The Center Cannot Hold: Perils and Promises of a Global Online Anthropology

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Work in Progress

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Abstract

New media offer up the promise of a global dialog between the writers, readers and subjects of anthropology; however, the reality of online social media has shown that there are perils as well. This paper will explore three models of online collaborative authorship with an eye to the potentials and limitations of each for opening up such dialog. First, exploring the reuse of images on Flickr, I ask whether we should allow the text, sound, and images we've collected in the field to be remixed in new and imaginative ways, or does our moral obligation to our informants require us to restrict how they are used? Second, looking at Wikipedia, I ask whether anthropologists trust the "wisdom of the crowd," or is enthnocentric bias even harder to address when we relinquish authorial control? And third, I explore international blogs to ask if our online efforts merely replicate the existing hierarchical relationships between national anthropologies, or can we draw on lessons from existing global online communities to reshape the boundaries of our discipline? In answering these questions, specific attention will be paid to attempts by scholars to extend existing institutional, commercial and legal regimes to these new online fora.

Turnbull's Typewriter

James Clifford, in his introduction to *Writing Culture*, wrote:

> Participant observation, the classic formula for ethnographic work, leaves little room for texts. But still, somewhere lost in his account of fieldwork among the Mbuti pygmies – running along jungle paths, sitting up at night singing, sleeping in a crowded leaf hut – Colin Turnbull mentions that he lugged around a typewriter. (Clifford 1986, 1)

Turnbull's offhand mention of his typewriter highlights how "marginal" the act of writing was for his self-image as an anthropologist; but by the mid-eighties, Clifford tells us, writing had already "emerged as central to what anthropologists do both in the field and thereafter" (2). *Writing Culture* is often seen as heralding anthropology's "literary turn" (Scholte 1987) but Clifford was at pains to clarify that his focus on writing was not a call for "a 'literary' approach" to anthropology, but rather a focus on writing as a process (Clifford 1986, 4). By emphasizing writing as a process which must be examined contextually, rhetorically, institutionally, generically, politically, and historically, Clifford argued that the present marked a "post-literary" moment in anthropology (5).

In this paper I wish to embrace this notion of a post-literary anthropology, and in doing so re-imagine these issues in light of the current moment. Implicit in Clifford's image of Turnbull's typewriter are a whole host of assumptions about the possibilities and limits of a post-literary anthropology - assumptions which may have been true at the time, but are not necessarily true in the age of the Internet. Today few anthropologists are likely to go to the field with a Typewriter. Instead they will be cary around a laptop computer, and even if they don't have access to the Internet at their field site, they will likely have it at a nearby Internet café. While online they can blog about their research, share photos with their friends and family, video conference with their advisor, and even, as Tom Boellstorff did, participate in virtual worlds (Boellstorff 2008). The people studied by anthropologists also have increased access to the internet and may be more sophisticated users of specific online tools than the ethnographer herself. Or even, as in in Boellstoff's work, may only meaningfully exist as a community in terms of such online tools.

For these reasons, I wish to move beyond the focus on alternative readings of traditional ethnography and experimental forms of writing ethnography that so dominated Clifford's earlier essay "On Ethnographic Authority" (Clifford 1983) and which (correctly or not) so colored the responses to *Writing Culture*. I wish instead to embrace Clifford's post-literary focus on process and institutions. It is precisely such a post-literary approach which can best enable us to make sense of the impact of these technological changes upon our discipline.

