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E-Seminar 56

Pudding – can anthropology teach us how to use media?

by

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Discussant Comments by

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Hi all,

Thanks to Veronica for inviting me to open the discussion on this paper, and to Danny, Elisaabetta, Laura, Nell, Tom, Razvan, Jolynna, Juliano, Shriram, and Xinyuan (hereafter known as “the team” or “the authors”) for a thought-provoking paper from a highly creative and boundary-pushing project.

The paper gives a rundown of the project and its findings, but since the paper's title refers to dissemination of findings, this is what my discussion mainly focuses on. At the end, I make a comment on comparative research. Some of my comments may seem contentious, but I hope to provoke a discussion that builds upon the authors' claims productively.

Dissemination

The main question posed in this paper is “can anthropology teach us how to use media?”. But what does this question mean? The authors point out that, in their paper, they do not specifically talk about their own use of recognized social media platforms such as Facebook, and Twitter. Rather, they focus on a far wider range of dissemination strategies, from MOOCs (a kind of social media), school curricula, and open access books. They say that their studies of social media have taught them:

“how to re-configure social media as one part of a much wider programme of research dissemination that confronts the diversity of audience and the diversity of media.”

In other words, then, the “proof of the pudding” really was in the eating: anthropological research helped them to situate social media as part of a broader communication spectrum through which they could develop and enact their dissemination strategy. In doing so, their communications resemble those of the people they (and other researchers) study.

Just as Madianou and Miller (2013) found that people use “polymedia” to communicate, rather than depending on one platform alone, so are the team using multiple platforms at different levels of “scalable sociality” to reach groups of different sizes and configurations (see also Miller et al 2016).

This makes sense and I think it is important for anthropologists who want to communicate with broader publics to take this on board. There are still today (although probably not on this medianthro list!) anthropologists who believe that we should not even try to communicate our findings to the general public (and definitely not to economists), since simplifying will allegedly corrupt what we have to say.

But if this is the case, why, then, is it ok to teach? We are deluding ourselves if we believe that students are universally more receptive to our material than the general public: we are probably both overestimating our students and underestimating the general public. Teaching and communicating with the general public both involve a) simplifications; and b) creating pathways so that individuals who want to dig deeper can do so.

This is exactly what the team has done: present the insights as “discoveries” or other brief insights (such as through cat memes), but providing links for people to find the MOOC, books, newspaper articles, and journal articles, if they feel like it. Effective communication requires creating pathways through which people can discover material, and it is the responsibility of the learner as much as the educator to dig deeper (or not). Dissemination isn't just promotion, it's pedagogy.

The authors express reservations about the term “discoveries” and justify its use by pointing out that their “discoveries” involve diverse and sometimes contradictory findings. I find nothing wrong with this framing. In 2011, Greg Downey published an article on his Neuroanthropology blog called “Brand Anthropology: New and Improved, with Extra Diversity!” <http://blogs.plos.org/neuroanthropology/2011/01/28/brand-anthropology-new-and-improved-with-extra-diversity/>” In this post he builds upon an article by Ulf Hannerz called “Diversity Is Our Business”, calling for anthropologists to embrace the idea that we make “discoveries”, just as science does.

Of course, such an approach can be problematic in many ways, including the dangers of commoditizing our work by framing it in business terms, equating our work with the natural sciences, and the difficulties of getting across complex messages through popular media. However, he argues, we do worse by staying out of public conversations altogether, since we then have no avenue whatsoever to challenge claims that our anthropology does not support.

There is another good argument for why it does not make sense to shy away from public conversations, and I imagine that many of you are intimately familiar with it. Fieldsites are no longer confined to distant lands; our research participants find us on social media platforms and elsewhere through the Internet, and they often expect to hear about the results of our research. The kinds of media venues and organizations that we tend to be afraid of are far from being the only

way to communicate about our research. Thus I feel that anthropologists could indeed learn a lot from the Global Social Media Project in rethinking how we communicate with diverse audiences.

We also tend to underestimate how interesting our findings would be to the general public, because to us they are somewhat obvious or esoteric. But sometimes it's precisely the mundane, everyday parts of life that people find most attractive. People want to understand more about why we live the ways we do. Those of us who are engaged in media research are surely well-situated to learn from our own research and invent new ways to present our “discoveries” that can lead people to further learning.

In 2012, a group of us founded the project PopAnth: Hot Buttered Humanity<<https://popanth.com/>> with a view to creating a venue for alternative interpretations and promoting popular anthropology generally (see an interview<<https://thegeekanthropologist.com/2016/04/08/anthropology-blogging-101-popanth/>> on The Geek Anthropologist for more about the concept). PopAnth only publishes articles that are written for a general audience, and roughly covers the “four fields.” All of our articles provide links for further reading so that readers can go into more depth if they wish. We use our social media accounts to promote articles that are either written by anthropologists or mention anthropologists. In three-and-a-half years we have published 153 articles and 20 book reviews by 67 authors and had probably over half a million readers.

While we are clearly reaching a sizeable audience, I do feel that what we are missing, however, is the kind of two-way dialogue that social media encourages. We could do with more endeavours like the Global Social Media Project to push the boundaries of our communications and bring them more into line with contemporary practices.

For whom does the pudding provide proof?

That leads us to audiences. I would like to hear more from the authors about who the “us” in the paper's title could be. I originally expected “us” to refer to the general public, but in fact it largely refers to the authors themselves. We receive hints that the project's findings can be useful for people and organizations using social media for pedagogical and practical purposes (such as educators and parents). But we need to eat more of the proverbial pudding to get at the proof.

But what of individuals using social media for their own purposes? Everyone uses media, and millions of people put in a huge amount of effort to invent ways to use it more effectively. Can anthropology help the general public to understand not only social media but also, as the authors learned, how social media fits into their own broader communications? People are engaging with the project, but what are they taking away and how is it impacting their lives, self-understandings, and world views?

Comparative research

Finally, a word and a question on comparative research. When the Global Social Media project was launched I was very curious as to what the team would discover. Truly comparative projects are not so common in anthropology, precisely because, as the authors point out, we tend to think of different research sites as incomparable. But what is a research site? How are sites bounded? There are a few complicating factors.

First, places are interconnected through trade, migration, and of course communications. Group belonging is often “transnational” (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc, 2005), even if people

are unable to physically relocate (Gregory 2007). Further, as Ulf Hannerz (2012) and Leslie Sklair (2001) have pointed out, some social groups, such as a “transnational capitalist class” may have more in common with the same class in another country than with people from another class living in the same locality.

Second, and, as the authors point out, phenomena like social media have arisen “a posteriori” and so they have no clear point of cultural/spatial origin. Money, originally a highly localized and culturally embedded phenomenon, is increasingly joining social media in this, given the rise of e-money and globalized consumer finance products.

I would be interested to hear the authors' ideas about what forms a good basis for comparison. If you were to do this project again, would you still choose nation-states as the unit within which you choose your populations? Why or why not?

P.S. Note that, in a somewhat recursive move, we are running this seminar on a social media platform to discuss whether social media research can help us to use social media platforms.

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