

## **DIGITAL ANTHROPOLOGY: AN EASA WORKSHOP**

By Heather Horst and Daniel Miller

On August 25<sup>th</sup>, we held the very first “Digital Anthropology” workshop in Maynooth, Ireland. When we sent out the Call for Proposals last spring, we were uncertain as to the extent of interest and the potential response to the call. We were pleased to receive a large pool (more than expected!) of submissions; a sign that we believe represents a strong indication of the increasing interest in this domain. Indeed, we saw this point reinforced by the vast number of media and technology-focused papers interspersed throughout the EASA conference – never before have we attended an anthropology conference with so many media papers to choose from, or have to miss to attend our own workshop(s)! For our own panel, we decided to select papers loosely focused around the intentionally amorphous term “Digital Anthropology” in order to include as wide a range as possible in order to illustrate the eclectic nature of incipient work in this field. We, in turn, organized the day so that the morning session would focus on topics that would foreground the issues that arose from a more self-conscious sense of becoming a digital world, while the afternoon was directed more towards the wider field of anthropology and more classic ethnographic terrain (see original abstracts below).

We began the day with a paper by Andrew Bowsher who focused upon the production and circulation of ‘authentic music’ based upon research in the alternative music capital of Austin, Texas USA. Bowsher’s paper represented a classic instance of ‘resistance’ with respect to the increasing connoisseurship for vinyl records and the micro-negotiation and compromises associated with digital forms such as re-packaging CD’s in beautifully designed and crafted settings that looked also like original vinyl. The paper thereby stood for the way many other non-digital forms find a new sense of authenticity through their contrast with the digital. By contrast, Gabriella Coleman focused her presentation on Anonymous and some of the most extreme activists of the digital scene and their stream of attacks on Scientology. As she illustrative through videos of Tom Cruise and others, hackers view Scientology as their nemesis in that Scientology also uses the idiom of new digital technology but asserts the ‘correct’ use of this technology while hackers advocate incorrect or at least unconstrained usage. The final presentation was from Lane DeNicola who utilized Bruce Sterling’s notion of the spime to examine the new devices for location awareness. As with so many studies of digital media, his presentation revealed problematic issues of control and surveillance alongside vast new potentials and capacities. In the concluding discussion, we collectively discussed the value of exploring extreme forms of practice and participation, with Miller suggesting that hackers and other sorts of groups represent extremes that people may choose to occupy because it is a perspective from which to make sense of the digital age, or worlds. Coleman, by contrast, argued that there are a vast number of users for sites such as 4chan that might otherwise be seen as peripheral.

The afternoon session(s) shifted the focus from the perspectives that, in many ways, emerge out of the material culture tradition of understanding relations

between people and objects to broader perspectives on the role of digital media in imagining and realizing futures. The session began with a presentation from Peter Pels who is beginning a project with Bart Barendregt on the way various ideas of the future are being reconfigured by the digital Building upon the influence of James Ferguson and the history of science fiction. Barendregt then gave a more detailed account of his own work on the appropriation of digital media by Indonesian Islam such as halal mobile phones, and the importance of this in asserting Indonesian creativity and local production rather than merely the periphery to the West. Switching to a different vision of futures – national development – Paula Uimonen employed Victor Turner’s notion of the liminal and Ulf Hannerz’s conceptualization of creolization to analyze micro-decisions around changes in web addresses in Tanzania as the country worked to incorporate arts websites and activities into its national agenda. Julie Archimbault revealed how the circulation of mobile phones in low income Mozambique was based primarily upon petty theft from tourists as well as friends and intimates. In contrast to the centrality of individual possession we see in other contexts, Archimbault found a lack of commitment to individual phones and customization given the continued threat of theft among youth in Mozambique.

Sirpa Tenhunen kicked off the final session by returning to the topic of politics and activism. Noting that for all the journalism and hype about the use of mobiles in politics, there was little sustained work to date. Taking on concepts such as Howard Rheingold’s “smart mobs” and other related work as her point of departure, Tenhunen’s patient ethnography gave a clear sense of how mobiles had facilitated opposition to the ruling Marxist regime of West Bengal as well as providing evidence against such opposition. This was followed by Lee Komito who reported on the findings of his comparative study of Polish and Filipino migrants in Dublin. Tracing the ways migrants connected with each other in Dublin and with those back home (and elsewhere), Komito stressed the role of kinship and friends from the homeland as well as the hostland. He further suggested that despite his misgivings about the concept during the web 1.0 era, the emergence of social networking and other social media may researchers cause to return to concepts like “community” to understand the experience of migrants and their participation in local and global communities. We then turned to Adolpho Estalella who demonstrated how bloggers in Spain were constantly concerned to show the political and wider significance of blogging itself, be it through blogging conventions or micro-politics, such as making a difference by addressing problems of queuing in places like Ikea. Finally, and returning to the broader properties of the digital highlighted in the first session, Sabra Thorner provided a detailed description and demonstration of cutting edge software in use by Australian Aboriginal societies. Designed to facilitate culturally relevant interactions, the archival software included such culturally-sensitive functionality, including the ability to obscure the recently deceased whose image should not be viewed. Thorner argued that this new software program was leading to a genuine popularity in spending time on various forms of digital archiving of family materials amongst such groups.

