

# Public Anthropology in the Digital Era

ANTONIO DE LAURI<sup>1</sup> AND KRISTIN BERGTORA SANDVIK<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Chr. Michelsen Institute, Norway

<sup>2</sup>University of Oslo and Peace Research Institute Oslo, Norway

The public anthropologist grapples with not one but many overlapping digital transformations. The digital turn shapes the social fields with which the anthropologist engages; the political opportunities and risks arising from the engagement of the public anthropologist; and the methodological approach of the public anthropologist as they access, produce, and disseminate knowledge.

Public anthropology refers to the potential—and to some extent the duty—of anthropology to effectively address and communicate, via a variety of media, key societal issues from an ethnographic perspective. This entry examines how digital transformations, as processes of social change, bring new opportunities and challenges for the public anthropologist. Public anthropology emphasizes the anthropologist's role as an engaged intellectual and an ethnographic witness, committed to reframing the terms of public debates and fostering social and political change that benefits others, especially those with whom anthropologists work (De Lauri and Borofsky 2019). Debates about the public dimension of anthropology have been salient across different periods of the discipline's history and, in the past few decades, have sparked discussions ranging from militant anthropology (Scheper-Hughes 1995) to prudent skepticism regarding a certain degree of inward attitude (i.e., the tendency to write mainly for other anthropologists). There is no univocal definition of public anthropology, no univocal profile of the public anthropologist. The difficulty in establishing an agreed-upon definition suggests that public anthropology might be considered as a process more than a clear concept, a collective aspiration shaped by generally shared values and intentions within significant sections of the discipline (De Lauri and Borofsky 2019). Digital transformations influence the modalities of interaction, knowledge production, and dissemination in the field of social and cultural anthropology, thus expanding the capacity of public anthropology in terms of both possibilities and risks.

## Digital tools and transformation

Digital tools, broadly defined, refer to a variety of elements including electronic devices; systems and resources that generate, store, or process data; computing platforms; electronic hardware and software; and programs. In a digital transformation, the integration of information communication technologies (ICTs) within an organization, a social group, or a social field more broadly transform how groups and individuals operate, struggle over resources (and also what they consider to be resources), and

*The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Edited by Hilary Callan and Simon Coleman.

© 2021 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Published 2021 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

DOI: 10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea2505

achieve their objectives. This also includes processes of digitization (the conversion, articulation, and management of historically analog information and processes) and datafication (through the conversion and articulation of information, concepts, processes, or systems in mathematical and machine-readable formats) (Sandvik, Jacobsen, and McDonald 2017). It also entails the rapid growth of a sprawling digital infrastructure and the rise and proliferation of a vast range of digital goods.

Whereas ethnographic research remains at the core of anthropological knowledge, doing ethnography is today an experience that is often rearticulated by digital tools. Indeed, anthropologists have the possibility of interacting with their interlocutors in a larger variety of ways and across greater geographical distances and temporalities than in the past: connections can be immediate and transnational, and the “field” can be located in one geographical space or distributed across vast expanses. Fieldwork is no longer a bounded process marked by arrival in and departure from the field. A period of field research, for example, can be preceded and followed by a number of digital interactions and exchanges (via email, virtual meetings, video calls, SMS, social media). Digital ethnography (i.e., ethnographic data collection mediated by digital tools) can also become the main methodological avenue, a feature which in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, at least in the short term, has dominated the discipline as a whole. As a consequence, anthropology is increasingly concerned with the making of human connections in cyberspace, human interactions with digital devices, the coproduction of notions of the real and the virtual, and the conditions of living in a digital culture (often referred to as digitality) (Coleman 2010; Hassan 2020; Horst and Miller 2012; Pink et al. 2016).

## **Anthropological audiences**

Digital tools and spaces bring a significant amplification of research outreach in terms of temporality (with instant interaction), geography (everywhere there’s a connected device), and forms (blogs, websites, social media, emails, online repositories, etc.). With the multiplication of ways to produce research outputs in the digital sphere, it follows a more diverse articulation of publication outlets and anthropological production. Blogging, for example, has become prominent in disseminating anthropological insights in a more accessible way (Stoller 2018), while public anthropological dissemination aims to continually and directly confront limiting cultural assumptions and kindle a deeper engagement with topical issues (Haapio-Kirk 2017). As anthropologists produce knowledge in a larger variety of contexts and formats, access to anthropological knowledge develops and diversifies in parallel, for example by reading a text on a mobile phone, listening to a podcast, or attending a virtual exhibition.

