as part of their collaboration, and sometimes against their ethnographic judgment, our anthropological colleagues have found themselves working on websites, embedding videos, setting up twitter accounts. In part, we write this book to recognize their efforts. In addition, we acknowledge the non-linear nature of the work; part of the wonderful (or annoying) part of networked anthropology is the unpredictability of the enterprise. Even though – as anthropologists – we welcome the emergence of new ideas and new connections that comes with the process of ethnographic discovery, and we know that fieldwork is wonderfully unpredictable, still we know from personal experience that the growth of social media has meant a concomitant loss of control that has placed us in uncomfortable situations.

Accordingly, we’ve included an ethics chapter that has strong elements of both theory and practice; one of our central arguments here is that “ethics” cannot be neatly pared away from anthropology. If anthropology is at the outset, as Peter Pels has characterized, a “duplex” method, then we have to recognize that it is always already an ethical practice (even if we find the ethics of our historic forbears abhorrent) (Pels 1999).

Finally, we include a range of “activities” that we hope will be of special interest to instructors and students. These are descriptions of networked anthropology that stand by themselves and serve to illustrate many of the ideas here with concrete examples. But they could also be classroom activities that could each take up to a week of class-time to explain and utilize. Regardless of how you use them, the activities form the building blocks of our networked anthropology. But they don’t cover every stage of the ethnographic research; for these, readers are advised to consider one of many, many texts in ethnographic
methods that have appeared over the last fifteen years. Given the heterogeneous materials and the different publics to whom we’re writing, it seems axiomatic that readers should be free to ride roughshod all over the order we’ve imposed on these chapters, and to use them in whatever order, and to whatever extent, they would like.

Other resources

Since we are essentially talking about mediums that exist beyond this book there is an accompanying website to this project found at networkedanthropology.com. (See Figure 0.2.) This is not one of the curricular websites that accompany textbooks and provide test banks and other supplementary materials. It is a space where we solicit feedback from other practitioners as well as continue to theorize and discuss different aspects of a networked anthropology and the tools we are using lest we fall by the wayside of static technologies: the magic of the CD-ROM anyone? Hence, you will find references to different ICT and SNS platforms in this book but we steer away from specific technology naming found too often in visual methods books that are frozen upon their publication. Our hope is that linking to our website whilst you read this book connects you to our networked anthropology and continues to expand upon it. Or, as our guiding influence Jean Rouch might desire, it may provide the means of building a bridge and then coming back and blowing it up.

Figure 0.2 Screenshot of our networked anthropology site (networkedanthropology.com)
References


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