In doing so I am greatly influenced by F. Niyi Akinnaso's work on the similarities and differences between orality and literacy. Akinnaso rejected the simple binary opposition posited in earlier debates on literacy and instead argued that discourse in both mediums can be placed along a sliding scale with formal discourse at one end and informal discourse at the other (Akinnaso 1985, 329). Akinnaso does not shy away from discussing the role of literacy in facilitating various institutional changes in the production of knowledge, but the empahsis is on the word "facilitating" which is quite different from a theory of causation (Akinnaso 1991, 75). As Akinnaso points out, some of the institutions associated with literacy, such as formal schooling, can be found in nonliterate societies (Akinnaso 1992). But to say that literacy is not necessary for the development of such institutions is not the same thing as saying that literacy does not play an important role in their development. The facilitating approach acknowledges the importance of literacy in the promotion and widespread dissemination of such institutions. Moreover, this focus on institutions and social processes leads to the interesting discovery that "It is not only the literate whose consciousness is impacted by literacy. Nonliterates are also affected" (Akinnaso 1991, 93).

Accordingly, a post-literary approach to the role of new technology in anthropological practices needs to look at those institutions and social processes which might have existed before the advent of the internet, but which were accentuated and spread by such new technology. And, at the same time, such and approach must also look at the ways in which such new technologies are affecting even those people who may not be regular users of these technologies. If news of an earthquake or a revolution spreads faster because of Twitter, it is enough to know someone in your social network who uses Twitter to benefit from the new information flows. As Clay Shirky explains in his book *Here Comes Everybody*

"Communications tools don't get socially interesting until they get technologically boring" (Shirky 2008, 105). It is precisely because we are at such a "boring" moment that it behooves us to look at the impact of such technology for our profession.

Shirky's book also gives us some important clues as to what social changes are being facilitated by this new technology. Shirky argues that the social hierarchies we associate with large modern corporations emerged as a way to reduce the complexity of large-scale social action. The structure of such hierarchies is reproduced in a typical "org chart": "an inverted tree of boxes and arrows" with lines connecting the "head of the organization" at the top with the various layers of management and workers down below (39). Shirky tells us that such structures emerged with the rise of large railroads in the mid 1800s, spanning the width of the United States. Whereas "a small railroad could function with ad hoc management," large-scale networks saw their "management challenges grow faster than organizational size" resulting in unfortunate accidents (41). The creation of large management bureaucracies reduced the "transaction costs of running a railroad" by clarifying chains of command and areas of responsibility (42). However, while businesses profit and remain competitive by making small reductions in transaction costs, the necessity of such large management bureaucracies makes it unprofitable to use the power of such structures for activities which generate little profit (46). Traditionally only very strong bonds, such as those of family, church, political ideology, etc. could motivate people to overcome the difficulty of organizing collective action, but Shirky argues that, by reducing the transaction costs to close to zero, the internet makes such social action trivially easy, even for "loosely structured groups, operating without managerial direction and outside the profit motive" (47).

Shirky suggests an ascending scale, or ladder, of group action facilitated by online social tools, ordered in terms of increasing difficulty: "sharing, cooperation, and collective action" (49). Each step up the ladder requires exponentially more effort on the behalf of the participants. Forwarding a joke via e-mail is a good example of sharing. New social tools improve upon this by being able to aggregate millions of individual acts of sharing, whether it is photos, links, or movie ratings, and delivering them back to users in a structured format. In fact, as Shirky points out, Google works by ranking "the linking preferences hundreds of millions of internet users" (49). Cooperation involves more work as it requires people to coordinate their actions with other users. Wikipedia is famously a collaborative endeavor, although (as we will see) not all users contribute to an equal degree. Finally there is collective action. This is particularly difficult because it requires that even those who might be unhappy with some group decisions to remain committed to the goals and activities of the group as a whole, and to take personal action to further those goals (53). The Obama campaign famously made excellent use of online social networks to run its get-out-the-vote phone banks during the 2008 election.