As a collective, the papers demonstrated the diversity of what could be termed 'digital anthropology' by starting with the way anthropology can help understand unprecedented activities and debates that pertain to the specifics of digital cultural and then moving to the very opposite end of the spectrum in order to understand the ways in which digital technologies have become handmaidens to the facilitation of classic anthropological issues of cultural specificity and sensitivity. Taken together with the Media Anthropology workshop papers, a number of shared and overlapping themes emerged in both panels that could have been addressed in either session. For example, papers across the two sessions focused upon the increase in user-generated content creation in terms of cultural and family heritage sites (e.g. Smiljana Antonijevic, Burt Barendregt/Peter Pels, Phillip Budka, Sabra Thorner and Paula Uiomonen) and the struggles to balance issues such as representation and social change. The use of new media for politics and activism also became a key issue, ranging from the tech-savvy hackers of Coleman's study to Estaella's Ikea-focused bloggers, Tenhunen's community politics in north India and Tilo Gratz's radio stars. Issues around digital labor and the boundaries between professional and amateur communities also became a key focus of many of the papers and highlighted the changing relationship between production, consumption, participation and distribution (e.g. Elisenda Ardevol, Andrew Bowsher, Alexander Knorr and Lane DeNicola). And, of course, there were a range of papers (e.g. Julie Archimbault, Heather Horst, Lee Komito, Elke Mader, John Postill and Francisco Osario, Pille Runnel) that focused on the broader media ecologies in which people now live and operate within over the course of their daily lives. Yet, and given the range of papers shared across the two sessions, there continue to be questions that remain. For example, for the theme of cultural heritage we saw papers that stressed the importance of culturally specific designs, practices and modes of interactions, yet also revealed a tension towards conservatism and essentialism in the designs and systems even when not intended. What do we know about where and when these tensions emerge? Does the design of a system, even a flexible, open-ended system, automatically produce such tensions? Where politics and activism are concerned, when and where are politics (with a small p) most effective and do these politics replicate, reshape or, at the very least, destabilize broader power distinctions (and for whom)? Related to the above, what do we know about these broader practices of production, consumption, participation and distribution, and what does it mean for global corporations and users, governments and others to take seriously the user experience? Finally, how are people navigating the increasingly diverse media ecologies? What is the relationship between cost, convenience, location and capabilities of media, and to what extent are these changing for different groups as we saw in Komito's paper on migrants? For the purposes of the Media Anthropology mailing list, there remain a range of questions that, I suspect, are on many of our minds these days. What does this mean to carry out research in the realm of 'digital or media anthropology'? How do we understand and capture the new realities of everyday life? What new possibilities might exist for studying and understanding the implications and development of the digital? In what ways might these new tools and publics the types of ethnographies and other forms of publications we produce and disseminate? What might this mean for the processes of knowledge creation and production more generally?

## **Summary of Presentations (Abstracts)**

Digital Anthropology Workshop

Location John Hume Lecture Theatre 2

Date and Start Time 26 August 2010 at 11:30

Convenors

Daniel Miller (University College, London) email

Heather Horst (University of California, Irvine)

*How can anthropology contribute to an understanding of the impact of new digital technologies? This session explores topics ranging from how digital technologies become part of everyday life to their role in the development of new infrastructures within both commerce and the state.*

A key component of many peoples sense of crisis today is the impact of digital technologies that appears to constitute a loss of control over the world. For example, one theory of the recent financial crises is that too many financial instruments were set to automatically sell when shares reached a certain level so the crisis was an integral effect of digitisation itself. People's imagination of the digital seems to bifurcate as something that, on the one hand, lies at the keyboard at the tip of their fingers but at the same time appears as an abstraction from traditional analogue modes of representation. This bifurcation is often what makes the digital appear to be either the cause or the solution of impending crises. Often this imagination is fed from science fiction and images of humans losing control of the planet to the new technologies themselves.

This is perhaps the moment when anthropology has to choose how to respond to digital technologies. Whether to demonise them as a form of alienation, to romanticise them as open-source utopias or get to grips with the way they speedily become part of everyday life. To resist this bifurcation we need to link the study of ordinary people's consumption of social networking sites and Google Earth with an appreciation of deeper infrastructural developments such as the digitalisation of financial systems, geographical positioning systems and the impact upon both state and commerce. This is the task to which this workshop will be dedicated, beginning with an introduction by the co-convenors.

