Savage Minds

Notes and Queries in Anthropology

Armchair Anthropology in the Cyber Age?

🕐 **May 19, 2005**   👤 **Kerim**

The **just-so story** we tell to all first year anthropology students is that the modern anthropology emerged largely as a result of **Malinowski's** desire to stay away from Europe during the First World War. As a result, he "discovered" the ethnographic method and "**participant observation**." While Malinowski was certainly not the first writer of ethnographies, nor even the first to get *involved* with his subjects, we can certainly give him credit for the popularization and institutionalization of this methodology. To this day, participant observation is a ritual that nearly every anthropologist must complete in order to secure a place in the discipline.

When I initially described the work I wished to do to my committee they objected that it was not "anthropological" since it was too historical or theoretical. When I pointed to successful works by anthropologists which were both historical and theoretical in focus, it was pointed out to me that these were largely *second* books. The first one is usually an ethnography. I relented and, in the end, I am happy that I undertook participant observation. While **my dissertation** did end up having a strong focus on theory and history, it would not have been the same if I hadn't spent so much time in the field, absorbing Taiwan through the pores of my skin. I'm not sure I was successful in articulating how the ethnographic process influenced the final work, but there is no doubt in my mind that it was absolutely essential.

It is largely for this reason that I head back to Taiwan next week. As I figure out how to proceed with publications, post-doctorate applications, and my career, I don't feel I can do this in the vacuum of my own own home – even with the internet. Face-to-face interaction does bring something intangible. I'm not sure what it is. Perhaps it is simply all the down-time. On the internet you only pay attention to what you *want* to pay attention to. I'm even pretty effective at eliminating any annoyances from SPAM or internet ads. While I do have e-mail and voice-chat with friends from Taiwan, when you sit with someone in a cafe drinking bubble tea, or in a restaurant drinking Taiwan Beer, things happen that are random and unexpected. All those **off-stage actions** we usually ignore, and which we can filter out on the web, suddenly grab our attention. And there is the powerful force of serendipity, making unexpected connections for us which can only be discovered "in the field."

And yet … And yet the web is changing. **Folksonomy** is creating new forms of serendipity. Video chat is leaking us more off-stage information. And the ubiquitous presence of wireless and broadband access is perhaps even giving us more opportunity for down-time observation.

But, and I always seem to get to my point late in the game, I think the web is going to change anthropology in another way. I predict that we will slowly see the return of the "armchair anthropologists" Malinowski so famously dethroned. Armchair anthropology was a colonial endeavor. Missionaries and colonial officers collected data in the field (often following manuals detailing how such data should be gathered), and scholars back in England compared and collected this data from all over the empire. Such broad synthetic studies are largely out of favor in Anthropology today (as came up in the **comments** to my last post). Sure, there are a few people, like **Jack Goody**, but they are largely exceptions.

I predict that will change.

For one thing, the web offers a tremendous, and ever growing database of lived

experience. One need only look at the ways in which Google has already been **leveraged by linguists** to study language change. This past semester I had my students **use Flickr as a source of ethnographic data** for one of their papers. As more and more of people's lives are lived online, it will become possible to not only conduct cyberethnographies of online communities, but leverage the power of social tagging, Google, and other such tools to conduct broad synthetic studies of the kind anthropologists have not done in some time.

The problem, of course, is the tremendous **digital divide**. Anthropology is no longer a discipline that only focuses on "those people," the traditional subjects of colonial inquiry, and yet anthropologists are more aware than most of the importance of not excluding huge swaths of humanity from our analysis.

It is here that the work of **Ethan Zuckerman** enters the picture. He has been working hard to encourage blogging in developing nations. Ethan argues that "**bridge bloggers**" (a term coined by **Hossein Derakhshan**) can cross linguistic, cultural, and digital divides, and has set up **several projects** to do just that.

One of these projects is the **Global Voices Aggregator**, a public bloglines reading list of blogs from around the world. (Ethan is working on a **high-powered replacement** which can handle the huge number of feeds.) As Ethan **points out** that there is hardly a region of the world where there isn't *somebody* blogging.

> In other countries, where blogging is less widespread, we sometimes discover that there are only one or two bloggers talking about the country. Sometimes that person is an expatriate aid worker, like **Yvette Lopez in Somaliland**. Other times it's a non-resident expert, like Nathan Hamm of **Registan.net**. A Peace Corps volunteer in Uzbekistan until 9/11, Nate speaks Uzbek and Russian and is able to contextualize and translate events in Central Asia for a global audience.

These accounts are important – but they are perhaps not yet the stuff of

anthropology. Many of them are focused on news, politics, human rights, and other pressing matters, but do not necessarily provide the kind of data which would be necessary for a modern day armchair anthropologist. However, if someone were really motivated to do a massive synthetic study collecting data from around the world, these bridge bloggers could function in much the same way as nineteenth century missionaries did for the first anthropologists.

I know putting it that way sends chills up the spines of most anthropologists, but I am not proposing a colonial endeavor. I'm not proposing anything in fact. I'm just pointing out that the capabilities exist to do this kind of study, and predicting that anthropologists will eventually figure out how to make use of it. I'm also hopeful that the de-centered nature of modern networks will mean that such future studies are conducted in an open and transparent way.

I'm off to Taiwan next week for some important face-to-face time with my friends, contacts, and informants. I don't think ethnography is dead. But I do think that Anthropology will change yet again, and armchair research will not be disparaged as much as it once was.

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May 19, 2005 at 7:44 pm

goesh

There is something to be said for real time observations as they are happening with people, free from some bias in a sense that the reporting source may not have any expectations of what viewers would want, on the other hand, ignoring things that would be of key interest to Anthropologists. I guess it is a sort of two way street, but certainly no threat to your profession, just as bloggers are not going to be the death knell for mainstream media.

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