The ability of online tools to facilitate group action is important for anthropology because collaboration has been one of the central concerns of the discipline since *Writing Culture* came out over twenty years ago. If online tools can facilitate such collaboration — among anthropologists and between anthropologists and their informants — then we need to carefully explore what such collaboration must look like. One of the strongest statements regarding the moral imperative for a more collaborative approach to anthropology which emerged in the eighties and nineties was that made by the 2002 El Dorado Task Force assembled by the American Anthropological Association in response to the Tierney affair (American Anthropological Association 2002). Although not universally endorsed, I believe this statement accurately describes the spirit of the times:

> The El Dorado Task Force insists that the anthropology of indigenous peoples and related communities must move toward "collaborative" models, in which anthropological research is not merely combined with advocacy, but inherently advocative in that research is, from its outset, aimed at material, symbolic, and political benefits for the research population, as its members have helped to define these.... Collaborative research involves the side-by-side work of all parties in a mutually beneficial research program. All parties are equal partners in the enterprise, participating in the development of the research design and in other major aspects of the program as well, working together toward a common goal. Collaborative research involves more than "giving back" in the form of advocacy and attention to social needs. Only in the collaborative model is there a full give and take, where at every step of the research knowledge and expertise is shared. (from Lassiter et al. 2005)

But the difficulty of producing truly "dialogic" texts (as called for by the Task Force) is something which should not be underestimated. Focusing on collaborative forms in documentary film, Jay Ruby wrote:

> Advice, consent and cooperation are necessary but not sufficient when dealing with the potential for exploitation. ... While a multivocal approach to the documentary does empower subjects, it will not absolve the filmmaker form the ethical and intellectual responsibility for the film. (Ruby 1991, 55-56)

This was published in 1991. At that time it was not unfair to say that "linguistic, religious, ethnic or sexual minorities" were either symbolically annihilated by the television industry, or else "mainstreamed" by giving "the appearance of minority representation without seriously challenging anything" (61). While the same is true of the mainstream media today, 1991 marks the emergence of the World Wide Web (Wikipedia contributors 2009), a tool which would challenge some of the very assumptions about collaboration and mainstream media responsible for Ruby's cynicism. But what of Ruby's central point, about the ultimate ethical responsibility of the filmmaker or anthropologist? Have new tools for collaboration and dissemination also challenged the way we think about anthropological ethics?

Because online collaboration is still emergent in the field of anthropology, I draw upon three examples of sharing and collaboration already in wide use on the internet. Online sharing and collaboration raise unique problems for anthropologists and their subjects, and in some cases interesting solutions have already been presented. First, exploring the sharing of images on Flickr, I ask whether we should allow the text, sound, and images we’ve collected in the field to be remixed in new and imaginative ways, or does our moral obligation to our informants require us to restrict how they are used? Second, looking at cooperation on Wikipedia, I ask whether anthropologists trust the “wisdom of the crowd,” or is enthnocentric bias even harder to address when we relinquish authorial control? Third, I explore how the web might be affecting the institutional boundaries of our discipline by asking whether our online efforts merely replicate the existing hierarchical relationships between national anthropologies, or can we draw on lessons from existing global online communities to reshape the boundaries of our discipline? In answering these questions, specific attention will be paid to attempts by scholars to extend existing institutional, commercial and legal regimes to these new online fora.

The Image Ethics of Flickr

Nicolas Peterson's essay on "The Changing Photographic Contract" highlights the shifting relationship between anthropologists and Australia's Aboriginal community (Peterson 2003). He gives the example of a 1970 paper by Catherine Ellis which includes photographs from women's ceremonies "each of which has printed on the actual image a copyright symbol and the sentence, 'The taking of even one copy of this photograph is strictly forbidden'" (133). This is striking for its effort to limit further circulation of the images, even after they have been published in a journal. As Peterson points out, the author clearly understands Aboriginal concerns, yet feels "the advancement of knowledge, and possibly of career, still justified their inclusion" (134). Even more striking is the note which appears at the end of the article: "ATTENTION FIELD WORKERS: Great offence can be caused if this material is shown to tribal Aboriginal people. The author strongly requests in the interests of further research that this not be done" (134). Whatever her motivations, the effectiveness of Ellis' approach depends on two crucial assumptions: first, that the Aboriginal population would not themselves be readers of the journal, and second, that printing in an obscure academic journal would make further circulation of these images unlikely. Neither of these assumptions hold in the present age, when Aboriginal students are increasingly likely to be wondering the university stacks, and when digital reproduction of journals (and the images therein) makes the "long tail" no longer obscure or difficult to find.

