Anthropological Networks

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Anthropological Networks

Anthropology is broadly defined as the science of the study of human behavior. Behaviors that are studied by anthropologists, particularly cultural anthropologists include the social and cultural behaviors of groups. In looking at these behaviors, anthropologists look at the communications and connections of the group. Studying kinship and social relationships, anthropologists are often looking at the structure and meaning of a group’s social networks. Social and cultural anthropologists have contributed to the study of social networking and the development of social network analysis. An anthropologist is actually attributed with having first used the term “network” to describe social structures. Not only have anthropologists contributed to the study of social networks, they have also created their own anthropological networks in order to communicate and collaborate while conducting their study of human behaviors.

The discipline of anthropology is divided into four subdivisions; cultural anthropology, physical anthropology, archaeology and linguistic anthropology. Within each of these sub-disciplines are smaller interest groups with specific focuses and specialization. As with many interdisciplinary disciplines, the social networking in anthropology takes place both within these groups and divisions, among these groups and divisions and with outside disciplines, institutions and groups. This article will focus on the general anthropological networks that are used within the field of anthropology.

A brief history of anthropology provides insight into the establishment of social networks within the field. Previous to the 20th century, most anthropologists were
gentlemen scientists and hobbyists. While anthropology courses were offered at universities, few had specific departments dedicated to the discipline and there were no academic requirements for practicing. Despite the absence of professional or academic degrees, these researchers and practitioners were respected for their expertise and experience. However, there was little coordination and organization in the research and few guidelines or expectations for practicing fieldwork. Networking, coordination and collaboration took place within the societies and groups that formed by these researchers and practitioners. Publications by these societies such as *American Anthropologist* (Anthropological Society of Washington) provided an outlet for sharing and discussion on the reports and research. Also, many of these gentlemen scientists and hobbyists had specialties in other areas as well. These connections lead to the early interdisciplinary nature of anthropology and a diverse social networking among practitioners and scholars both within and outside of the field.

At the start of the 20th century, anthropology began to emerge more dominantly as an academic profession, and students and researchers were being required to obtain a PhD in order to have their scholarship recognized. During this time, more anthropology departments were established in colleges and universities. The strengthening of the departments provided new and local social networks for the students and scholar. As with the school departments, many of the social networks that developed during anthropology’s early years were local to the region and the subject matter or subdivisions. Scholars and practitioners networked through published journal articles, newsletters, conferences and written correspondence. The networks of anthropologists were further broadened with the creation of national organizations and associations. The American
Anthropological Association was founded in 1902 as the first national organization for the promotion of anthropology. This association was formed in order to promote, organize and support the study anthropology in America. The creation of this organization provided American anthropologists with a single organization to coordinate sharing, collaboration and networking. While at its inception the organization remained local to the Northeastern United States with a membership of 175 mainly male, white intellectuals from the area universities, the American Anthropological Association has grown and expanded with the discipline to now include over 10,000 diverse members representing all fifty states.

America was not the first to establish a national organization. The longest-established anthropological association is The Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, founded in 1871. Other examples of early organizations are The Italian Institute of Anthropology (Istituto Italiano di Antropologia), founded in 1893 in order to promote an interdisciplinary approach to anthropology and The German Anthropological Association which can trace it roots back to even before its official founding in the 1920’s.

As the study and practice of anthropology grew, a need for central organizations to promote and support sharing and collaboration among anthropologists was met in many different countries through the founding of national organizations. Organizations founded during the following decades include Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth (1946), Brazilian Association of Anthropology, Associação Brasileira de Antropologia (1955), Indian Anthropological Association (1969), Canadian Anthropological Society (1974), and the Hong Kong Anthropological Association.
The emergence of these associations provided anthropologists with an organized forum for the sharing and exchanging of ideas that did not previously exist. Increasing the social networking on a national level through these associations also paved the way for International Associations such as the World Council of Anthropological Associations, which was founded in 2005 in order to promote communication and coordination worldwide. Even more recently is the creation of the World Anthropologies Network which, according to its website has the ambitious goal of forming a self-organizing world anthropologies network. Some of these associations are embracing newer social networking technologies for communication and cooperation. All of them function as some type of social network for anthropologists.