Widening audiences remains a key objective of public anthropology (De Lauri and Borofsky 2019). Many anthropologists agree that the lack of a meaningful public footprint is a problem because anthropological knowledge has an inherent capacity to add nuance to reductionist approaches and to simplistic depictions of reality. It can push

everyone to question commonsensical but ethnocentric assumptions or to debunk certain stereotypes (Pelkmans 2013).

The amplification that accompanies today's digital transformation offers opportunities to reach audiences who might previously have had limited access to anthropological insights. For instance, online magazines and journals, websites, and blogs are more immediately accessible than physical libraries, while they also provide the space—especially for young anthropologists—to easily join in important debates without necessarily having to wait for a book or a peer-reviewed article to be published. Clearly, not all these possibilities are fully used. Historically, anthropological knowledge has been predominantly disseminated in colonial languages, mainly in English, followed by French, Spanish, Portuguese, and German. Whereas digital tools may potentially facilitate multilingual dissemination, English remains the lingua franca of online anthropology and with it comes not only broad access but also a degree of standardization of the anthropological vocabulary and knowledge production.

## **Contesting power**

The issues at stake in conceptualizing public anthropology revolve around theoretical and methodological challenges and opportunities related to the role anthropologists can play in fighting injustice and inequality and promoting respect and diversity. While this is not new, specific instances of ethnographic interaction and anthropological dissemination have become prevalent in the digital era.

A recognizable feature of anthropological knowledge is the will to challenge dominant narratives, question established truths, and expose hidden realities—wherever the ethnographic research is conducted, be it a small village or a big corporation. Anthropologists have traditionally confronted what could be seen as the mainstream knowledge in a specific geographic, cultural, and historical moment, that is, a body of information and beliefs relative to a number of relevant societal issues which is shaped and controlled by those in power and which circulates consistently via multiple channels and institutions including mass media, schools, movies, books, and social media.

Informed knowledge has an intrinsic, destabilizing power. Attempts at limiting or controlling this potentially emancipatory and transformative power are a constant throughout human history. Many places in the world continue to live under authoritarian rule, where dissent is in direct antithesis to an institutional (e.g., governmental) or economic (e.g., corporate) power, which can suppress antagonism with a variety of violent tools, from intimidation to incarceration to disappearance. Indeed, many continue to pay with their lives in their struggle to expose injustices or oppose political regimes. In these situations, ethnographic witnessing and anthropological knowledge aim to be outward oriented rather than confined to small (academic) circles. This often translates into forms of engagement that take place in public arenas where informed knowledge is particularly challenged, for example on social media.

At the same time, as a do-no-harm imperative steers the anthropologists' ethical commitment toward their interlocutors, instant connectivity and global diffusion means

that anthropologists are faced with the dilemma of challenging power while maintaining the security, integrity, and wellbeing of their interlocutors. Sometimes this concerns disclosure of particular facts; at other times it entails the loss of control of how written and visual material is manipulated and circulated, for example through deepfake technology or conspiracy websites. The safeguarding of interlocutors is a dual challenge in the digital realm as it implies both keeping physical bodies safe by not compromising them as well as keeping digital bodies (Lupton 2017) and personal information safe against cyber security threats, misuse, and manipulation.

## **Co-construction and empowerment**

Among the important roles of the public anthropologist is that of facilitator of knowledge production and public testimonies. The notion that the anthropologist legitimately speaks on behalf of a vulnerable or silenced group remains contested (De Lauri 2014), and the concept of giving voice has problematic trajectories in public anthropology with respect to representation, authenticity, and diversity (Hastrup 1993; James 2007). As reflected by the plea to “stop stealing our stories” (Pittaway, Bartolomei, and Hugman 2010), knowledge production may rest on deeply extractive premises. At the same time, practices of witnessing and testimonials continue to be central to a sort of historically shaped moral compass of the discipline. Involved in this witnessing is the commitment to convey depth of feeling, emotion, passion, trauma, and loss, as well as political analysis and claims (Stephen 2017). Relatedly, a frequent topic in public anthropology is the role of the anthropologist as expert witness (e.g., in the asylum context), and the commodification and instrumentalization of ethnographic knowledge—and the risk of this knowledge being dismissed as anecdotal and lacking in rigor—vis-à-vis experts drawing on quantitative knowledge.