A cartoon on the Joy of Tech website depicts people gathering around for a picture at an office party [image 1], but before the picture is taken one man holds up a sheet of paper and says: "Not so fast! First you have to sign this agreement stating that you will not, under any circumstances, publish this photo on the internet ... including blogs, Facebook, MySpace, or Flickr without my written consent" (Joy of Tech 2008). This cartoon shows how far the landscape has changed since the publication of the book Image Ethics in 1988 (Gross, Katz and Ruby 1988a). Already at that time there was an awareness of the conflict between the ubiquity of photography among the population of more developed countries and the importance attached to "freedom of expression" even if tempered by the "right to privacy" (Gross, Katz and Ruby 1988b). Since then the spread of cell phone cameras among people in the developing country has greatly altered attitudes towards photography, but the rise of Web 2.0 photo sharing sites, as well as the "free culture" movement, have led to a new divide: between those who feel comfortable widely distributing pictures of everyone they meet, and those who wish to continue to control or limit the distribution of certain images, as Ellis attempted in her 1970 paper.

The free culture movement arose in reaction to corporate attempts to limit what users can do with knowledge they acquire online, whether through legal means, such as copyright, or even through technical limitations imposed upon the media, such as Digital Rights Management (DRM) (Lessig 2005). This movement was itself strongly influenced by the Open Source software movement, which advocates the public sharing and reuse of software code (Kelty 2008). In an effort to encourage greater sharing of culture the website Creative Commons was developed; "Its aim is to build a layer of reasonable copyright ... making it easy for people to build upon other people's work" (Lessig 2005, 282). The photo sharing website Flickr has built into its software the ability to automatically assign a creative commons license to your photographs. You can choose the exact permissions you wish to grant other users, including the ability to use with attribution or to even to create new original works using your photographs as source material. Needless to say, anthropologists and communities which wish to exert greater control over the context in which images are reproduced are bound to run into a culture clash with an online community which encourages the create repurposing of existing images. Enforcement is also an issue, as even images posted with more restrictive copyright are still likely to get appropriated without the author or subject's consent. In a global internet it is unlikely many ordinary users will have the means to pursue those who violate their copyright with more than an angry e-mail.

One interesting project which seeks to find a balance between openness and Aboriginal sensibilities is the Murkutu Archive created by the Warumungu community in Tennant Creek, N.T. Australia in collaboration with researchers Kimberly Christen, Craig Dietrich, Chris Cooney, and Tim Dietrich (Murkurtu 2008). Here is how the archive describes its goals:

> The archive, like the dilly bag, is not meant to close off or hide knowledge. The archive uses Warumungu cultural protocols to facilitate access to content. In doing so,

> the archive mirrors a system of accountability in which many people engage in the responsible reproduction and transmission of cultural knowledge and materials. (Murkutu 2008).

Community members using the archive fill out a user profile, "This information (gender, mother's/father's family and country, community status-elder, community member, child) then sets the parameters for what one will be able to access when they login to the archive" (Christen 2007). Because the site understands Warumungu cultural protocols, any community member using the site need not worry that they will be subject to images they should not see otherwise. Like Wikipedia archive is an example of what Chris Kelty refers to as a "recursive community" (Kelty 2008) or a community whose rules for interacting online are encoded into software by the members of that community. In this case, in consultation with anthropologists and software engineers committed to respecting the local culture.