The associations discussed serve as formal anthropological networks. There are many informal networks within the field. These informal networks are among colleagues in the same departments, researchers working on the same project, and people with shared interests. Many of these informal networks were established while anthropology developed in academia after the First World War. As the field developed internationally, each country produced its own approach to the study of anthropology. These approaches were embraced and shared within the schools in the region, sometimes shifting to another region when an important figure relocated to teach or chair a department. Often this led to an internal focus on core issues, with little external sharing and collaboration, which is why the creation of national and international organizations was necessary for expanding formal social networks. This focus within a particular department led to the creation of very distinct approaches to anthropology. These approaches are often equated with the particular location, school and individuals producing the research. Social networks at this
time consisted quite heavily of the professors and the students who wished to continue the same approach, with research and information being shared in relatively small circles. Each area’s own unique approach to the study of anthropology created individual cultures and networks. Within the countries there were also specific approaches, often named for the school or location such as the Chicago School in the United States and the Manchester School in Britain. Four of the major historical figures involved in the development of anthropology as an academic field played a large hand in the creation of the social networks within the discipline. Their approach and work in their respective countries; United States (Franz Boas), Britain (Bronislaw Malinowski and Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown) and France (Marcel Mauss) helped form the different schools and networks that exist in today’s anthropology. As these and other influential teachers taught classes and chaired departments, they developed a loyal following of students who continued the approaches and broadened the reach of the teachings. Some of these students include well known anthropologists Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, Max Gluckman and E.E. Evans-Pritchard. The dominant player’s approaches to anthropology impacted the field differently, with the United States Departments splitting into the sub-disciplines while British Anthropology departments focused primary on cultural and social anthropology. The social networks were deeply influenced by the individuals and their means and methods of research.

As the field of anthropology grew, these informal social networks also expanded, branching out from the specific subject and school to include other aspects and approaches. The expansion of informal networks helped influence the creation of associations as formal networks. By the late 60’s and early 70’s new journals,
conferences, workshops, monograph series and associations led to the expansion of anthropological networks. Existing Anthropology departments grew and became more diverse and more departments were being established in institutions around the world. This expansion was being further helped by newer technologies that allowed social networks to expand beyond the local/regional and even national levels.

While anthropologists were not the first to embrace these technologies within academia, there is evidence that some within the field sought to encourage their peers to use the technology for more communication and collaboration. A 1986 article in *Anthropology Newsletter* encourages the use of electronic bulletin boards that provide the ability to send data electronically worldwide. This new technology allowed for e-mail communication, and data and program sharing. The author sites evidence that anthropologists had begun to take advantage of this technology and attempts to simplify the process and emphasize the importance of embracing the technology in order to expand social networks and better anthropological scholarship. A year later, another article appeared in *Current Anthropology* that encourages the use of BITNET which was a newly developed academic network based on IBM computers. The article touts the possibility of both intra-institutional and inter-institutional communication using this technology. The author presses anthropologists with access to these networks to use them to engage in formal and informal communication and scholarly collaboration.

Evidence that anthropologists heeded this advice is found in a 1995 article from *College and Research Libraries News* that lists internet resources for Anthropology. The article gives a brief description of over forty active LISTSERVs in each of the sub-disciplines. Many of these LISTSERVs are still active today in the same format as in
1995 and others have embraced newer technologies such as blogs, Yahoo Groups and RSS feeds. While not at the forefront of adopting social networking technology, there is evidence that anthropological networks are adapting to the needs of the members and the available technology. Anthropologists are now using a variety of social networking technologies in order to exchange ideas and promote the discipline.