Digital transformations shift the parameters of these engagements. As a process, public anthropology in the digital sphere interacts with converging global trends such as the rise of social (viral) media, the consolidation of digital activism (epitomized by phenomena such as Anonymous, Wikileaks, the Occupy movement, etc.), and the digitization of public spaces (Postill 2015). However, the digital turn also shifts the sites of dialogue in radical ways, and conversations that used to be disciplinary are now inherently disposed to spill over into the general public. While this development—where anthropologists may be challenged by their interlocutors at any time—destabilizes the power and legitimacy of the expert voice, it also enriches dialogue. Collaborative knowledge practices, including the collecting, analyzing, and sharing of information, may be enhanced by digital possibilities (Sanjek and Tratner 2016), although they remain imbricated into a larger and ambivalent decentralizing knowledge’s approach whereby collaboration can be the site of empowerment but also the terrain of governance. This is clear as we see an increasing number of government agencies, research and funding institutions, international organizations, and humanitarian actors promoting participatory methods to further their own agendas (Kennemore and Postero 2021).

## Technological colonialism and surveillance

Beyond the methodological challenges presented by the digital turn, public anthropologists must also grapple with the political economy of their participation as knowledge producers in the global digital commons. While anthropology is generally uneasy about totalizing claims of technological determinism, be that of a dismissive or a utopist nature, the emergence of societal discontent around the power and practices of technology giants and the increasing feudalism of data governance point to new challenges facing public anthropologists in the global domain. While issues of complicity and appropriation are not new, the turn to Big Data, biometric surveillance, and artificial intelligence support global structures that must be examined for the power they represent.

Central to this debate are notions such as “data colonialism” (which combines the predatory extractive practices of historical colonialism with the abstract quantification methods of computing) (Couldry and Mejias 2019), “data relations” (new types of human relations which enable the extraction of data for commodification), or “surveillance capitalism” as the unilateral claiming of private human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data. Surveillance capitalism refers to a market-driven process where the commodity for sale is our personal data, and the capture and production of these data relies on mass surveillance of the internet (Zuboff 2015). This activity is often carried out by companies that provide us with free online services, such as search engines (Google) and social media platforms (Facebook). Social life all over the globe becomes an open resource for extraction that is somehow just there for capital appropriation (Couldry and Mejias 2019). These data are then computed and packaged as prediction products and sold to behavioral futures markets—business customers with a commercial interest in knowing what we will do now, soon, and later (Zuboff 2019).

The public anthropologist engages with these processes of change and contestation. Indeed, cyberspace is what Deibert and Rohozinski (2010) describe, against totalizing claims, as a site of intense competition where an ever-changing mix of opportunities and constraints for social forces and ideas is constantly re-created. In the domain of data rights activism (Segura and Waisbord 2019), for example, described as a form of digital collective action, the public anthropologist can play a role in defining new dynamics of citizenship and claims.

## Intellectual freedom

From a disciplinary perspective, and particularly from the perspective of public anthropology, the digital transformation also engenders a set of disciplinary limitations and constraints and specific dilemmas about the politics of digital representation. Most seriously, this concerns the scope of intellectual freedom. What is critical for a public anthropologist today is that, in addition to explicit silencing regimes, there are growing and more subtle dynamics affecting intellectual freedom and informed knowledge. One of these relates to the exacerbation of the politically correct, a sort of capillary ramification and expansion of the mainstream. Although, as mentioned, the

ambition of many anthropologists has been to question what is taken for granted, a certain degree of conformism is somehow part and parcel of academic history, including in anthropology. Public exposure, further enhanced by digital means, brings a broader and more pervasive connotation of conformism, which seems to have reached dogmatic levels today. A Twitter trend can have someone fired; a social media storm can destroy a career. An opinion expressed in contrast to the mainstream position can ignite public lynching instantly and everywhere. Against these trends, public anthropology must continue to assert the assumption that confronting ideological conformity is the substance of intellectual work. Of course, while the modalities through which the space of intellectual freedom is shrinking operate today in different ways than in the past (and crucially relevant here is the role of social media and the changes in ICTs), their origins go deep. Issues such as “cancel culture” are widely debated and polarizing: some believe cancel culture to be part of a simplistic historical revisionism while others see the label itself as a weapon for privileged anthropologists. This poses public anthropologists with an open dilemma as they navigate between intellectual and academic freedom on the one side and historical responsibility and awareness on the other. The discipline still has a great deal of work to do on representation and power—between anthropologists and communities but also, within the academic field, between differently situated academics and institutions.