Wikipedia's User Elite

Despite the considerable derision it has evoked, Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia written by volunteers, has been a tremendous success. "Tens of millions of people visit Wikipedia every day, making it one of the world's most popular sites" (Sunstein 2006, 150). It far exceeds the Encyclopedia Britannica in terms of the number of topics it covers, and while it is true that "you can easily find articles that are thin or amateurish or that contain significant omissions and errors," there is actually a tremendous amount of very well written, detailed, accurate high quality articles (151). How does it manage to work so well? For one thing, even though thousands of people are making small contributions, with "more than seven hundred articles ... added every day," a small cadre of volunteer editors spend a tremendous amount of time monitoring and editing those user contributions: "For the English edition, over half the edits are done by 0.7 percent of all users – a mere 524 people" (152). This Wikipedia elite, however, focuses mostly on issues of formatting, citations, vandalism, etc. not so much on the actual accuracy or content of the articles, which seems to depend largely upon the dedication of individual volunteers who adopt a few articles or topics about which they are particularly knowledgeable, or care about enough to research deeply.

This ad-hock system has had growing pains over time. Back in the old days, when Wikipedia was new, there were just a handful of rules, and one of the key ones was “Ignore all rules.” Or, more specifically: "If a rule prevents you from working with others to improve or maintain Wikipedia, ignore it" (Wikipedia, 2008). Wikipedia has changed a lot since then. Andrew Lih recounted his efforts to understand why a new article was rejected from Wikipedia. An hour after posting the article was removed with a "speedy delete" notice which read:

> This page may meet Wikipedia’s criteria for speedy deletion. The given reason is: It is a very short article providing little or no context (CSD A1), contains no content whatsoever (CSD A3), consists only of links elsewhere (CSD A3) or a rephrasing of the title (CSD A3). Speedy concern: It is a very short article providing little or no context (CSD A1), contains no content whatsoever (CSD A3), consists only of links elsewhere (CSD A3) or a rephrasing of the title (CSD A3). If this page does not meet the criteria for speedy deletion, or you intend to fix it, please remove this notice, but do not remove this notice from pages that you have created yourself. (Lih, 2007)

So we’ve gone from the days when people were encouraged to create stub articles just to mark a subject as worthy of further work, to the automatic deletion of articles based upon a lengthy list of criteria for speedy deletion, each marked with its own code number. This bureaucratization of Wikipedia has made amateur participation a little more complicated, but why the monthly rate of growth peaked in late 2006, the total number of articles on the English language website continues to grow exponentially (Wikipedia 2008). This change, however, may simply reflect the increasingly refined nature of the changes to each article as focus shifts from adding new topics to editing and expanding existing content.

Another problem faced by Wikipedia is that of systematic bias. As blogger Ethan Zuckerman wrote: "It's got a problem common to almost all peer production projects: people work on what they want to work on" (Zuckerman 2004). Since "Most of the people who work on Wikipedia are white male technocrats from the US and Europe" Wikipedia tends to reflect the interests specific to such a population: "technology, science fiction, libertarianism, life in the US/Europe" and so on (Zuckerman 2004). The impact of such systematic bias can be seen by searching through subjects related to Japanese anime and comparing the length and breadth of topics to those related to African literature. There have, however, been efforts to combat systematic bias in Wikipedia, such as through the WikiProject Countering Systematic Bias which seeks to draw attention to topics and articles currently undeserved by the Wikipedia community (Wikipedia 2008). What is less well understood is the extent to which, if any, Wikipedia's emphasis on a "neutral point of view" leads to an inherently Eurocentric bias in the actual content of articles about ethnic minorities and communities living in the developing world, where there are less likely to be members of those communities actively monitoring how they are represented on Wikipedia.

Online collaborative authorship seems like the holy grail of those who began experimenting with multivocal ethnography in the eighties, but the lessons of Wikipedia should give us pause. Just as Jay Ruby noted with ethnographic film, it seems that a certain degree of training is required to be able to be an active participant in a complex online community such as Wikipedia - especially as the community evolves and becomes increasingly bureaucratic. Those who have the time and energy to invest in such communities are more likely to be privileged males from the more developed countries. While there are examples of such tools being used as a technique of collaboration among anthropologists themselves (Kelty et al. 2008), it seems likely to only be suitable for collaborating with informants under certain conditions: the informants are already web savvy, the anthropologist trains the informants as part of the collaboration, and/or the collaborative forum is restricted to registered members of a particular community to ensure a degree of community control.