### **A brief theory of digital anthropology**

Authors: Daniel Miller (University College London) and Heather Horst (University of California, Irvine)

Can one have a general theory of Digital Anthropology? What are the consequences of the digital for theory and ethnography? This introduction will provide an overview of digitisation as the simultaneous expansion of the abstract and the particular, and its consequences, through the lens of contemporary

debates over open source, money and the rise of digital money, virtual worlds and ethnographic practice.

### **Digital sound technologies: the renegotiation of music production, consumption and collecting practices**

Author: Andrew Bowsher (Oxford University)

Today, commercial and consumer music worlds play substantial roles in safeguarding sounds and challenging institutional hegemony over preservation practices. Digitised sound technologies have been instrumental in this shift, but have been regarded both as a utilitarian innovation as well as an aural and tactile failure by amateur and professional music archivists, as well as consumers and collectors in the music marketplace. This paper draws on fieldwork in the United States with music collectors and record labels to examine the democratisation and commodification of digital sound, archiving aesthetics and curatorial voices, and the resulting conflicts between digital technologies and analogue practices - the valorisation of materially substantive archives in the face of the digital-technology revolution. Examining the everyday conflicts between analogue and digital technologies as aural and tactile entities in the marketplace of music commodities and consumers' homes elicits new insights into our conception of a digital future for our archives.

### **Phreaker/hacker/troller as trickster**

Author: E. Gabriella Coleman (NYU)

In this paper I lay out the connection between the trickster (the mythical archetype) and the living, breathing practices of phreakers, hackers, and trollers. I will lay out some of the similarities based on some consistent features of tricksters, which will allow me to provide some instances of phreaking/hacking/trolling that can be considered in terms of trickery. At the moral and political heart of my talk lies the following question: For the most part the trickster is enshrined in myth and stories. What happens when we can locate tricksters in full-bodied, full-blooded groups of people who are actually engaging in all sorts of acts of trickery? This is culture not in the sense of art and myth but people and practice and this of course makes a difference. What happens when you are the recipient not of a story by an elder, but the recipient of tricker, an act of pranking or trolling? What are the implication when you can trace the reworking of boundaries enacted by acts of hacking?

### **Spimes as material culture: anthropological approaches to (and through) location-aware objects**

Author: Lane DeNicola (University College London)

In 2004 author and design theorist Bruce Sterling used the term "spime" to refer to an emerging class of electronically-enhanced object whose closest existing prototype is perhaps represented by the Apple iPhone. Among their defining features: an awareness of their own location, perpetual network connectivity, and a virtual "instantiation" that parallels their material one. Advocates suggest that the proliferation of such capabilities into an expanding array of pedestrian

objects could initiate profound changes in human-artefact relations. In this paper I tentatively adopt Sterling's concept and discuss its relevance not just as a subject for material culture, but as a tool for innovative anthropological inquiry. In helping to reframe our imagined relations with artefacts, I suggest that the nascent field of digital anthropology could build upon the spime and location-awareness as contributions to a deeper encounter with industrial production, material flows, and the crises of human-artefact relations.

### **Emerging futurities in Muslim southeast Asia: science fantasy, digital development and the urge for moral technology**

Author: Bart Barendregt (Leiden University)

Thinking of the future is hardly possible without reference to the role of digital information technologies or the growing impact of knowledge industries. But how relevant are these concepts outside the Northern Hemisphere? Said to be on its way by 2020, Islamic Information Society posits an alternative to both Western ideas on the Global Village, as well as the hijacking of Islamic futures by radical conservatives. In this paper I examine how majority Muslim countries in Southeast Asia have increasingly become role models in Islam's quest for a digital future. I will do so by targeting the history of technological developments from the top down, and manifested in state run and commercial technological projects, but also through competing claims to the future as portrayed in the current fusion of modern popular culture (pop music, fashion, gadgetry) with religion and futurist thinking.

### **Digital dramas, online liminality and the state of creolization in Tanzania**

Author: Paula Uimonen (Stockholm University)

"Quick question. sanaabagamoyo.com is expired - is it worth keeping it alive or are we 100% tasuba.ac.tz" (email May 2009). Using Turner's notion of social drama, this paper explores institutional transformations framing Internet development at TaSUBa, a national arts and culture institute in Tanzania. TaSUBa's change of web addresses is instructive of the institute's recent transformation into an executive agency, a process characterized by considerable ambiguity. In order to make sense of how neoliberal public sector reforms are responded to in this postsocialist context, I will explore the concept of liminality to explain the composition of what can be conceptualized as a state of creolization. The analysis builds on ethnographic engagements at TaSUBa from 2002 to 2009, combining digital, visual and sensory research methods.