## Conclusion

The digital transformation reshapes how anthropologists access, produce, and disseminate knowledge. The anthropological vocation of addressing structural violence, injustice, and inequality must be considered in relation to the digital transformation, which raises important questions for public anthropologists in regard to possibilities and risks associated with modalities of interaction with interlocutors, data collection, methodologies, collaborative approaches, and dissemination. In such a context, the role of public anthropology is crucial in accounting for the whole range of consequences and implication of digital transitions, including empowering and disempowering interlocutors and shaping specific dynamics of power.

SEE ALSO: Action Anthropology; Activism; Anthropological Knowledge and Styles of Publication; Anthropology, Public Perceptions of; Creative Commons, Open Access, Free/Libre Open-Source Software; Digital Anthropology; Digital Religion; Ethics and Morality, Anthropological Approaches to; Expert Witnesses, Anthropologists as; Fieldwork; Hacking; Literacy Practices across Cultures and Sectors; Media Anthropology; Public Anthropology; Technology; Virtual Worlds

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

---

Coleman, Gabriella. 2010. “Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39: 487–505.

- Couldry, Nick, and Ulises A. Mejias. 2019. "Data Colonialism: Rethinking Big Data's Relation to the Contemporary Subject." *Television & New Media* 20 (4): 336–49.
- De Lauri, Antonio. 2014. "Bourgeois Knowledge." *Allegra Lab*, December 13. Accessed August 11, 2021, <https://allegralaboratory.net/bourgeois-knowledge>.
- De Lauri, Antonio, and Robert Borofsky. 2019. "Public Anthropology in Changing Times." *Public Anthropologist* 1 (1): 3–19.
- Deibert, Ronald, and Rafal Rohozinski. 2010. "Liberation vs. Control: The Future of Cyberspace." *Journal of Democracy* 21 (4): 43–57.
- Haapio-Kirk, Laura. 2017. "Why We Post: Digital Methods for Public Anthropology." *Teaching Anthropology* 71: 34–44.
- Hassan, Robert. 2020. "Digitality, Virtual Reality, and the 'Empathy Machine.'" *Digital Journalism* 8 (2): 195–212.
- Hastrup, Kirsten. 1993. "The Native Voice—and the Anthropological Vision." *Social Anthropology* 1 (2): 173–86.
- Horst, Heather A., and Daniel Miller, eds. 2012. *Digital Anthropology*. London: Berg.
- James, Allison. 2007. "Giving Voice to Children's Voices: Practices and Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials." *American Anthropologist* 109 (2): 261–72.
- Kennemore, Amy, and Nancy Postero. 2021. "Collaborative Ethnographic Methods: Dismantling the 'Anthropological Broom Closet'?" *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 16 (1): 1–24.
- Lupton, Deborah. 2017. "Digital Bodies." In *Routledge Handbook of Physical Cultural Studies*, edited by Michael Silk, David Andrews, and Holly Thorpe, 200–8. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Pelkmans, Mathijs. 2013. "A Wider Audience for Anthropology? Political Dimensions of an Important Debate." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (2): 398–404.
- Pink, Sarah, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, and Jo Tacchi. 2016. *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. London: SAGE.
- Pittaway, Eileen, Linda Bartolomei, and Richard Hugman. 2010. "'Stop Stealing Our Stories': The Ethics of Research with Vulnerable Groups." *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 2 (2): 229–51.
- Postill, John. 2015. "Public Anthropology in Times of Media Hybridity and Global Upheaval." In *Media, Anthropology and Public Engagement*, edited by Sarah Pink and Simone Abram, 164–81. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Sandvik, Kristin Bergtora, Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, and Sean Martin McDonald. 2017. "Do No Harm: A Taxonomy of the Challenges of Humanitarian Experimentation." *International Review of the Red Cross* 904: 319–44.
- Sanjek, Roger, and Susan W. Tratner, eds. 2016. *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology in the Digital World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 1995. "The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology." *Current Anthropology* 36 (3): 409–40.
- Segura, Maria Soledad, and Silvio Waisbord. 2019. "Between Data Capitalism and Data Citizenship." *Television & New Media* 20 (4): 412–19.
- Stephen, Lynn. 2017. "Bearing Witness: Testimony in Latin American Anthropology and Related Fields." *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 22 (1): 85–109.
- Stoller, Paul. 2018. *Adventures in Blogging: Public Anthropology and Popular Media*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. 2015. "Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization." *Journal of Information Technology* 30: 75–89.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. "High Tech Is Watching You." *Harvard Gazette*, March 4. Accessed August 11, 2021, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/03/harvard-professor-says-surveillance-capitalism-is-undermining-democracy>.