Birds of a Feather: Blogs and Social Networks

Insofar as anthropologists wish to foster a truly global dialog which doesn't privilege North American and European institutions and cultures, they are likely to find that the new world of user-generated content offers new obstacles. Specifically, that of "homophily" or the "principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people" (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 2001). As Cass Sunstein puts it, "Because of the possibility of personalization, people can construct 'profiles' that include what they accept and exclude what they reject. The extent that this happened, polarization is all the more probable, as like-minded people sort themselves in virtual communities that seem comfortable and comforting" (Sunstein 2006, 97). Thus the very tools which make it so much easier for alternative voices to be heard on the internet also make it easier for people to filter those voices out. It is a far cry from Anderson's "imagined community" who discover themselves through the shared experience of reading the same daily newspaper (Anderson 1991) to the "Daily Me" described by Sunstein (who gets it, in turn, from Marshall McLuhann). Numerous studies have shown the effects of such self segregation, from patterns of book ordering on Amazon.com to who friends whom on various social networks, even the very choice of social networks people are likely to choose. These effects are magnified on the global scale by national preferences for various social networks, as well as linguistic divisions. Even more pressing is the continued digital divide. There is a divide both between those who are connected to the internet and those who are not, as well as a divide among the connected between those who have access to fast and easy always-on broadband connections and those who can only afford to get online long enough to send an e-mail via dial-up.

To the extent that Anthropologists wish to work as both advocates and interlocutors for the communities they study, and to the extent that these communities remain those without a large presence in the online world, anthropologists need to find a way to amplify the message of these under serviced communities. One project which has done a great job of doing just that is Global Voices Online, a project of Harvard's Berkman Center: "Global Voices seeks to aggregate, curate, and amplify the global conversation online - shining light on places and people other media often ignore. We work to develop tools, institutions and relationships that will help all voices, everywhere, to be heard" (Global Voices Online, 2008). They do this with the help of an international team of volunteer authors, bloggers and translators. By aggregating, translating, and highlighting stories from around the world, Global Voices helps amplify these voices among the deafening internet buzz. In addition, through their Rising Voices program, they also do outreach with citizen journalists and media activists around the world to ensure that under serviced communities have a voice. Anthropologists should be taking the lead in projects like this, as our unique training allows us to help the communities we study communicate their concerns to the rest of the world. In addition, similar projects could help highlight anthropological work being done around the world by various national anthropology programs.

Conclusion

Concerns over the ethical dilemmas involved in producing knowledge about the “other” have, in the past few decades, radically changed how anthropologists conduct research and write ethnographies. Unfortunately, they have not changed how we publish. While it is true that many anthropology journals never recoup their publication costs, the system of barriers which serve to protect their meager revenue comes at the expense of accessibility. These barriers make it all but impossible for those outside of well-endowed academic institutions to access that knowledge, undermining the lofty goals of producing a “shared anthropology.” This paper has discussed some of the new ways in which the internet opens up new possibilities for online collaboration, as well as some of the new hurdles with which we are now presented. By way of conclusion I'd like to end with a discussion of some of the institutional hurdles we face in moving anthropology online; namely, the reliance on traditional publishing models which recoup costs by restricting access and charging users to read what we write.

Open Access is an alternative publishing model in which costs are recouped up front and access is made free. While anthropology journals are often made available online by non-profit institutions who make these journals available to universities in developing countries at a discount, the fact that they are not free means that the vast majority of the world's population, many of whom can barely afford the cost of internet access, not to mention the per-article fees that these institutions charge, do not have access to what anthropologists write about them. So even as new technologies provide greater opportunities for collaboration, the core texts of our discipline are withheld from those with whom we proclaim our desire to collaborate.