One technology embraced by the anthropological community is blogging. The many anthropological blogs available are a means to share information, promote discussions and provide alternative ideas and approaches to the discipline. From the general to the specific, the network of anthropological blogs is diverse both in content and geography. A 2008 list of the Top 100 Blogs highlights those that are recommended, but is by no means an all inclusive list. Blogging provides a platform for those with alternative ideas, allowing them to engage the mainstream and locate like-minded users. An example of this is Zero Anthropology, a blog attached to the project of the “decolonization” of anthropology. Among its many descriptions and charges detailed on the website, Zero Anthropology aims to open anthropology up by “encouraging academic engagement in social transformation beyond the walls of the university while working on the transformation of university practices with respect the production of knowledge.”. With no geographical boundaries and the advanced technology of web browsers to translate entire pages, conversations and discussions on blogs and other social networking technologies are all inclusive of the world anthropological community.

Another active blog is that of the American Anthropological Association. The blog is just one way that this large association communicates with its diverse membership. In addition to the blog and website, the association offers podcasts, a
Twitter feed and Flickr photostream. Many of the other larger associations do not currently have a presence in this new media. However, special interest groups, academic departments, publications, smaller organizations and individuals are using social networking sites. For example, Zero Anthropology expands the reach of its blog by using other social networking technologies like Twitter, video sharing sites YouTube and Vimeo, podcasting and social bookmarking sites Diigo, CiteULike and Delicious. Twitter lists and hashtags demonstrate how scholars and practitioners are connecting through micro-blogging site, from sharing breaking news to remaining connected during conferences. A search on Delicious.com reveals tags for anthropology and anthro, with many major anthropological sites being saved by users worldwide. The photo-sharing site Flickr and video sharing sites like YouTube and Vimeo allow anthropologists to share visual images, an especially important development for those studying Visual Anthropology. There are a few representatives of anthropological networks in Google Wave, Yahoo Groups and Facebook to name some other social networking sites open to anyone with an anthropological interest or specialty.

This openness of anthropological networks is quite clear in many of the names and descriptions of the networks. Some of these networks use the word “open” to promote the use of Open Source within anthropology, such as the blog “Open Access Anthropology”. Others such as the “Open Anthropology Project” promote opening up the discipline to alternative ideas. Technology has allowed for more accessible sharing of data and documentation, as in the case of the website “Open Context” which strives to advance archaeological research by sharing and promoting reuse of primary field research. The “Open Anthropology Cooperative” is a network that invites anyone
interested in anthropology to join. Its creators first met and conceived of the network on Twitter, creating it in May 2009. With over 3000 members and 155 groups the “Open Anthropology Cooperative” is an active anthropological social network. Users are both amateur and professional, representing hobbyists and PhD’s. Anyone can post questions and add to discussions and it is an excellent forum for networking and finding others with similar interests from around the world.

Currently this group exists as Ning network, however, Ning, a previously free service for creation of social networks recently opted to phase out its free service, affecting many educational sites such as this one. Also affected by this move is the “Moving Anthropology Student Network”, a group of European students of cultural/social anthropology. Discussions are taking place now as to how these groups will move forward with this change as the need for and usefulness of this type of social network is apparent in its popularity.

There are a variety of networks available to the world-wide anthropological community. These forums for conversation, collaboration and information sharing advance the research and promote the discipline. The topics discussed on these various networks represent almost all areas of anthropological research. The recent use of popularity of social networking tools among all humans has given anthropologists new discussion topics. As scholars of human behavior, anthropologists are contributing to the current conversation and research on social networking and new media. Not only are anthropologists using available technologies for their own social networking, but they are studying the very same tools that they use. Cultural anthropologists are currently studying
new media tools, virtual worlds where social networking takes place, the use and effect of
digital media such as blogs and Twitter and even the anthropology of YouTube.

The ability to reach out to a world-wide audience for research and discussion
presents the anthropological community with unique opportunities to both study and use
the social networks that are available. Anthropological networks have grown from small
academic departments to local and national organizations to world-wide open forums.
The networks have allowed for debates and discussions among a wider audience while
promoting different approaches and innovative ideas that continue to enhance and expand
the field of anthropology.

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