### **Phones, foreigners, and the fluctuating digital divide in Southern Mozambique**

Author: Julie Archambault (SOAS)

"I can't wait for the World Cup", explained a young Mozambican man during a recent phone conversation, "more tourists means more mobile phones and iPods for us". For many in Mozambique, crime is not a way of life but rather a tactic, amongst others, to address needs and desires unfulfilled by more conventional means. Mobile phones participate in this economy as coveted objects and as

communication tools that, in turn, lubricate the circulation of consumer goods. Many phones initially make it to Southern Mozambique in the pockets of tourists before being inserted into the local pool of goods that petty crime stirs up further. In the city of Inhambane, most of the male youth I work with have spent some time in jail, almost all of them for petty theft, often involving mobile phones. In this paper, I draw on their experiences to unpack the notion of 'digital divide' and to tease out the role mobile phones and mobile phone communication play in the workings of petty crime in the region. By looking into the circulation of mobile phones, I hope to shed light on broader economic dynamics, while contributing to our understanding of the socio-economic impacts of new technologies.

### **Culture, conflict and translocal communication: mobile technology and politics in rural West Bengal, India**

Author: Sirpa Tenhunen (University of Helsinki)

As media reports of political movements from various locations have shown, mobile technology can be a powerful political instrument. Howard Rheingold (2002) has famously argued that the new information technologies and especially mobile phones enable smart mobs. "Smart mob" is an evocative and yet problematic term in emphasizing the unruliness of protestors thus detracting attention from their patterns of action and meanings. This article seeks to understand the relationship between politics and mobile technology by examining how political activists in rural West Bengal, India use mobile phones for their daily political work. I illustrate how riots and protests relate to the increase in translocal communication enabled by phones. I also demonstrate how the political use of mobile technology for extra ordinary events is grounded in the social and political processes of ordinary everyday life and draws from the local understanding of politics by emphasizing certain aspects of it.

### **Migration and virtual community 2.0**

Author: Lee Komito (University College Dublin)

Explorations of the impact of new technologies on community and social life often reflect a utopian or anti-utopian polarisation by framing new technologies either as inimical to community (especially when framed in terms of social capital) or as enabling a redefined community composed of 'networked individuals'. In the context of migration, transnational ethnic groups are manifest through email, discussion groups and web pages, and the utopian/anti-utopian duality revolves around technologies supporting long-term durable social relations versus fragile and instrumental relations subject to easy disruption, and whether technologically mediated social relations can support 'virtual communities'. Studies of social media practices of non-nationals living in Ireland suggests that information exchange and coordination of activities via these new media are enabling durable, non-local social groups that complement migrants' other social relations. This is not only transforming the migration process, but also illustrates the problems inherent in any utopian/anti-utopian duality.

### **Hope infrastructure: enacting expectations in bloggers' material practices**

Author: Adolfo Estalella (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya)

Based on 18 months of fieldwork focused on the study of intensive bloggers in Spain this paper discusses how expectations are enacted in the everyday material practices of a group of individuals that expect to transform society (mass media, science and politics) through their blogging practice. Drawing on the concept of inscription (Latour, 1999) I describe how blogs and bloggers interactions are materially inscribed (in the form of statistics of visitors, for instance) in a massive way by blog technological infrastructures. I highlight how present facts are materialized in graphics of visitors and lists of incoming links and expectations of the future are materially enacted when exceptional facts take place (an unusual wave of visitors, v.g.). I then argue that the inscription of the present is the condition of possibility for the performance of future expectations through an infrastructure that take part in the everyday enacting of hope among bloggers.

Imagining an Indigital Interface: Ara Irititja Indigenizes the Technologies of Knowledge Management Author: Sabra Thorner (New York University)

Databases and digital archives are tools embedded with assumptions about the world. Drawing from dissertation fieldwork with Ara Irititja, an Aboriginal organization based in Adelaide, Australia, but with workstations throughout the remote Pitjantjatjara-Yankunytjatjara Lands, this paper examines how Indigenous ontologies reshape digital technologies.

Beginning 15 years ago with the digital repatriation of photographs, oral histories, and film recordings, Ara Irititja is undergoing a significant transition—from an object-based digital archive into a multimedia knowledge management system. New software (purpose-built, browser-based, cross-platform) will store and share knowledge using structures and strategies that reflect and enact Indigenous cultural protocols. Organizing principles are nonlinear; access is directed by a user's gender and seniority; and individuals/families can record stories in their own words and language directly into an easy-to-use interface.

Interrogating "the archive," the Internet, and the production of contemporary Indigeneities, this paper argues that traditional cultural knowledge and state-of-the-art digital technologies can be interanimated, as Indigenous people dare to imagine their own cultural futures.