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Appendix: From the Savage Minds Blog: http://savageminds.org/

Anthropology 2.0: For Real?

by Kerim on June 27th, 2009

In Clay Shirky’s book *Here Comes Everybody* he says that “Communications tools don’t get socially interesting until they get technologically boring.” The problem for those of us who are early adopters of new communications tools is that we get caught up in the excitement of new possibilities and lack the patience it requires to wait for the potential to be realized. I remember hooking up my Mac+ to a New York City node of France’s Minitel network via a 300 baud modem sometime in the late 1980s. I could see the possibility, but as late as the mid nineties I still faced angry looks from students when I told them they needed to sign up for an e-mail account if they took my class. Sometimes we forget how unnecessarily complicated all this seems to most people. Especially anthropologists. I have been blogging for nearly eight years now, but it seems like it is only in the past year that I suddenly stopped being able to keep track of every new anthropology blog out there. E-mail is now boring, as are blogging and the social web. And that’s exciting, because it means things are just getting started!

The evidence? If you haven’t already, take a look at the Open Anthropology Cooperative. Back in May I wrote yet-another-post complaining about how the AAA relied upon poorly made user surveys instead of proper qualitative research, or genuine bottom-up democratic decision making. That sparked an interesting discussion on Twitter about what a more open, global, and democratic alternative to the AAA might look like. The discussion soon outgrew the 140 character limit, and so moved over to Kieth Hart’s forum. The discussion there progressed for a while until, at the end of May, Maximilian Forte suggested using Ning, and Kieth Hart set up the Open Anthropology Cooperative.

At present, OAC isn’t really an alternative to the AAA at all, its just another social networking site for anthropologists all around the world. But it seems to attract people interested in issues of openness and governance. In Shirky’s book he argues that the modern corporation was created to reduce the transaction costs involved in coordinating activity among large groups of people. It did that by imposing a large management hierarchy on top of the people actually doing the work. This model has worked for a long time, but it has limits. Such a management hierarchy is expensive to maintain, so it isn’t worth it for management to engage in activities which don’t generate enough revenue to support the hierarchy. Shirky argues that the social web solves this problem by reducing transaction costs to near zero. While the AAA may still be required to pull off something as monumental as the massive annual meetings, software like Open Conference Systems should make it easier to organize smaller conferences outside of the AAA. And, apart from their prestige, it is increasingly unclear that publishing in AAA journals offers any added value beyond what could be done with Open Journal Systems. Since much of the academic labor for these things is donated anyway, the cost really can be reduced to near zero.

But Shirky raises another point, which is that as the transaction costs get close to zero, it becomes trivially easy to do things which used to require either a strong ideological commitment or an oversized organizational hierarchy. As a result, it becomes much harder to gauge commitment. Signing an online petition is not the same thing as marching on Washington. So I was initially skeptical that what is essentially an Anthropologically branded version of Facebook would produce much in the way of "Open Anthropology." It may still be too early to tell, but the site just seems to be growing and growing. There have been other attempts to create online forums for anthropologists but never have any of them succeeded like this. Time will only tell how well OAC survives its own success, but today gave me real hope saw the launch of yet another initiative: the OAC Wiki, thanks to the efforts of Paul Wren. I myself have tried to start a few wikis and given up because one needs a certain critical mass for a wiki to succeed. In general social media has a "user elite" who do most of the work editing and maintaining the site, even as content is added it bits and pieces by the entire membership. But with over a thousand people on OAC, maybe running a wiki has become boring enough that it can succeed.

Looking forward, one of the biggest hurdles will probably be in the realm of self-governance. Already this has been an issue on OAC, with Maximilian Forte leaving in a huff, citing "authoritarian and elitist tendencies" by which I think he means over-zealous moderation in the forums. Self-governance is difficult, especially since a small handful of people tend to do all the hard work of maintaining these communities. Two years ago I wrote a blog post about the bureaucratization of Wikipedia. It seems like these are issues already facing the fledgling OAC. But I'm encouraged that this time, Anthropology 2.0 might be taking off for real. I certainly hope so!